

## EPIC OR TRAGEDY? KARL MARX AND POETIC FORM IN *THE COMMUNIST MANIFESTO*

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BARKER, J.: Epic or Tragedy? Karl Marx and Poetic Form in *The Communist Manifesto*  
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Although *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848 was clearly not intended as a work of poetry, this article considers the merits of reading it according to the aesthetic criteria of epic poetry and of tragedy respectively. Following a brief treatment of the role of poetry in Karl Marx's evolution as a philosopher and critic, the article then speculates that the identification of certain poetic themes in the text can aid our understanding of the *Manifesto's* political meaning, particularly in light of the "dialectical Prometheanism" that played such a defining role in Marx's intellectual and political universe.

**Keywords:** Dialectics – Epic – *Odyssey* – Prometheus – Prometheanism – Marx

**Introduction: Prometheus Bound and Unbound.** Karl Marx's favorite poet was Aeschylus and many personal episodes suggest the former's incarnation as a modern Prometheus. In March 1843 the *Rheinische Zeitung* – which at the time was one of the largest subscription newspapers in Germany – was suppressed by the Prussian authorities and Marx resigned as its editor. A political cartoon of the period, now famous, was published depicting Marx bound to a printing press with a Prussian eagle biting out his liver. The final issue of the *Rheinische Zeitung* carried the following short poem:

Our mast blew down, but we were not affrighted,  
The angry gods could never make us bend.  
Columbus too at first was scorned and slighted,  
And yet he saw the New World in the end.  
Ye friends, who cheer us till the timbers rattle  
Ye foes, who did us honor with your strife –  
We'll meet again on other fields of battle:  
If all is dead, yet courage still is life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Hal Draper, "Marx, Engels, and Self-emancipation" (1971). *International Socialist Review*, Issue 52, May-June 2007. Accessed 24 September 2015.  
<http://isreview.org/issues/53/emancipation.shtml>

It is not clear whether the author of these lines was Marx. However, as Hal Draper notes, one can easily detect in their Promethean register – of rebel spirits who refuse to “bend” before “the angry gods” – the kind of stubborn defiance that would surge up in Marx’s writing at decisive historical moments. One needs to be careful when labelling Marx a writer of tragedy, or as a tragic writer, much as it would be very easy to do so given the trials and tribulations of his personal life, especially following his expulsion from Paris and arrival in London in September 1849. As Alberto Toscano has argued<sup>2</sup> there is a tendency today to read tragedy purely in terms of human nature and the flawed individual, rather than through the form of historical events whose circumstances, according to Marx, are never of man’s own free will. “Men make their own history,” Marx famously announces; “but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”<sup>3</sup> Recall how for Aristotle tragedy is an imitation of action, not of “men” (*mythos* being superior to *ethos*). As such one has reason to be cautious when Draper argues that Marx “seems to have been born with the [Promethean character].”<sup>4</sup> If Marx was Promethean then it is advisable and only in keeping with his method (of historical materialism) to locate the presumed origins of his Prometheanism. In solving this riddle we would no doubt recognize his character (*ethos*) as being subject to the historical situation (*mythos*), and that therefore his Prometheanism could not be tragic in the sense of a flawed or cursed individual.

In drama, tragedy always implies the flawed individual, the one whose inner compulsions *destine* his failure. But Marx’s short poem certainly does not strike one as tragic in this regard. On the contrary, it is implacably optimistic, promising its readers “We’ll meet again on other fields of battle:/If all is dead, yet courage still is life.” It sums up in other words what the Italian Marxist of the inter-war years, Antonio Gramsci, would say in 1932, that “it is necessary to direct one’s attention violently towards the present as it is, if one wishes to transform it. Pessimism of intelligence, optimism of the will.”<sup>5</sup>

Certainly we could describe this idea that hope springs eternal, even and especially when there’s nothing to hope for, as voluntarist. It is an expression of political voluntarism. But we should be skeptical of the suggestion that it invites tragic pathos, simply because, as Toscano argues, tragedy is *part and parcel of the inner logic and driving mechanism of revolution itself* – the type of revolution of which Marx was only one of countless and mostly anonymous historical actors. “Revolution is only tragic,” Toscano remarks, “from the standpoint of a commitment to its drive, process and aims.”<sup>6</sup> Flawed nature is incompatible with the *subjectivity* of such commitment. Indeed, flawed nature is

<sup>2</sup> See Alberto Toscano, “Politics in a Tragic Key.” *Radical Philosophy* 180, July/August 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852, online version, no page number. Accessed 24 September 2015. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Hal Draper, “Marx, Engels, and Self-emancipation,” no page number.

