



Hearing Hearings, Part One

Tonight's symposium will be a device of manifold containment, a double-bottomed double feature--or should I rather say, a half feature, as you will only listen to the first part tonight. As we are desperately seeking exposure to the background noises of the past, tonight, we will introduce, and then listen to, Eric Bentley's commentary on Bertolt Brecht's deposition before the House Un-American Activities Committee on October 30th, 1947. Bentley's comments date from 1963. Now, those who live on the black surface of a vinyl record don't realize how strange it is for the living to be taken without preamble inside the thick atmosphere of a recording that is as recent as our father's year of birth and at the same time old enough to be considered a documentary fable. If the label wasn't, as Charles Marowitz put it, mealy-mouthedly inadequate, we would call Bentley's piece a "Brechtian docudrama." This is, at any rate, our tribute to Eric Bentley.

For those who are not familiar with the figure and work of Eric Bentley, I will say that he was born in 1916 and that he is still alive as we record these pages. A British-born American, Eric Bentley met Bertolt Brecht while teaching at UCLA in 1942. Brecht had established himself in Santa Monica at that time, and Bentley was maybe already incubating what would become his first manifesto, *The Playwright as Thinker*. Later, he not only launched his career as a hard-boiled critic and playwright, but also as a stage performer and singer--a thinker with many hats, all of them double-bottomed. Brecht and Bentley became friends, and Bentley translated some of Brecht's plays and closely followed the reception of his work by the American scene. In 1963, after Bentley had published *In Search of Theater* and *What is Theater*, the Folkways label released an extraordinary document edited and annotated by Bentley: Bertolt Brecht's appearance before the HUAC in the morning of October 30th, 1947. In a few moments Eric Bentley himself will properly introduce this priceless document, that anybody can of course buy on the Internet just as I did. But let me add that in 1963, 1964 and 1965, and in parallel to the appearance of Bentley's book *The Life of the Drama*, three other Folkways records came out, the first one featuring the play *A Man's a Man* directed by Bentley, the second and third presenting poems and songs written by Bertolt Brecht and performed by Bentley himself. Thenceforth he appeared as the critic-cum-cabaret singer we so much admire--introducing his own performances and his "healthy defeatism" in a way that, for totally personal reasons, reminds me of Johnny Cash during his concert at Saint Quentin. Allow me a digression: maybe I have this feeling because "Wanted Man" is, at any rate, a fully Brechtian song, and this despite the fact that I prefer Nick Cave's version of it. And I have failed and failed at searching for those performances of Bertolt Brecht's songs by Johnny Cash, and, as I was getting lost in one website after the other, I've been humming the verses of "Surabaya Johnny" where Cash is mentioned, "You only want cash, Johnny," etc., as you may remember. But what Johnny Cash didn't do, Eric Bentley did before him.



In 1971, another outstanding document was published, which brought Bentley's more rigorous scholarly side back to the forefront. This time taking a book form, the volume *Thirty Years of Treason* encapsulated about a thousand pages of transcripts from the Hearings before the HUAC during the period 1938 - 1968. Most witnesses, friendly and unfriendly, were artists and intellectuals. I am sure the specific weight of that thirty-year stretch will be immediately felt by most of you. But Eric Bentley never was one of them, certainly because critics are not considered dangerous, and he lived on, and kept recording. He published more books on Brecht, the famous *Brecht Memoir* and finally *Bentley on Brecht*, the latter bearing the same title as his recording of Brechtian songs and poems from the 1960s.

I should say I found in Eric Bentley's 1963 edition of the Hearings of Bertolt Brecht before the HUAC a missing link in the genealogy of our symposium, and in the figure of Eric Bentley himself a model of scholarship on the recorded sound medium. Eric Bentley has been something like an aesthetic guerrilla of one; he has ambushed theater audiences from all sorts of corners, jumping from stage to blackboard, from blackboard to cabaret, from the written to the aural and beyond. He befriended Brecht, translated Brecht, sang Brecht, examined, taught, read, impersonated Brecht. The critic is not far from the ventriloquist.

[*About Poor B.B.*, poem by Bertolt Brecht. Translated and performed by Eric Bentley.]

