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Independent Scholar

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“Trace your grave”: On the poetry of The Communist Manifesto’s grave-digger thesis

Abstract:

The Communist Manifesto (1848) was written by two erstwhile poets, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who dedicated themselves to working-class self-emancipation, which requires the forcible overthrow of capitalist society. Poetry vitalised their revolutionary politics and impelled them beyond poetry to critico-practical class struggle against the bourgeoisie. Using Samuel Moore’s 1888 English translation, which Engels assisted and authorised, this paper presents new readings of famous images and passages in the *Manifesto* by demonstrating the significance of poetry to its representation of working life and living-dead extremity in bourgeois society. It focuses on the poetry of the *Manifesto*’s thesis that the bourgeoisie produces its own grave-diggers. Marx and Engels wove poetry into their thesis, including blank verse by Shakespeare and works by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Thomas Hood and Heinrich Heine. The paper addresses Marx and Engels’s critical assimilation of one poem in particular: Shelley’s “Song to the Men of England” (1819). It also regards, through poetry, their critique of *the* extremity of capital – its infinity – which necessitates proletarian revolution for human liberation. The coda posits the *Manifesto* as a “barricade-poem” in prose form.

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Introduction

Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848), better known as *The Communist Manifesto*, was written by two erstwhile poets, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who dedicated themselves to working-class self-emancipation, which requires the forcible overthrow of capitalist society. It is steeped in poetry and their critique of capitalist production of new types of existential, economic, political and social extremity. Indeed, poetry, for Marx and Engels, was inseparable from critique of alienation, exploitation and precarity as well as support for proletarian militancy, radicalism and revolution. Engels wrote the *Manifesto*’s first two drafts, *Draft of a Communist Confession of Faith* in June 1847 and *Principles of Communism* that October, but these were too constraining. In November, he suggested to Marx a new title and more commodious form: “I think we would do best to abandon the catechetical form and call the thing Communist *Manifesto*. Since a certain amount of history has to be narrated in it, the form hitherto adopted is quite unsuitable” (Marx & Engels, 2010, vol. 38, p. 149). Marx wrote the third and final draft, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in December 1847–January 1848. As Engels’s ‘catechisms’ formed “a crucial concrete foundation for the *Manifesto*, in terms of structure and of key concepts, overall approach and tone,” they justify Marx and Engels being “jointly credited” as its writers (Miéville, 2022, p. 38). Its first edition, in German, was published in London in February 1848.

Using Samuel Moore’s 1888 English translation, which Engels assisted and authorised, this paper demonstrates the significance of poetry to the *Manifesto*’s representation of working life and living-dead extremity in bourgeois society. It focuses on the poetry of the *Manifesto*’s formulation of “what has come to be known as the gravedigger thesis” (Vidal, 2018, p. 65). Marx and Engels wove poetry into their thesis, including blank verse from Shakespeare plays, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s “Der Zauberlehrling” (The Sorcerer’s Apprentice, 1797), Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Song to the Men of England” (1819), Thomas Hood’s “The Song of the Shirt” (1843), an anonymously authored protest song, “Hier im Ort ist ein Gericht” (In This Place There is a Court, 1844), which became known as “Das Blutgericht” (The Blood Court), and Heinrich Heine’s “Die armen Weber” (The Poor Weavers, 1844), which Engels translated into English under the title “Song of the Silesian Weavers” and became known as “Die schlesischen Weber” (The Silesian Weavers). The paper addresses Marx and Engels’s critical assimilation of one of these in detail: Shelley’s “Song to the Men of England”. “Song” depicts working people placed in extremis by their exploiters and oppressors, but also limns the prospect of workers contesting their oppression and exploitation by armed resistance and revolt. Through the intense lens of poetry, the paper also regards Marx and Engels’s critique of *the* extremity of capital – its infinity – which necessitates proletarian revolution for human liberation. The coda posits the *Manifesto* as a “barricade-poem” (Murphet, 2019) in prose form.

The grave-digger thesis

The opening of the *Manifesto*’s first section, “Bourgeois and Proletarians,” observes that the class struggle between “oppressor and oppressed,” throughout the history of class-based society, “each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the

common ruin of the contending classes" (p. 482). The grave-digger thesis elaborated at the end of that section is based on the premise that, "in order to oppress a class, certain conditions must be assured to it under which it can, at least, continue its slavish existence" (p. 495). The modern oppressor, the bourgeois, cannot assure those necessities, and so the "modern labourer,"

instead of rising with the progress of industry, sinks deeper and deeper below the conditions of existence of his own class. He becomes a pauper, and pauperism develops more rapidly than population and wealth. And here it becomes evident, that the bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an over-riding law. It is unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery, because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state, that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him. Society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie, in other words, its existence is no longer compatible with society.

