

‘EINE SPRECHMASCHINE BIN ICH’:
JOHANNES R. BECHER’S VERSION
OF MAJAKOVSKIJ’S *150 000 000*

The Aufbau edition of Johannes R. Becher’s complete works contains a number of translations of Soviet poetry which Becher made during the mid-1920s, once he had committed himself finally to the KPD. The pieces form part of his frenzied output of experimental and agitprop writing in these years, responding to the incessant demands which the Party leadership placed on its members, and are thus far from masterpieces of the translator’s art. In fact, since Becher had no Russian at all in this period, they are hurriedly conceived responses to interlinear translations made available by journalists on the radical press.¹ However, although these works are *Auftragsarbeiten*, finished off at high speed for the German market, it would be wrong to maintain that they are of no further interest for anyone interested in either Becher’s work or the reception of Soviet literature in Germany. On the contrary, I am going to argue that the way in which Becher responds to the work of the iconic Soviet writer Vladimir Majakovskij can tell us much about Becher’s attitude to the Soviet Union in his work and about the route taken by artists from avant-gardism to Stalinism. In order to do this, I shall first discuss the status of Futurist avant-gardism and the Soviet Union in Becher’s literary work in the 1920s, before looking specifically at his translation of Majakovskij’s long poem *150 000 000*.

Alongside that of August Stramm and Alfred Döblin, Becher’s work in the late 1910s and early 1920s can count as the most comprehensive German reception of the formal and stylistic preoccupations of Futurism. His association with the circle around Herwarth Walden’s journal *Der Sturm* during the war years, and, in particular, his relationship with Else Hadwiger, one of the first German translators of the work of the Italian Futurists Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Paolo Buzzi, brought him into contact with the small but enthusiastic band of German disciples of Futurism. Walden, who had published in *Der Sturm* a translation of Marinetti’s *Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista* in 1912, had been spreading the gospel of Italian Futurism as an antidote to the mainstream of German Expressionism.²

A number of scholars, notably Norbert Hopster, Peter Demetz, and Becher’s biographer Jens-Fietje Dwars, have acknowledged Becher’s debt to Marinetti and have traced the influence of Futurism in his work.³ Becher appropriated

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¹ Specifically, the editorial staff of Erich Baron’s journal *Das neue Rußland*. See the editors’ afterword, Johannes R. Becher, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by Johannes R. Becher-Archiv der Akademie der Künste zu Berlin, 17 vols, VII (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau, 1968), pp. 547–68 (p. 553). This edition will be referred to hereafter as *GW*.

² ‘Die futuristische Literatur—Technisches Manifest’, *Der Sturm*, 133 (October 1912), 194–95, trans. by Jean-Jacques (=H. Jacob).

³ See Jens-Fietje Dwars, *Abgrund des Widerspruchs: Das Leben des Johannes R. Becher* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1998), pp. 83–86; Peter Demetz, ‘The Futurist Johannes R. Becher’, *Modernism/Modernity*, 1 (1994), no. 3, 179–94; Norbert Hopster, *Das Frühwerk Johannes R. Bechers* (Bonn: Bouvier,

Marinetti's theory of the *parole-in-libertà* with a vengeance, producing work in which the word, freed of the constraints of traditional syntax, takes on a magical quality, bursting open the bounds of time and space and of the isolated human individual, and overcoming the chaos and suffering of the war. In the introductory essay to his verse collection *An Europa* of 1915, Becher sets out his Futurist programme:

Ja—: unser neues Buch, 'An Europa' betitelt, stellt sich nicht geringer die Aufgabe [. . .], heilige, schwerste, ruhmreichste Aufgabe, als Jüngster repräsentative Kraft aus dem gleichsam zu eiterigem Porphyrronnenem knirschendem! Blut-Chaos endloser wirr über-, in- und durcheinander geschobener Schlacht-Flächen aufgebrochener Azure umwalltes Menschheits-Monument vereinter europäischer Völker mitzuerrichten.⁴

For Becher, the renewal of poetic language is a utopian project in which the redemption of the world is achieved through its transformation in an avant-gardist aesthetic project, illustrated in programmatic poems from *An Europa*, such as 'Die neue Syntax':

Die Adjektiv = bengalischen = Schmetterlinge
 Sie kreisen tönend um des Substantivs erhabenen Quaderbau.
 Ein Brückenpartizip muß schwingen! schwingen!!
 Derweil das kühne Verb sich klirrend Aeroplan in Höhen schraubt [. . .]
 Ein junger Dichter sich Subjekte kittet.
 Bohrt des Objektes Tunnel . . . Imperativ
 Schnellst steil empor. Phantastische Sätzelandschaft überzüngelnd.
 Bläst sieben Hydratuben. Das Gewölke fällt.
 Und Blaues fließt. Geharnischte Berge dringen.
 So blühen auf wir in dem Glanz mailichter Überwelt.⁵