The exact date of this recording is not more uncertain than the date of the poem. From any day in 1925 to any day in 1965. The rings of time are like rings of smoke coming out of Bertolt Brecht's cigar. Maybe we should start this program at least as many times as circles it carries of recorded memory, making it a collection of false starts. As I speak, I am trying to get a smoke ring through the microphone. "Counting Rings"--that may, in fact, be an alternate title to this program, although we already made the hard choice of titling it "Hearing Hearings," I mean the *hear-rings*. This title does not quite do justice to what will be presented, as we will not only listen to the Hearings of the Un-American Activities Committee, but also to a good deal of reading and singing and breathing.

[*Ballad of the Dead Soldier*, poem by Bertolt Brecht. Translated and performed by Eric Bentley.]

In a statement prepared for the Un-American Activities Committee, Bertolt Brecht claimed that the song we just listened to was the main reason for his expatriation from Hitler's Germany in 1933. As an exile, Brecht often imagined dialogues of expats and migrants as concrete manifestations of the historical spirit. He dreamed of a wisdom that belonged to the land and its communities like a fruit tree, or a fountainhead, but his standpoint on that land was that of the wanderer, the stowaway. He thought of his fellow poets as stowaways, also as they travelled on the ship of death or sojourned in the refugee camps of purgatory. He was right if he considered Tu Fu as the most notable poet of all time, but he certainly had more success than Tu Fu, even in exile.



[*A Visit to the Exile Poets*, poem by Bertolt Brecht. Translated and performed by Eric Bentley.]

And as an exile, Brecht always carried a radio with him.

[*To the Little Radio*, poem by Bertolt Brecht. Translated and performed by Eric Bentley.]

Tonight's program (a double feature, which in other words means, a half program) is not titled "Counting Smoke Rings" but rather "Hearing Hearings". With the phrase "hearing hearings" I would like to propose that we place ourselves besides those endearing investigators that interrogated Brecht in that October of 1947. Let us be the glass of water near the microphone, the gadfly on the wall of the court room, the lamp over the chairman's toupee. But there is an added meaning to this title, "hearing hearings." The deposition of Bertolt Brecht before the HUAC that you will soon hear was not recorded directly at the court room, but somewhere else by means of a radio receiver. As Eric Bentley explains, the sessions of the HUAC were not recorded, but they were broadcast on national radio. Someone, we suppose, friendly to Brecht's cause, and/or aware of the significance of the event of his public interrogation--someone with some equipment, we assume--recorded this event live while it was being broadcast, somewhere else--recording from the elsewhere which is more or less where we are right now. Bertolt Brecht himself had this recording and played it for Eric Bentley a year or so later, in Zurich. And now, you are about to hear those hearings on radio, on September 1st, 2013, perhaps, or later on your device, online or offline, adding a new circle to this accumulation of concentric smoke rings.

[*October 30th 1947: The Actual Recording with Added Commentary by Eric Bentley*]



§ 5

Hearing Hearings, Part Two

[October 30th 1947: The Actual Recording with Added Commentary by Eric Bentley]

Welcome back. This is §ympo§ium. We just heard the hearings of Bertolt Brecht before the House Un-American Activities Committee held on Oct 30th, 1947. Between October 20th and October 30th, the HUAC investigated the so-called "Communist Infiltration of the Motion-Picture Industry" by interrogating twenty-four witnesses associated with Hollywood at that time. Five of them were considered friendly witnesses to the anti-communist cause (Ronald Reagan, Ayn Rand, Gary Cooper were amongst them) and nineteen were considered unfriendly. From those scheduled to appear before the committee, eight did not show up, and ten appeared but refused to answer the committee's questions claiming that the committee's activity was unconstitutional. They thenceforth became known as the "Hollywood Ten." Besides these ten people, there was an eleventh man who had been called to testify the last day of the hearings. The eleventh man in the Hollywood Ten was Bertolt Brecht.

