

Karl Marx's Verse of 1836-1837 as a Foreshadowing of his Early Philosophy

Author(s): William M. Johnston

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1967), pp. 259-268

Published by: [University of Pennsylvania Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2708421>

Accessed: 17/02/2012 16:44

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Pennsylvania Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
Journal of the History of Ideas.

KARL MARX'S VERSE OF 1836-1837 AS A FORESHADOWING OF HIS EARLY PHILOSOPHY

BY WILLIAM M. JOHNSTON

Among the extant writings of Karl Marx those which have probably received the least attention from scholars are the poems and plays which he wrote in 1836 and 1837. Until the mid-1920's it was in fact thought that all but two of Marx's poems had been irrevocably lost. Then sixty of them were rediscovered, and were published in 1929.¹ But, the rediscovery of the poems came simultaneously with the discovery of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, written in the early 1840's, and quite justifiably scholars gave precedence to the philosophical manuscripts, to the almost total exclusion of the poems.² The neglect of the poems has continued to this day, however. One reason, and a most subtle one, for continued neglect is a prejudice which haunts students of Marx. Long known primarily as the philosopher who said, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it,"³ Marx seems to many scholars the least poetic of philosophers.

Of the two scholars who have written at some length on Marx as a

¹ See Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe*, D. Ryazanov, ed (Berlin, 1927-) Abteilung I, Band I, Halbband 2, 2-58. [Abbreviated hereafter as *MEGA*, I.2.] For the story of the recovery of the poems among the papers of Dr. Roland Daniels, see D. Ryazanov, "Einleitung," *MEGA*, I.2, p. xi. As an invidious reward for his epoch-making contributions to Marx scholarship, David Borisovich Ryazanov (1870-1938), (*né* Goldendakh), who founded the Marx-Engels Institute in 1920, was deposed by Stalin in the early 1930's and died in exile.

² Important works which pioneered the interpretation of the philosophical manuscripts are: Auguste Cornu, *La Jeunesse de Karl Marx* (1817-1845), (Paris, 1934); Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx* (London, 1936). Cornu mentions the poems only in passing; Hook ignores them. More recent works of careful research on the young Marx are: Karl Hugo Breuer, *Der junge Marx: sein Weg zum Kommunismus* (Cologne, 1954); Karl Löwith, "Man's Self-Alienation in the Early Writings of Marx," *Social Research*, XXI (1954), 204-230; Maximilien Rubel, *Karl Marx: Essai de biographie intellectuelle* (Paris, 1957); Paul Kägi, *Genesis des historischen Materialismus: Karl Marx und die Dynamik der Gesellschaft* (Vienna, 1965).

³ The Eleventh of the "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845) in K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow, 1957), 71.

poet, Marcel Ollivier and Peter Demetz,⁴ Ollivier describes above all the discovery of the manuscripts, finding their literary merit dubious at best. He suggests that at age eighteen Marx took the writing of verse so seriously that we may suppose that he aspired at least briefly to be a poet. This view is shared by Demetz, who stresses the thorough training in late XVIIIth-century poetry which Karl had received from his father. But in exploring some probable models for Marx's verse, Demetz glosses over those themes in Marx which have no obvious precedent. Both Ollivier and Demetz appear to assume a lack of continuity between the versifier of 1837 and the thinker of the early 1840's and later.

Yet an obvious continuity between Marx's verse and his later work lies in the style of his writing. His love of metaphor, his use of allusions, his construction of complex sentences all bear witness to his early exercises as a composer of verse.⁵ A second continuity is the fact that Marx used to read the works of Aeschylus through every year, in the Greek.⁶ We may suppose that he read the plays in part in order to savor their style—as well as to contemplate the trials of Prometheus, Orestes, and Eteocles in their contest with the usurper of the cosmos, Zeus. Long after Marx had ceased to write it, he retained a fondness for verse. Still, if Marx's early verse-making did nothing more than indicate something about the roots of his prose style and his taste for Greek tragedy, perhaps the verse would deserve the neglect it has received. But there is more to the matter. In this note we shall investigate two deeper continuities between Marx's verse and his early philosophy.

