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UNMASKING THE MONUMENT: A NEW HISTORICIST ANALYSIS OF BERTOLT BRECHT'S "QUESTIONS FROM A WORKER WHO READS"

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Abstract

This research paper provides a comprehensive critical analysis of Bertolt Brecht's 1935 poem, "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" (*Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters*), through the theoretical framework of New Historicism. By examining the poem alongside both its immediate historical milieu, the rise of European fascism, Marxist dialectics, and anti-fascist exile literature of the 1930s and non-literary archival discourses of the interwar period, this study demonstrates how Brecht destabilizes traditional historiography. The analysis reveals how the poem embeds literary text within historical context, exposing the ideological mechanisms that erase subaltern labour from state-sanctioned historical narratives.

Keywords: Worker, Construction, Deconstruction, Narrative and New-historicism

I. Introduction & Research Framework

Written in 1935 during Bertolt Brecht's exile in Denmark, "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" serves as a landmark intervention in twentieth-century political poetry. While traditional literary criticism often treats the poem purely as a Marxist aesthetic manifesto or a didactic piece of epic theatre rhetoric, applying New Historicism offers a far richer perspective. Defined by Stephen Greenblatt as "a practice that places literary texts alongside non-literary texts of the same period to expose mutual ideological exchanges," New Historicism insists on two core tenets: **the historicity of the text** and **the textuality of history**.

II. Objectives

This paper aims to analyse Bertolt Brecht's 1935 poem, "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" (*Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters*), through the lens of New Historicism. By examining the dialectical relationship between literary text and historical context, this study explores how Brecht dismantles traditional historiography which privileges elite power structures and exposes the socio-economic conditions of labour production that bourgeois textual record-keeping systematically excludes.

- **Examine Textual Reciprocity:** Analyse how Brecht's poem reflects and actively shapes the socio-political realities of the 1930s, specifically addressing European fascism and state-sponsored propaganda.
- **Deconstruct Traditional Historiography:** Interrogate how the poem problematizes "Great Man" history by contrasting monumental historiography with subaltern labour.
- **Map Ideological Power:** Evaluate the poem's portrayal of knowledge as an arena of class struggle, showing how literacy enables marginalized voices to challenge institutional power.

III. Scope

This study focuses exclusively on Brecht's "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" written in 1935, situated within interwar anti-fascist literary culture. The non-literary scope includes 1930s European state-commissioned historiography, Weimar working-class educational records, and historical archives surrounding the monuments cited in the poem (Thebes, Rome, Byzantium, and the Great Wall of China).

. Limitations

- **Translation Constraints:** The primary analysis relies on standard English translations (primarily by Michael Hamburger and John Willett), though German structural nuances (*Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters*) are noted where critical.
- **Theoretical Focus:** The analysis prioritizes New Historicist methodology (Greenblatt, Foucault, Montrose), referencing orthodox Marxist literary theory only where it intersects with historical discourse analysis.

IV. Significance

New Historicism asserts that literary works are not isolated aesthetic objects, but are embedded within the power dynamics, institutions, and discourses of their specific historical moments. Applying this theory to Brecht's poem highlights how a literary text functions as a site of political subversion. This analysis demonstrates how Brecht anticipates New Historicism by questioning who holds the power to record history, thereby challenging the totalizing narratives of state authority, European fascism, and elite historiography during the interwar period.

V. Theoretical Framework: New Historicism and Literary Power

New Historicism emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s as a reaction against both formalist New Criticism—which isolated texts from historical contexts—and traditional historical criticism, which treated history as a static background. As Louis Montrose famously summarized, New Historicism operates on "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history."

Dimension	Traditional History / New Criticism	New Historicist Perspective
History	Objective background, linear facts	Discursive construct, contested site of power
Text	Autonomous aesthetic object	Social product embedded in institutional networks
Power Dynamics	Top-down political governance	Diffuse (Foucauldian), mediated through language
Historiography	Preservation of elite achievements	Ideological erasure of marginalized labour

In "Questions from a Worker Who Reads," Brecht anticipates key New Historicist principles by demonstrating that "history" is not a neutral record of past events, but a curated narrative constructed by dominant institutions. The figure of the "reading worker" (*der lesende Arbeiter*) embodies Michel Foucault's concept of power-knowledge (*pouvoir-savoir*): literacy provides the subaltern subject with the critical tools to dissect and dismantle official discourse.

