

## *The Novels of Willi Bredel [1931/2]*

### I. FOR DIALECTICS AS A LITERARY PRINCIPLE\*

Bredel's two novels hold an important place in the development of proletarian revolutionary literature in Germany.<sup>1†</sup> With the happy combination of both genuine talent and militant class standpoint, Bredel has chosen themes that are not only central to the interest of every worker, but open up a new landscape for all readers. Neither of his subjects, the effects of the beginnings of rationalization on the working class, and the everyday life and struggle of a proletarian tenement block, have ever before been depicted in Germany from the proletarian class position.

This is no small thing. And yet it is by no means the whole of Bredel's achievement. In the organization of his subject-matter and the construction of his works, he shows a skilled hand, a sure political instinct and a militant combativeness. His first novel was already well constructed in this way, with its description of the preparation, outbreak and defeat of a strike in a factory. Here Bredel not only creates the outlines of a lively plot, through which the details of everyday working-class life are translated into elements and stages of the class struggle; over and above this, he shows that the entire action is only a single moment in the class war as a whole, which began before the novel opens, and will continue with undiminished vigour after the present battle is lost. This is undoubtedly a correct pattern for a proletarian novel. For it offers the possibility of fitting the whole significant class development within the factory (the struggle of the workers against the capitalists, the intervention of state power, the stratification of the workers, political divisions, the role of the social democrats and the trade union, the life of the Communist cells, etc.) into an artistic composition, which even though it forms a coherent narrative entity, still has no absolute beginning or end, but is portrayed as one part of the overall process.

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† See Notes at end of book.

The composition of the second novel marks a further step forward in this direction. Here Bredel extends still further the framework of his composition, setting himself the correct and important goal of depicting the life of the workers in concrete interaction with that of the other classes, in particular the petty bourgeoisie. Both politically and artistically this goal is absolutely correct, and an important development. For most works of our proletarian revolutionary literature suffer from the defect of taking as their theme either the contradiction between bosses and workers within the factory, or else that between the workers' state and the bourgeois state in a situation of acute class warfare — a narrowing of the field that sometimes even amounts to 'economism'. In this way, the political horizon is narrowed from one which, while 'national in form', poses the question at an overall level, to the isolated emphasis on a single aspect, no matter how important this might be. And this inevitably leads also to narrowness, insufficiency and impoverishment from the artistic standpoint as well. It is against this tendency that Bredel stands out with such boldness and vigour. The content of this novel is the life of a working-class tenement. Here both workers and petty bourgeois of the most varied levels and political tendencies, Communists, social democrats, Nazis, apolitical, etc., live closely together and come into contact with one another in the most varied of ways in the course of their everyday life. A rent strike, and at the close of the book the Hamburg elections, provide the nucleus of the story around which the most diverse episodes of proletarian and petty-bourgeois life are colourfully hung, both political (Nazi attacks, demonstrations, etc.), and private (an abortion tragedy, childbirth, the pawnshop, etc.). Here again, we have a picture that is correctly conceived from the standpoint of its content, and thus once again has genuine epic potential: once more the framework and pattern for a fine proletarian revolutionary novel.

Unfortunately, however, in both cases it is no more than a framework or pattern, an outline and no more. For Bredel's novels fail to develop far beyond the conception stage. To summarize the basic weakness in Bredel's artistic creation, we can say that there is an artistically unresolved contradiction between the broad narrative framework of his story, which includes everything that it essentially requires, and his manner of telling it, which is partly a kind of journalistic reportage, and partly a kind of public speech. The bare bones of the novel are correct, but there is nothing more than these bare bones. What is needed to make them come alive, i.e. living human beings, with living, changing