Our hearings of the hearings, in two parts, included a one-month interlude--an interlude from which, by the way, I am writing and reading this. I sincerely hope that you, dear listener, survived the very dangerous month of September. For me, that's still the future. I am, so to speak, sending you an audio postcard from an airplane in between time zones. One side of the postcard is this text; the other shows Eric Bentley holding a portrait of Bertolt Brecht--the cover of his Folkways record --Brecht wearing an unusual suit, a tie, his round glasses, and speaking in front of several microphones in some sort of court room. Brecht is facing the Un-American Activities Committee, which remains out of the picture. At times, Eric Bentley described the hearings in terms of a "Brechtian tragicomedy," and other times he described the event with a formula of his predilection--the biologist being taken as an object of study by apes, meaning that a very odd and clumsy form of theater was organized to host, or should I say to encircle, one of the foremost masters of the modern dramatic device: B.B, the eleventh man.

Many comparisons are plausible, but two come especially to mind. First, let's not forget that, while the gang of apes prepares the theater scene, the biologist is forced into it by means of a subpoena. The band of apes is eager, and the biologist, reluctant to participate. The latter decides to play the game until he can take the first exit, in a similar situation to the protagonist of Julio Cortazar's story "Instructions for John Howell." The character goes to the theater to see a play, and in the middle of it he is taken backstage, given costumes and instructions, and thrown on stage to replace an actor. Then he understands other



actors are also kidnapped members of the audience. I see in this a strong parable about the artist's political engagement, although I am pretty sure Brecht would disagree with my vision.

Second comparison, the evolution of the hearings--from tension and hostility on the part of the committee members and the audience, to some sort of hysterical exhilaration and feeling of general fraud, *cachondeo*--makes me think of famous fictive or reconstructed trials where the search for judicial truth is ridiculed as a grotesque masquerade. Besides, of course, the fraudulent trial in Brecht's *Mahagonny*, I remember the Stalinist trial in Costa-Gavras's film *The Confession*--which, I believe, is a pertinent comparison. One of the accused, as he stands up for public interrogation, loses control of his pants. They drop. There's confusion and exhilaration. The tribunal highly disapproves this accident, and insults the witness. Exhilaration in trials is such a locus. It's one of the few moments when the audience participates in a manifest manner. What is the difference between the theater audience and the trial audience? The differences are dim, indeed. By the way, it wouldn't be illogical if one had to purchase a ticket to attend a trial. This said, Brecht was lucky to perform in this un-American circus, despite the ruthless bureaucracy and the bad jokes and the absurd spectacle and all you want. He would not have been so lucky under a Stalinist regime, he who spent the last decade of his life wearing an appalling Stalinist disguise. Had Brecht been an American citizen, he would have been blacklisted--in other words, he would have had to work at a factory to support himself, for example--in other words, he would have lived to keep writing, anyhow. Had the trial happened in some sinister basement of a government building in Moscow, we would not even have a transcript. It goes without saying that I admire Brecht the skeptic, but I loath his Stalinistic acquiescence and his inclination for propaganda. We may consider the latter a result of a historical entrapment--but that could never work as an alibi. Did Brecht refuse to see the bullet that went into Tetryakov's head, along with many other bullets, ten years before his deposition in DC? Would Tetryakov's trial be included in Brecht's utopian theater of justice? I don't even know if Tetryakov had a trial. In the end, the artist always seems to suffer the effects of politics on levels his or her work cannot reach, and propaganda is the most unforgivable aesthetic mistake.

The hearings are interesting in their folds. If Bentley speaks about a Bechtian tragicomedy, the interrogator, Mr. Something, says it more clearly when he reads Tetryakov's article, evoking Brecht's project, in 1932, to organize a theater entirely devoted to re-enact the most interesting trials in the history of mankind. The investigator seems unaware of the fact that he is contributing to the making of one of those trials, and feeding Brecht's unrealized project with an incomparable material--he is putting Brecht on the scene of his own dreamed theater of justice. Bentley, on his side of things, will not be oblivious of this fascinating redundancy. His book *Thirty Years of Treason*, which compiles hundreds of transcripts of hearings before the HUAC, is an American script that could provide Brecht's trial theater with enough material for years of programming.