The essential condition for the existence, and for the sway of the bourgeois class, is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage-labour. Wage-labour rests exclusively on competition between the labourers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable. (2010, pp. 495–496)

This passage's striking and seemingly contradictory evocation of sinking, starving, disintegrating, yet grave-digging workers as well as that opening acknowledgment that some past class struggles culminated "in the common ruin of the contending classes" cast a pall over the inevitability of proletarian victory and communist society. As Lucio Magri notes, "communism is only one face, the positive one, of a gigantic historical contradiction, whose other face is catastrophe" (translated by and quoted in Toscano, 2021, p. 421).

Magri disputes the *Manifesto*'s thesis that the bourgeoisie produces its own negation in the form of a united, combative proletariat. Capital, he despaired in 2012, "produces its own putrefaction and that of the social body, but not its own gravedigger or the equipment required for the burial" (Toscano, p.422). Certainly, capitalist social relations produce "the accumulation of catastrophe on a truly planetary level" (Foster, 2011, p. 14). The Salvage Collective asks: "What does it mean that as capitalism has become truly global, the gravediggers it has created dig not only capitalism's grave, but also that of much organic life on earth?" (2021, p. 7) In Shelley's "Song to the Men of England," English workers are being worked into the grave: "England be your Sepulchre" (2002, p. 406). Now, Earth itself seems sepulchral, so the workers of the world have won only the prospect of "emancipation on an at best partially habitable planet": "Capitalism has, one hundred and fifty years after Marx predicted, finally produced enough diggers to complete the grave, but in doing so it ensured all that was left to inherit was the graveyard" (The Salvage Collective, p. 7). Capital creates, simultaneously and inseparably, putrefaction of the social body and dissolution of the natural

body: “the great globe itself, / Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,” to quote *The Tempest* (4.1.153–154), which is an intertext of Moore’s translation, as shown below.

Being “a political pamphlet whose express purpose was to educate and organise the working class,” the *Manifesto*’s “very existence assumes that the development of revolutionary class consciousness is *not* inevitable” (Vidal, p. 72; original emphasis). Facing the complications of political self-organisation for proletarians always already trapped in the wage-relation, the *Manifesto* “uses language to enact a will to realize a particular future” (Osborne, 2005, p. 88). Guying charges made by the bourgeoisie and calling the world’s workers to action, its prose is “vigorous, varied, and highly concrete, alive with imagery and flashing with figures of speech” (Siegel, 1982, p. 223). Its wilful, exhortatory language, fresh diction and bold tropes (Siegel, p. 223), “dense with the packed power of high explosives” (Wilson, 1960, p. 160), are shaped and shaded by Marx and Engels’s shared youthful immersion in poetry, parody and satire (Rose, 1978), their regard for poetry’s adequacy to portray capitalist modernity and “give form to the multiple modalities of exploitation and oppression” (Hartley, 2021, p. 835), and their recognition of its powerlessness against the inhumanity, or monstrosity, of capitalist social relations.

The *Manifesto* was intended to educate, organise and mobilise another monstrosity – Marx called it *der ungeheuren Mehrzahl* – to combat and upend the bourgeoisie’s monstrous society. Moore translated Marx’s thrice-used German epithet as “the immense majority”. However, *ungeheuren* can be translated equally accurately as “monstrous” and “immense”. Marx would have intended this double meaning for his vision of the proletarian movement out-monstering and superseding bourgeois society, instead of sinking proletarians being swallowed by it:

All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interest of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense [and monstrous] majority, in the interest of the immense [and monstrous] majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air. (vol. 6, p. 495)

Marx’s third use of *der ungeheuren Mehrzahl* occurs when he provocatively addresses his readers “as if *they* were the bourgeoisie” (Martin, 2015, p. 58; original emphasis) and eviscerates bourgeois reason with characteristic mordancy:

You are horrified at our [the communists] intending to do away with private property. But in your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population; its existence for the few is solely due to its non-existence in the hands of those nine-tenths. You reproach us, therefore, with intending to do away with a form of property, the necessary condition for whose existence is the non-existence of any property for the immense [and monstrous] majority of society. (vol. 6, p. 500)

Marx and Engels had no intention of putting anti-communist horror stories to bed. They doubled down on them, so that the bourgeoisie would be sleepless, seized by the nightmare of a proletarian uprising springing it into the air, to tumble into its grave. As Marx wrote in the

Manifesto’s final paragraph, “Let the ruling classes *tremble* at a Communistic revolution” (vol. 6, p. 519; emphasis added).

To adapt Arthur Schopenhauer’s gothic imagery, *der ungeheuren Mehrzahl* was, potentially, *not* inevitably, the most revolutionary of the “monstrous organized forms [*monströse Organisationen*]” that emerged in “an age of monstrous creations [*ungeheuren Ausgeburten*] in philosophy” (2010, p. 453). Marx’s philosophical touchstone for *der ungeheuren Mehrzahl* was Hegel, for whom “*the appearance of God in the flesh ... is the monstrous reality [das Ungeheure] whose necessity we have seen*” (1984, p. 214; original emphasis). The image of a monstrous irruption by the lowest social stratum partly derives from the one of Marx’s friends, the exiled poet and journalist Heine. In his Epistle Dedicatory to *Lutèce* (1855), Heine reflected on the newspaper articles that he wrote about communist workers before the 1848 revolutions: “Many a time and oft did I depict the demons ... who lurked in the lower depths of society, and who would come bursting up out of their darkness when the destined day should come. These monsters, to whom the future belongs” (Heine, 1893, vol. II, pp. 25–26). The gothic poetics of Heine’s depiction of communist “monsters” haunting a social and symbolic nether world underlies Marx’s vision of a vast insurgent monstrosity becoming the bourgeoisie’s grave-diggers.