The extant poems of Karl Marx (1818–1883) date from the years 1836 and 1837, when Marx was studying law in Berlin. Many of the poems are inspired by his love for Jenny von Westphalen, his childhood sweetheart from his home town of Trier. Karl's father, Heinrich Marx, did not approve of the proposed match between his ambitious son and the aristocratic daughter of a high Prussian official. When old Heinrich Marx insisted in 1836 that as a love test Karl should remove himself for a time from the proximity of Jenny, off to Berlin went the young poet. During his first year as a student Karl wrote about sixty lyrics, portions of two plays,

⁴ Marcel Ollivier, "Karl Marx poète," *Mercure de France*, CCXLIII (1933), 260–284; Peter Demetz, *Marx, Engels, und die Dichter: zur Grundlagenforschung des Marxismus* (Stuttgart, 1959), 73–87. Unfortunately, in his otherwise excellent study of Marx's literary style Stanley Edgar Hyman seems to have overlooked the survival of these sixty poems. See S. E. Hyman, *The Tangled Bank: Darwin, Marx, Frazer, and Freud as Imaginative Writers* (New York, 1962), 86.

⁵ See Eduard Kölwel, *Von der Art zu Schreiben: Essays über philosophische und dichterische Ausdrucksmittel* (Halle a.S., 1962), 130–159, for a stylistic analysis of *Das Kapital* and *ibid.*, 159–166, for a stylistic analysis of Marx's article of July 1842 in the *Rheinische Zeitung*. Kölwel emphasizes Marx's preference for chiasmus, puns, images, and allusions to classical antiquity in his prose. He does not mention the poems, where these same characteristics may be found in abundance.

⁶ See K. H. Breuer, *Der junge Marx*, 143, note 365, which cites Wilhelm Liebknecht as a source for this information.

and part of a novel.⁷ About half of the poems are ballads, in the mode of Schiller and to some extent of Heine.⁸ There are also several love poems entitled "To Jenny," in which Marx expresses yearning for his distant sweetheart.

Outside of the romantic poems written largely for his *fiancée*, Marx develops in 1836-37 two major themes which foreshadow his prose writings of the early 1840's. First, he embarks upon a satire of Hegel and Hegel's predecessors in a series of "*Epigramme*." In intent, though not in meter, these epigrams seem to be modelled on the *Xenien* of Schiller and Goethe. Already in 1837 Marx can epitomize his objection to German idealism in the tersest form:

Kant und Fichte gern zum Äther schweifen,
Suchten dort ein fernes Land,
Doch ich such' nur tüchtig zu begreifen
Was ich—auf der Strasse fand.⁹

[Kant and Fichte like to whirl in the ether,
Searching for a distant land,
While I only seek to understand completely
What I found in the street.]

Although Marx never goes so far as to accuse Hegel of ignoring altogether what he "finds in the street," he does, as we shall see, judge him to be no less fond than his predecessors of the "ether" and "the distant land." For in another *Xenion*, Marx satirizes the influence of Hegel's abstractions on poetasters who aspire to apply his *Ästhetik* in their writing of verse. They are doomed to fail as poets and must apologize for their failure as follows:

Verzeiht uns Epigrammendingen,
Wenn wir fatale Weisen singen,
Wir haben uns nach Hegel einstudiert
Auf sein' Ästhetik noch nicht abgeführt.¹⁰

[Pardon us creatures of epigram
If we sing disagreeable tunes;
We have schooled ourselves in Hegel
And from his Aesthetic we have not yet been purged.]

Here Marx speculates on the practical applications of Hegel's aesthetic.

