

Karl Marx, Theorist Autobiographer

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Before describing the kind of interest I take in Marx as a “theorist autobiographer,” I want to comment on the category crisis this phrase produces (at least for me), and then briefly describe the parameters of a forthcoming book, *Re-Marx: Life, in Writing*.

I find the very notion of a theorist autobiographer a challenge to the customary sense that autobiography is one thing and theory another. We usually assume that to write theoretically about autobiography is not to write autobiographically, just as to write autobiographically is not in the first instance to theorize about that writing. One can be an autobiographer, or a theorist of autobiography, but hardly ever both at once (unless you happen to be, say, Roland Barthes). Those who write as *subjects* of autobiography and those who write about autobiography as an *object* are, in general, thought to be different people—as different as, well, subjects and objects. The very possibility of Theory conventionally rests upon this difference, which the title of this special section provocatively throws in doubt. The writing produced by a theorist autobiographer would be less, in this reading, the autobiography of a theorist than an autobiography which messes in crucial ways with its own discursive limits—which constitutes itself as autobiography only by incorporating within itself kinds of reflection that are normally thought to be foreign to it.

“Theorist autobiographers” thus would be the name of a deconstructive project, though Derrida comes at these issues from the other direction, where philosophy—in distinguishing classically between life and work as a difference between outside and inside—attempts to expel all traces of the philosopher’s life as so much inessential contingency:

The philosophical field, if it has an identity, if it has strict limits [. . .], has nothing to do with the unveiling of the identity of the thinker or the philosopher; this field was constituted, precisely, by cutting itself off from the autobiography or the signature of the philosopher. The field of the philosopheme in the traditional sense had to become essentially independent from its place of emission, from the subject or from the signatory of the text called philosophical. From the moment one speaks of signature or of autobiographeme, one is no longer in the philosophical field, in the traditional sense of the term.

(Derrida 1995, 135)

This mapping of the field of philosophy as other-than-autobiographical has its structural analog in the ways that books devoted to important philosophers tend “very quickly [to] run through the ‘life of the author’ in its most conventional features, then turn to the thought” (Derrida 1989, 62). If “the *lives* of thinkers” ever do receive sustained analysis, this attention fails to count as philosophy: “Such biographical novels or psychobiographies claim that, by following empirical procedures of the psychologicistic—at times even psychoanalytic—historicist, or sociologicistic type, one can give an account of the genesis of the system.” Derrida is obviously as unhappy with these reductions of thought to extra-philosophical “causes” as he is with protecting thought from the accidents of life. He would challenge us here to reconfigure “the entire *topos* of the *autos*” (Derrida 1987, 322), to devise other ways of imagining life and work together without viewing the one as the ground of the other:

Neither immanent readings of philosophical systems [. . .] nor external, empirical-genetic readings that have ever in themselves questioned the *dynamis* of that borderline between the “work” and the “life,” the system and the subject of the system. This borderline—I call it *dynamis* because of its force, its power, as well as its virtual and

mobile potency—is most especially not a thin line, an invisible or indivisible trait lying between the enclosure of philosophemes, on the one hand, and the life of an author already identifiable, on the other.

(Derrida 1985, 5)¹

In its most general terms, my book “Re-Marx” adopts these experimental protocols in tracing the life-and-work borderline as it winds its way through what is, perhaps, *the* iconic modern instance of the genre. Focusing on a crucial moment in the emergence of the modern distinction between the realms of politics and culture, the book explores the implications of a critical rupture in Marx’s life and work—not the distinction championed by Althusser between Marx’s early “humanist” writings and the “scientific” texts of his maturity, but a much earlier if largely unappreciated break separating all of these canonical writings from the literary juvenilia that preceded it.² Though by age twenty Marx had written two volumes of poetry, a tragic drama inspired by *Faust*, and a fragment of a novel after Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, these works are seldom acknowledged let alone taken seriously today, their very existence comprising something of a secret.

To experience these literary texts is immediately to understand one reason for their neglect, for by any standard of aesthetic measurement they are, to put it baldly, rather terrible. If they nevertheless deserve attention today, it is neither for their intrinsic merit nor for the possibility (as a few critics have suggested) that they contain in nucleus the full range of Marx’s subsequent concerns. I argue, rather, that these works are significant precisely because they never have counted as part of Marx’s official corpus but were consigned from the start to the supplementary volumes. Anthologies of Marx’s writings similarly do not begin with samples of his early poetry, drama, or fiction; indeed, several open with an 1837 letter in which Marx, writing from college to his father following a period of emotional distress, announces his decision to abandon the practice of literature. Functioning canonically for Marx’s editors as the frame separating the poetry of youth from the prose of adulthood, Marx’s letter also addresses these distinctions in explaining why, from this point in its author’s life onwards, “poetry could be and had to be only an accompaniment” (1977, 6). All the rest, as it were, would be History: the canon now officially opens as Marx, coming into his own as an adult male subject, leaves *Dichtung* for *Wissenschaft*, youth for maturity, mystification and fantasy for politics and truth.

