

Birds and Bees. On Science, Politics, and Literature in Rosa Luxemburg's Thinking

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“Hardly anyone becomes a Marxist for primarily cultural or literary reasons, but for compelling political and economic reasons” (Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*)

“In the case of a true artist the social recipe he commends is of minor importance; the crucial aspect is the source of his art, his stimulating spirit, not the aim he sets for himself” (Rosa Luxemburg, “On Korolenko”, *Werke* ([Works], 4, 307)

This article deals with the literary criticism of Marxist thinker and agitator Rosa Luxemburg, considered in relation to her political thinking, not in its supposedly obvious causal connection, but against the backdrop of the scientific method that characterizes her entire oeuvre. While it is important to consider Luxemburg's take on – or continuation of – Marxism in order to grasp her intellectual profile, the focus here is on the formal structure of her thinking, that consists of an extensive absorption of knowledge information and a consistent dialogical mode of reasoning in accordance with it. These methodological principles, which in turn can be related to her early formation in the natural sciences, constitute the core elements of Rosa Luxemburg's sense of epistemic authority. It was the mode of reasoning she considered indispensable for an ethical progress of history.

The Luxemburg Revival

Literature as a cultural phenomenon does not constitute a systematic element in Luxemburg's work, neither in her theoretical and political writings nor in her correspondence, which makes up more than one third of her entire oeuvre. She was not a literary critic in the professional sense, like Georg Lukács,¹ or even in any politically directive sense, such as her contemporary Vladimir Lenin (1905/1967, 255-258). There are no references to her name in surveys of Marxist literary criticism (see Jameson 1971). Nonetheless, her writings reveal a life-long interest in and extensive reflections on literature that add up to an impressive index. There are only a handful of technically formal texts in which Luxemburg addressed literature expressly, the most extensive of which is her introduction to the autobiography “Die Geschichte meines Zeitgenossen” [“The History of My Contemporary”] by the Polish-Ukrainian-Russian writer Vladimir Korolenko (1853-1921), which she had translated into German during her time in prison in 1917 (*Werke* [“Works”], 4, 302-317).

Luxemburg's approach to literature hinges on the idea that as a form of art it expresses a great deal about society in an aesthetic and, accordingly, in a highly lucid manner that transcends mere documentation. It is in its formal nature that literature opens up channels for discussion and understanding beyond “determination of thought” (Jameson 1974, 161). Most of the material related to Luxemburg's “reading mind” (Jameson 1982, 71) can be found in her letters.² Since her collected works were (re)edited, updated, and completed from the late 1990s onward (the work of German

historian Annelies Laschitzka has been of major importance in this regard) research on Rosa Luxemburg's political and economic thinking has increased strongly. In the wake of this intellectual regeneration Luxemburg's accounts of literature and art have been addressed with a greater sense of sophistication than they had been during the Soviet era (Eder 1993, Hexelschneider 2003/2007). That Rosa Luxemburg's Marxism was received with unease (and censorship) in orthodox Marxist regimes is well-known today and does not need to be rehearsed here (Laschitzka 2004, 1/1, vii-xxxvii). But, in the case of her literary criticism and particularly from an angle that coalesces scientific argument, politics, and literature, it is interesting to look at an early edition of some of her writings on art and literature that was published in the Soviet Union (and in German translation in the GDR) in the early nineteen-seventies: *Schriften über Kunst und Literatur* ["*Writings on Art and Literature*"]. The editor was the Russian journalist and literary critic Marlen Korallow (1925-2012), who fashioned his first name out of the first two syllables of the names of Marx and Lenin. In his introduction, Korallow underscores Rosa Luxemburg's position within Marxist-Leninist aesthetics by means of a quote from a letter she wrote to a friend in March 1917. In that letter Luxemburg reflects on her latest monograph, *Die Akkumulation des Kapitals oder was die Epigonen aus der Marx'schen Theorie gemacht haben* ["*The accumulation of the capital or what the epigones have made out of Marx's theory*"], published only in 1921, and prides herself on its stylistic purity:

The form is brought to its highest simplicity, without any addition, without any coquettish and dazzling elements, only reduced to its whole, I would say, 'naked' like a piece of marble. This is my taste above anything else nowadays which I appreciate both in scientific work as in art: the simple, the quiet and the noble (Korallow 1961/1972, 209).³

While this statement conveys some of her artistic taste, the Russian editor did not quote the entire sentence and left out Luxemburg's criticism of Marx's writing style in comparison to her own: "[...] this is the reason why for example I loathe the highly praised first volume of Marx's *Kapital* with its profusion of rococo ornaments in truly Hegelian style [...]" (*Briefe [Letters]*, 5, 187).⁴ In the same doctrinal mode the editor lapses between praise for Luxemburg's understanding of art as being bound by political duty without lapsing into the role of "subjected servant" ("*unterwürfigen Dienerin*") on the one hand and a strong critique of her indulgence towards highly subjective factors such as a writer's talent and creativity on the other. These latter aspects are alien to "true dialectic-materialism" and reveal a misunderstanding of "history as objective factor" (211). Thus, while Korallow concludes that Luxemburg can never achieve Lenin's position (219), his diagnosis of her "half-baked Marxist dialectic" (219) can also function as a challenge to investigate in a more complex manner how she considered the human faculties of art, history, and science at the margins of Marxist orthodoxy. Her letter about Marx's style of writing and her own reveals that she was able to read all genres and that she needed literature. Yet this correlation does not imply the blurring of borders between science, politics and fiction. Rather, as I will try to show here, it reveals the use of clear categories for all fields. In this matter, I will focus on the template of her argument and its underlying ethos, addressing, in other words, the how rather than the what.⁵

Romanticized Politics

Considering the components of Rosa Luxemburg's epistemic ethos and her informational openness towards different discourses and data should not be confused with trying to portray her as politically lenient. Her open form of thinking was part of a resolute political project, for which she eventually sacrificed her life. She was murdered participating in the attempt to realize a proletarian revolution in Germany in 1919. Her entire oeuvre witnesses her uncompromising political commitment and passion, a sample of which can be found in the last letters she wrote to her friend Clara Zetkin just before her death (explaining why she did not want to flee from Berlin in spite of all warnings), or in her very last articles in the communist journal *Die rote Fahne* ["*The Red Flag*"]. They express an unrelenting militant spirit at a time when the cause appeared – at least in hindsight – already lost.