⁷ For samples of the plays, see "Szenen aus *Oulanem: Trauerspiel*," in *MEGA*, I.2, 59-75. For the novel: "Einige Kapitel aus *Scorpion und Felix: humoristischer Roman*," *MEGA*, I.2, 76-89. Interestingly, these fragments as well as the sixty lyrics survived in a notebook which young Karl had sent to his father for the latter's birthday in 1837. Karl inscribed the notebook: "Gedichte/meinem/teuren Vater zu seinem Geburtstage 1837/ als schwaches Zeichen ewiger Liebe." ["Poems/ for my/dear Father on his Birthday, 1837,/as a poor token of eternal love."]

⁸ For Marx's relations to the poems of Schiller and to Heine see Demetz, *op. cit.*, 73-87.

⁹ *MEGA*, I.2, 42. Throughout, the translations from Marx's verse are my own.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

If it will not help poets to write better, of what use is it? As it is, he deplores the effects of Hegel's thought on young poets who, like Hegel, write prosily about disagreeable things. Unfortunately, Marx feels that, in order to lampoon the Hegelian poets, he too must write in this commonplace fashion. At times, he himself seems almost to be one of them!

In still a third satire on Hegel, Marx puts fulsome words of self-praise in the mouth of the philosopher. Marx has Hegel speak as follows:

Weil ich das Höchste entdeckt und die Tiefe sinnend gefunden,
Bin ich grob, wie ein Gott, hüll' mich in Dunkel, wie er.
Lange forscht' ich und trieb auf dem wogenden Meer der Gedanken,
Und da fand ich das Wort, halt' ich am Gefundenen fest.¹¹

[Because I discovered the Highest and found the depths by pondering,
I am roughhewn, like a God, I hide in darkness, like him.
Long I searched and floated over the rocking sea of thoughts.
And when I found the word, I clung fast to what I had found.]

Here Marx criticizes Hegel's ambition to interpret the world by means of "thoughts" and "the word." To explain the obscurity ("darkness") and roughhewness ("*grob*") of Hegel's thought, Marx attributed to him a desire to emulate God. But Hegel, however it may be with God, is incapable of expressing in words the "highest" and the "depths." The sea of "thoughts" is less navigable and less penetrable than the real sea, even when Hegel is the pilot.

Later, in 1844, Marx was to criticize Hegel above all for abstractness and for conceiving of man purely as mind. In the "Third Manuscript" of *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx begins his critique of Hegel's *Phenomenology* as follows: "When Hegel conceives wealth, the power of the state, etc., as entities alienated from the human being, he conceives them only in their thought form."¹² Marx then pursues this criticism of Hegel's abstractness ("his holding fast . . . to the word"): "They [wealth, the power of the state, etc.] are entities of thought and thus simply an alienation of pure (i.e. abstract) philosophical thought. . . ." ¹³ Here Marx rejects any separation of philosophical thought from the real world. By the real world, he means the world of society where men get hungry and lonely. With his abstractions, the philosopher can explain only the world of thought, where there is no need for food or love. Like Kant and Fichte, Hegel does not understand what he finds in the street.

Marx proceeds to expand this critique as follows:

The *philosopher*, himself an abstract form of alienated man, sets himself up as the *measure* of the alienated world.¹⁴

To set himself up as the measure of the world is precisely the ambition of Hegel's which Marx castigates in his epigram of 1837. In his world of thought, Hegel can only play at God, and in so doing he rivals God

¹¹ MEGA, I.2, 41.

¹² Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, tr. T. B. Bottomore, in Karl Marx: *Early Writings*, T. B. Bottomore, ed. (London, 1963), 200.

¹³ Marx, *Early Writings*, 200.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

merely in obscurity and self-concealment. Thus as early as 1837 Marx has enunciated the theme that idealist philosophy is an abstraction, divorced from the real world and blind to its own separation from reality.