Radiant poetry, brutal reality and abstract relations

Poetry vitalised Marx and Engels’s revolutionary politics and impelled them beyond poetry to critico-practical activity against “the deathly disjunctions of capitalism” (Hartley, 2021, p. 836). Romanticism “stands revealed in retrospect as the singular poetical movement in which the modern communist impulse first issued its ethical decrees against the brutalizing juggernaut of capitalist accumulation” (Jennison & Murphet, 2019, p. 3). This helps to explain why “Marx himself launched his writing career as a poet irradiated by the examples of Shelley, Heine, and others” (p. 3). Engels too had poetic aspirations, spending “perhaps even more of his talents on poetry and satire in his youth than Marx” (Rose, 1978, p. 91). Before their friendship and collaboration flourished in 1844–45, they had independently interrogated the acquisitive drives and destructiveness of capital. Shelley’s attack on bourgeois society’s commodification of the heart, art and Earth, in poems such as “Queen Mab” (1813), affected their earliest critiques of political economy (Althofer, 2021, pp. 35–37). Marx regarded Shelley as “essentially a revolutionist” (Aveling & Marx Aveling, 1975, p. 4; cf. Prawer, 1976, pp. 396–397). Engels translated him into German in 1839–40 and in his poetry “saw the deep need for the reconciliation of humanity with nature, which only a revolution could bring” (Foster, 2020a, p. 1).

“Marx came to recognize himself as an enemy of the bourgeois order ... under the sign of *poetry*” (Rosemont, 1989, p. 203; original emphasis), but he stopped writing his own poetry in 1837. In the early 1840s, Engels too abandoned poetry writing. For both, however, “poetry was not passively let go, but actively sublated, that is, at once negated and kept hold of” (Sutherland, 2015, p. 1). Marx expressed his “burning love of freedom” in poetic prose comprised of “flaming, annihilating, elevating words” (Liebknecht, 1908, p. 76). The flow of his flaming words – “the lava of poetic imagery accompanies the eruption of Marx’s youthful intellect to

an extent unusual among either philosophers or economists” (Hobsbawm, 1977, p. 325) – still illuminates and trembles the world. Even when undertaking what he called, in 1843, “*ruthless criticism of all that exists*” (vol. 3, p. 142; original emphasis), he had a poetic touch: “Like a poet, Marx strives to summon up an immediacy of sensation, to make the reader feel the experience itself” (Hyman, 1962, p. 135). In 1865, he told Engels that “the advantage of my writings is that they are an artistic whole” (vol. 42, p. 173); “it is the poet in Marx who makes [them] a whole,” writes Edmund Wilson, who calls him the “poet of commodities” (1960, p. 292). Keston Sutherland’s judgment that Marx’s *Capital* (vol. 1, 1867) “is poetic throughout and fundamentally” (2019, p. 207) could pertain to all his and Engels’s published works.

“References to poetry, often revolutionary in nature,” stand in Engels “for an irrepressible, luminous natural and social reality outside and opposed to the bleak world and degraded existence imposed by industrial capitalism” (Foster, 2020b, p. 179). His first book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (hereafter *Condition*, 1845), claimed that “the prophet, Shelley, and Byron, with his glowing sensuality and his bitter satire upon our existing society, find most of their readers in the proletariat” (vol. 4, p. 528). Their poetry sparked anti-capitalist praxis and emergent revolutionary socialism amongst those proletarians “cherishing the most glowing hatred, the most unbroken inward rebellion against the bourgeoisie in power” (vol. 4, p. 411). Engels’s love of their poetry was a factor that drove him to give up his own poetry and devote himself to revolutionary criticism, working-class activism and the communist movement to unite humanity and Earth in vibrant sensuousness (Foster, 2020b, pp. 178–179). In his and Marx’s first collaborative publication, *The Holy Family* (1845), they evoked “matter, surrounded by a sensuous, poetic glamour” (vol. 4, p. 128).