Futurism becomes for Becher a method for overcoming the crises of his past, an aesthetic of clarity and masculine hardness which overcomes the ambiguities of a decadent Modernism. Becher pursued this project with messianic zeal, since the state of aesthetic decadence which he wanted to overcome was associated in his mind with his own troubled mental state and with his own struggles with morphine addiction. He had suffered from a form of mental illness since a youthful suicide pact with an older woman had gone disastrously wrong, leaving her dead and him with serious injuries; his father, a highly placed Munich judge, had succeeded in covering up the affair, but the mental and physical effects of these events returned to torment Becher throughout his life. A key issue was the self-disgust brought on by his weakness in refusing to accept responsibility for his own actions, allowing his father to provide an interpretation which exonerated his son, by claiming that the woman, from a lower-class background (she was a cigarette vendor), had seduced and deceived him.

1969), esp. pp. 38–65. In his introduction Hopster suggests with some justice that Becher has often been assigned to Expressionism in a purely chronological sense, by his association with Expressionist artists in the so-called 'Expressionist decade' (p. 1).

⁴ 'Einleitung zu meinem neuen Versbuche', *GW*, xv, 20–21 (p. 20), originally published in *Die Aktion*, 45/46 (1915). The essay was not in fact included in the collection *An Europa*.

⁵ *GW*, 1, 228. Becher's habit of joining words by '=' is his way of finding a German equivalent for what Marinetti called 'analogies', in which words from disparate semantic fields, or with conflicting meanings, are forced into an explosive unity without the mediating presence of traditional grammar and syntax.

The characteristic image in Becher's work which links the concerns of psychology and aesthetics is that of apocalyptic bodily decay, e.g. in the poem 'Krankenhaus', which describes in drastic terms the physical and psychological symptoms of drug addiction: 'Gott, den wir in uns faulen lassen, | Verfärbt die Ströme unseres Blutes trüb' (*GW*, 1, 104–07). Becher's Futurist-influenced aspiration to purge language of ambiguity as a way of making it an effective weapon in the struggle against a corrupt society is, in fact, a fundamentally personal project: the new aesthetic will purge his own troubled psychology of the traumas and ambivalence of the past, and renew his personality in an act of creative will. Thus, ostensibly political statements in fact reflect intensely personal concerns:

hinweg über alle Depressionistischen, Zwitterhaften, Ungreifbaren, Unplastischen, Beschaulichen, Dekadenten, Exzentrischen, Lyrischen, Egozentrischen, Literarischen, Künstlerischen, Anarchistischen, Passiven, Mimosenhaften, Pazifistischen, Privaten . . . hinweg über sie alle und heran — hinauf — empor mit euch Imperativsten, Expressionisten, Hellstägigen, Morgendlichen, immer Attackenhaften, Athleten, Ethischen, Repräsentativen, Organisatorischen, Sozialistischen, Unpersönlichen, Totalen, Eindeutigen, Weiblosen, Fabelhaften, den Männern! den Politikern! den Tätern.⁶

The radical unity of the discourses of aesthetics, psychology, and politics which Becher strives for in this period clearly points forward to his later vulnerability to the attractions of totalitarian politics, for the new style will reflect the structure of a new state modelled on aesthetic lines: 'Stil: neue Grammatik, dem neuen Staat gleichgeordnet: Idealsyntax. Neuerungen in der Wort-, Melos-, oder Rhythmik-Technik, den sozialen Fortschritten des ersehnten Staat-Gebildes entsprechend.'⁷ This potent mixture provides the basis for his fascination with political and cultural events in Russia; while he is languishing in enforced isolation in his hospital bed, registering from a distance the carnage of the First World War battlefields, or doing the rounds of Munich's bohemian café culture, he projects his utopian longings onto a country which, after 1917, seemed to embody everything that he missed in Germany.

Although a fascination with Russian culture and the great changes wrought by war and revolution was not confined to left-wing intellectuals in Germany, but affected figures across the political spectrum, Becher seems to have experienced this attraction with unusual intensity. Michael Rohrwasser has shown that Becher's fascination with the Russian Revolution was fed by a disgust at the failure of radical politics in Germany to produce the utopian resolution which he strove for in his work.⁸ The Bolshevik Party, with its (seemingly) internally consistent and highly disciplined structure, is contrasted with the German revolutionaries who, according to Becher, suffered from just the problems of ambivalence and lack of structure against which he railed, and therefore could not offer him the perfect unity which he required. He had joined the newly

⁶ 'Gedichte für ein Volk', from the collection *Das neue Gedicht*, 1917, *GW*, 1, 408.