The courtroom is the stage were the tension between the truth and the appearance of truth is more palpable, and often more crude. It is the space of proof and falsification, the dissection table of responsibility. Brecht knows this well and walks the way of non-truth that leads toward the airport. He knows questions too can be true or false. For Brecht, the interrogation is based on false grounds; for him, being or not a communist is not the point;

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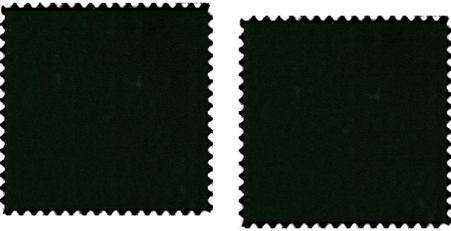
being un-American is not the point, as he had already had the experience of being un-German and becoming a stateless writer. Besides, he knows he may be, at worst, deported as was his friend Hanns Eisler. I suspect he would have been more ready to discuss why one is brought by circumstances to take one side or another. The interrogation mistakes the point, the committee refuses to hear his statement, and Brecht gives non-truth in return.

Brecht's memory performs a form of dribbling dance as soon as a name is named; the name can be recalled, not the date, or vice-versa, if the date is more relevant than the name, or vice-versa. A face goes perfectly blur, just as the page of a newspaper read decades ago, like in a dream; or only the trivial detail of a meeting is remembered. Sometimes, facts are drowned in generality--in that, too, Brecht's skill was quite remarkable. How can we be sure we went to that or that place, performance, reception, meeting--and if we really were there, who can assure it was not an accident? A conversation is turned inside out like a sock. And, this notwithstanding, Brecht doesn't exactly lie. "Are you certain about this and that?" "I think so. In my opinion, I am certain, for now." Call it a carefully measured excess of intellectual precaution. But when documentation offers no escape, then the mist of translation makes the searchers miss again their prey. To which extent is the writer to be blamed for the translations of his work--especially those that are made by bureaucrats--that is not an extent that can be measured. In the end, Brecht's memory refuses to be translated. Besides, the author is not responsible for the misreading of his work, even if misreading is favored, and in some cases, encouraged. Brecht knew his part so well that at some point the committee members seemed to forget theirs, out of sheer frustration or even unwilling amusement. Brecht is not a sphinx like he is in his writings; he is rather one of those characters in Chouang-Tzu's allegories--Mr. Elusiveness handling the questions of Mr. Something.

But now, I would like to highlight another aspect of the recording, no less elusive. Listen to this. Can you hear the ice cubes?

[Excerpts from the Hearings]

Water, or is it scotch, ice cubes, hands manipulating something blindly before the microphone... I mean, before the blind microphone... Somewhat the listener must take the standpoint of the recording device. I can't help being caught in the illusion that the recorder is on the other side, in the hearings room--inside the radio set that is being recorded. But no, it's actually encircling it, as Bentley is encircling it, as we are encircling the recording now, as I am myself encircled in the recording that is closest to the time surface. Where is the hearing room? Where is the hand? Background noises merge. If we believe what Bentley and the record's booklet and other books tell us, if we believe these hearings were recorded from a radio set while broadcast live, then we have to cope with a few other assertions. The microphone, through which we hear the voices of the witness and the committee members, and the recording device that is preserving that event for us, the future, exist in two different dimensions, and the distance between them is insurmountable. There are microphones everywhere in the hearing room, and only one recording device in the radio room of 1947. And then there is Bentley behind a glass in the spring of 1963; and us, in 2013; and so on. And thereby we can presume the differences



between the noises of the record, the various layers of recording, and the marginal noises of the actual recorded scene, and the artificial and non artificial background noises I have added. But where is the water, where is the hand dropping ice into a glass? These noises are like moldings on a wall, delimiting the recording and holding the imprint of its present time(s), parentheses around the 's.' The historical truth of the recording is encrypted in its cracks and hiss, its noise, or what Adorno seemed to call the "hear-stripe," whose texture collates with that of time itself. Like a chorus, the various layers of background noise perform a dialog between the historical elements of the recording--some of them fictive, perhaps--the situation contained in it, and its aural surfaces. The needle ploughs through the years. The record itself is but a plough, making a tight spiral. Now, if you cut through the spiral and look at its section, what you will see is the concentric rings of time within the recording, like concentric years on the section of a sequoia trunk. The trunk is covered with historical dates. And you, dear listener, are that point outside of the sequoia trunk.

M. C.
October 2013

Sonnets to the Critics

In Rebuttal

*od critics who reject my fairest song
And spatter my fine shirt with printer's ink
bellow bitterly you do me wrong
Were I not suffocated by your stink.*