On the other hand, in 1837 Marx is not yet a materialist. He singles out for satire physicians who pretend that they can understand human beings by recourse merely to the study of anatomy and physiology. This theme comes out in the most pungent part of Marx's several poems on doctors: ¹⁵

Verdammt Philistermedizinerpack,
Die ganze Welt ist euch ein Knochensack,
Habt ihr mit Wasserstoff das Blut gekühlt,
Und auch nur erst den Puls in Gang gefühlt,
Dann glaubt ihr, nun habe ich alles gegeben,
Man könne doch ganz gemächlich leben,
Der Herrgott sei ein Witzkopf gewesen,
Dass er so sehr in der Anatomie belesen,
Und jede Blume sei ein brauchbar Instrument,
Wenn ihr sie zu Kräuterbrühe erst brennt.¹⁶

[Damnable pack of philistine doctors,
The world to you is a bag of bones,
If you have cooled the blood with hydrogen
And felt the pulse move, for the first time
You think, "Now I have done everything.
One can live in total comfort."
For you, the Lord God was a clever fellow
To be so well-versed in anatomy;
And every flower becomes a useful tool
Only when distilled to herbal brew.]

This utterance on physicians comes from the romantic young Marx, who could write love ballads and could deplore the lack of emotion in the stars.¹⁷ As a humanist, Marx was hostile to the claim of science to reduce

¹⁵ In addition to "An die Mediziner" quoted below, there are four other diatribes against "Mediziner," in *MEGA*, I.2, 16-17.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 16.

¹⁷ In "An die Sterne," Marx apostrophizes the stars as follows:

Es tanzen eure Reigen
In Schimmer und in Strahl,
Und eure Bilder steigen,
Und schwellen ohne Zahl.
Doch ach! ihr glänzt nur immer,
In ruh'gem Ätherschein,
Und Götter werfen nimmer
Die Glut in euch hinein.
Ihr seid nur Truggebilde,
Von Strahlen flammt' Gesicht,
Doch Herzensglut und Milde
Und Seele habt ihr nicht.

(*MEGA*, I.2, 51-52.)

all life to its abstractions ("useful tool"). Indeed, the theme which unites Marx's critique of physicians with his rejection of Hegel is his hostility to abstractness. Above all, Marx wanted men to pay homage to life in all its concreteness of appetite and feeling.

The unifying motif of Marx's satires on physicians is that the doctors are philistines.¹⁸ This attack on philistinism is the second major theme of Marx's satiric verse. As an example, he derides those physicians who lack the capacity or desire to evaluate correctly the place of their work in society. Like all philistines they tend to exaggerate their own importance, while ignoring the needs of others.

Marx does not limit his critique of philistinism to physicians. In the first of his "*Epigramme*," he expresses his contempt for the German public. Above all, he satirizes the penchant of Germans to belittle and even to ignore a political crisis until it is safely past. But once it is over, these know-nothings feel impelled to theorize about it, in a vain effort to explain it away. Such people constitute a kind of political philistine.

In seinem Sessel, behaglich dumm,
Sitzt schweigend das deutsche Publikum.
Braust der Sturm herüber, hinüber,
Wölkt sich der Himmel düster und trüber,
Zischen die Blitze schlängelnd
Das rührt es nicht in seinem Sinn.
Doch wenn sich die Sonne hervorbegegnet,
Die Lüfte säuseln, der Sturm sich leget,
Dann hebt's sich und macht ein Geschrei,
Und schreibt ein Buch: "der Lärm sei vorbei."

[In its arm-chair, cozy and stupid,
The German public sits without speaking.
When the storm roars above and around,
When the sky clouds over thick and dark,

[Gleaming and shining
You dance in rows,
Numberless your forms
Climb and undulate.
But alas! You shine forever
In peaceful ether-light;
Into you the gods
Never pour heat.
You are only phantoms,
A face flaming with rays of light,
But you have no heart's fire
Nor pity nor soul.]

Here we see Marx's humanistic preference for the heart and soul of man, as opposed to the mechanical world of Newtonian nature.

¹⁸ Starting in 1693, the term "philistine" was used by German university students to denote any townsman. During the XVIIIth century it came to imply a person deficient in culture and enlightenment. *Oxford English Dictionary*, repr. (Oxford, 1933), vol. VII, 776.