Conservative press had represented the woman politician as the embodiment of the communist threat that needed to be eliminated for the sake of civilization (Hoffmann-Curtius 2009, 131). It was against the backdrop of this caricature of a fanatic revolutionary that circulated at the time of her assassination that some of Luxemburg's friends tried to redeem her humane image by publishing some of her private correspondence. Thus arose the idea of a fundamental difference between Luxemburg's political persona and her private self, which needed to be conjured (see Hahn, 2005, 193). Dutch communist writer Henriette Roland Holst (1869-1952), who had been acquainted with Luxemburg for some years, underscored this double identity in her 1935 biography: "In a certain way there *are* two Rosas: one is the loving woman and motherly friend [...] the other [is] the idealist and dogmatic politician" (215).⁶ It was particularly during her long years in prison, Roland Holst states, that the uncompromising politician developed a strong sense of compassion that revealed itself not only towards her fellow-human beings but particularly in her sensitive observations of nature (207 f.). Luxemburg's acknowledgement of all living things as it was expressed in her letters became very popular very quickly. Most well-known, more well-known probably than anything she had written as a Marxist thinker, became "the buffalo-scene" from one of her prison letters to Sophie Liebknecht, who published a selection of them in 1920 (Roland Holst 214; Liebknecht 1920, Luxemburg, *Briefe*, 6, 349). The tears Luxemburg reported she shed over the animal abuse she had witnessed, touched contemporaries across the political spectrum, from Karl Kraus to Joseph Goebbels. However, it also cast her into a mystical light and her observations, particularly those related to nature or art, were wrested from her strategic and political mind, (re)appearing as signs of a truly affective being.

This biographical myth greatly vexed Hannah Arendt. In her review of Peter Nettl's biography in the *New York Review of Books* (1966), which became a chapter in her 1968 volume *Men in Dark Times*, the "sentimentalized image of the bird watcher and lover of flowers" (1973, 42) is rejected as an embarrassment to the memory of a great political thinker "whose ideas belong wherever the history of political ideas is seriously taught" (61). Arendt puts Luxemburg's "exquisite literary taste" and her fundamentally scholarly mindset on a par. It distinguished Luxemburg from Lenin, who was a man of action who could not do much else but go into politics (44). Also, unlike Lenin, Luxemburg was never a "believer" (44). She was a meticulous thinker with a highly developed sense of theory and infallible observation: "She might just as well have buried herself in botany and zoology or history and economics or mathematics, had not the circumstances of the world offended her sense of justice and freedom." (44). According to Arendt these qualities – theory and observation – made Luxemburg a true scientist, but not much of a Marxist: "The trouble was only that what was an error in

abstract Marxian theory was an eminently faithful description of things as they really were" (46). What a true Marxist is, should not be solved here. Yet, it is clear that from the different perspectives of a Soviet literary critic and a critical political thinker being a Marxist implies a clouded relationship to the realities of life and – on a meta-critical level – little autonomy of thought. Luxemburg spanned a bridge between reality and theory by a method of reasoning that made an epistemological ethos compatible with political conviction. The constant mode of observation, reflection and dialogue also transcends the perceived difference between the "bird watcher," the literary reader and poetic soul, and the political thinker.

Marxism and Scientific Thinking

In what follows, I want to point out some examples of that methodical mode and highlight specifically what I consider the fundamentally dialogic dimension of Luxemburg's reasoning. As mentioned, it transcends the different genres and degrees of consistency with which she addressed certain topics in her work, including in her letters. Marxism was Luxemburg's "untranscendable horizon" (Jameson, 1982, 10) as a political thinker, in spite of Soviet – as early as Lenin – disapprovals of her attentiveness to, for example, the transformational capacity and resilience of capitalism. Some of the forewords to the editions of her work in the GDR are testimony to the sometimes awkwardly sophisticated ways in which Luxemburg's contingent criticism – or update – of some of Marx's theoretical premises was dealt with. It is refuted as inconsistent or wrong and equally praised for its philosophical strength (Lehmann 1974, *Werke*, 5, 1-32; Radczun 1974, *Werke*, 4, 37).

Marx's scientific self-positioning as an economic and social thinker whose theoretical insights allowed him to explain developmental patterns in history strongly resonated in Rosa Luxemburg. Science was the theoretical human practice that allowed her to understand politico-economic structures in a reliable manner. In an article entitled "Karl Marx", written for the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* ["*Leipzig People's Newspaper*"] in March 1913 (published at the same time as her article "Tolstoi's Nachlass" ["Tolstoi's legacy"]) in *Die neue Zeit* ["*The New Times*"], Luxemburg expressly distinguishes Marxism from all other political projects of good faith, that are fueled by moral indignation about social injustice ("die Nichtswürdigkeit der bestehenden Gesellschaftsordnung"; "the unworthiness of the existing societal order"), but that produce "vague projects for the future" ("unklare Zukunftsprojekte", *Werke*, 3, 180-181). In contrast to these politics of bad conscience and their *ad hoc* solutions, Engels and Marx had "researched the economic relations of bourgeois society, [...] the laws of capitalist economics" and discovered the "true sources of the exploitation and suppression of the proletariat, that could never escape as long as capitalist property and the wage system exist" (*Werke*, 3, 181).⁷ It was Marx, who "for the first time put both the aim and daily battle of the proletariat, the programme and tactics of socialism on the solid basis of scientific knowledge [...], which has enabled it to become the most unique mass movement in history" (*Werke*, 3, 182).⁸

