

Marx in Hell: The Critique of Political Economy as *Katabasis*¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines one of the many Judeo-Christian allusions in Marx's corpus, his citations of Dante in the "1859 Preface" and the preface to the first edition of *Capital*. It demonstrates that Marx borrowed key features of Dante's *Inferno* for his own critique of political economy, and that Marx thereby situated his critical journey through economics as the heir to the Western tradition of the *katabasis*, the formative descent into the underworld. This undermines the dichotomization of religion and science prevalent in Marxology, and suggests that Marx must be read outside both of these traditional categories.

KEY WORDS: Marx, Dante, political economy, capital, *katabasis*.

O you who have sound intellects,
gaze on the teaching that is hidden
beneath the veil of the strange verses.
Dante, *Inferno*, IX.61-63

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Introduction

Those commentators who locate Marx firmly within the tradition of messianic or utopian projects of the Judeo-Christian West – either in order to condemn his theological impulse or to herald his religion of the human – are clearly drawn to their conclusions by the dense and varied set of references and allusions to religious texts and tropes in Marx’s writings. These citations and figures are frequently read, especially by detractors and debunkers, in a depth psychological manner, as a largely or wholly unconscious fund of thought patterns that support and/or undermine the scientific, atheistic, and anti-utopian surface of Marx’s discourse.² Regardless of the conclusion drawn, the question oscillates in the space of a science-religion dichotomy that ruthlessly monopolizes the terms of the debate. If Marx is a religious thinker, then his scientificity is questionable, incidental, or utterly lacking. If his discourse is scientific, then the religious tropes must be non-existent, or non-serious, or at least isolable and excisable.³

What is too frequently lacking in such easy generalizations is an actual examination of how Judeo-Christian tropes function within Marx’s discourse, and how they are textually and rhetorically related to scientific tropes. If we are to follow Marxological tradition and start from Marx’s dominant rhetoric of scientificity, it is worth noting right away that this rhetoric is not at all ubiquitous in Marx’s writings; rather, it is largely localizable to the critique of political economy, the unfinished project that stitches the early to the later Marx, stretching from the notebooks of 1844 through the volumes of *Capital*. The question then becomes; What Judeo-Christian figures does Marx deploy within the context of the critique of political economy, and how do these figures interact with the scientific rhetoric of the critique? When the question is posed in these terms, it becomes susceptible to analysis in a way that “Is Marx a scientist or a religious thinker?” is not, for the question 1) no longer presumes to know the relationship between scientific and religious figures; 2) no longer collapses those figures automatically into the abstract essences “science” and “religion”; and 3) no longer posits them as exhausting the possible modes of Marx’s discourse. Even with these advantages, however, the question remains far too large to explore adequately in a single essay. Therefore, I propose to examine only one set of religious tropes within

² It is no surprise, then, that Freud is an early and notable observer who claims to discern a religious depth under the scientific surface of Marxism; see his comments in “The Question of a Weltanschauung,” (1965).

³ Cf. (among many others); Berdyaev (1938:483-496); Hook (1966); Schumpeter (1948:5-20); Tucker (1961); and North (1968).

the critique, namely, Marx's intimations that he is leading his readers on an *Inferno*-esque descent into Hell. Far from deciding the question of Marx's religious or scientific classification, I hope this examination will render Marx's writings more difficult to understand according to such traditional schema.⁴

The 1859 Preface

In the critique of political economy, Marx seems to set aside his role as journalist, pamphleteer, and partisan, and to become a social and economic scientist, retreating to the study to discover the truth that will set us free. Indeed, this is precisely the story Marx himself tells in the 1859 Preface, wherein his massive output of polemics, philosophy, and journalism between 1844 and 1859 either disappears or is assimilated to a progression of scholarly works. Looking over the mountain of books that dissect, diagnose, and demystify Marx – from love or from malice – it is astonishing how central this short text has become to our efforts to know where Marx stands, whether in order to place ourselves at his side, to run as far away from him as we can, or to better target our missiles and bombs. Whether it is cited explicitly or not, the autobiographical narrative of the 1859 Preface is the keystone of the edifice of Marxology.⁵