When lightning hisses and twists about,
 That does not stir the public in its senses.
 But when the sun comes forth,
 When the breezes whisper and the storm subsides,
 Then the public rises and lets out a cry,
 And writes a book, "The alarm is past."]¹⁹

And the book will explain, moreover, that the danger did not really exist, because:

Der Himmel spasse auch ganz apart,
 Müsse das All systematischer treiben. . . .²⁰

[Heaven made a joke quite out of the ordinary,
 The whole must move more systematically. . . .]

The German public wants only to theorize about a political clash, in order to rationalize it out of existence. But the Germans dare to fly so naively in the face of the facts only after the crisis has passed, having played ostrich for its duration.

Marx's scorn for mere theorizing in the face of political upheaval is a major theme of his later thought. He expresses the priority of practice over theory trenchantly in the second of his "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845):

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but a *practical* question. In practice man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question.²¹

Here we see an hostility to abstractions such as that which prompted his satire on physicians and his epigrams against Hegel. We may assume that in Marx's view only a reading public which could ignore political tempests would welcome the abstract theodicy of Hegel and the impractical theology of the physicians. This suggests that the foundation of Marx's attack both on theorists and on philistines lies in his awareness of their political inertness. A supine public, doped on Hegel and other purveyors of abstractions, could do nothing to improve man's lot in society. Such a public would remain forever "cozy and stupid." It would be, in a word, *bourgeois*.

Besides his contempt for the *bourgeois* German public, a second lifelong attitude in Marx which we may trace back to the verse of 1837 is his emphasis on the isolation of the creative individual within society. In his poems, Marx depicts the artist as a creator who lives solely for his art, and this dedication to art makes him misunderstood by everyone. Thus the artist is portrayed as a victim of alienation.²²

¹⁹ MEGA, I.2, 41.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in: K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow, 1957), 69-70.

²² By alienation, I mean Marx's usage of *Entfremdung* (a general separation from one's environment) as distinct from its sub-species, *Entäusserung* (externalizing of one's creativity in a piece of work). Throughout this paper, for "alienation," one may read "*Entfremdung*."

Marx's sharpest expression of the artist's isolation is found in "The Minstrel" ("Der Spielmann"). As in so many of his lyrics, he uses a dialogue form, in which an unnamed interlocutor challenges the principal figure. After being briefly introduced, the minstrel is piqued into enunciating his *credo*. He expostulates:

"Was geig' ich Mensch! was brausen Wellen,
Dass donnernd sie am Fels zerschellen,
Dass's Auge erblind't, dass der Busen springt,
Dass die Seele hinab zur Hölle klingt!"²³

["What do I play, man! What do waves roar,
As they break in thunder on the rocks,
As the eye is blinded, as the bosom leaps,
As the soul sounds down toward hell!"]

The interlocutor then replies:

"Spielmann, zerreibst dir's Herz mit Spott,
Die Kunst, die lieh dir ein lichter Gott,
Sollst ziehn, sollst sprühn auf Klangeswellen,
Zum Sternentanz hinanzuschwellen!"²⁴

["Minstrel, you grind your heart with mockery,
And art, which a bright god gives you,
You shall carry and dazzle on waves of sound,
Until it swells up to the dance of the stars."]

The angered minstrel bursts out:

"Was, was! Ich stech' stech' ohne Fehle,
Blutschwarz den Säbel in deine Seele,
Fort aus dem Haus, fort aus dem Blick,
Willst Kindlein spielen um dein Genick?
"Gott kennt sie nicht, Gott acht't nicht die Kunst,
Die stiess in den Kopf aus Höllendunst,
Bis das Hirn vernarrt, bis das Herz verwandelt,
Die hab' ich lebendig vom Schwarzen erhandelt!
"Der schlägt mir den Takt, der kreidet die Zeichen,
Muss voller, toller den Todmarsch streichen,
Muss spielen dunkel, muss spielen licht,
Bis Herz durch Sait' und Bogen bricht." ²⁵

["What's that? I'll thrust without missing
My sabre black with blood into your soul.
Get out of my house, get out of my sight;
Do you want children playing around your neck?