<sup>5</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 175.

<sup>6</sup> Toscano, “Politics in a Tragic Key,” 27.

a *spectatorial* phenomenon, a cathartic impression (Aristotle uses the word *to rhaumaston*, meaning “wonder”<sup>7</sup>) arising from the audience’s fascination for events taking place on stage. Such is the reaction of Kant to the French Revolution. What is progressive about the latter in Kant’s mind is not the revolution itself, but the rational contemplation of its moral lessons – conducted, needless to say in Kant’s case, from a safe distance.<sup>8</sup>

If Marx was a Promethean then in all likelihood he was a dialectical Promethean. What do I mean by this? Simply put, the idea or practical conviction that what is made can be unmade, what is bound can be unbound by purposeful action. It is the sober acceptance that stealing fire from the gods will have serious consequences that will ultimately lead either to the emancipation, or the annihilation, of humanity. The dialectical Promethean is conscious of the bigger picture, has visions (albeit not always accurate) of his place in the grand design or totality of things, and risks his life for humanity’s liberation. Although regularly conducting his journalism of the 1840s under conditions of insupportable state censorship, Marx also knew how to break the chains of his oppression. No sooner had the *Rheinische Zeitung* been suppressed than Marx was in Paris, carrying on the war of ideas there, as coeditor with Arnold Ruge of the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (of which, in passing, only one issue was ever published). A dialectical Promethean, then, is one who is both *bound to* and *unbound from* “human nature.” He is the one who breaks material constraints. It is the difference Shelley describes between his own *Prometheus Unbound* and the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus.

“The Prometheus Bound of Aeschylus,” writes Shelley in 1820, from the Preface to his great masterpiece, “supposed the reconciliation of Jupiter with his victim... But, in truth, I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind.”<sup>9</sup> It is not difficult to imagine these words having been spoken by Marx.

**From Romanticism to Materialism?** It is far from rare to hear Marx described as a romantic.<sup>10</sup> However, as Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre argue in their landmark study of Romanticism,<sup>11</sup> one employs the term at one’s peril; no argument is served well, particularly one involving Marx, by using the word romantic as a synonym for “idealistic,” or as

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus/Pullins Press, 2006), chps. 24-25.

<sup>8</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 44-45.

<sup>9</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Preface to *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts*” in *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley* (Herts: Wordsworth Editions, 2002), 225.

<sup>10</sup> John Gray has done his utmost to popularize the negative impression of Marx’s belief in a world beyond capitalism which, according to Gray, was based “on an incoherent mishmash of idealist philosophy, dubious evolutionary speculation, and a positivistic view of history.” See, as one of many examples of his position, John Gray, “The Real Karl Marx. Review of Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth Century Life*.” *The New York Review of Books*. Accessed 24 September 2015. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/may/09/real-karl-marx/>

<sup>11</sup> Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. Catherine Porter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

a catchall epithet that seeks to distance Marx's "mature" works from his youthful ones. Löwy and Sayre illustrate the point by returning several times to *The Communist Manifesto*, which famously uses the romantic disenchantment of the world of "chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism" as grounds, not for its restoration, but for proletarian revolution.<sup>12</sup>

We can find ample evidence of romanticism in the poems – of "mediocre literary quality," according to Löwy and Sayre<sup>13</sup> – that Marx wrote his childhood sweetheart and future wife Jenny von Westphalen. These mostly date from the years when Marx was a student at the University of Berlin. He would complete a book of verse – comprising some forty or so poems, sonnets and fragments from his unfinished "humoristic novel" *Scorpion and Felix* – and dedicate the entire work to his father, on the occasion of the latter's sixtieth birthday, "as a feeble token of everlasting love"<sup>14</sup> on 17 April 1837. However, later the same year, in November, Marx wrote his father an exuberant letter whose ramifications, it is no exaggeration to say, would be felt for the rest of his life. In his letter of 10 November, Marx, writing like a man possessed, announces a change of heart regarding the vocational nature of his poetry:

In accordance with my state of mind at the time [i.e. after Marx's arrival in Berlin in October 1836 – JB] lyrical poetry was bound to be my first subject, at least the most pleasant and immediate one. But owing to my attitude and whole previous development it was purely idealistic. My heaven, my art, became a world beyond, as remote as my love... Poetry, however, could be and had to be only an accompaniment; I had to study law and above all felt the urge to wrestle with philosophy.<sup>15</sup>

Marx's letter bears witness to a passionate spiritual experience verging on the deranged, with a personal account of his "wrestling" with "the Hegelian system" mixed up with heavy drinking in Berlin, and even news of a "hunting excursion" with his landlord. Of course, the letter is more than a mere wayward *expression* of Marx's state of mind as a student in Berlin. Instead, it needs to be read as a *symptom* of Marx's becoming and the material circumstances conditioning a far-reaching revolution in his thinking.

The letter triggered an attack of sacrilegious panic in Marx's father. Ever mindful of his son's responsibilities as Jenny's future husband, the father wrote back on 9 December 1837 with the words "God's grief!!!" "As if we were men of wealth," the father continues, "my Herr Son disposed in one year of almost 700 talers contrary to all agreement, contrary to all usage, whereas the richest spend less than 500. And why? I do him the justice of saying that he is no rake, no squanderer. But how can a man who every week or

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 29-30; 91-92.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 89. Marx's early writings "manifest particular affinities with E. T. A. Hoffmann's writings."

<sup>14</sup> Marx and Engels, *Collected Works, Vol. 1. Marx 1835–1843* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 533.

<sup>15</sup> "Marx to His Father" *Collected Works, Vol. 1*, 11.

two discovers a new system and has to tear up old works laboriously arrived at, how can he, I ask, worry about trifles?”<sup>16</sup>

Werner Blumenberg in his biography of Marx describes the conflict as “the central personal experience for Marx as a young man”: “never again did he expose himself to another in a manner that was so ruthlessly open, so naively trusting, so lacking in pose or pretence, so free from all cynicism and so unrestrained...”<sup>17</sup> If the conflict did indeed make Marx more cynical, hardening his romantic sensibility, then can we go so far as to say that it provoked a “break” in Marx’s intellectual development, ending his love affair with the “drunken speculation” of metaphysics and pointing the way towards his preferred method, which by 1843 he was describing as the “*ruthless criticism of all that exists*”?<sup>18</sup> Was Marx’s conflict with the father moreover responsible for his renunciation of poetry?

This is a difficult, if not misleading, question in the sense that it assumes that the formal devices and themes of romantic poetry, in the context of the 1830s, were superfluous to, or could be straightforwardly subtracted from, critique or social criticism, or what might very generally be described as “materialist” philosophical questions, again in the same context.<sup>19</sup>

Marx’s relationship with his father merits its own separate study. However, there would seem no reason to suppose that poetry should cease to have a bearing on Marx’s intellectual development simply because he stops practicing it at a certain point in time. Poetry did not desert Marx in an instant. Six months following the letter to his father, Heinrich Marx died. There would be no time for reconciliation between the gallivanting son and his esteemed father, who must have gone to his grave with the image in his mind of his favorite son as the new Faust. What a nightmare. And yet it is precisely owing to this unfinished business that we should be wary of ascribing to this episode some kind of decisive break between Marx the young romantic poet and Marx the mature thinker.

This is where Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* may prove useful in revealing the extent to which its poetic themes have a political function in and of themselves. This question is much more in line with the Promethean ambitions of Marx’s work. Is poetry and its performative mode of address part and parcel of the political declaration of the 1840s? Does Marx’s reliance on the poetic idiom have a certain political meaning? Might it deepen our understanding of the political times in which Marx lived and of the potentials for political thought and action?

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<sup>16</sup> “Heinrich Marx to Karl Marx,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, 690.

<sup>17</sup> Werner Blumenberg, *Karl Marx: An Illustrated History*, revised ed. Trans. Douglas Scott (London: Verso, 1999), 32.