While strategies are open for discussion (which was very much the case in Rosa Luxemburg's political existence) the idea of establishing universal historical laws based on limited observations made Marxism a pseudo-science according to many. Marxist theory was (deceivably) unfalsifiable because it only observed what it had established (Burke 2022, 47). However, the scientific exploration of certain dynamics of historical change does not imply that this was simply a natural rhythm that could be grasped with a handful of formulas. Luxemburg's entire economic and political work reveals the need for constant observation, reflection, and adjustment. Developmental laws needed to be

justified by means of accurate and up to date analyses. This is what Luxemburg did in painstaking detail and constant discussion and interaction with all protagonists in the field of historical economic research. It is this extreme sense of detail, the tireless collection and analysis of data as well as her argumentative technique of (extensive) comparison with others that makes her theoretical work at times difficult to read today. Tracing the conditions of historical trends implied first of all returning to Marx's oeuvre time and again to reinforce what he had revealed. But it also implied readjusting certain of his insights imposed by the contemporary state of things. According to Luxemburg, nothing was more alien to Marxism than the "ossification of forms that were once valid." In her work *Die Akkumulation des Kapitals*, mentioned at the outset of this article, she writes:

[But] Marxism does not consist of a dozen of people who award each other the right of expertise for which then the mass of faithful moslems has to die in blind confidence./ Marxism is a revolutionary Weltanschauung that must always strive for knowledge, and there is nothing more despicable than the ossification of forms that were once valid and that can best be saved in the spiritual sabre rattling of self-criticism and that proves its lively force in the thunder and lightning of history (*Werke*, 5, 523).⁹

Self-criticism, which she calls sabre rattling, was one of the basic elements of her scientific ethos.

In her reconstruction of the genesis of Luxemburg's *Einführung in die Nationalökonomie* ["Introduction to the National Economy"] Annelies Laschitzka reveals the enormous amount of material Luxemburg consulted and digested in preparation of her own study. (322) While Luxemburg's political work was propelled by a profound sense of injustice, affect did not cloud her view of facts. She provided mathematical, numerical and other material evidence to reveal the systemic political mechanisms of exploitation and imperialism not only in monographic economic studies, but also in the many articles and even speeches she gave during her lifetime. In a one-page article on German colonial politics written for the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* in December 1899, "Brauchen wir Kolonien?" ["Do we need colonies?"] she counters the national rhetoric that declared that colonial plans and the development of an armada "happen in the interest of trade": "Against this we should shout just like Mr. Bounderby in Dickens' *Hard Times*: facts and numbers! Number and Facts!" (*Werke*, I/1, 642)¹⁰ This is then followed by several charts that reveal the financial failure of the new territories.

A proof that her work was scientifically sound, even to those who did not sympathize with her political views, was the doctoral degree she obtained at the University of Zurich with a dissertation on the industrial development in Poland in 1897. Her findings that Polish industrial growth was strongly geared towards the Russian market and thus that the – passionate – ambition for Polish national autonomy was in fact flawed in terms of progress and welfare did not make her popular among Polish exiles and major political parties in Poland (Laschitzka, 68 f.). Most of all, however, she reported to her friends on acquiring her PhD: "There is an interesting curiosity: I have written a *socialist* dissertation and it was received with the highest credit by Professor Julius Wolf!" ("Eine interessante Kuriosität: ich habe eine *sozialistische* Dissertation verfaßt und sie wurde mit großem Lob von Professor Julius Wolf angenommen. Das gibt ein Gaudium!"; quoted in Laschitzka 66). Like Marx Luxemburg turned towards the past in order to form an idea of pre-capitalist societies

in a world that had naturalized the laws of labour productivity, social exploitation, accumulation of capital, and colonial expansion. It was in particular her experience of teaching the history of economics to working-class people with little historical knowledge at the communist party school in Berlin that set her on a quest to gather documentation of other societal forms. It was the opposite of historicist thinking. Rather, Luxemburg was well aware of the elusiveness of history and fostered a plausible sense of scepticism towards macroscopical projections into the past. On Max Weber's *History of Agriculture* (1898) she remarked that it was full of "curious hypotheses," made ancient Greece resemble contemporary Prussian society and Sparta look as if it were "the military academy of Groß-Lichterfelde near Berlin" ("die Kadettenanstalt Groß-Lichterfelde bei Berlin"; *Werke*, 5, 662-663).¹¹

Luxemburg's letters reveal that even for the shortest texts she executed profound research and assembled as much material as could be gotten. As most of her short texts deal with acute contemporary situations and pressing questions such as mass strike, nationalism, suffrage and parliamentary politics (or not), imperialism, social destitution, the documentation often consisted of recent research that had been executed across the political spectrum. The writing process always implied feedback from others (Laschitza 318). While this disposition is at the basis of dialogical thinking, the example of the "revisionist controversy" (Nettl 94) reveals the proportions it could take on. The source of this controversy was the work of Eduard Bernstein, which, much to the delight of the conservative press, turned the social-democrat party into a boxing ring. This debate was existential to both Marxist philosophy and the communist party. Against the backdrop of the progress trade unions and workers' parties had made in Britain in terms of social welfare and political rights Bernstein had pointed out the adaptability of capitalism and expressed doubt as to whether the (utopian) aim of socialisms should be a proletarian revolution (see Luxemburg *Werke*, 1/1, 404). While Luxemburg herself had studied the evolution of capitalism in changing conditions and adjusted some of Marx's hypotheses about its future, she understood well that Bernstein's work was a major challenge to her fundamental conviction of a revolution. Yet more than just a heated yes-and-no, it needed a qualified reply (which none of the progressive newspapers had succeeded in doing). She prepared her counterargument carefully in her usual way, "ordering books, in particular Marx's *Kapital*, collected data on crises and cartels and subscribing to even more newspapers" (Laschitza 92-97). and acquired extremely minute information and data, as, for example, on the policy and consequences of cartelization and unemployment. Her rebuttal consists of strong rhetoric (which gave her the reputation of being a quarrelsome person) as well as a mass of quotes and numbers. Eventually, she published a serial of reviews for the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* that were compiled into a book that exceeded the original size of Bernstein's book by far (see Laschitza 94 f.; Nettl 130-135). Her reply is structured in close discussion with Bernstein's argument, using precise quotes to which she systematically provides replies laden with economic terminology, historical facts, philosophical and political considerations. The debate between Luxemburg and "the Bernstein method" ("die Bernsteinsche Methode"; *Werke*, 1/1, 373) has been portrayed as a battle (or quarrel) for the monopoly of socialist thought in the hands of scientific theory. Whether one agrees or not, it was not done cheaply or light-heartedly. While most of it was published in one of the major workers' newspapers, reading through it today one wonders how this very scholarly discussion took into account the average knowledge and/or patience of its readership. In spite of being a teacher with strong didactic skills, the urge to refute what she considered flaws in facts and reasoning manifested itself at times in idiosyncratic scientific discourses.