Marx ceased writing poems and parodies of Romantic sentiment in 1837, when he converted to Hegelian philosophy. He subsequently broke with Hegel’s idealism, “in the recognition of the impotence of poetic intensification in the face of systemic, capitalist abstraction” (Hartley, p. 825). He found in “*capitalist society taken as a whole*” an extreme, “all-encompassing transfer from the real meaning of human life towards a distorted meaning. The capitalist metaphor is *alienation*” (Silva, 2023, pp. 102–103; original emphases). Marx’s traversal from his poetry to *Capital*, in Sutherland’s analysis,

is the transition from ardently abandoned poetry to the materialist critique of political economy, whose idea depends on the power of its satirical polemic against an “idealism” that still clings to poetic images. The poetry that is actually abandoned in this progress survives in negated form as the power of expression that contrary to its concept cannot by itself make abstract relations vivid, or bring what is dead back to life. Poetry is intensification pressed to the point of absolute impotence against the real limit of capitalist social reality, where abstract relations reveal their abhorrent imperviousness to poetry in “brutal” detail. (2015, pp. 11–12)

Following Sutherland, Daniel Hartley states that in Marx’s materialist critique, the intensity, compression and vividness of his “early poetic ideal remain, but now inform a polemical mode of writing that dramatises precisely the brutality of capitalist abstraction” and its invulnerability to idealist poetic intensification (2021, p. 825). This process was in train in *Condition*, as when

Engels polemicised against proletarians being made "weak and resigned to their fate, obedient and faithful to the vampire property-holding class" (vol. 4, p. 526). It reached "its apogee in *Capital*, where the violent urgency of Marx's poetics," Hartley concludes, "is fundamental to its project of critique" (p. 825). In formulating their historical-materialist critique, then, Marx and Engels recognised that poetic glamour is defenceless against capital's "new world ... in all its unlovely detail" (Jameson, 1973, p. xxi). Capital's depredations and repressions are based in the forcible extraction, alienation and abstraction of living labour power for its own formation and augmented self-reproduction. It is, in *Capital*'s gothic poetics, "a live monster that is fruitful and multiplies": "Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (vol. 35, pp. 205 & 241).

Idealist poetic glamour gloms on to a famous image of social phase change in Moore's translation of the *Manifesto*: "All that is solid melts into air" (vol. 6, p. 487). This alludes to fey disembodiment in metatheatrical lines from *The Tempest*: "These our actors, / As I foretold you, were all spirits, and / Are melted into air, into thin air" (4.1.148–150; see Gandesha, 2017, pp. 9–10). Less ethereally, Moore's apophthegm also recalls Hamlet's desire for suicidal decorporealisation: "O that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew, / Or that the Everlasting had not fixed / His canon 'gainst self-slaughter" (1.2.129–132). Melting flesh implies its own materialist dysphemism: putrefying flesh. This grisly image retraces *Condition*'s pictures of capitalist horror, especially Engels's account of an obscene unburial created by an early-1840s rail construction through Manchester's pauper burial-ground, "the resting-place of the outcast and superfluous":

piles were driven into newly made graves, so that the water oozed out of the swampy ground, pregnant with putrefying matter, and filled the neighbourhood with the most revolting and injurious gases. The disgusting brutality which accompanied this work I cannot describe in further detail. (vol. 4, p. 577)

The gases emanating from desecrated corpses added to "the pestilential breath of civilisation" (vol. 3, p. 307) – an eco-gothic metaphor from Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844). "All that is solid melts into air," then, sustains a corporeal reading in terms of cadaverous putrefaction – capital, being dead labour, inaugurated "the rule of the corpse" (Baldick, 1987, p. 105) – and, correspondingly, an atmospheric reading arising from "the total pollution of the air," to pull a prescient phrase from *Condition* (vol. 4, p. 346; see Althofer, 2022, pp. 108–112). Both readings visibilise the face of catastrophe, to adapt Magri's terms, as already monstrously present in the 1840s.

The *Manifesto*'s conjuration of melting flesh and rotting bodies, reinforced a few pages later by the image of the labourer who "sinks deeper and deeper [into] pauperism" and thus, prematurely, a pauper's grave, anticipated *Capital*'s "exhausting catalogue of human suffering" (Hartley, 2021, p. 825). That catalogue is epitomised by Marx's references to an edible commodity familiar to his contemporary German readers, namely *Gallerte*. *Gallerte* denotes "undifferentiated glue-yielding ... animal substances industrially boiled into condiments" (Sutherland, 2008, p. 8) and connotes the undifferentiated living labour sucked out by capital, vampire-like. Exploited and expended "human brains, nerves, and muscles"

(vol. 35, p. 54) are buried and unlabelled ingredients of every commodity, cannibalised in each act of commodity consumption. Hamlet wishes for spontaneous deliquescence and laments his God's law against killing. For Marx and Engels, as *Capital's* exegesis of commodity fetishism demonstrates, capital is bourgeois society's "strange God" (vol. 35, p. 742). This eldritch deity commands proletarian self-liquidation – workers should sacrifice themselves to the bourgeoisie – while the bourgeoisie must "Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the prophets!" (vol. 35, p. 591).

