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**Stephen Parker. Bertolt Brecht: A Literary Life. London:
Bloomsbury, 2014. x + 704 pp.**

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Abstract

Review of Stephen Parker. *Bertolt Brecht: A Literary Life*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. x + 704 pp.

Keywords

Bertolt Brecht, Stephen Parker, Biography, Literary Life, Book Review

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In his introduction to the first major English-language biography of Bertolt Brecht in two decades, author Stephen Parker writes that “when Brecht espoused Marxism-Leninism at the end of the 1920s in the struggle against rising Fascism, his biophysical materialism remained a potent force, colouring his dramatic and poetic precepts and intuitions” (3). This statement encapsulates the broader implications of Parker’s novel treatment of the life of the poet and playwright. Instead of retreading the familiar ground of understanding Brecht’s work primarily within the context of his political thought—an approach that restricts, among other things, the importance of the earlier work—Parker establishes as the contextual basis for his study Brecht’s “biophysical materialism,” which manifests itself in Brecht’s writing from childhood and provides a consistent context in which work from all periods of Brecht’s life may be better understood; it is back to this common point that Parker traces major elements of Brecht’s social, political, and aesthetic thought as they develop throughout his life. Parker draws deeply from the immense breadth of Brecht’s personal correspondence, journal entries, and literary and theoretical work, including a wealth of unpublished archival sources. He also reinforces his claims with informative looks into the letters, journals, and other writings of scores of Brecht’s peers and contemporaries. Parker displays his close familiarity with these sources as well as a voluminous body of secondary literature, archival texts, and medical reports as he incorporates them, without artificial contrivance, into his own arguments. The extent of Parker’s research is especially apparent in the copious endnotes and bibliography. Thankfully for readers everywhere, Parker has also included a thorough index. The book is not only scholarly meritorious, however; it is also written in an entertaining and clear style that invites a wide readership.

Parker identifies a particular instance in Brecht’s childhood—an untreated streptococcal infection and its consequences—as a likely source of many of the physical infirmities that would plague Brecht throughout his life and eventually lead to his death. Citing medical science as evidence, Parker shows how this early illness also likely contributed to many aspects of Brecht’s thought and behavior, such as the erratic, self-destructive physical and social behavior found in the teenage and early adult years, and the sudden shift to a much more controlled, ascetic lifestyle that began in the mid-1920s. Parker then goes on to demonstrate how Brecht’s awareness of his own biological organism became a key foundation for his whole life’s work in a manner much more comprehensive than previous studies have attempted. Again and again Parker locates the literary image of the storm, a Brechtian *Urszene* ‘primal scene’ recurring in texts spanning the poet’s entire life. The storm is often internal, at times signifying Brecht’s suffocating

anxiety about his physiological frailty and at others a tortuous sociality that his idiosyncratic personality would sometimes not allow him to successfully navigate. Just as often, the storm reflects the dangerous external circumstances Brecht encountered in times such as his exile years. Internal or external, the storms in Brecht's life often involved the very real prospect of physical destruction.

In this context, seemingly disparate biographical elements take on a greater meaning in Parker's holistic examination of Brecht's life: from his sometimes narcissistic exploitation of those close to him to his acute sensitivity to suffering and social injustice; from fascination with the Taoist doctrine of *wu wei* 'without action' to a passionate adoption of Marxist thought; from polemicist antagonism of friends and enemies to quiet, submissive politeness he exhibited in American exile and his cunning personal victories in the GDR in his final years. The book reflects not only an impressive knowledge and understanding of Brecht's life, but also Parker's ability to find biographical moments which, he convincingly argues, fundamentally shaped important ideas in Brecht's thought and work, ranging from aesthetic notions to everyday behavior. Just a few examples of such moments include treatment for childhood illness, his physical reaction to certain types of art, and his grandmother's use of stories to clearly communicate difficult concepts without resorting to unnecessary melodrama, all of which shaped Brecht's aesthetic and theory. With admirable discernment, Parker reveals such connections not only as merely possible, but as entirely natural; indeed, many of these insights should prove enlightening even to those readers already closely familiar both with Brecht's biographical details and the intricacies of his work. In addition, Parker's unique approach allows him to compellingly argue the importance of various works by Brecht that have generally been neglected the scholarly attention they deserve. Within the new context of Parker's biography, these works receive new meaning and significance. For this, Parker certainly deserves our gratitude.

Rather than dividing Brecht's life into different stages and treating them separately, Parker identifies a context that, while not neglecting substantial shifts undergone in Brecht's behavior and attitude, still sheds a new and fascinating light on the common ground underlying the playwright's life and work. In this way he shows us Brecht's biography as a whole in a manner that never feels contrived or forced, and which provides an unapologetic and coherent understanding of this polarizing cultural figure. Parker's work should quickly establish its position as an authoritative and essential addition to Brecht scholarship.

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