The obsession to have things stated correctly and not merely in an ideologically convenient manner lead to complex editorial correspondences and a lot of frustration for all parties involved. This happened in a debate about the suffrage movement in Prussia that sparked between various socialist leaders in August 1910 and was carried out in various newspapers. In numerous letters to the editors, time and again Luxemburg sought to correct the misrepresentations or misunderstandings of her arguments by her opponents. She insisted on the publication of her correspondence with its condensed and detailed arguments, such as her reply to Karl Kautsky, who had quoted her using quotations from Friedrich Engels which were in fact misquotations from Engels by Kautsky, which she herself had quoted correctly. She wanted all this to be made public in an accurate way, adding that "the reader" would probably have noted all this or otherwise be utterly confused. It led to a point where editorial boards refused to publish any further sequels in the category "Rectification" ("Zur Richtigstellung", *Werke*, 2, 443).

Discussing Literature

Dialogue was also the format of Rosa Luxemburg's reflections on literature: the same pattern of careful reading, reflection and discussion is displayed in all her writings on this topic. As mentioned, the idea is not to match Luxemburg among Adorno, Marcuse, Bloch, or Lukács. She was not a systematic literary or cultural critic and did not consider herself so, yet she understood the importance of literary criticism too well. In her introduction to her translation of Korolenko's autobiography she states: "Literary criticism is an excellent means to fight the reactionary in all its hiding-places" (*Werke*, 4, 319; "Die literarische Kritik [ist] ein hervorragendes Kampfmitterl, die Reaktion in allen ihren Schlupfwinkeln zu bekämpfen"). Literature interested her enormously and her writings contain an impressive list of modern European literature. She was convinced of the importance of literature in society, pondered on its meaning and artful forms, expressing joy or disappointment in reading. But as a modern professional thinker she also realized she did not have the proper expertise and abstained largely from writing publicly about literature or claiming authority on the matter. She was not acquainted with the academic disciplines of literary studies or philology and the name of Wilhelm Dilthey, the founder of hermeneutics, appears nowhere in her work. In a letter to the anthroposophical pedagogue Rudolf Steiner, with whom she was acquainted through the workers' education movement in Berlin, she asks for advice on some literary questions she cannot provide herself. She ends her letter with the statement: "I consider the vulgarization of science as one of the most beautiful duties, but I myself, being a downright egoist, prefer to get my nourishment straight from the source" (October 14th 1902, *Briefe*, 6, 224).¹²

It has been remarked by many that Luxemburg's conviction that a world revolution should take place, did not imply a comparable sympathy toward aesthetic revolution. Peter Nettle states that her "literary mind" bore the imprint of a specific generation and class (17 f.). However, her openness towards literature in all European languages, and particularly towards contemporary work, is everything but static. In fact, compared to the emerging modern academic discipline of (national) literary studies at that time, Luxemburg appears remarkably pluralist. She considered literature as a form of plural exchange: between historical world and author, author and readership, and readers among readers. The meaning of a text cannot be monopolized and needs to be addressed in its complex and often paradoxical dimensions. This is revealed in a short review Rosa Luxemburg wrote of Franz Mehring's 1905 book on Friedrich Schiller – *Schiller, ein Lebensbild für deutsche Arbeiter* ["Schiller, a biographical picture for

German Workers"]. In 1905 the centenary of Friedrich Schiller's death was celebrated in Germany by means of innumerable events and publications across the spectrum of cultural life, from academic conferences to commercial advertising. Rudolf Steiner alone gave a dozen public lectures in Berlin in the first two months of the year. The poet and playwright Schiller had been advanced as the icon of German bourgeois culture and national identity since the second half of the nineteenth century. Much more than the cosmopolitan and morally not entirely flawless Goethe, Schiller reflected the (deceiving) self-image of German universalist humanism. In his book on Schiller addressed to working class readers, social-democratic politician and literary scholar Franz Mehring (1846-1919), analyzed this case of cultural hegemony, as Gramsci would develop it later, and pointed out the many contradictions in Schiller's life and work. Rosa Luxemburg herself had been raised with this idealization of Friedrich Schiller and his ideas of literature and art as autonomous artifacts beyond social constraint. And she was well aware of how this work served as a plane of bourgeois self-projection. However, to her uneasiness she witnessed a similar form of reception among proletarian readers, who adopted a socially different yet comparable projection of their own onto this literary oeuvre:

A weird process of assimilation takes place in which the workers do not look at Schiller as a spiritual entity in itself, as he was in reality, but handpick parts from his work and merge it unconsciously into their own revolutionary universe of thought and sentiment. But we have outgrown this stage of political development, in which boiling enthusiasm, semi-dark striving towards the heights of the "Ideals" revealed the dawn of the spiritual rebirth of the German working class [...]. (*Werke*, 1, 534)¹³

This appropriation needs to be countered in a "scientific-objective" ("wissenschaftlich-objektiv") manner that, for example, will reveal that Schiller's fictional and romanticized representation of revolution does not match in the least the realities of mass historical change. Luxemburg underscores and provides the echo of what she considers the core of Franz Mehring's diagnosis on the tension and paradoxes in the work and person of Schiller. The historical value of Schiller's work is its transcendence of history as literature:

Schiller was most of all a true playwright in the greatest style, and he found his subject matter in the battles of history, not because and as they were revolutionary, because they embodied the tragic conflict in its highest power and impact.¹⁴

A comparable argument is made with regards to Tolstoy, whose work was equally turned into a cultural instrument by the German "petty bourgeois" ("Philistertum" is the word she uses), that was utterly blind towards Tolstoy's mortal societal animosity, his "lack of propriety, profound alienation and everything hurtful [...]" ("Unpassendes, Befremdendes, Peinliches", *Werke*, 3, 188). Only when casting off all "cowardly compromises" ("alle feigen Kompromisse") towards this literature and opening up toward the unsuitable, amoral and paradoxical, there will be no better educational reading for the workers' youth than Tolstoy (*Werke*, 3, 190).¹⁵ Though Schiller and Tolstoy are obviously quite different writers, in their own way they fuel the understanding of mankind, which, however, can be grasped only by opening up toward

the tensions and incompatibilities unfolded through their "artistic instincts" ("Künstlerinstinkt", *Werke*, 1/2, 536).