Hamlet's "too too solid flesh" afforded an image of workers' disgustingly brutal transubstantiation into *Gallerte*, their subjugation and slaughter, by being worked into the ground and an early grave. On the other hand, Hamlet's praise for his dead father's talpine activity – "Well said old mole, canst work i'th'earth so fast?" (1.5.162) – gave Marx a readymade image of proletarian subversion and insurrection as digging in the Earth and rising from the grave. As "the radicalized proletariat *itself* erupts as a ghost" (Stallybrass, 2001, p. 23; original emphasis) in the *Manifesto's* first sentence, "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism" (vol. 6, p. 481), so Marx symbolised proletarian revolution as the "old mole" (vol. 11, p. 185) in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). In his "Speech at the Anniversary of *The People's Paper*" (14 April 1856), he lauded "the old mole that can work in the earth so fast, that worthy pioneer – the Revolution" (vol. 14, p. 656).

Détournement, Gebrauchslyrik, Eskamotage

Besides *Hamlet* with its extremist protagonist, earth-grubbing revenant and grave-digging scene, Marx and Engels buried themselves in and borrowed from multiple texts to write the *Manifesto* and, in Engels's case, supervise Moore's translation. According to Peter Osborne, the *Manifesto's* "basic compositional procedure is thus a kind of montage" (2005, p. 85). For Stanley Hyman, it is "almost an anthology of revolutionary rhetoric, and some of its most effective slogans" are taken from, among others, Jean-Paul Marat and Saint-Amand Bazard (1962, p. 100). "German readers," S. S. Prawer predicts, "will more than once feel that the *Communist Manifesto* is itself a palimpsest: that beneath the utterances of Marx and Engels they detect those of German poets," notably Goethe and Heine (1976, p. 139). Marx and Engels treated poetry as "*Gebrauchslyrik*, verse meant for use, verse whose original wording is not sacrosanct but may be altered and adapted to suit its new context" (Prawer, p. 119).

This treatment exemplifies their profane, tactical approach to all textualities. The *Manifesto*, as McKenzie Wark observes, "belongs, not to a monument outside the history it narrates," but to interventionist processes of writing and rewriting that the Situationists called *détournement*: "the appropriation and retooling of phrases, terms, polemics" (1998, p. 57). The *Manifesto's* thoroughgoing *détournement* of found or pre-existing texts represents the advent of a "literary communism" that approaches literature, broadly defined, as a common legacy, not private property (Tom McDonough quoted in Wark, 2011, p. 39). "Capital produces a culture in its own image, a culture of the work as private property"; *détournement* "sifts through the material remnants of past and present culture for materials whose untimeliness can be utilized against bourgeois culture [for] the destruction of all forms of middle-class cultural shopkeeping" (2011, p. 39).

Communist literary struggle to supersede private property involves the practice of *Eskamotage*. Peggy Kamuf, who translated Jacques Derrida’s *Spectres de Marx* (1993), notes that, while the English translation of Marx and Engels’s *The German Ideology* (1845) renders their use of *Eskamotage* as “conjuring trick,” the French *escamotage*, with which they were familiar, “could also be translated by ‘dodge,’ ‘evasion,’ ‘filching,’ ‘pinching,’ and so forth” (Derrida, 1994, p. 237). Derrida himself remarks of *Eskamotage*: “Marx loves this word [that] speaks of subterfuge or theft in the exchange of merchandise, but first of all the sleight of hand by means of which an illusionist makes the most perceptible body disappear”. *Eskamotage*, then, “is an art or a technique of *making disappear*. The *escamoteur* knows how to *make inapparent*” (1994, pp. 127–128) – just as the *Manifesto*’s first edition did not appear under their names, but rather made their joint authorship disappear. Its preamble attributed authorship to an anonymous ensemble: “Communists of various nationalities [who] have assembled in London, and sketched the following Manifesto” (vol. 6, p. 481). This is the *Manifesto*’s artful dodge or shop-lifting legerdemain: it is not readily apparent that many texts are not so much hidden under its sleeve as they have become threads of its very fabric (Althofer, 2022, pp. 102–106).

Engels had used Goethe as *Gebrauchsllyrik* in writing *Condition* in 1844–45. He détourned Goethe’s “Der Zauberlehrling,” but made his appropriation inapparent. His narrative history of industrial capitalism discerns sorcery that is immensely powerful and infernal: “giant cities ... spring up as if by a magic touch,” but their working-class quarters are a new “Hell upon Earth” (vol. 4, pp. 313 & 355). Engels devised a sublime vortical metaphor for deadly bourgeois society: *den wilden Strudel*, that is, in the translation he authorised, “the fierce whirlpool” (vol. 4, p. 331). This metaphor for capital’s fluid inferno conjures the bespelled, weltering waters, *Wasserströme*, of Goethe’s ballad. It also recalls the vortices, “the black tempestuous vortices of this world’s history” (Carlyle, 1885, p. 32), which form a leitmotif of Thomas Carlyle’s proto-manifestoes on the “Condition-of-England question” (1885, ch. 1). Carlyle delved into Goethe, and Engels closely read Carlyle, writing in his 1844 review of Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1843) that “work too has been dragged into the furious vortex of disorder and chaos” (vol. 3, p. 459). Engels extrapolated the social, existential and economic significance of Goethe’s and Carlyle’s baleful waters to reveal the extreme environment of bourgeois society. He portrayed the worker hurled into the fierce whirlpool, “in which it is hard and often impossible to keep his head above water. He knows that, though he may have the means of living today, it is very uncertain whether he shall tomorrow” (vol. 4, p. 331).