<sup>18</sup> The quotation is of course from the famous exchange between Marx and Arnold Ruge. Quoted in August H. Nimtz, Jr. *Marx and Engels. Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough* (Albany: SUNY, 2000), 17.

<sup>19</sup> See Keston Sutherland, “Marx’s Defence of Poetry.” *World Picture* 10, Spring 2015. Accessed 24 September 2015. [http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP\\_10/Sutherland\\_10.html](http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_10/Sutherland_10.html)

**The Communist Epic.** *The Communist Manifesto* was drafted in 1847 and published anonymously on 21 February 1848 two days before the outbreak of the French Revolution. How does poetry inform its narrative and epic presentation? As noted above, the tragic or Promethean form is dominant in Marx's "ruthless criticism" of the early 1840s. However, let us begin with the epic form. Let me tentatively put forward the thesis that this political text might be read on the model of epic poetry. Of course, it is not written in the *style* of epic poetry; for instance, it does not employ the heroic hexameter.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless I think there is a case to be made for the *Manifesto* as a work of epic poetry in the thematic sense, as well as at the level of its narrative voice or mode of address. If poetry is the discourse through which revolutionary politics can be articulated, as Alain Badiou believes,<sup>21</sup> then the thesis that the *Manifesto* is epic poetry also raises a further question about the politics or political context of the *Manifesto* itself. Is its political context "epic"? I will not pursue this question here. But it does at least suggest that epic poetry might be one of the modes or discourses through which revolutionary politics – and not just of the 1840s – might be most accurately understood.

Let us begin by considering the *Manifesto* against the following three categories. Perhaps they are proto-Marxist or proto-communist categories common to all epic poetry. However, I want to restrict myself here to something of the epic vision set out in the *Manifesto* which, for its authors, was intended as a prescriptive work (as opposed to a factual or descriptive one) and which assumes a performative mode of address, to coin a phrase from J. L. Austin.<sup>22</sup> Here I take "performative" simply to mean a statement bearing on an ideal rather than an objective referent. "Workingmen of All Countries, Unite!" is a performative or poetic statement in the sense of employing language in an attempt to subvert, and thereby transform, our experience of reality. How so? Precisely in the sense that in 1848 there was no international *organization* of workingmen – i.e. no given, ready-made "public" – to whom this statement could have been addressed. Marx and Engels are aiming to bring into existence – precisely, to unify – the addressee – namely, the proletariat – through the act of uttering the statement. This bringing into existence is of course the politicization, the political transformation, of the class in itself (historically unconscious) into the class for itself (historically conscious). The declaration of international solidarity and revolution certainly de-familiarizes the context in which it is first declared, for in 1848, prior to the outbreak of the February revolution in Paris, such revolution is completely inconceivable (as indeed it is today). As such, at the moment of its publication, we can say that the *Manifesto* was a text "out of this world."

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<sup>20</sup> "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism," which scans as verse in iambic tetrameter, is strongly reminiscent of "To be, or not be, that is the question," written in iambic pentameter. It would be fascinating to perform a more meticulous reading of the rhetorical structures of the *Manifesto*.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005), 105; "The Contemporary Figure of the Soldier in Politics and Poetry," Lecture at UCLA, January 2007. Accessed 24 September 2015. <http://www.lacan.com/badsold.htm>

<sup>22</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

Let us leave for a separate occasion the question of whether the social and political world in which the *Manifesto* “appears” – its social stage – is as much of an epic as the (text of the) *Manifesto* itself. For the moment allow me simply to introduce the following three categories in order to test my thesis that the *Manifesto* somehow “functions” as epic poetry.

**1. Historical materialism.** With this term I am referring to Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where he declares that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” The idea that “men” make history, that they are history’s heroes or protagonists, is a given of the epic, and hardly worth noting. But men “do not make it as they please,” do not choose their point of entry into history, which means that the epic is *in medias res*. “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,”<sup>23</sup> Marx and Engels declare in the *Manifesto*’s opening chapter. Epic history has always already begun. This is Marx’s universal history, the law of the social world.