Reading and discussing literature was part of Luxemburg's exploration of society and history with, as Jürgen Eder has called, its specific "mixture of stern belief in science and evangelism" (159). The technique of the dialogue is as much literally at work in her letters as in her political and scientific expositions; Luxemburg quotes abundantly from the statements of her correspondents and the literary texts to which they refer and then provides her reply. Though the letters that were sent to her are not included in the edition of her work, nonetheless reading Luxemburg's part enables the reader to grasp a good deal of what had been written to her.

As literature has strong merits in terms of human emancipation but never in any simple utilitarian sense, it should also never be feared by those who acknowledge its essentially imaginative nature. In a letter to Clara Zetkin, leading thinker of communist feminism and a prolific editor of the journal *Die Gleichheit* [*Equality*] she stated in 1910:

You are asking me if your study of Bjornson is not a "luxury"? No, it is very much matters like this which I consider more important than our daily bread, to counterbalance the withering of our spirit caused by the daily treadmill of the trade unionist and parliamentary battles and the shabbiness of our agitation. If only our masses could feed upon this kind of studies. I am certain the masses would be upset if one would consider this kind of nourishment as a luxury! It acts more for us than ten articles on phosphor poisoning and joint employment offices (*Briefe*, 3, 258).¹⁶

The process of reflection is never halted, neither by ideology nor by emotion. Also, interestingly, these reflections seem to preclude the idea of an authoritative hermeneutical voice or any fixed ideas of *Nachfühlung* and *Nacherleben* as they were established by academic literary studies in Germany at the time. The comments and arguments about texts and writers Luxemburg shares with her correspondents are the same intellectual challenges among sparring partners that she considered essential for any progressive insight. Books were sent, read, and discussed, often revisited and rethought. While this process intensifies during her times of imprisonment, it exists in her entire correspondence. In October 1907 she writes:

I still wanted to tell you how I felt about Choderlos de Laclos, which I have read because Stendhal admired him and you do too, and your judgement is important to me. But frankly, finishing him was quite a self-conquest and gave me a hangover. I understand it is a pamphlet, a moralist portrayal, but as a work of art I really cannot appreciate it (*Briefe*, 2, 310).¹⁷

Or in December 1916:

I am not sure I will understand Walt Whitman, I may not have enough imagination [...] Thank you so much for Verhaeren and particularly [Charles] Decoster, I will throw myself into it today [...] Sorry I could only send you [John Galsworthy's] *The Man of Property*, but you must really read it and send me your opinion. I was really moved by it (*Briefe*, 5, 152).¹⁸

The experience of pleasure or displeasure (expressed with equal passion) is a vital element in Luxemburg's literary discussions, and they are related to the artistic form in the widest sense. Literature as a high art, an artefact, springs from a writer's – or artist's – talent, which she acknowledged as a unique human given and a humane strength in spite of an unjust society. While this may be alien to Marxist criticism, it is important to rehearse that Luxemburg systematically relates literature to the socio-historical circumstances in which it was produced, and she pursues the question how it adds to the understanding of these circumstances, either in its immediate historical context or beyond. The connection between form and ideological merit is manifold. On the work of French author Romain Rolland, champion of the international peace movement with which she strongly sympathized, she writes in June 1917 to a friend: "I have recently read *Johann Christophe in Paris*. It is an honest book" ("ein braves Buch") filled with sympathetic tendency. But like all books with a social tendency in fact hardly a work of art, rather a pamphlet in belletristic shape" (*Briefe*, 5, 266).¹⁹ "Tendenzliteratur" (*Briefe*, 5, 266), that is, literature boiled down to ideology, may have its merits, but it loses the status and strength of literature as art form. In spite of the fact that Romain Rolland was one of the few who did not relapse into "psychology of the Neanderthals" ("den Rückfall in die Psychologie der Neandertalzeit") at the outbreak of the war, he does not have the talent to be a writer:

I am in a matter as this unrelentingly sensitive: the most beautiful sense of sympathy cannot replace the mere godly genius. But I will happily read more of him, in particular in French, which will be a real joy for me, and maybe I will find more in the other volumes as in these ones (*Briefe*, 5, 298).²⁰

It makes Goethe, whose political engagement was remote from social democracy, as a poet and writer more interesting than his democratically committed contemporary Ludwig Börne (1786-1837), who was all "honesty and virtue." Börne's political engagement is to be admired, yet Goethe created a "laughing world of appearances beyond the borders of states and civil duties, beyond good and evil [...]" ("die ganze lachende Welt der Erscheinungen, die jenseits der Grenzen von Staatsformen und Bürgerpflichten, jenseits von Gut und Böse liegt"; *Briefe*, 3, 182). The criteria that distinguish a literary artefact from the pamphlet are never clearly outlined, yet in all her literary comments Luxemburg tries to express what it is that fascinates her. As a scientific thinker she never lapses into contemplation and disinterestedness and remains historically awake. Yet history is not literature and vice versa. On the biographical portrait *Wallenstein* by her contemporary Ricarda Huch, who held a PhD in history from the University of Zürich, Luxemburg replies to the criticism of one of her fellow-partisans: "Of course this is not exact science, her historical basis is not serious and full of flaws [...] But I don't care about wrong views, as long as I find inner authenticity, lively intelligence and artful delight in the representation of world and life" (*Briefe*, 5, 209).²¹ From a different yet comparable stance, this sense of history also applies to John Galsworthy's novel *Fraternity*. Again written in a conversational form, Luxemburg points out that also a sharp-eyed and satirical writer like Galsworthy, who captures his own world so well in his work, is a produce of his society.