⁷ Letter to Heinrich F. S. Bachmair, 13 October 1916, in Johannes R. Becher, *Briefe 1909–1958* (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau, 1993), p. 57.

⁸ Michael Rohrwasser, 'Das rettende Rußland: Erweckungserlebnisse des jungen Johannes R. Becher', in *Deutschland und die Russische Revolution*, ed. by Gerd Koenen and Lew Kopelev (Munich: Fink, 1998), pp. 462–81.

founded KPD in late 1918, but Harry Graf Kessler reports in September 1919 that he had become disillusioned with its lack of internal discipline:

Becher hält nichts von der revolutionären Energie der Arbeiter. [. . .] Der ganzen kommunistischen Partei fehle es an Führern, an Erfahrung, an allem, was zu einer erfolgreichen Partei nötig sei. Sie sei außerdem von Spitzeln ganz zerfressen. Die Arbeiter faßten die ganze Revolution nur als ein Mittel auf, zu Autos und seidenen Strümpfen zu kommen. Revolutionär sei der deutsche Arbeiter nur, wo er Hunger habe. Eine kommunistische Revolution in Deutschland wäre nur möglich, wenn die Verbindung mit Rußland hergestellt werde, mit russischen Führern und russischen Rotgardisten.⁹

In a sense, with his stress on internal discipline and psychological unity, and with his progressive self-radicalization and periodic 'purging' of his past self, Becher is 'Bolshevizing' his inner life in advance of the KPD. Yet the Party itself is not ready for him, and he turns his back on it.

When we read Becher's comments in the context of his work as a whole in this period, it is clear that he is talking about his own psychological needs and literary project as much as about the politics of revolution in Germany. His disillusion with revolutionary politics lasted precisely as long as it took the newly founded KPD to sign up to the principles of Comintern membership in 1920, which demanded that revolutionary parties adhere to the Leninist avant-garde principle and carry out regular shake-ups among party cadres to promote discipline and loyalty. Although he did not finally commit himself again to KPD membership until 1923, after his period of disillusionment, his work and letters in 1921–22 show a renewed interest and a growing realization that the discipline which Party membership imposed on the individual seemed to offer a way to resolve his agonizing psychological tensions.

A peculiarity of Becher's approach to the Party was his apparent ability to identify absolutely with any collective or tradition in which he placed himself, in order to find a structure for his thinking about his own mental health problems which offered a potential resolution. The Party which Becher rejoined in 1923 was going through a period of internal reorganization following the failure of the armed revolts in 1918–19 and March 1921, after which membership of the Party had halved. These experiences, as well as the memory of the collapse of the Second International at the outbreak of the First World War, had shattered the blithe historical optimism of the workers' movement. The radical parties which came together to form the KPD saw the mainstream socialist movement as bourgeois traitors who had seduced the workers away from their 'true' selves; the dangers among their own ranks of becoming reconciled with a post-revolutionary situation, of putting ties to milieu, family, or other forms of identification above Party loyalty, had to be combated by the development of a priestly Party avant-garde on the Leninist model, which tried to create a sense of permanent crisis and mobilization in the Party.

In a strangely parallel process, Becher had been portraying his own psychology as an avant-gardist, 'true' self which struggles constantly to discipline an unwilling, bourgeois side with a tendency to disengagement, depression, and ambivalence. Constant, feverish Party work, and radicalization of both opi-

⁹ Diary entry 4 September 1919: Harry Graf Kessler, *Tagebücher 1918–1937* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1961), p. 167.

nion and means of artistic expression were the result, and Becher identified the structure of the Party, with its internal tensions and perceived solutions, as a model for writing about his own personality. So what seems to be an eminently political process of submission to the will of the Party was seen by Becher in aesthetic terms, as a struggle to find a language which adequately expressed the shape of the self and which 'overcame' the crises and ambiguities connected with his Expressionist period. Whereas both Expressionism and individualism were associated for Becher with his traumatic past, the Soviet Union, and the literary practices associated with it, seemed to offer ways of writing life stories into the broader story of history. They offered the legitimacy of a story bigger than the story of the individual self, as well as ways of telling that story which seemed sanctioned by a vast political movement in a country where history was being made.