Incidentally, the *Manifesto*’s preamble or exposition begins by invoking the epic Muse, which is the famous Communist spectre. “A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism.” The narration here belongs to the epic hero or rebel in defiance of the gods: “Where is the party in opposition,” the authors demand, “that has not been decried as communistic by its opponents in power?”<sup>24</sup> And yet in the *Manifesto* the Communist spectre, or Muse, is not the only god. There is also the god of the bourgeoisie, Capital, precisely the one against whom the proletarian hero will need all his powers to overcome – although it is not always clear in Marx whether the proletariat is supposed to be fighting against capital, or against its representative on earth, the bourgeoisie; or even whether it’s possible to reliably distinguish one from the other. In any case the epic hero cannot defeat the gods, any more than he can defeat history or time. He can struggle against them, temporarily outwit them, but that is all. In truth the real adversary in the *Manifesto* is a social *relation*, i.e. the *capital* relation, which is a *manifestation* of social life that Marx and Engels regard as frightful in the sense of being inauthentic. Like the Cyclops that Odysseus encounters in Homer’s great epic, it must be vanquished, even if in so doing the real underlying relation, or universal antagonism, between men and gods remains an integral structural principle.

**2. The Wanderer.** Odysseus and the proletariat are history’s great wanderers – although in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus is a king, whereas Marx’s proletariat is an entire working class. Is this a false comparison? Can an entire people be equal – or equivalent –

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<sup>23</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto, A Modern Edition* with an introduction by Eric Hobsbawm. (London: Verso, 1998.), 34; my emphasis.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 33.

to a king? An image comes to mind here of the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, published in 1651, which depicts the king's body as being composed of the multitude. There are many ways of interpreting it, but if we accept that the king is equal to the people for whom he is sovereign then the people and the king are ontologically identical. So, Odysseus may be a king, but from a modern contractualist perspective he depends on the people in a coming together under one roof, so to speak, of all the petitioners and claimants to "his" estate. But what of his heroism? Wouldn't heroism distinguish his sovereignty, i.e. his *right* to be a king, from the people over whom he strives to rule? There is nothing heroic in *being* a member of the working class, since class is simply a fact of social life. However, for Marx we know that the proletariat, as a class for itself, must actively attain its sovereignty through a form of mass political organization hitherto unknown in human history, and so overthrow the bourgeoisie, which is the usurper of the sovereignty of the whole people.

A more modern incarnation of the wanderer is to be found in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, in which the poem's "hero" is defined precisely through the *absence* of a consistent narrative voice. Here we are confronted, as readers, with all manner of errant pilgrimage, dissolution and dissociation characteristic of that class which is not a class – the "parts of no part" in the words of Jacques Rancière<sup>25</sup> – which is the urban, industrialized and – precisely in terms of its "identity" as a class – socially invisible proletariat.

**3. *The Underworld.*** The epic poem leads us on a melancholic journey through the underworld, or hell. Dante's *Inferno* must have inspired the *Manifesto*. I am thinking in particular of the litany of sins of the bourgeoisie who, we learn in chapter one, "has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation."<sup>26</sup> This would correspond to the Ninth Circle of Hell, which is not burning but frozen. (In passing, for the French Jacobin Saint-Just "the revolution is frozen, all its principles have grown weak"<sup>27</sup>). As always in Marx witness his fascination with religious imagery: "The bourgeoisie has *stripped of its halo* every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe."<sup>28</sup> Incidentally, are Marx and Engels following in the footsteps of *Paradise Lost* by imagining the proletariat as fallen rebel angels? That seems far too utopian and Calvinistic an inference to draw, since the proletariat would therefore be an elect people. If we follow the logic of historical materialism, which Marx regards as a science which does for social history what Darwin's theory of natural selection does for natural history, no one

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<sup>25</sup> Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics." *Theory and Event* 5 (3), 21.

<sup>26</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Antoine de Saint-Just, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 1141.

<sup>28</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 38; my emphasis.



will be saved. In the long run, human civilization is doomed. Human beings are going the same way as the dinosaurs.