I liked this novel less than *A Man of Property*, not in spite of, but *because* in this one the social tendency is too strong. [...] He is the same type as Bernard Shaw and also Oscar Wilde, this type of English intellectual one sees everywhere

nowadays, smart, full of spirit but blasé, who perceives *everything* in the world with smiling skepticism (*Briefe*, 5, 179).²²

And in the same letter she dismisses Clara Zetkin's feminist criticism of one of Galsworthy's female protagonists, Irene, as being a weak character who seems to be nothing but a "sexual and digesting machine" ("Geschlechts- und Verdauungsapparate", the word is quoted by Luxemburg from Zektin's letter). For Luxemburg, these are the wrong criteria: the beauty of fictional woman "decorates the world" ("die Erde schmücken"), it bears a different meaning (*Briefe*, 5, 180).

While the falsification categories for understanding literature are not fully formalized, a continuous line of argument about literature and society can be drawn across her reflections and comments. It is in her thirty-page introduction to her German translation of Wladimir Korolenko's autobiography that all elements in Luxemburg's literary thinking come together: literature is always the produce of its time and – often before the terms exist – propellor of the historical process of human emancipation. Prime example of this is the (very recent) history of modern Russian literature, which became "a power in public life in czarist regime, stayed there for a century until it was released by the material power of the people, until the word became flesh" (*Werke*, 4, 303).²³ This does not imply that Russian literature is "an ideological art in the rough sense of the word [...] or that all Russian poets would be revolutionary." Dostoevsky was in fact a reactionary and Tolstoy a hopeless mystic and their own solutions to escape from the social labyrinth were no solutions at all. Yet, "in the case of a true artist the social recipe he commends is of minor importance; the crucial aspect is the source of his art, his stimulating spirit, not the aim he sets for himself" (*Werke*, 4 307).²⁴ The singular artistic value as well as the potentially political strength of a literary work is rooted in the writer's profound connection to the world that finds itself mirrored, at best in multiple ways, in his art. As such, anyone who wants to understand the drastic changes in recent Russian history should read Russian works of literature. This will reveal "[the] miraculous rise from social abyss into the sunlight of modern education, genius art and a scientifically grounded world perception" (*Werke*, 4, 330 "[den] wunderbaren Aufstieg aus dieser sozialen Tiefe zur vollen Sonnenhöhe moderner Bildung, genialer Kunst und einer wissenschaftlich fundierten Weltanschauung [...]"). Literature contains a dimension of human life that is truly incomprehensible for the "petty minded who confuse good street lightening, punctual train schedules and clean collars with culture [...]" (*Werke*, 4, 330; "für alle Kulturphilister, die gute Straßenbeleuchtung, pünktlichen Eisenbahnverkehr und saubere Stehkragen für Kultur [...] halten.").

Luxemburg's early biographers merged her poetic sensitivity with her romantic experience of nature as a proof of her affective character that had been disguised by her political work. Yet while affection and science may not always be the best match for valid knowledge acquisition, they are hardly mutually exclusive. Luxemburg was a passionate thinker in everything she addressed. As a thinker she tried to provide a rational and reliable understanding of things fueled by relevant information, observation and reflection. Dialogical, as I call it here. This also applies to the "romantic bird watcher." When Luxemburg enrolled at the University of Zürich in 1889, she initially studied natural sciences, which included, among other subjects, zoology, botany, and seminars of microscopic research (Laschitzka, 34). She changed to the law faculty one and a half years later, where she obtained her doctoral degree. It is interesting to note that Luxemburg turned to natural sciences both at the beginning and the end of her career as a political thinker and activist. One of the last discoveries from

the Rosa Luxemburg archives in 2009 was a 400-pages herbarium she had compiled during her three-year imprisonment 1916-1918 (Wittich/Politt, 5-11). This discovery confirmed Luxemburg's love of nature that has been evoked extensively in biographical writings. Next to the well-known buffalo scene that brought Luxemburg and subsequently her readers to tears, her correspondence, notably from prison, contains many depictions of flora and fauna, such as the following example from a letter to her friend Hans Diefenbach from late August 1917:

Massive numbers of wasps swarm into my cell since some days (of course I keep the window open day and night). At this time they resolutely seek nourishment and I am, as you know, hospitable. I have put a little mug of water and all kinds of little sweet things for them and they help themselves to it well. It is a pleasure to see how these tiny animals disappear through the window with a new load every other minute [...]. What a fabulous sense of orientation they have with their little eyes, that have the size of a pin-head and what a memory. They come day after day and do not get lost [...]. In Wronke I observed them during my walk in the garden every single day and [saw] how they drilled deep holes and tunnels between the cobble stones while removing the earth towards the surface (*Briefe*, 5 298).²⁵

This letter reveals both accurate observation as well as the consciousness of being part of the great chain of nature. The epistemological disposition that structured these observations includes the conditions of existence of animal life, its energy of adaptation, and the manifestation of what appear to be self-control programmes (Borgards, 162). This perspective on nature was in tune with the modern biological and zoological thinking since Darwin (Borgards, 162). Darwin's theories of nature made Luxemburg's frame of mind: "I am very happy about Darwin, if only because natural sciences are so beneficent for the mind, I myself suffer at times terribly from the one-sided, overfeeding with societal and economic stuff" (*Briefe*, 2, 310).²⁶ She was in this matter well-informed, as always. The same goes for Luxemburg's herbarium, which constitutes a plant taxonomy in the most classical sense: name, description, and species are noted both in German and Latin as well as the locations of the objects. An herbarium is a standard genre of sample collection that has a long tradition. In their foreword the editors mention that Luxemburg's herbarium was qualified by two renowned botanists as "an amateur herbarium, that must have given much pleasure to the collector" (Wittich/Politt, 10). While I do not want to debate a professional judgement, it is nonetheless interesting to look at the notes Luxemburg added at the end of her collection. These are very much up to date with the latest biological developments of her time. They contain geological observations and relate to plant development as well as to chemical and physiological analyses, in other words to biochemistry. The last – incomplete – note in her plant book is about hypogeal germination, which clearly fascinated her. In one of her last letters Luxemburg inquired after the work of Wilhelm Pfeffer, pioneer of plant biochemistry of that time (Höxterman 1998, 499-504; 924). Photosynthesis and plant metabolism leave little room for anthropomorphic identification or projection. All the more symptomatic is then the fact that the title of Pfeffer's work that Luxemburg requested, *Physiologie der Pflanzen* [*Physiology of Plants*], is misspelled in the edition of her herbarium as *Psychologie der Pflanzen* [*Psychology of Plants*] (Wittich/Politt, 413), plant psychology instead of physiology. While this may be more plausible today, it casts Luxemburg into an arcane field of mystic nature that was totally alien to her scientific mindset.