Given Becher's engagement with Futurism and his view of the Soviet Party as the route to salvation, it would seem that his work offered fertile ground for a fruitful creative exchange with Majakovskij's poetry. Certainly, Becher aspired to the iconic, representative status in German literary life which Majakovskij had created for himself in the immediately post-Revolutionary period; there is a striking similarity in the two poets' self-stylization and their development from an extreme individualism to an attempt to fashion a poetic personality which fuses the mass experience of the mechanical, revolutionary age. Similarly, their work is profoundly shaped by the styles which they aim to overcome: in Becher's case, the Expressionism associated with the crises of his youth, and with Majakovskij, the religious-mystical world of Russian Symbolism and the isolated individualism of pre-Revolutionary Futurism. Yet there is little evidence that Becher was aware of Majakovskij's work before 1921–22 in anything other than a very general way; references to Futurism in his work and letters are always concerned with the theory and practice of the Italian Futurists who provided inspiration for the *Sturm* circle.

The high point of this preoccupation with Futurism comes in Becher's remarkable collection *Maschinenrhythmen*, which was written in 1922–23, although not published until 1926. These poems have in my view been unjustly neglected in assessments of Becher's work, which have tended to mourn him as being lost to Modernism once he repudiated Expressionism; they also provide a fascinating insight into the aesthetic stance of a Modernist poet who is about to commit himself to the Party. When we compare stanzas from *Maschinenrhythmen* with the voice which Majakovskij was developing in poems like *150 000 000*, we see that both poets had reached a similar aesthetic position at approximately the same moment, seemingly without any direct mutual influence.

This is a little difficult to establish precisely, since it was while writing *Maschinenrhythmen* that Becher received the commission from the Malik-Verlag to translate a selection of Majakovskij's verse. Towards the end of 1922 Majakovskij was conducting negotiations with the Malik-Verlag, which was making efforts to rush through translations of recent Soviet literature for a German readership, about a translation of *150 000 000*, as well as various shorter

poems.¹⁰ Although no mention is made in this correspondence of the identity of the translator or *Nachdichter*, Becher was the obvious choice among his contemporaries, and we can assume he began work on his version shortly after the contract with Majakovskij had been finalized in early 1923. Becher's version appeared as a separate edition in 1924.¹¹ It seems, therefore, that Becher received the commission at a point in his literary career where he was about to make a decisive break with the styles which he had explored in the first decade of his creative life, and was to commit himself to the polemical, operative work which the KPD demanded of him.

Becher's first great public statement of this new style, in which he announced his reinvention of himself as the most high-profile German Communist poet, was the epic poem *Am Grabe Lenins*, which appeared in March 1924, shortly after Lenin's death on 21 January (*GW*, VII, pp. 5–36). The similarity in tone, form, and imagery between this poem and Becher's version of *150 000 000* indicates that Becher was using the Malik-Verlag commission as an opportunity to explore new poetic methods and ways of reaching a larger audience than the tiny market for avant-garde, Futurist lyrics. Majakovskij's status as the representative Soviet poet was clearly attractive to Becher, and he was naturally unaware of the political difficulties which the Soviet Futurists were beginning to encounter, and of Lenin's disdain for Majakovskij's work.¹²

The image cultivated by Majakovskij abroad was in stark contrast to his increasing isolation in the Soviet Union: to Becher, troubled by fears of isolation and disengagement, Majakovskij represented a country where the poet assumed the role of spiritual leadership and rejoiced in spontaneous and enthusiastic communion with the masses. The pattern for such a view of the poet is set by the personality cult around Lenin, and the poet is imagined in the same terms, as the artist-demiurge, refashioning the raw material of the world in an act of creative willpower. Becher and Majakovskij share this avant-gardist attitude to the raw material of their art, namely language, and the vast transformations being wrought in the Soviet Union seemed to indicate to Becher that the world could be remade in the same way. Translations of his work which began to appear in large print runs in the Soviet Union once he had committed himself to the KPD could only confirm the impression that reinventing himself as the poet of the mass movement offered him a route to personal salvation.¹³

Thus, Becher's versions of Majakovskij's work are a committed, passionate aesthetic response, not to the text itself, which Becher could not read in the original, but to the image of a poet who embodied everything that Becher desired for himself. Indeed, Becher's version achieved a kind of notoriety in Communist literary circles as an example of an individualistic re-

¹⁰ See Hans-Dieter Müller, 'Der Malik-Verlag als Vermittler der jungen Sowjetliteratur in Deutschland 1919–1933', *Zeitschrift für Slavistik*, 7 (1962), no. 5, 18–45.

¹¹ *150 Millionen* (Berlin: Malik, 1924). I shall be referring to the version which appears in *GW*, VII, 491–542.

¹² For details of Majakovskij's struggle to have his epic poem published see Bengt Jangfeldt, *Majakovskij and Futurism, 1917–1921* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1976), pp. 108–15.