This deadly second nature reappears in the *Manifesto*. In the first section, after an unattributed reference to Carlyle’s term “cash payment” (Carlyle, 1843, p. 32), one sentence alludes not only to middle-class idealisation of the Middle Ages, such as Carlyle’s own, but also to the freezing effects of alienation and reification in a society awhirl with capital’s expansive circulation. “The bourgeoisie,” Marx proclaims, “has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation” (vol. 6, p. 487). The bourgeoisie, however, cannot master this engorging water. “Modern bourgeois society” – and here Marx replaced Goethe’s *Zauberlehrling* with the *Hexenmeister* himself – “is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to

control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells” (vol. 6, p. 489; see Baldick, 1987, p. 127). Marx’s filch and the confluence of Goethe’s *Wasserströme*, Carlyle’s world-historic maelströms and Engels’s *wilden Strudel* are now apparent in the image of precarisation at the end of the first section. The worker “sinks deeper and deeper” because the sorcerous bourgeoisie cannot undo its sorcery, cannot control its perilous enchanted waters and, so, “cannot help letting him sink” into extreme states of pauperism, desperation and decomposition, subjectively as well as physically.

“the prophet, Shelley”

Shelley wrote “Song to the Men of England” (Shelley, 2002, pp. 405–406) and “The Mask of Anarchy: Written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester” (1819) in the wake of the Peterloo Massacre of 16 August 1819 (Morgan, 2014, pp. 153–154). In Mary Shelley’s recollection, “He believed that a clash between the two classes of society was inevitable, and he eagerly ranged himself on the people’s side. He had an idea of publishing a series of poems adapted expressly to commemorate their circumstances and wrongs” (quoted in Shelley, 1947, p. 588). Contrary to the reductive suggestion that Mary’s novel *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) was “the source” of the *Manifesto*’s grave-digger thesis (Gandesha & Hartle, 2017, xxi), the thesis is an intense poetico-theoretical transfiguration and encapsulation of many insights and images, not least from Percy’s “Song”. Also, Engels transfused the second of the song’s eight stanzas into his aforementioned image of demoralised workers, “weak and resigned to their fate, obedient and faithful to the vampire property-holding class”.

Wherefore feed, and clothe, and save,
From the cradle to the grave
Those ungrateful drones who would
Drain your sweat – nay, drink your blood?

The extreme brutality of ruling-class violence at Peterloo moved Shelley to restrain “his habitual poetic flow and exuberance” and turn to “the emphatic simplicity of contemporary ‘mass’-poetry” (Szenczi, 1968, p. 185). In “Song,” he alighted on “a new poetic direction – not just more political but more focused, controlled, and graphic. Following [William] Cobbett, he addressed the common people. Using the form of the popular ballad, he called on them to recognize their exploitation and to rebel” (Fulford & Sinatra, 2016, p. 7). Its sixth stanza presents “an uncompromising view on labor alienation” (Scrivener, 1982, p. 232) and its seventh sanctions armed self-defence against vampiric extraction and expropriation by “your tyrants”.

The seed ye sow, another reaps;
The wealth ye find, another keeps;
The robes ye weave, another wears;
The arms ye forge, another bears.

Sow seed, – but let no tyrant reap;
Find wealth, – let no imposter heap;
Weave robes, – let not the idle wear;

Forge arms, – in your defence to bear.

Shelley's last two stanzas, however, seem to reverse the poem's sense and tone by suggesting that "he did not consider the 'men of England' actually capable of so decisive an assertion" (Behrendt, 1989, p. 195). Those stanzas make "a sardonic request that workers do what Marx and Engels said the capitalist bosses do – dig their own graves" (Keach, 1997, p. 95).

Shrink to your cellars, holes, and cells;
In hall ye deck another dwells.
Why shake the chains ye wrought? Ye see
The steel ye tempered glance on ye.

With plough and spade, and hoe and loom,
Trace your grave, and build your tomb,
And weave your winding-sheet – till fair
England be your Sepulchre.

These stanzas may be interpreted as bitterly ironic, as against paying obeisance to blood-drinking oppressors: "a calculated challenge to the audience to reject their subhuman images ... and to assume their full status as human beings" (Behrendt, p. 196). Reading them in conjunction with the imperatives and exhortations of "The Mask of Anarchy" – "Shake your chains to earth like dew / ... Ye are many – they are few" (Shelley, 2002, p. 400) – clarifies Shelley's intended meaning as antipodal to the literal sense of "Shrink to your cellars, holes, and cells". Do not go to ground and let your minds and bodies be resolved "into a dew," to reprise Hamlet's words. Trace the grave of the English ruling class by rising in "unvanquishable number" (p. 400). Shelley's shaking chains resonate, of course, with the *Manifesto*'s famous declaration: "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains" (vol. 6, p. 519).