For Marx there is no corruption of the soul, since the notion of the Christian soul is to be understood as politico-religious ideology. Indeed, if the *Manifesto* is a journey through hell then Marx and Engels are in it, no doubt with the Epicureans, in the Sixth Circle (Heresy), trapped in flaming tombs. However, it's appropriate that they should escape the Seventh Circle in which usury is punished. Marx does not subscribe to the rather infantile idea that money is the root of all evil. It is not *moral corruption* of the soul that society should be worried about, but the capitalist or *material exploitation* of its living labour, which has replaced the social contract with the wage contract, and which has created hell on earth.

**The Return of Tragedy.** Like Dante and Virgil, Marx's epic journey through hell, as revealed in the *Manifesto*, retains a moral lesson for us, which at least intends to be positive: Another world is possible. But at what price? Perhaps the prospect of Marx exiting from hell reveals the improbability of reading the *Manifesto* as epic poetry. In what sense? In his doctoral dissertation of 1841, Marx writes the following in his Foreword:

The confession of Prometheus: "In simple words, I hate the pack of gods" [Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*] is its own confession, its own aphorism against all heavenly and earthly gods who do not acknowledge human self-consciousness as the highest divinity. It will have none other beside.<sup>29</sup>

The epic has closure because the hero is either transformed or manages to return home. But at the end of the *Manifesto* we discover that the proletariat is only at the beginning of its quest. "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working Men of All Countries, Unite!"<sup>30</sup> Marx and Engels' epic, we discover, has merely been a preface to a future, untold story. Their "epic," we might say, lies in the promise of the communist *future*. Where then is the transformation? Is it, as Marx seems to believe, in the confession of Prometheus, a confession which – literally absent from the *Manifesto* – somewhat tragically declares contempt for the gods?

In confronting these questions we are once more faced with the suspicion that human nature is undeniably flawed, ineluctably wedded to the fate of a deterministic universe. Man, even were he to succeed in overthrowing the tyranny of the gods, can seemingly do no more than repeat their misdeeds on the universal model of their "heroism." Communism risks transforming men into gods, Marx's detractors allege, and is therefore doomed to repeat the crimes of history. However, this is where Marx's dialectical Prometheanism

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<sup>29</sup> Karl Marx, "The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature" in *Collected Works, Vol. I*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 77.

provides a strong rebuke to this perverse reading of tragedy. For as we have already noted, on Promethean terms tragedy is to be understood precisely on the basis of a purposeful and organized action, one which bears not just on individual heroes and villains, but on historical forces. Granted those forces may not be freely chosen by men and women. But they are made by them, sometimes chaotically and in hellish circumstances, yet nonetheless affirmed or negated with a view to being transcended. Marx's falling out with his father can certainly be regarded as tragic in the prosaic sense of one who falls prey to human nature. But on the other side of the coin this event is wholly uplifting and transformative in the wider context of Marx's evolution as a revolutionary thinker.

And yet the final lines of the *Manifesto* remain profoundly disconcerting. For if we interpret them as transformative or life-changing then the conventions of the epic dictate that they entail a measure of reconciliation – hardly a revolutionary trait. Whereas, if they are revealed as a preface to a so far unwritten story, then tragedy on the Promethean model dictates that such a book could offer nothing new, since Prometheus has been *cursed* with prophecy:

The woe which is and that which yet shall be  
I wail; and question make of these wide skies  
When shall the star of my deliverance rise.  
And yet – and yet – exactly I foresee  
All that shall come to pass; no sharp surprise  
Of pain shall overtake me; what's determined  
Bear, as I can, I must, knowing the might  
Of strong Necessity is unconquerable.<sup>31</sup>

Can the communist book, the one of total worldly transformation, ever be started, let alone completed, under iron laws of historical necessity?<sup>32</sup> It is certainly worth noting that once Marx had finished his contribution to the *Manifesto*, which in novelistic terms is no more than a short story, it then took him another twenty years for the “deliverance” of his masterwork *Capital*, which for all his eternal woe was only the first volume of what would become an unfinishable book (with the editorial assistance of Engels and Karl Kautsky a further three posthumous volumes would eventually appear). Prometheus, we recall, “planted blind hope in the heart of [man].”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. G. M. Cookson (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Library, 2014), no page number. Accessed 24 September 2015. <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aeschylus/prometheus/>

<sup>32</sup> “It is a question of these laws themselves, of these tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results. The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.” Marx, “Preface to the First German Edition,” in *Capital Vol. I*, 1867, online version, no page number. Accessed 24 September 2015. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p1.htm>

<sup>33</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, no page number.