¹³ In particular, it was the poem *Am Grabe Lenins* which enjoyed the most success in Russian translation: cf. *GW*, VII, 570.

sponse to Majakovskij. In an essay in the exile journal *Das Wort* in 1938, written in the context of the controversy over Expressionism and Formalism currently being fought out in its pages, Franz Leschnitzer contrasts Becher's 'halb-expressionistisch' versions with a more faithful translation by Hugo Huppert. Leschnitzer, quite correctly, states that Becher has failed to bridge the gap between the poet's language and his own; Becher's poem is about himself and his own language. In fact, the aspects that Leschnitzer criticizes, 'eine dichterische Verwandtschaft, die entwicklungs-psychologisch auf dem Expressionismus als dem gemeinsamen Ausgangspunkt beider Lyriker beruht', are precisely what make Becher's version such a rewarding object of study.¹⁴

Majakovskij's *150 000 000* was published in 1921, after a long battle with the state publishing house Gosizdat. Majakovskij's intention had been to publish the text anonymously, as the product of the collective author whose presence is announced in the opening lines: '150 000 000 мастера этой поэмы имя' ('150 000 000 is the name of the one who crafted this poem').¹⁵ However, there was never any doubt as to his authorship, and he eventually allowed the text to be published under his own name; the text's games with authorship are in any case still part of Majakovskij's monumental self-stylization, showing how what is portrayed as an artist's 'submission' to a mass movement is in fact an assertion of the creative personality.

The poem is, among other things, an updating of the Russian *bylina* tradition, epic folk tales in which larger-than-life warriors vanquish monstrous enemies, usually modelled on Russia's Tatar conquerors. Majakovskij's hero, Ivan, is a composite being in which Russia's people and animal life are melted together into an invincible warrior, who strides across the Atlantic to the 'electro-magnetic city' of Chicago to defeat a heavily armed and monstrously fat Woodrow Wilson in single combat. Whereas in the *bylina* the hero, when sliced in half by the enemy, simply divides into two warriors, Wilson's sabre-cut into Ivan's flesh releases the swarming multitudes who overwhelm their enemy. Majakovskij's audacious updating of Russian folk tradition is achieved in verse of extraordinary linguistic invention, characterized by rhythmic and metapho-

¹⁴ Franz Leschnitzer, 'Majakowski in deutscher Sprache', *Das Wort*, 3 (1938) no. 1, 111–16 (p. 112). Leschnitzer's article, while seeming to take the official, 'anti-formalist' Soviet line, is in fact an attempt to defend certain aspects of Huppert's translations, in which he seeks to find German equivalents for Majakovskij's linguistic experimentation and exotic rhymes. However, the only translation of Majakovskij which appeared in *Das Wort*, his poem to Lenin ('Wladimir Iljitsch Lenin', *Das Wort*, 4 (1939) no. 1, 66–69), appears without reference to the translator, but with a curt note (p. 157) stating that such experimentation has been deliberately avoided. Huppert had been arrested on 12 March 1938 as part of the purge of the German exile community, and was released fourteen months later. Leschnitzer's reference to 'Expressionismus' is the standard formulation of the time which lumps together what we would now identify as the very different practices of Expressionism and Futurism.

¹⁵ Vladimir Majakovskij, '150 000 000', *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij v trinadcati tomach* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo chudožestvennoj literatury, 1955–61), II (1956), pp. 115–64 (p. 115). Further page references will be given in the body of the text. I shall not attempt to give a comprehensive account of Majakovskij's text, but shall refer only to those aspects which are relevant to Becher's aesthetic development. The translations of Majakovskij's lines are my own; I have attempted to render the literal content of the verses, rather than making any attempt to convey the poetic qualities of the original.

rical leitmotifs which pit 'heroic' stanzas against popular and marching song forms, bound together by his typically eccentric rhymes.

Naturally, working from an interlinear translation, Becher is unable to do justice to these features of the poem, and the absence of a tradition comparable to the *bylina* in Germany to provide a recognizable structure for the plot means that it is often hard to follow what is happening in Becher's version. Indeed, Becher often allows his own invention to take over, seemingly inspired by a fleeting image in the original to spin out a passage in which he deals with his own preoccupations. For example, Becher's rendering of Majakovskij's opening statement of aesthetic and political intent gives us a clear idea of the differences between the two poets' aesthetic strategies. Majakovskij's opening lines are a masterpiece of compression: imagery, rhythm, and rhyme combine to illustrate the unity of aesthetic and political practice which is Majakovskij's aim:

1 50 000 000 мастера этой поэмы имя.
Пуля — ритм. Рифма — огонь из здания в здание.
1 50 000 000 говорят губами моими.
Ротационкой шагоб в булыжном верже площадей
напечатано это издание.