In the heat of the revolution in Berlin between December 30th, 1918 and January 1st, 1919, when the German Communist Party was founded to oppose the existing social democratic party, Rosa Luxemburg made several urgent speeches to the party members on the question of whether or not to boycott the upcoming national elections (and take power by means of a violent overthrow of the system). The situation was extremely urgent, the issue of the greatest importance for the political future both of the party and the country. While Luxemburg had never disguised her skepticism over the parliamentary system as a means to achieve radical change, she now pleaded passionately to exercise the voting right. In spite of all the time pressure in her first speech Luxemburg asks her impatient audience "not to hurry and to hear her to the end" ("Nicht so eilig, habt Geduld, zu Ende zu hören", *Werke*, 4, 480). Then she counters naive plans of a successful overthrow as follows:

You want to work with claims in parliament. That is not the right way. Which one is the best to educate the masses in Germany to the duties they need to fulfill? You count in your tactics on a constellation that will enable you to establish a new government in 14 days, that is, if the Berlin people leave: 'We make a new government within 14 days'. I would be very glad if that were to be the case. Yet as a serious politician I cannot build my tactics on a speculation (*Werke*, 4, 480).²⁷

A little later she asks for patience again, because "work and time are needed [...] to examine his as well as our ideas carefully and quietly" (482, "ruhig und gründlich zu prüfen sowohl seine wie unsere Auffassung"). Not only our own ideas need to be considered, also that of those who think differently. This was not mere rhetoric. Her argument to examine and reflect profoundly in spite of what appeared to be a unique historical opportunity may appear odd for someone with a life-long commitment to revolution. Yet, it was the continuation of a scholarly mindset that strove for completeness of information and the time it took to do it well. Until the last moment she did not wield science in a simple ideological way to impose (abstract) laws on reality, her mind worked differently, even at a moment when long-cherished plans appeared feasible. It is a far shot from the monologue of orthodoxy.

Notes

1. Lukács, who was well over ten years younger than Luxemburg but died a century after her birth, dealt with her political thinking extensively, but was also awkwardly in denial of her work. (Opitz 2002, Hahn 2005)
2. In order to avoid confusion: I use Jameson's terminology, he does *not* refer to Luxemburg in these works.
3. "[...] die Form zur höchsten Einfachheit gebracht, ohne jedes Beiwerk, ohne jede Koketterie und Blendwerk, schlicht, nur auf große Linien reduziert, ich möchte sagen, 'nackt' wie ein Marmorblock. Dies ist jetzt überhaupt meine Geschmacksrichtung, die in der wissenschaftlichen Arbeit wie in der Kunst nur das Einfache, Ruhige und Großzügige schätzt."
4. "weshalb mir z.B. der vielgerühmte erste Band des Maxrschen Kapitals mit seiner Überladung an Rokoko-Ornamenten in Hegelschen Stil jetzt ein Greuel ist."
5. The importance of this methodological form is something one of Luxemburg's earliest biographers, the British historian Peter Nettl, already pointed out: "[I]t was not only the quality of her ideas, but the manner of their expression: the way she said it was as much as what she said." (1966, 5)
6. "in zekere zin zijn er twee Rosa's. De eene is de liefhebbende vrouw, de moederlijke vriendin [...] de andere is – de idealistische en dogmatische politikus."
7. "Sie wendeten sich an die Untersuchung der wirtschaftlichen Verhältnisse der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft. [...] In den Gesetzen der kapitalistischen Gesellschaft deckte Marx die Quellen der Ausbeutung und Unterdrückung des Proletariats auf, denen es nimmermehr zu entrinnen kann, solange kapitalistisches Privateigentum und Lohnsystem bestehen werden."
8. "[...] durch Marx zum ersten Mal auf die ehernen Basis des Prinzips der wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnis gestellt, [...] die sie zur gewaltigsten, besipellosten Massenbewegung der Weltgeschichte machen." (Werke, 3, 182).
9. "Aber Marxismus ist nicht ein Dutzend Personen, die einander das Recht der "Sachverständigkeit" ausstellen und vor denen die Masse der gläubigen Moslems in blindem Vertrauen zu ersterben hat./ Marxismus ist eine revolutionäre Weltanschauung, die stes nach neuen Einzichten ringen muß, die nichts so verabscheut wie das Erstarren in einmal gültigen Formen, die am besten im geistigen Waffengeklirr der Selbstkritik und im geschichtlichen Blitz und Donner ihre lebendige Kraft bewährt."
10. "Demgegenüber muß man immer und immer wieder mit Mr. Hounderby aus Dickens "Harten Zeiten" rufen: Tatsachen und Zahlen! Zahlen und Tatsachen!"
11. "[...] Professor Max Weber stellt vom Standpunkt der heutigen Verhältnisse und Begriffe die kuriosesten Hypothesen auf [...] Womit die Griechen der Heroenzeit [...] in eine zuchthausartige Kadettenanstalt Groß-Lichterfelde bei Berlin verwandelt sind."
12. "Die Popularisierung des Wissenschaft ist für mich eine der schönsten Aufgaben, aber ich ziehe immer noch vor – ich krasser Egoist – selbst an ihren Mutterbrüsten zu saugen" (Werke, 4, 224)
13. "Es hat hier ein eigenartiger Assimilierungsprozeß stattgefunden, in dem sich das Arbeiterpublikum nicht den Schiller als ein geistiges Ganzes, so wie er in Wirklichkeit war, aneigneten, sondern sein geistiges Werk zerpflückte und es unbewußt in der eigenen revolutionären Gedanken- und Empfindungswelt umschmolz."
14. "Schiller war vor allem ein echter Dramatiker größten Stils, als solcher

aber brauchte und suchte er gewaltige Konflikte, gigantische Kräfte, Massenwirkungen, und er fand seine Stoffe in den Kämpfen der Geschichte, nicht weil und insofern sie revolutionäre waren, sondern weil sie den tragischen Konflikt in seiner höchsten Potenz und Wirkung verkörpern.“