It is straightforward to conclude that Prometheus, at least when one reads him as a proto-communist god, is a nihilist: chained to his rock, he suffers the indignity of daily torture without end, like the forced laborer under capitalism who, according to Marx in his *Manuscripts of 1844*, “mortifies his flesh and ruins his spirit. The worker, therefore, is only himself when he does not work, and in his work he feels outside himself.”<sup>34</sup> Shifting our attention away from tragedy we recall how in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer put forward the thesis that the epic does not present a dress rehearsal for revolutionary enlightenment, but the eternal return of bourgeois civilization.<sup>35</sup> It is interesting to note that Marx in his *Eighteenth Brumaire* arguably has a similarly nihilistic intuition when he observes of the French Revolution of 1789 that “in the austere classical traditions of the Roman Republic the bourgeois gladiators found the ideals and art forms, the self-deceptions, that they needed to conceal from themselves the bourgeois-limited content of their struggles and to keep their passion on the high plane of great historic tragedy.”<sup>36</sup>

This is usually the point where Marxists come out on the side of voluntarist optimism over intellectual pessimism, preferring to will nothing rather than not will at all. However, if what I have been arguing in respect of dialectical Prometheism is correct then we can conclude that Prometheus plants “blind hope” in the heart of man *for a reason*. “That finitude is the horizon of our meaning-making,” declares Ray Brassier in his reading of the Promethean myth, “does not entail that finitude is the condition of meaning tout court.”<sup>37</sup>

Somewhat anticipating Harold Bloom’s wish (by almost thirty years!) that “Freud had turned to Aeschylus instead, and given us the Prometheus complex rather than the Oedipus complex,”<sup>38</sup> Alain Badiou provides a genuinely novel case for Marx’s dialectical Prometheism in his *Theory of the Subject*. Although Badiou contrasts Sophocles and Aeschylus at some length “as signifiers, or even as concepts, and not as names or as literary works,”<sup>39</sup> space prevents me from doing any more than merely citing him in support of my own argument. According to Badiou’s analysis, Sophoclean tragedy stands for anxiety and the superego, leaving no way out for the subject besides death. Whereas:

In a tragedy by Aeschylus, the dynamic course of insurrection, as Hölderlin would say,

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<sup>34</sup> Marx quoted in Julian Young, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 102.

<sup>35</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “Odysseus or Myth of Enlightenment” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1989), 43-80.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, no page number.

<sup>37</sup> Ray Brassier, “Prometheism and its Critics” in eds. Robin McKay and Armen Avanesian, *#Accelerate* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 481.

<sup>38</sup> Harold Bloom, “Introduction” in *Greek Drama*, ed. Harold Bloom (Broomhall, PA: Chelsea House, 2004), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. and with an introduction by Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009), 161.

does not coincide with the propagation of death. It is what finds justice through the internal division and withering of the old right. Far from being tied to the exclusion of the absent cause, the rebel – Orestes or Prometheus – is the immediate agent of this dynamic course.<sup>40</sup>

As Badiou argues, it requires “courage” to take this course. Applying this insight directly to Marx’s communism makes a strong case for tragedy *in* and *as* revolution, rather than the morbid outcome of political failure. Or, more precisely, tragedy as the motor or dialectic, the very subject of revolution, whose chorus is one of its actors, instead of a subject exercising the reasoned detachment of the Kantian spectator. I don’t pretend by any means to have resolved all the difficulties of reading *The Communist Manifesto* as tragedy. But in these closing remarks I would at least hope to have disproved the thesis that the *Manifesto* is a communist epic. After all, can we really imagine Prometheus (Marx) being led through the Underworld? Granted the *Inferno* forms part of the *Divine Comedy*. But note comedy, not bathos; the Underworld, not Disneyworld. And Prometheus as a wanderer? That would be tragicomic indeed. Odysseus is a mere hapless seafarer by comparison, a middle class tourist on an Aegean cruise in thrall to the exotic sights being dangled one by one before his eyes. Such is the liberal ideology of the modern day epic.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 166.