The immense scholarship on Marxism has tended to view this critical moment as possessing, if any, merely “biographical” significance—which then can be safely ignored. In most academic treatments (whether left, right, or center), Marx’s life and writings have been rigorously separated as if to illustrate one of his own chief theoretical tenets: that, as Fredric Jameson (1988) puts it, the political subject “is not, as in the bourgeois epistemologies, an *individual* one, but is the result of ‘the abolition of the isolated subject’” (65).³ What has been foreclosed in this process is any recognition of the ways that Marx’s political project, like Marx’s “life,” also takes its bearings by opposing itself to literature. Indeed, throughout his major writings Marx consistently employs the term literature and its ontological cognates in a pejorative sense to distinguish the ideological realm of mere representations (*Vorstellungen*) from the immediacy and authenticity of production (*Praxis*). In *The Communist Manifesto*, for example, Marx and Engels bemoan the fact that French socialism had “lost all its immediate practical significance, and assumed a purely literary aspect [*ein rein literarisches Aussehen*]” (2002, 249). As S. S. Praver glosses this passage, “Here ‘purely literary’ implies—as so often in Marx—a world of words floating loose, words cut off from things, cut off from social and political reality” (1976, 142). Though the *Manifesto* itself was greeted initially as “only a literary curiosity,” its authors suggest that what had once been merely a specter has since become reality, Communism in the interim having outgrown its youthful pre-history.

This distinction between language and world, or indeed between life and writing, remains crucial not only for Marx and his legacy but for our own efforts to discern the limits between politics and culture. To find Marx consigning literature to a past defined as immature, unreal, and inauthentic is, among other things, to wonder whether it can possibly remain there—whether, indeed, the predicates Marx ascribes to literature belong to the pre-history of politics or rather to the latter’s future. “Re-Marx” will address these questions by tracing the enabling presence of the “literary” throughout Marx’s career, representations that return time and again to ensure that the political as such becomes possible. Drawing specifically on Derrida’s analyses of Freud’s and Hegel’s performative lifewritings, I will be concerned in each chapter with “the dynamis of that borderline between work and life, a borderline neither outside nor inside either system or subject but which traverses ‘two bodies’” (Derrida 1985, 5). To find that Marx’s “two bodies” are bound to each other by the ineradicable *Vorstellungen* of literature is neither, I suggest, to discredit his project as

internally inconsistent, nor to dismiss it as mere fiction. It is rather to reimagine what politics might mean, after Marx, if its conditions of possibility include what, in theory, should have remained alien to itself.

The book will open with a chapter-length introduction concerning the causes and consequences of Marx's fateful decision to abandon the writing of literature. I argue that this disavowal has had an enduring impact on the notion of the individual presupposed by much subsequent political criticism, influencing even new work in the field of cultural studies in the United States which, unlike its British progenitor, has never envisioned itself in particularly Marxist terms. The following chapter, indebted to a famous essay by Foucault, explores the question of what, for Marx and Marxism alike, is an author. I am interested here not in settling disputes over attribution but in appreciating the intense ambivalence that Marx, eulogized by Engels as "a man of science," experienced in his life as a writer. How can writing be political when, as *The German Ideology* has it, language is itself secondary and derivative—"mere" representation? Can Marx properly regard himself as the author of his works when, with the emergence in the nineteenth century of new conventions regulating the status of discursive genres, works classed as literature must have authors but science, in its ideal anonymity, should not? What notion of authorship leads Marx and Engels to insist that the *Manifesto* is "in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer" (2002, 235)? What, in short, is a communist author—if not a contradiction in terms?

Following the opening theoretical chapters, the book will proceed through a series of "literary" readings that work against the grain of previous Marxist criticism. Rather than applying Marxist theory to particular literary texts, I argue instead that Marx's canonical writings retain the trace of the various literary modes he first practiced and then sought to consign to the past. One long chapter reads the anti-theatricality and homophobia of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* against the evidence both of the Marx family's private theatricals and Marx's unheralded essay "English" (in which, drawing on Goethe and Shakespeare for his models, he rendered into dramatic form an account of a trial that he took from a London newspaper). Another chapter on poetry pairs Marx's own juvenile poems with works by Heine, and argues that the lyric and the Jew come to name for Marxist tradition an ambivalent relation to a past that cannot be sublated. In different ways, each of these chapters explores conflicts between Marx's *Praxis*-driven conception of the political and other conceptions rooted in

gender, ethnicity, and sexuality—conceptions that grant a constitutive role to the epiphenomena that Marx sought to put in their place. I argue throughout that these representations cannot remain so constrained but continue to exert their pressure on the text of Marx’s life and work, as well as on ours.

In the introduction to his edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Marx* (1991), Terrell Carver asks why it is that we should “read Marx at all” or “take any notice of [Marx’s] biographical circumstances” (3). Why, indeed? Even if Carver’s answers to these questions confirm the generic conventions of the life-and-work—“Biography allows us to speculate on [Marx’s] development as a personality, his motivations for action or inaction, his reasons for saying or doing what he did” (1991, 4)—Carver’s questions are uncharacteristically explicit and self-conscious in posing themselves *as* questions. I have been suggesting here, however, that there are other ways to pose these questions, ways that may have political import even as they reframe the genealogy of the political, and that the question of reading Marx—perhaps even the question of reading *for* Marx—passes through the question of the *autos*. To say as much is to find Marx’s writing incorporating within itself (this is the phrase I used at the outset) “kinds of reflection that are normally thought to be foreign to itself.” It would be to acknowledge Marx, even if against himself, as a theorist autobiographer after all.

Notes

1. Ironically, Derrida has since received the “life-and-works” treatment that he found so deeply enervating. See, for example, Hill (2007), whose four chapters are divided into “life,” “contexts,” “works,” and “reception.”

2. A few sentences in the following paragraphs revise Parker (1996/97).

3. Jameson quotes from Lukács (1971), 356. See also Forbes (1990).

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