What I find so worthy of skepticism in all attempts to fix Marx's position by means of the 1859 Preface is the attendant assumption that Marx is therein "really" or "honestly" telling us "what he's up to." As soon as Marx says, "This is what I have been doing," we jump to take him at his word, and then judge the success of his other works on the basis of the intention he so conveniently revealed for us in 1859. Here, we seem to think, we have gotten behind all textuality and are exposed directly

⁴ What follows is little more than a prospectus of a much longer examination of Marx's use of infernal tropes in the critique of political economy. The condensed nature of the presentation renders the argument more provocative than demonstrative, a shortcoming for which I must beg the reader's indulgence. Citations from *Zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* are my own translations; those from *Capital* are Ben Fowkes' translations, but have occasionally been modified very slightly by myself.

⁵ Compare the judgment of Richard Marsden (1999:91): "The *Preface* functions as the guide to Cohen's, much criticized, but not yet displaced, use of analytic philosophy to explicate Marx's key concepts. And Sayer's critique of Cohen agrees that 'there remains no reason not to regard the 1859 *Preface* as Marxists traditionally have: as providing a definitive summary . . . of the core of materialist conception of history.' The *Preface* survives as the most influential guide to Marx's analytic and it is no exaggeration to say it stands as an obstacle to developing an alternative to traditional Marxism."

to Marx's own self-image, to his statement of purpose. The hermeneutics of suspicion is here suspended in the face of Marx's simple declaration.

What Marx declares in 1859 is that he is an unbiased scientific investigator. The preface is composed of what he calls a "sketch of the course of [his] studies." This apologetic autobiography, he writes, "should merely demonstrate that my views, however, one may judge them, and however little they agree with the interested prejudices of the ruling classes, are the result of conscientious and lengthy research" ([1859] 1964a:11). The point of the preface is to portray Marx as a serious scholar, and to thereby foreclose the accusation that his position is merely that of a political partisan. This strategy gives the whole preface what Terrell Carver (1996:xiv) calls "a curiously de-politicized form." In addition, Marx's pointed remarks about opposing the botching of the *Rheinische Zeitung* lend a Cartesian flavor to his conscientiousness. His colleagues at the paper turned to "French socialism and communism, faintly tinged with philosophy" because "the good will to go further often outweighed factual knowledge at that time." Marx avoided this error by withdrawing to his "private study" to "dispel the doubts that disturbed [him]," just as Descartes before him, seeking certain knowledge, on which secure basis he could make certain judgments ([1859] 1964a:8). This image is only reinforced by the *other* preface to his critique of political economy, the one to the first edition of *Capital*, where Marx analogizes his work to that of the physicist, the molecular biologist, and the natural historian ([1867] 1976:90, 92).

However, a detail in each preface has been consistently overlooked by commentators: Marx's citations of Dante. The final sentence of the 1859 Preface, directly following Marx's *apologia*, incorporates a quotation from the *Inferno*. The sentence runs thus: "But at the entrance to science, as at the entrance to Hell, this demand must be registered: 'Here one must abandon every suspicion; every cowardice must here be slain'" ([1859] 1964a:11).⁶ Similarly, the final lines of the *Capital* preface contain a citation (slightly doctored by Marx) of *Purgatory*; "Every opinion based on scientific criticism I welcome. As to the prejudices of so-called public opinion, to which I have never made concessions, now as before the maxim of the great Florentine is mine: 'Follow your own course, and let the people talk'" ([1867] 1976:93).

To my knowledge, no one has made much of these citations, despite their crucial placement in the unfolding of Marx's science. Why is Marx

⁶ My citations from *The Divine Comedy* are based on Alighieri (1996-). I have modified the translation in places, either to make it more literal or to highlight an aspect I think Marx picks up on.

twice drawn to Dante's poem at the very same juncture – *the final words* before entering into his critique of political economy? Is it not remarkable that Marx closes both published prefaces to his life-long scientific project with references to the greatest poet of Christianity?⁷ The quote in the 1859 Preface is especially striking. If Marx is so bent on producing a science, why compare science to Hell? Hell has the distinction of never being a chosen destination. Given the plot of Dante's poem, moreover, the questionableness of the comparison seems doubled. *The Divine Comedy* is a comedy because Dante escapes from Hell, and from the prospect of ever returning to it. Must we likewise escape political economy in order for *Marx's* tale to end happily? Must our souls be saved from eternal damnation in science?⁸ Is political economy still required, not as a principle or foundation for political action, but rather as a necessary trial?