15. “[...] von den Schlacken des deutschen Philistertums gereinigtes Arbeiterpublikum [...] das den Mut hat, auch innerlich alle feigen Kompromisse von sich zu werfen. Namentlich kann es keine erzieherisch bessere Lektüre für die Arbeiterjugend geben als die Werke von Tolstoi.“

16. “Du fragst, ob Deine Björnson-Studie nicht “Luxus“ wäre? Nein, ich halte gerade solche Sachen [für] so nötig wie das tägliche Brot, um der Verödung des Geistes durch die tägliche Tretmühle des gewerkschaftlichen und parlamentarischen Kampfes und der Drüftigkeit unserer Agitation entgegenzuwirken. Wenn unserer Massen sich nur öfters an solchen Studien erquicken könnten! Ich bin sicher, garde die Massen würden entrüstet sein, wenn man solche Nahrung Luxus für sie betrachten wollte. Das agiert für uns mehr als Zehn Artikel über Phosphorvergiftung und paritätischen Arbeitsnachweis.“

17. “Ja, ich wollte Dir noch meinen Eindruck über Choderlos de Laclos schreiben. Ich las ih, weil Stendhal ihn verehrte und weil Du ihn lobtest, ich gebe aber sehr viel auf Dein Urteil. Nun muß ich doch offen sagen, daß ich das Buch nur mit Überwindung zu Ende gelesen und mit saterken Katzenjammer aus der Hand gelegt habe. Als Pamphlet, als Sittenspiegel verstehe ich das, aber als Kunstwerk kann ich's nicht hoch stellen.“

18. “Ob ich den Walt Whitman verstehen werde, weiß ich nicht, meine Phantasie reicht kaum so weit. [...] Du sei herzlich bedankt für Verhaern und namentlich [Charles] de Coster, auf den ich mich eben heute stürzte. Dir konnte ich diesmal leider nichts als den “Reichen Mann“ schicken, lies ihn aber unbedingt und schreib mir gleich Dein Urteil. Mich hat das Buch stark erschüttert.“

19. “Von Romain Rolland habe ich kürzlich ersten den “Johann Christophe in Paris“ gelesen. Es is ein braves Buch von *sympathischer* Tendenz. Aber wie allen sozialen Tendenzbücher eigentlich kein Kunstwerk, eher ein Pamphlet in belletristischer Form.“

20. “Ich bin in dieser Beziehung so unerbitterlich empfindlich, daß mir die schönste Tendenz das einfach göttliche Genie nicht ersetzen kann. Aber ich werde sehr gerne mehr von ihm lesen, zumal franzzösisch, ws mir an sich ein Genuß sein wird, und vielleicht finde ich anderen Bänden mehr als in jenem.“

21. “Natürlich ist das keine exakte wissenschaftliche Arbeit; ihre Geschichtsauffassung hat gar keine ernste Basis [...] Ganz verkehrte Ansichten stören mich gar nicht, wenn ich nur innere Aufrichtigkeit, lebhaftige Intelligenz und künstlerische Freude am Weltbild und Leben finde.“

22. “Dieser Roman hat mir freilich weniger viel gefallen als “Der reiche Mann“, nicht obwohl sondern *weil* die soziale Tendezn dort mehr überwiegt.[...] Aber er ist derselbe Typ wie Bernard Shaw und auch wie Oskar Wilde, ein jetzt in der englischen Literatur wohl stark verbreiteter Typus eines sehr gescheiten, verfeinerten, aber blasierten Menschen, der *alles* in der Welt mit lächelnder Skepsis betrachtet.“

23. “Die russische Literatur war unter dem Zarismus wie in keinem Lande und zu keiner Zeit eine Macht im öffentlichen Leben geworden, und sie bleibt ein Jahrhundert lang auf dem Posten, bis sie der materiellen Macht der Volksmassen abgelöst, bis das Wort zum Fleisch war.“

24. “Doch beim wahren Künstler ist das soziale Rezept, das er empfiehlt, Nebensache: die Quelle seiner kunst, ihr belebender Geist, nicht das Ziel, das er sich

bewußt steckt, ist das Ausschlaggebende.“

25. "Seit einigen Tagen schwirren massenhaft Wespen zu mir in die Zelle (ich halte natürlich Tag und Nacht das Fenster offen). Sie suchen jetzt zielbewußt nach Nahrung, ich bin, wie Sie wissen, gastfrei. Ich habe ihnen ein Näpfchen mit allerlei Naschwerk hingestellt, und sie beladen sich fleißig. Es ein Genuß zu sehen, wie diesen winzigen Tiere alle Paar Minuten mit einer neuen Ladung durchs Fenster verschwinden [...] welches fabelhaftes Orientierungsvermögen bei diesen Äuglein, so groß wie ein Nadelknopf, und welches Gedächtnis: sie kommen Tag für Tag un, vergessen also über Nacht keineswegs den Weg [...] In Wronke habe ich sie auf meine Spazierweg im Garten täglich beobachtet, wie sie in die Erde zwischen Pflastersteine tiefe Löcher und Gänge bohrten und die Erde zur Oberfläche hinausschaffen.“

26. "Über Darwin freue ich mich auch sehr, schon deshalb, weil die Naturwissenschaft Dir eine große Erholung des Geistes geben wird; ich leide selbst stark, zeitweise bis zur Unerträglichkeit, an der einseitigen Überfütterung mit nur gesellschaftlichem Lese- und Denkstoff.“

27. "Im Parlament mit Schlagwörtern will man arbeiten. Nicht das ist das Entscheidende. Welcher Weg ist der sicherste, um die Massen in Deutschland zu erziehen zu den Aufgaben, die sie haben ? Ihr geht aus in Eurer Taktik von der Konstellation, daß man in 14 Tagen, wenn die Leute aus Berlin herausgehen, in Berlin eine neue Regierung machen kann. "Wir machen in 14 Tagen hier eine neue Regierung" Ich würde mich freuen, wenn das der Fall wäre. Aber als ernstr Politiker kann ich meine Taktik nicht auf eine Spekulation aufbauen.“

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