and developing relationships between them, is as good as completely lacking. True, Bredel does provide sketches of his various characters, describing quite well, even, their external features, and emphasizing certain of their character traits, etc. But the whole thing still remains rigid. His characters fail to grow and develop. At most, they change suddenly overnight. Not that this is inherently impossible, but it works only if it is artistically prepared, if there is a transformation from quantity (i.e. small changes that might well remain unnoticed even for the people who undergo them) to quality, and not just a sudden pistol-shot. This unprepared and sudden transformation fails to ring true in its artistic effect even if it is abstractly possible. Bredel's characters, therefore, turn out to be little more than what in theatrical language used to be called '*Chargen*' [stereotypes]: they possess a fixed and characteristic feature (possibly more than one), which is repeated and underlined at every possible (and even impossible) opportunity. But in this way the characters fail to come alive, even if these features are observed correctly. A novel simply demands a different kind of characterization than a journalistic report: what may be good enough for the one is completely inadequate for the other.

This inadequate characterization is most evident in Bredel's language. With rare exceptions, this is little more than the language of press reports. In some passages this is justifiable. In describing a public meeting or a party cell in session, for instance, it is quite possible to depict this simply and dryly, as a straightforward report, so as to bring out the political content in the speeches, interjections, etc. Even here, however, it should be stressed that real political life is richer and more finely textured and alive than in Bredel's depiction. If Comrades Thälmann or Neumann,<sup>2</sup> for example, speak on the same theme or political line that Bredel portrays, their speeches are completely different in their construction, language, tone, etc. Bredel always gives his political speeches the same tone (simply with the already mentioned stereotyped trimmings, which do not make things any better). In language, too, therefore, he lags behind the reality that he seeks to depict in his art, stuck in a pale reproduction of this.

What is still worse is that he uses the same kind of language outside meetings, sessions and reports. I shall quote just a few random examples. Two workers are discussing literature. One of them says about Emil Ludwig<sup>3</sup>: 'He is certainly an unusually absorbing and instructive historian.' The other answers: 'He is undoubtedly a very interesting literary figure, but an unreliable historian.' In another case, a

woman worker goes to the pawn-shop, and Bredel describes her horror at it as follows: 'In the pawnshop she came to know the whole wretchedness of human poverty.' Then again, some workers are listening to the radio, and a woman Communist says: 'The radio is a mouthpiece of the ruling class, and every hour millions of people are manipulated and stupefied by it.' This abstract treatment of language necessarily leads many of Bredel's attempts to come to grips with concrete reality to collapse into absurdity and kitsch. To give yet another example, a Communist wants to get to know a non-party colleague whom he is working with on a committee, and has a little talk with him. All Bredel gives of the conversation are a few fragments, which neither succeed in characterizing the non-party man, nor the developing relationship between the two characters. As he sums it up: 'He now got to know a deeply honest and interesting person, who hid his understanding and heart behind a rough exterior.'

It would be very tempting to conclude from all this that what Bredel lacks is simply the 'technique' of writing. But this is not in fact the problem. Of course, Bredel is short on technique, too. Yet it would be highly misleading for a critic to say to him: Yes, your novels are quite correct in their content and world-view, they are Marxist and politically exemplary, all you need is to improve your 'technique' of writing and master its form, and you will write a great proletarian novel.

In reality, form and content are far more closely linked, and their dialectical interaction – despite the predominance of the class content – is far more intimate, mediated and complex than would permit us to answer the question in so mechanically simple a way.

First of all, the portrayal of human character is not a 'technical' question, it is above all a question of applying dialectics in the field of literature. In every introductory course in dialectical materialism we stress the difference between metaphysical and dialectical thought; we emphasize time and again that dialectical thought dissolves the rigid appearance of things, which obtains also in thinking, into the processes that they really are. Doesn't this basic principle of dialectics hold good for literature as well? In the everyday class struggle, any party cadre would very rapidly come to grief if he treated the milieu in which he had to act, and which is made up of human beings (individuals, groups, masses), metaphysically rather than dialectically. Is it not a correct demand that literature, in its methods of portrayal, should attain at least the same level that is beginning to be generally reached in the everyday practice of class struggle, often by mere instinct, and despite all errors? I would say we are justified in putting higher demands than this. The

demand, for instance, that the highest achievements of our literature should be measured, as far as their deployment of dialectics goes, against the highest achievements of КРД [German Communist Party] and Comintern theory and practice.