The *Katabasis*

With this comparison of science and Hell, I propose, Marx situates his critique of political economy as the heir to the Western tradition of the *katabasis*, the “educational” descent into the underworld. He casts us, his readers, as pilgrims – joining, among others, Odysseus, Theseus, Heracles, Dionysus, Socrates, Er, Aeneas, Jesus Christ, Saint Paul, and Dante himself – on a round-trip to a place from which one can hardly expect to return. Obviously, given just this partial list of past pilgrims, the *katabasis* can take many forms, and serve many functions. Nonetheless, Marx's citation links him to a very particular lineage. Dante's Hell is an elaborate reworking of the Hades from Virgil's *Aeneid*, which, in turn, draws many of its central tropes from Homer's portrayal in the *Odyssey*. When one examines this direct citational lineage – Homer to Virgil to Dante – there emerges a tendential pattern that produces certain expectations of Marx's *katabasis*. With every reiteration, the descents of the Homer-Virgil-Dante line transform and empower the pilgrim to a greater degree. Odysseus returns from the land of the dead oriented toward his fate, but this knowledge does not alter his course in any obvious way. Odysseus perseveres in the face of his revealed fate; he is immutable, and so is the world. He had to die and await Plato to give him a chance at a

⁷ Marsden (1999:107) notes the reference, but, quite inexplicably, decides that “by quoting Dante in conclusion, Marx cloaks himself in the legitimacy of science.”

⁸ Cohen has argued that social science will disappear come the revolution, but this does not seem to have led him to question the status of science for Marx; see his “Karl Marx and the Withering Away of Social Science” (2000:396-414).

new life as a private man. Aeneas also learns of his fate in Hades, but the fate of which he is appraised is one that stretches beyond himself, through his offspring, to the creation of the Roman Empire, and is the future of his productivity. It is not simply something that befalls him from beyond; instead, it is something he will make. Dante's journey radicalizes Aeneas' education by inwardizing it as "a descent in humility, a death of the self," as John Freccero has called it (1986:4).⁹ His travels below make Dante into a new person, one who is ready for the labor of purification that awaits in Purgatory. Unlike Odysseus and Aeneas, Dante has a salvific conversion experience; his *katabasis* changes his fate by changing his soul.

Yet this inward transformation is not a repudiation of the worldly effects highlighted in the *Aeneid*. Just before entering Hell, Dante recoils from the pilgrimage in doubt of his own strength. He compares himself to Aeneas and Paul, the acknowledged precedents for his descent, and questions his presence in such illustrious company. He refers to "the high effect that was to come" from Aeneas (II.17-18), and says of Paul: "Later the chosen vessel went there, to bring back strengthening for that faith which is the principle of the way of salvation" (II.28-30). Aeneas' *katabasis* prepared him to found the Roman Empire. Paul's *katabasis* permitted him to strengthen Christianity, transforming Aeneas' empire into a Christian one. The *katabasis* is a sign of election and a preparation for playing a world-historical role. Dante sees this significance and protests; "I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul" (II.32). But Dante is precisely establishing himself as a new Aeneas, as a new Paul. The protest of the pilgrim might signify honest incredulity, but for the fact that the pilgrim is also the poet, who *already knows* he had the strength for the journey – since he has completed it – and deliberately inserts the comparison to Aeneas and Paul. Dante the poet is writing himself into history as the third of a glorious triumvirate. Dante's trip, he himself implies, inaugurates a third empire, after the Roman and the Catholic ones. When one reflects, as well, that Dante is the first great poet to write in the vernacular, that he called for a global government on the basis of humanity's oneness, and that he reveals to all readers "the secret things" of Christianity (*Inf.* III.21), one can justifiably conclude that the empire Dante claims to inaugurate is modernity itself.