(p. 115)

1 50 000 000 is the name of the one who crafted this poem. | Bullet—rhythm. Rhyme—fire leaping from building to building. | 1 50 000 000 speak with my lips. | This edition is printed in the rotary press of stamping feet on the cobbled squares.

Becher's rendering reflects his concern with using language as a weapon to inflict violence on a world imagined in aesthetic terms, yet his work, in contrast to Majakovskij's, lives by verbal excess rather than concentration:

Einhundertfünfzig Millionen:
Das ist der Name des Dichters dieses Gedichts.
Geschoßhagel prasselnd:
Dies ist der Rhythmus.
Feuerböen geschleudert zickzack,
Schlagwetter, Tretminen —
Plätze platzen,
Haus hüpfte an Haus. —
Eine Sprechmaschine bin ich.
Pflastersteine wirbelten.
Euere Schritte preßten den Böden sich ein
Klirrend, als Buchstaben:
Einhundertfünfzig Millionen:
Stampft!!
Und also gedruckt ward hier diese Ausgabe. —

(p. 491)

Majakovskij's comparison of his elaborate rhyming schemes to fire leaping from building to building becomes, possibly through a mistranslation, one of Becher's characteristic images of urban chaos and destruction, which mingle extreme violence with absurd ironic distancing. (This may, of course, also be a tactical omission on Becher's part, since he had no intention of employing a

ing to these ideas in his own terms, Becher transforms Majakovskij's Chicago from the shimmering electro-magnetic city into a madhouse of modernity run apocalyptically wild:

Chicago: Stadt,
 Auferbaut auf einer Schraube!
 Elektro=dynamo=mechanische Stadt!
 Spiralenförmig —
 Auf einer stählernen Riesenscheibe —
 Jeden Stundenschlag
 Sich um sich selbst drehend —
 5000 Wolkenkratzer —
 Granitene Sonnen!
 Die Plätze:
 Kilometerhoch in den Himmel galoppieren,
 Menschenmillionenüberkrabbelt,
 Auf Stahlrossen geflochten,
 Fliegende Broadways.
 An den Wimperspitzen
 Klebt knisternd dir
 Elektrisches Licht . . .

(p. 501)

This last image is a telling alteration of an image in Majakovskij's text which describes how even the eyebrows of the inhabitants are lifted using electricity:

В Чикаго,
 чтоб брови поднять —
 и то
 электрическая тяга.
 (p. 130)

In Chicago, even raising your eyebrows—is done by electricity.

Becher's version of this image is of a piece with his concern with the fate of the individual's subjectivity in the modern city, describing the effect of the magical electrification of life on the fragile body, producing a mixture of desire and horror. Similarly, Majakovskij's lines on the high life in Chicago's bars ('В Чикаго у каждого жителя не менее генеральского чин. | А служба — в барах быть, кутить без забот и тягот' ('In Chicago, every citizen has at least a general's rank | And their duties—sitting in bars, carousing without a care in the world') (p. 130)) are transformed into images of psychological violence and intoxication:

Und du schlürfst in Bars,
 In elektrisch=sprühenden Schalen,
 Die von dem Mixer kredenzt,
 Den elektrischen Yankee=sift=saft.
 God save the drink!
 Schön ist so ein Elektrik=Wahn! . . .
 Menschenlippen,
 Elektrisch wispernd,
 Wachsen auf Kehlenröhren,
 Blattförmig.
 Schädelbomben gewittern;

Gehirnbahnen:
 Tempo:
 Explosionen expreß:
 Süß schmeckt
 Dynamit = Salz!!!
 Wahrhaftig:
 Ein Fabelwesen ist so ein
 Chicago = Mensch!!

(pp. 502–03)

Much of Becher's version at this point is so far from the original that one can no longer talk about mistranslation or misunderstanding; instead, Becher is pursuing his own obsessions in a way which shows that this text stands at a crucial turning point in Becher's poetic career. Whereas much of his earlier work had been concerned with exploring decay and violence against his own body as a way of finding metaphors for his own state of mind, here he projects these fantasies onto a clearly defined, externalized enemy. Association with the Communist movement gives him a political explanation for psychological problems: decadence, decay, and mental anguish are simply products of the doomed bourgeoisie, and of his own bourgeois upbringing, and will therefore be overcome when this class has been eradicated.

For this reason, we can read Becher's response to Majakovskij's descriptions of other artists in *150 000 000* as self-portraits which set out conflicting sides to his own character, a struggle which must be resolved if he is to commit himself to the KPD. We have already seen how Becher was using the vocabulary of violence to describe his need to overcome his traumatic past, even before he entered the Party, and how the KPD provided him with a persuasive political justification for radical surgery on his own personality. This process continues in the 1920s in a number of works for which *150 Millionen* provides the experimental springboard: among others, the novel *Levisite* provides an explicit and violent reckoning with his upbringing, and Becher's biographer Jens-Fietje Dwars has identified convincingly a number of hidden self-portraits in figures of decadent artists in stories like *Der Bankier reitet über das Schlachtfeld* (1925) (Dwars, pp. 291–93 and 497).

