Bertolt Brecht: Two Poems on Dialectic

Many of Brecht’s poems, and perhaps all of his plays, either depict dialectical processes or encourage a dialectical attitude. Very few of his poems explicitly mention the term dialectic, and one of them mentions it only in its title. There is a gap of more than twenty years between the writing of the two poems transcribed below; the second of them was written two years before his death. At first sight, the two poems seem quite different in intention and spirit: in 1930, dialectic was a technique for changing the world; in 1954, a pleasure, like comfortable shoes! But the gap between them may not be as wide as all that.

In Praise of Dialectic

Today injustice goes with a certain stride,
The oppressors move in for ten thousand years.
Force sounds certain: it will stay the way it is.
No voice resounds except the voice of the rulers.

And on the markets, exploitation says it out loud:
I am only just beginning.

But of the oppressed, many now say:
What we want will never happen.

Whoever is alive must never say ‘never’!
Certainty is never certain.
It will not stay the way it is.

When the rulers have already spoken
Then the ruled will start to speak.
Who dares say ‘never’?

Who’s to blame if repression remains? We are.
Who can break its thrall? We can.

Whoever has been beaten down must rise to his feet!
Whoever is lost must fight back!
Whoever has recognized his condition—how can anyone stop him?
Because the vanquished of today will be tomorrow’s victors
And ‘never’ will become: ‘already today’!

1930–31
Pleasures

The first look out of the window in the morning
The old book found again
Enthusiastic faces
Snow, the change of the seasons
The newspaper
The dog
Dialectics
Taking showers, swimming
Old music
Comfortable shoes
Taking things in
New music
Writing, planting
Travelling
Singing
Being friendly.

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