Excerpts from "Song" appeared frequently in the Chartist press (Morgan, 2014, p. 153). Allusion to it is evident in a speech by a Chartist leader, George Julian Harney, who made important contributions to Chartist print culture as an editor of *Northern Star*, *London Democrat*, *Democratic Review* and *Red Republican*. On 1 January 1839, Harney spoke at a meeting of the Carlisle Radical Association and predicted a momentous clash between "the people" and their "tyrants":

The people had built houses for their comfort, and they knew how to destroy them if necessary. – (Cheers.) God avert such a danger from our beloved land; but rather than the hand-loom weavers and the agricultural labourers should continue to live upon their present miserable gains, he would say to the former, weave nought more for your tyrants but their winding-sheets; and to the latter, dig nought more for them but their graves. (*The London Dispatch*, 1839, p. 970)

Harney, in effect, détourned "Song" for unequivocal "physical-force" Chartism. He concluded his speech by asserting, "Universal Suffrage the people would have – peaceably if they could; forcibly if they must" (p. 970). He reformulated "Shelley's image of the agricultural worker

and the weaver digging their own graves and weaving their own winding sheets, respectively, into a more combative form of class struggle than Shelley proposed explicitly in his poem" (Morgan, 2014, p. 167). By transforming Shelley's final stanza into "a more proactive formulation" (p. 167), Harney foreshadowed the *Manifesto's* grave-digger thesis. Given his close association with Engels, it is possible that he influenced Marx's very formulation of the thesis.

Engels was an assiduous reader of Chartist newspapers and he befriended Harney in 1843, when he was living and working in Manchester. In 1846, Harney wrote to Engels, then in Brussels: "Notwithstanding all the talk in 1839 about 'arming,' the people did not arm, and they will not arm". He lamented, "The *body* of the English people, without becoming a slavish people, are becoming an eminently pacific people". He disagreed with the ebullient Engels: "Your speculations as to the speedy coming of a revolution in England, I doubt. Revolutionary changes in Germany I think certain and likely to come soon" (Harney, 1846, n.p.; original emphasis). As it happened, Harney was right: revolution erupted in Germany in February 1848, shortly after publication of the *Manifesto*.

The infinity of capital in poetry

We'll be the salmon swimming against the tide
Swimming against the tide of life

Work, work, work, work
Work, work, work, work
Work, work, work, work
Work, work, work, work
(Blue Orchids, 1981)

Carlyle's recognition that work had been subsumed by capital's "furious vortex of disorder and chaos," Engels wrote in his review of *Past and Present*, "leads to the main issue, the future of work" (vol. 3, p. 459). In *Condition*, the foreseeable future of work seems the same as the present condition of work: grinding, degrading and deadly for workers themselves. Engels wrote of seamstresses, for instance, "bent over their work, sewing from four or five in the morning until midnight, destroying their health in a year or two and ending in an early grave, without being able to obtain the poorest necessities of life meanwhile" (vol. 4, p. 500). At this point, he referred his readers to Thomas Hood's popular verse "The Song of the Shirt" (1843). First published in *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 16 December 1843, "it made the round of all the papers," Engels reported (vol. 4, p. 500).

Work! work! Work!
While the cock is crowing aloof!
And work – work – work,
Till the stars shine through the roof!
...

Work – work – work
Till the brain begins to swim;
Work – work – work,

Till the eyes are heavy and dim!
(Hood, 1920, p. 625)

Engels found workers' bodies and brains flailing, sinking and drowning in capital's fierce whirlpool: "want and disease permanent or temporary, and demoralisation ... slow but sure undermining, and final destruction of the human being physically as well as mentally. Is this a state of things which can last?" (vol. 4, p. 500) It lasted, and worsened, as Wilhelm Liebknecht excoriated in 1896:

And the seamstresses? Has their condition improved? Has the sweating system ceased to flourish? No, no! The number of victims has increased, and if Hood were to rise from his grave, he could add a few more verses to his "Song of the Shirt". "Sweating" is in use more than ever. And the sweating system has made the tour around the world ... And could anything else be expected? ... You cannot ask of capitalist society what it cannot accomplish; and it is incapable from its very nature to exterminate the misery and vice that it creates itself. (Liebknecht, 1908, p. 171)

This catastrophe persists into the present, as Aspasia Stephanou observes of the current incarnation of capitalist vampirism: "In neoliberalism, where work increasingly defines one's being, the individual is imprisoned in repetition and competition". Echoing Carlyle's neologism "cash payment" and Marx's polar-gothic image of "the icy water of egotistical calculation," Stephanou writes: "Working oneself to death, and the compulsion to repeat it without escape, reduce human relations to cash exchange and alienation". This means that "the rituals of capitalism are essentially an anti-life, condemning one to the grave of work" (2017, pp. 26–27). The worker's tragedy, as The Salvage Collective asseverates, "is that, as long as she works for capitalism, she must be her own grave-digger" (2021, p. 39).