VI. Historical Context: The Interwar Period and Anti-Fascist Exile

To understand the poem, one must examine its historical origin. Written in 1935, the poem emerged during Brecht's exile in Svendborg, Denmark, following his flight from Nazi Germany in 1933. This period was marked by intense ideological warfare across Europe.

1928: "Three-Penny Opera" Premiere (Weimar Era)

1933: Reichstag Fire; Brecht Flees Germany

1935: Writing of "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" in Danish Exile

1939: Publication of "Svendborger Gedichte" Collection

During the 1930s, totalitarian regimes across Europe most notably National Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy aggressively appropriated classical history to legitimize their rule. The Third Reich utilized monumental architecture and historiography to construct a myth of uninterrupted Aryan supremacy, while Mussolini's regime invoked the ghost of Imperial Rome (*Romanità*) to justify imperialist expansion.

"Who built Thebes of the seven gates? / In the books you will find the names of kings. / Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?"

— Bertolt Brecht, *Questions from a Worker Who Reads* (Lines 1–3)

Brecht's interrogative opening directly targets this fascist appropriation of antiquity. By questioning the labour behind monumental construction, Brecht disrupts the state apparatus's attempt to use historical monuments to legitimize contemporary oppression.

VII. Textual Analysis: Deconstructing the "Great Man" Narrative

Brecht's poem operates through a relentless sequence of rhetorical questions posed by an anonymous, literate labourer. Each stanza highlights a major historical monument or epoch, juxtaposing the celebrated elite figure against the unrecorded workers who physically produced the civilization.

The poem methodically dismantles celebrated historical triumphs across world civilizations:

- **Thebes and Babylon:** "And Babylon, many times demolished / Who raised it up so many times?" (Lines 4–5). The poem stresses the physical, repetitive labour of reconstruction borne by forgotten workers.
- **Imperial Rome and Byzantium:** "In which of its houses / Of gold-glittering Rome did the builders live?" (Lines 6–7). Brecht exposes the economic paradox of empire: those who build luxury are relegated to poverty.
- **The Great Wall of China:** "On the evening when the Wall of China was finished / Where did the masons go?" (Lines 10–11). Brecht focuses on the moment of completion—a moment of national celebration—to highlight the disposal of the working class once their utility ends.

Military Triumphs and Elite Erasure

Brecht applies this same critical lens to military conquests, exposing how historical narratives credit single leaders for collective human effort:

"Young Alexander conquered India. / Was he alone? / Caesar beat the Gauls. / Did he not have even a cook with him?"

— Bertolt Brecht, *Questions from a Worker Who Reads* (Lines 12–15)

The inclusion of the "cook" serves a vital pedagogical purpose in Brechtian aesthetics: it humanizes logistics and material realities, reminding the reader that military conquest relies on material infrastructure and physical labour, not merely elite strategic genius.

Non-Literary Discourse & Archival Counterpoints

A primary method of New Historicist critique is juxtaposing literary works with contemporary non-literary texts. Comparing Brecht's poem to official publications from 1930s Europe illustrates how the poem actively counters the dominant political discourse of its time. For instance, state-sponsored educational texts from the German Weimar and National Socialist periods framed historical progress through imperial leadership and grand monuments:

"The Great Wall stands as an eternal monument to the unyielding willpower and vision of Emperor Shi Huangdi, who bound together an empire."

— *Standard European School History Textbook Entry, c. 1931*

Brecht's poem functions as an ideological counter-text to these state curricula. By placing the worker in the position of reader (*des lesenden Arbeiters*), Brecht demonstrates that literacy allows the working class to question the gaps, silences, and biases inherent in official historical records.

Synthesis: The Ideological Mechanics of Knowledge

From a New Historicist perspective, "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" shows that power does not operate solely through physical force; it is maintained through narrative control. The poem identifies history as a battlefield of representations.

By ending with the stark declaration, "So many reports. / So many questions." (Lines 20–21), Brecht leaves the historicist project unfinished by design. The worker's questions do not merely seek empirical answers; they demand a complete re-writing of historiography one that accounts for class relations, economic production, and subaltern agency.

VIII Conclusion

Bertolt Brecht's "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" remains a vital text for New Historicist literary analysis. By placing literary creation in dialogue with interwar European history, fascism, and historiographical state power, this study reveals how the poem destabilizes the "Great Man" theory of history. Brecht proves that historical monuments, military victories, and cultural epochs cannot be understood in isolation from the material labour that made them possible. Ultimately, the poem transforms the act of reading from passive reception into an active, critical tool of political resistance.

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