Becher's rendering of Majakovskij's description of the decadent poets who surround Wilson is a case in point. The original uses a few terse lines in the context of the build-up of tension before the duel begins, where the inhabitants of America are challenged to decide on which side they will stand (ermine and beaver pelts on the one side, working clothes on the other):

К бобрам —
 декадентов всемирных строчки.
 К блузам —
 футуристов железные строки.

(p. 149)

To the beaver pelts—the silly little verses of decadents the world over. | To the overalls—the iron lines of the Futurists.

Becher expands this couplet beyond all measure to twenty-three lines, providing what seem in the context of his other work in this period to be two self-portraits:

one of the suffering, decadent Expressionist drug addict which he had been, and the other the confident Futurist who sweeps away the past:

Ein Weltschmerzdichter,
 Glaswangig,
 Mit Haschisch genährt:
 Mit chinesischer Tusche
 Auf Zandersbüttlen
 Kritzelt er phosphoreszierende Reimreihen.
 Der Futuristen eisern = gehackte Marschlieder
 Befeuern der Rußgesichter
 Gellschallend den Schlußreim nachjauchzende
 Millionen = Chöre.
 Muskelstraffe Schenkelbeine
 Bestampfen paukend den Boden.
 Noch formlose Klumpen,
 Aus magnetischen Feuern geknetet,
 Aufleuchten,
 Signale der Zukunft,
 Der neuen Dichter prophetische Worte.
 Schwirrend —
 Rotierend —
 Maschinen = Rhythmen —
 Tönende Liniengefüge —
 Elektrik = Manifestationen —
 Flaggen = Rot auf Telefunken = Stationen.
 (pp. 523–24)

The reference in these lines to Becher's own collection *Maschinenrhythmen* is a clear indication that this is a statement of intent to place himself firmly on the side whose supreme representative is Majakovskij, and which seems to offer the way to salvation. Needless to say, Majakovskij's cinematic technique of rapid intercutting as a way of building up narrative tension before the duel becomes lost in this linguistic assault; the plot of *150 000 000* (such as it is) is clearly not Becher's main concern. Instead, Becher is pursuing his own project of violent self-radicalization as a preparation for committing himself to the KPD.

Majakovskij's first two chapters, in which he describes the creation of the massive body of his hero Ivan through the melting together of Russia's flora and fauna, provide Becher with an ideal opportunity for exploring his favourite theme, the physical manifestation of psychological and political conflict. Becher's entire poetic output expresses a continual striving for wholeness and healing, where mental torment and the clash of class positions within the individual are expressed in the obsessive rending and reassembling of bodies. The impression that reports of wartime carnage had made on the ailing poet had led him to produce collection after collection of war poetry in which his longing for healing is projected onto fantasies of violence and bodily resurrection on the battlefield. In the post-war period, with the failure of revolution in Germany to produce the expected transformation, Becher looks to the Soviet Union for the fulfilment of his fantasies of the radical unity of political and aesthetic practice, and of individual and collective. His use of body imagery in his work changes to reflect this, producing images of hard masculine bodies ('Arbeiter = Völker! Muskel =

Beat, drum! Drum you drum! | We were slaves! No longer slaves! | Drum! Drum! Drum! |
 Hey, you steel-chested! You strong ones, hey! | Beat, drum! Drum, beat! | Either—or. |
 You fall or you stand | We will beat! We beat! Have beaten! | On the drum!

Becher's version recognizes this section as a moment of climax and concentration, although it does suffer from the odd mistranslation (for which he himself is presumably not to blame), e.g. in rendering the words 'Будем бить! Бьем! Били!' as 'Das war. Das ist. Das wird sein', instead of the more correct 'Wir werden schlagen! Wir schlagen! Wir schlagen!' Yet it is telling for the direction in which Becher's work was heading in this period that he allows his text to be carried forward purely by enthusiasm and exclamation marks rather than by any concern with metre:

Trommle, du,
 Trommle! . . .
 O ihr Stahlbrüstigen! O ihr Kraftäugigen!
 Trommelt! Trommelt!
 Entweder — oder.
 Zweierlei nur:
 Als Gefallener oder als Kämpfender. — — —
 Trommelt, trommelt, trommelt!!!
 Das war.
 Das ist.
 Das wird sein . . .
 Marschier! Marschieren wir!!!