Stephanou's and The Salvage Collective's vivid analyses recall earlier critiques of workplaces as chambers of torture and vivisepture. In "Critical Marginal Notes on the Article 'The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian'" (1844), Marx referenced "Das Blutgericht" (The Blood Court) as "the *song of the weavers*, that bold *call* to struggle ... in which the proletariat at once, in a striking, sharp, unrestrained and powerful manner, proclaims its opposition to the society of private property" (vol. 3, p. 201; original emphases). The unknown author(s) of this threnody cum revolutionary song sang of enduring slow violence.

The place of our slow suffering,
This is a torture chamber,
Here you will hear countless sighs
As evidence of our hardship.
(Anonymous, 2020, p. 84)

"The supervision of machinery," Engels likewise recorded in *Condition's* ethnography of factory work, "is, properly speaking, not work, but tedium, the most deadening, wearing process conceivable. The operative is condemned to let his physical and mental powers decay ... This condemnation to be buried alive in the mill, to give constant attention to the tireless machine is felt as the keenest torture by the operatives" (vol. 4, p. 466).

The whirling pit of work is a necessary condition for *the* extremity of capital – its infinity. Marx’s materialist critique of political economy détourned Hegel’s idealist distinction between “the spurious infinite” and “the true infinite” (Arthur, 2004, p. 137). He found that capital’s truly infinite character “is that it returns to itself in its circuit, and the spurious infinity of capital is that it is embarked on the escalator of accumulation and cannot get off. These two aspects combine in the image of a ‘spiral’” (p. 148) – Marx’s image for the movement of capital. As capital “can only develop as more of the same” (p. 149) and as the condition for capital is wage-labour, to repeat the *Manifesto*, capital’s infinity demands and depends on unending work and workers’ ceaseless sighs, groans and rales. If “the spiral form of endless cumulative exponential growth,” in David Harvey’s words, “is of the utmost theoretical significance” (2023, p. 364), poetry can portray and give form to the theory and lived experience of what Marx called capital’s drive “to spin [human labour] out to infinity” (vol. 30, p. 179). “Work – work – work / Till the brain begins to swim; / Work – work – work,” – ad infinitum.

There is a positive lining to Hood’s verse, which makes the most of monotony, “maximizing the repetitive affordances of poetic form” (Levine, 2017, p. 647). Caroline Levine elaborates: “Since Hood deliberately focuses our attention on an oppressive model of labor, it is not surprising that he wallows in repetitiveness. The point of representing monotony is to spur us to reject it” (2017, p. 647). As Levine suggests, “the forms of rhythm and rhyme ... afford the prospect of more pleasant arrangements of repetitive experience too” (p. 647). In *Economic Manuscript of 1861–63*, Marx saw this affordance practiced, naturally and intently, by John Milton: “Milton, WHO DID THE *Paradise Lost* FOR £5, was an *unproductive worker*. But a writer who does factory labour for his publisher is a *productive worker*. Milton produced *Paradise Lost* for the same reason as a silkworm produces silk. It was an expression of *his own nature*” (vol. 34, p. 136; original emphases). For Marx and Engels, means for creative expression should be afforded to all people (Eagleton, 1997). But this affordance can be made common only through revolutionary praxis: swimming against the tide of capital’s anti-life and digging the grave of the bourgeoisie to forever seal the grave of wage-labour.

Instead of “the old bourgeois society,” Marx declared in the *Manifesto*, “we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (vol. 6, p. 506). Transcending the degraded existence imposed by capitalism, communist association would be, to adapt John Bellamy Foster’s words above, an irrepressible and luminous social reality. Like salmon, silkworms and blue orchids radiating their own sensuous nature, socialised humanity will “develop itself in freedom, knowing itself to be an end-in-itself, not content to remain what it already is, but being always ‘in the absolute movement of becoming’. And what is this but the genuine infinity?” (Arthur, p. 149, quoting Marx)

Coda

Let a vast assembly be,
And with great solemnity
Declare with measured words that ye
Are, as God has made ye, free –

(Shelley, 2002, p. 398)

With reference to this stanza from Shelley's "The Mask of Anarchy," Julian Murphet makes a compelling argument: "what is most urgently required is what Silvia Federici calls *commoning*, 'the production of ourselves as a common subject'" (2019, p. 203; original emphasis). What Murphet calls the "barricade-poem" is a means to form and defend our commonality as revolutionary subjective universality: "The barricade-poem is that behind which the common subject, Shelley's 'vast assembly,' the true being of communism, shelters in order to produce and define itself under the ravages of the capital-relation" (pp. 203–204). This paper's demonstration of the significance of poetry to the *Manifesto*'s representation of working life, the worker in extremis and the insurgent proletariat supports the idea that the *Manifesto* represents a barricade-poem in prose form. Out of the grave of work, Marx and Engels, themselves masked as an assembly of untold number – "Communists of various nationalities have assembled in London, and sketched the following Manifesto" – erected a barricade-poem to call into united being the immense monstrous majority that will define itself against and forcibly overthrow capital's brutalising social reality.

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