This lack of dialectics in characterization gives rise to a distortion in content, too. As a result of the mode of presentation we have described, Breidel – quite unintentionally – inevitably makes light of the difficulties that the development of the revolution comes up against. For these difficulties can only be portrayed in literature if our writers succeed in depicting, in a genuinely living and palpable way, the obstacles that keep good workers away from the revolutionary movement, and the currents that drive even the lower and proletarianized stratum of the petty bourgeoisie into the camp of counter-revolution – only if they show us how hard a road these sections of the masses face in attaining ideological clarification. Breidel however takes a short cut – not that this is his alone. He offers results, but not the process with its obstacles, difficulties and setbacks. This is bound to falsify his picture as well. For Breidel does indeed portray the upward course of the revolutionary movement. But by failing to depict the obstacles, he necessarily gives a distorted view. The honest non-party man becomes a Communist overnight; the badly functioning cell suddenly takes on the leadership of the strike; in public meetings, the revolutionary line always prevails against the trade-union bosses, and so on.

All this is in no way a matter of inadequate ‘technique’, but of lack of dialectics.

Many comrades will certainly think this criticism too hard. But its author is only applying the words that Comrade Stalin expressed in regard to another literary question: ‘Since when have Bolsheviks feared the truth?’ Our proletarian revolutionary literature has had to fight for its existence, and has proved its right to exist in hard struggle. Our proletarian revolutionary writers are proven and devoted soldiers of their class. And now, when the tasks facing us on all fronts of the class struggle are greater than ever, they must not lag behind the general movement. On the contrary, they must confront their failings by unsparring self-criticism, unembellished exposure of this backwardness and its causes, and by setting themselves tasks that correspond to the general level of development of the revolutionary class struggle. By tenacious and deliberate work, by learning to deploy materialist dialectics in literary creation, they must eliminate these weaknesses as quickly as possible.

This criticism of Breidel’s works is also in the fullest sense of the word

a self-criticism. The problem is in no way that Bredel as an individual has failed to attain the level of our proletarian revolutionary literature, but rather that we have all failed to match the level of the objective situation in Germany in our literary activity (both creative and critical). Bredel is one of our best writers, in terms of his talent and his potential for further development. His failings are less individual failings than the general failings of the whole literary movement. If we are to uncover these failings by self-criticism, therefore, we must not fall into the opposite error of underestimating Bredel and forgetting that his novels, for all their weaknesses, have also great merits. For a start, the revolutionary literature of the proletariat has struggled through and justified its existence. And how could it have done this, without possessing at least some literary qualities? At the start of this essay I expressly stressed these qualities, and I emphasize here again that Bredel's novels open up a new landscape, and remain therefore useful, instructive and stimulating reading, even indispensable reading for anyone who wants to understand the everyday life of the workers in Germany today. Secondly, the sharpness of my criticism also implies a recognition of our achievements so far, and not least Bredel's own achievements. For if Bredel were simply a modest beginner, without artistic talent worthy of recognition, it would be necessary to cherish and protect the young plant from the harshness of the elements. We are beyond that stage, however, and not least due to the achievements of Bredel himself. Because Bredel is talented (as are also other proletarian revolutionary writers), and because his writing has reached a certain level already – because he deserves to be read! – we must make higher demands of him. And this is possible only by way of sharp criticism and self-criticism. It is precisely what is good and worthy of recognition in Bredel's writing that makes it possible and necessary to take one step further and require higher achievements of him (and of others of our writers, too), i.e. a real mastery of materialist dialectics and the matching of the performance of our movement in other fields. We can and must demand this, as we are convinced that Bredel is in a position to fulfil such demands.