²³ *MEGA*, I.2, 57. Marx published a slightly revised version of this poem in *Athenäum: Zeitschrift für das gebildete Deutschland* (Berlin, January 21, 1841), as one of two "Wilde Lieder." These were the first works by Karl Marx to appear in print.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

"God does not know art, he pays no attention to it,
 Art which rises into the head from the fumes of hell,
 Until the brain is addled, until the heart is transformed;
 I obtained it direct and living from the Black one!
 "He who beats my time, who writes my piece,
 Must play the death march louder and more furiously,
 Must play dark, must play light,
 Until heart breaks from bow and string."

This is one of Marx's most complex poems, and accordingly, one of the most difficult to translate. The image of the sabre which stabs the listener's soul suggests the violinist's bow. The metaphor of music "going to one's head" like fumes from hell conveys the intoxication of the player and of his audience. This intoxication will intensify as the music plays on and on, until it becomes like a death-march which absorbs all the hearer's sensations. Marx has painted a picture of an artist utterly absorbed by his craft, oblivious of all save his desire to move hearts to the point of breaking. This artist knows no restraint in his calling. The reference to the devil and the picture of the artist as a dealer in black magic is a way of expressing the artist's separation from normal life. The artist lives in the dark-side (*Nachtseite*) of the soul, an idea which by 1837 had become a romantic commonplace.

Indeed, at first glance it may seem that here Marx is expressing a whole series of romantic commonplaces. The artist as a man in league with the powers of darkness, the musician as the supreme artist, the power of music to intoxicate the soul, the scorn of the artist for the restraints of the social order—these themes are familiar in Germany from Wackenroder, Tieck, and Novalis in the 1790's on down to Platen, Lenau, and Heine in the 1830's. Marx, however, voices these sentiments with a fury that suggests rebellion of a starker sort than mere poetic *Weltschmerz*. Unlike Novalis, who dreams of dying in the magic of the night, Marx has his artist threaten to kill the unappreciative listener. This artist carries a sabre, as well as a violin and bow. He wishes to slay hearts with his music, but he also threatens to slay critics with his sword. A musician who is willing to kill for his art, as well as to die for it, is no ordinary Romantic!

While it may be going too far to say that this minstrel is an incipient revolutionary, it is plain that his estrangement from society is total. He lives uniquely for his art, as a dedicated revolutionary lives uniquely for his cause. In temperament, Marx's minstrel is a born despiser of the social order. It is not far-fetched to say that out of this minstrel a revolutionary is waiting to be born. And even if we ignore Marx's post-1846 vocation as a revolutionary, his portrait of the artist as the alienated individual *par excellence* suggests that his own sense of alienation may have deepened enormously during 1836 and 1837. During his first year in Berlin, he adopted the clichés of romanticism with a vengeance. He went so far as to depict the poet as a kind of sacrificial victim to the powers of darkness, a victim who performs his rite because the devil leaves him no choice.

But if we follow out the romantic stereotype, we may suppose that behind this image lies the hope, albeit unexpressed, that the sacrifice made by the poet may liberate others from similar dark forces within themselves.

The poet then emerges as a kind of unwitting liberator of mankind. This is the rôle which in the 1830's Heine undertook to play consciously, as a man of letters, and which Marx later was to condemn in Heine.²⁶ For by 1845 Marx, frustrated poet, had already learned that words unaccompanied by actions change nothing, except men's visions. And Marx, like the Aeschylean hero Prometheus, wanted to change the world itself.

University of Massachusetts.

²⁶ See Walther Victor, *Marx und Heine*, 3rd ed. (Berlin, 1953) on the relations of Marx and Heine after they met in Paris in 1843.