(pp. 499–500)

Becher's account of the creation of Ivan proceeds along similar lines, so that the hero in his text is a composite of his own obsessions, rather than of Majakovskij's. In essence, Becher characteristically spends far more time on descriptions of bodies, and his Ivan is a more specifically phallic (and religious) figure than Majakovskij's: 'O Rußland! | Der Turm deiner Stärke heißt Ivan, | Und alle deine Völker, sie lobpreisen ihn' (p. 499). He also often seems more concerned with describing the corrupt old world than the healthy new.

Becher's additions to the original transform Majakovskij's brief invocation of the old Russia squandered by the *ancien régime*:

Пропала Россейчка!
 Загубили бедную!
 Новую найдем Россию.
 Всехсветную!

(p. 117)

Dear old Russia has fallen! They've done the poor thing in! | We'll find a new Russia!
 Universal!

into a set of images which portray Russia as a decaying body ('Lange genug gefüttert mit Verwesungsgestank!') in expectation of physical resurrection:

Verloren ist Rußland, das arme.
 Zerschmissen zu einem Haufen ist Rußland,
 Ein knöcherner Brei.
 Auf!

text which deal specifically with religion. Majakovskij is concerned to overcome the old faith and develop a new cult of the 'бог-человек' (god-man) (p. 123); miracles are possible through a materialist faith in technology and the unity of the masses in an act of revolutionary will. Becher ignores these more philosophical concerns, since his version is an absolutely personal response in which the imagery of the body becomes an end in itself, rather than a political allegory. Thus, where Majakovskij's new religion is built on the unity of human and machine: 'Вместо вер — | в душе | электричество, | пар' ('Instead of faith — | in the soul | electricity, | steam') (p. 125), Becher adds imagery which puts the emphasis clearly on the physical body: 'Athletisch = kühn sein, die Muskeln gestrafft, | Voll von der Religion der Aktivität! | Deine Seele: | Dampf, Preßluft Elektrizität!!!' (p. 498). He essentially ignores Majakovskij's philosophical concerns, instead contrasting a new religion of unambiguous physicality with the old world of 'poetischen Schwächlingen' and 'Weichlingen, molluskenhaft' who cover everything with their 'schmierigen Reimsauce' (p. 499). Becher has more or less eliminated those aspects of the original which conflict with his portrayal of his own inner conflicts.

Becher's version of Majakovskij's epic appears at a key moment in the development of the German poet's work, where the relationship between his Modernist aesthetic practice and his political stance is changing rapidly. His version is inspired less by a desire to convey the flavour of the original to a German-speaking public than by a need to establish himself as the iconic poet of the German revolutionary movement, corresponding to the image which Majakovskij projected outside the Soviet Union. As such, Majakovskij's text is used as a source of legitimacy for Becher's new aesthetic project, which is to integrate an avant-gardist aesthetic practice with the political practice of the revolutionary mass movement. Since the extreme individualist avant-gardism which preoccupied him during the war years had failed to produce the desired psychological and political transformation, he needed to look for other sources of legitimacy for his work, where the effectiveness of art as a means of acting on the world could be guaranteed by an imagined unity with the revolutionary mass movement. The transformations being wrought in the Soviet Union, seemingly the product of creative willpower, looked to an artist like Becher to be the realization in practice of his avant-gardist aesthetic programme. That Majakovskij, the poet who, more than any other, seemed to embody this unity of the artist and the masses, was himself becoming increasingly isolated in the post-Revolutionary Soviet Union, was an irony that was completely lost on his translator.

Becher's version of *150 000 000* is an eccentrically personal response to a text which presents formidable problems for the translator. His response is to use the interlinear version supplied by his publisher as a springboard for pursuing his own personal obsessions, using Majakovskij's name to support his exploration of a new style more appropriate to the role of pre-eminent German radical poet, to which he aspired. If we are to sum up the significance of the turning point at which Becher found himself when he was contracted to produce this work, we can perhaps frame it in these terms: his avant-gardist practice during the war years, in which aesthetics required no justification outside itself, since the world

was seen in aesthetic terms as material which the artist could mould through acts of pure creative will, had not produced the desired transformations, but had led to a feeling of failure, isolation, and disappointment. However, abandoning avant-gardism altogether, or worse still, severing the link between aesthetic and political practice, would have meant abandoning the fruitless quest for harmony and healing through radical self-overcoming. By committing himself to the KPD and imagining himself as a German Majakovskij, Becher was able to cling to his avant-gardist view of the purpose of art while changing his style to suit the changing conditions. What Becher's version of *150 000 000* shows us is that his reasons for committing himself to the Communist Party were primarily aesthetic rather than political.

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