## 2. AGAINST THE THEORY OF SPONTANEITY IN LITERATURE\*

I can only make a brief reply to Comrade Gotsche's article,<sup>4</sup> for he has not refuted my criticism of Bredel, but rather confirmed it on all points. Before I summarize these points, however, I should like to ask Comrade

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Gotsche – in the interest of our discussions, which are designed to be of practical benefit to the literature of the revolutionary proletariat – to discuss with me in a comradely and less naive fashion. If working-class readers demand that the critic should ‘produce something better himself’, then Comrade Gotsche should explain to them that this is not the critic’s task. Views such as this are always widespread in the early stages of any new literature. Bourgeois literature also experienced this infantile disorder (in Germany, before Lessing). But are we really to draw our model from a period of bourgeois literature that has today become actually comic, from the period of its very first stammerings? It can of course happen that a good Marxist critic is also a proletarian revolutionary creative writer, but this is accidental, no matter how desirable it might be that our proletarian revolutionary writers should work with a Marxist consciousness so developed that they are themselves in a position to give a critical presentation of their creative methods. The great writers of the bourgeoisie’s revolutionary era, from Diderot through to Stendhal, and from Lessing to Heine, were capable of this almost without exception. Criticism in itself, however, has just as valid a place in the division of labour of our proletarian revolutionary literary movement as does creative writing, with its special allotted tasks: it has the task of applying materialist dialectics in the field of literature, of discovering and helping to elucidate those creative methods that best correspond to the problems of the class struggle at the time (both at the level of the everyday struggle, and in the great struggles of whole epochs), and of establishing their literary validity. In no way can it rest content with simply following critically in the wake of our writers; it must rather seek – with the aid of our whole inheritance – to comprehend the necessary developmental tendencies of the epoch, independently, if need be, and struggle for their realization, when necessary even against the present practice of the writers themselves. A Russian worker would look very surprised if it were suggested to him that he should perhaps demand better novels, short stories, poems, etc., from Comrade Averbach,<sup>5</sup> before the latter might venture to criticize such works.

Comrade Gotsche’s notes, in fact, show that he is not clear himself as to what the proper tasks of criticism are. He seems to equate criticism with criticism by the masses. This is the standpoint of spontaneity, one of the several residues of Luxemburgism in the German workers’ movement. It is very far from my intent here to underestimate the value of criticism by the masses. This is indispensable for the sake of es-

tablishing, broadening and deepening contact between our literature on the one hand, and the masses on the other. It is also of the greatest importance for the literary education of the masses, and for checking whether our literature really does give expression to the things that move the masses, and does so in a correct and penetrating way, rather than lagging all too far behind the development of the masses themselves. It is thus equally instructive and beneficial for both masses and writers. But criticism by the masses is not the same thing as criticism *per se*. And to put forward the idea that Marxist criticism, which leads and guides, pruning off erroneous developments in creative methods and struggling for correct developments, can be replaced by mass criticism, is the same in the field of literary politics as if a party comrade were to propose that the work of central ideological and strategic leadership should be 'replaced' by spontaneous factory discussions. Certainly Comrade Gotsche doesn't want that. He just has not thought the matter through.

Gotsche's viewpoint is still full of elements of bowing to spontaneity. He says: 'We have made a breakthrough in our literature. It will improve and perfect itself only in the constant to and fro of the developmental process as a whole.' Does he mean automatically? Or as the spontaneous result of 'development'? Comrade Gotsche even takes over, without noticing it, the very terminology of the Russian spontaneity worshippers, who used to speak of the 'slow zig-zag course' of development, virtually equivalent to Gotsche's 'constant to and fro'. Any criticism that with relentless candour points out mistakes is obviously 'destructive' for this view of things.

But what concrete arguments does Comrade Gotsche raise against my criticism? In actual fact, he only confirms its central point. He says of Bredel that 'above all . . . he fails to make a dialectical analysis', etc., and his very terminology here (his definition of characters) shows that Comrade Gotsche is still very insecure in questions of materialist dialectics and their application to literature. Can he really maintain that Bredel's books are satisfactory works of art if they are wanting in the application of materialist dialectics? The gist of my criticism was precisely to expose this deficiency, and on this very point Comrade Bredel himself agrees with me. Comrade Gotsche also admits the point, but he resists its concrete applications in criticism. Is this consistent? Is it dialectical? In no way. And it follows from this false point of departure that he is unable to explain to the party cell functionary H. R.,<sup>6</sup> who holds that 'for us it is not only a question of "artistic" form, but of the

value of the book in the class struggle', that the contradiction constructed here between artistic form and impact in the class struggle is a purely bourgeois one. On the basis of spontaneity, it is precisely bourgeois ideologies that make their way into the workers' movement, as Lenin demonstrated in so masterly a way as far back as 1902. Comrade Gotsche makes deep obeisance to this spontaneity, both here and also elsewhere. In this way he drags our literature back, instead of helping it forward. Or does he believe that even if Breidel did have the powerful creative method of Gorky, his works would not have more impact and hence be of greater value in the class struggle? Comrade H. R. seems to equate this improvement with an improvement in sales. But does Comrade Gotsche also believe that the difference in impact between Breidel and Gorky lies only at this level?

Comrade Gotsche bows to spontaneity a further time when he excuses our particular backwardness on the literary front by saying that there is backwardness in other fields as well. But this is hardly a Marxist argument. It would be a pretty pass if one bad factory cell could appeal to the existence of another bad cell, instead of saying: we have fallen behind the possibilities that the objective situation offers, and we must now make up for lost time, catch up and overtake! And this is only possible if we are clearly aware of both the goal to be attained and the difficulties to be faced on the way towards it, of both the favourable objective situation and its possibilities, and of our own strengths and weaknesses – if we consciously resolve to eliminate this backwardness by our own activity, and not by relying on the spontaneity of the movement as a whole.

It is bowing before spontaneity yet a final time, when Comrade Gotsche appeals to the fact that worker readers say: 'This is how people really are'; 'Bredel has depicted all his characters properly', etc. This is to lead the discussion up a wrong path. In my criticism I reproached Breidel for writing a mixture of reportage and public speeches, instead of genuine literary portrayal. This is a question of creative method. The fact that the comrades in Hamburg recognize themselves in Breidel's depictions is neither here nor there. For they would obviously recognize themselves just as well in newspaper reports or public speeches that described their factories and streets, indeed even if these speeches were deficient even in their own terms. Can a bad public speech be made into a good one in this way, or any public speech into a literary portrayal? Of course not. No more than a photograph becomes a painting just because the person it depicts recognizes himself in it. What should

be discussed is rather this, whether speeches or reports can replace literary portrayal? Is reportage perhaps, as certain proletarian writers maintain, both here and in the Soviet Union, the correct 'contemporary' method for our literature? Or is it an inferior creative method, which has been superseded in the Soviet Union, and should be overcome in our case also? This would provide the subject for a very useful discussion. But using the spontaneous method of Comrade Gotsche, we fail even to pose the right questions.

I do not intend to get lost in details. Even though almost every sentence of Comrade Gotsche's needs correction, and especially his basic approach, which can only reinforce working-class readers in sticking to their spontaneous and backward ideas, I would rather call for a discussion on the really burning questions of our literature. For unfortunately both spontaneity and bowing before spontaneity still hold a very great place in it. Until these have been eliminated, we shall not eliminate our backwardness either. For this bowing to spontaneity is a way of papering over the cracks, a way of bowing to our own backwardness, of bowing to those petty-bourgeois ideological residues that exist also among worker readers and writers. Comrade Stalin's criticism of Slutsky,<sup>7</sup> and the articles and speeches by Comrade Thälmann, have given the entire German workers' movement an important push forward. Our task now is to take up the struggle against the ideological inheritance of the Second International concretely and energetically in the field of literature as well, and not to strengthen the workers in their false conceptions, in their clinging to the basis of the spontaneity theory.