Thus, Dante's *katabasis* gives rise not only to a salvific metamorphosis of his own soul, but also to an immense new power. Aeneas' generative

⁹ Freccero's magnificent reading of the *Inferno* – contained in the first eleven chapters of his book – will be a touchstone throughout what follows.

powers were revealed to him in Hades, but not bestowed upon him *by* his descent. Dante, however, could not produce his poem without undergoing the journey it relates. That Marx mouths Virgil's reassurance to the pilgrim in the last instant before entering into the critique of political economy, suggests that the reader should expect to emerge similarly transformed and empowered, prepared even to found a new empire. I will use the rest of this essay to outline six infernal tropes I find within Marx's critique, and to indicate thereby the transformative and empowering effect promised by Marx's *katabasis*.

The Rhetoric of the Guide (1st Trope)

Both of the preface citations were originally Virgil's words to Dante. In repeating Virgil's words, Marx seems to cast himself as a Virgilian guide to his readers. Therefore, we must first investigate what characterizes Virgil's role as a guide.

Marx's 1859 citation comes from Canto III of *Inferno*. Virgil has brought Dante to the gates of Hell, which bear this inscription:

Through me you pass into the city of grief:
 Through me you pass into eternal pain:
 Through me you pass among the lost people.
 Justice moved my high maker:
 Divine power fashioned me,
 Supremest wisdom, and primal love.
 Before me were no things created,
 Save things eternal, and eternal I endure.
 Abandon all hope, you who enter. (*Inf.* III.1-9)

Dante reacts the way one just sentenced to death might react; he is stunned, and can only mutter, "their sense is hard for me". Virgil, "like a shrewd person,"¹⁰ responds with the words Marx quotes; "Here one must abandon every suspicion; every cowardice must here be slain." Then he smiles, takes Dante's hand, and leads him into Hell.

Virgil's response is initially unsatisfying, since it does not explicate the hard sense of the inscription as the pilgrim requests. The inscription Dante doesn't understand instructs travelers to abandon all *hope*; Virgil tells Dante to abandon only his suspicion. The words on the gate *inspire* fear, yet Virgil demands that Dante put his cowardice to death. As hermeneutics,

¹⁰ The word I am translating as "shrewd" is *accorta*, which is frequently translated as "aware" or "alert." I think "shrewd" better captures the multiple levels of Virgil's awareness, which is a sort of practical wisdom.

Virgil's response fails miserably. Nonetheless, the poet explicitly tells us Virgil is shrewd. Virgil must have some other aim than explication. The answer to the riddle has already been suggested, I believe, when Beatrice makes special reference to Virgil's "ornate" (II.67) and "honorable speech" (II.113). His response at the gate is an early and prominent example of his artful and fitting speech. What fails as hermeneutics succeeds as rhetoric. After all, no one would willingly enter Hell after understanding and accepting the sense of the inscription on the gate. Virgil redirects Dante's attention away from the inscription and back to himself as guide, drawing upon his charge's trust and admiration. He implies that the only possible reasons the pilgrim would not enter Hell would be mistrust or cowardice. But such rhetorical tactics can only be acceptable if Virgil already knows what Dante cannot yet know, and what the gate does not say, that there is a way out of Hell. Indeed, *any* guide, in order to lead a pilgrim, must know where the pilgrimage ends. Virgil, therefore, must be aware of Hell's limit, and his demand is a sign of this awareness, for it is only in view of such a known limit that Virgil's demand could be reasonable.

Marx uses these same tactics in the 1859 Preface, both to establish himself as a trustworthy guide and to placate the Prussian censors.¹¹ Marx exploits the fact that his primary audience doesn't know him from Adam, or from Adam Smith. Since moderns trust no one so much as they trust a scientist, it is no surprise that Marx should don the mantle of the scholar, and highlight his lengthy research, carried on under the most disagreeable circumstances. Science, even before the comparison to Hell, has been portrayed as dangerous, as the sort of pursuit that can get you deported. It is not for everyone. It is for the few who are brave. Marx asks his readers to elect themselves as fearless enough to enter science with him. However, he can only claim the mantle of our guide by virtue of an awareness of political economy's limit. In *Zur Kritik* Marx declares Ricardo to be the "finisher of political economy" ([1859] 1964a:46), and, in the Postface to the second edition of *Capital*, he writes that "with [Ricardo's] contribution the bourgeois science of political economy had reached the limits beyond which it could not pass" ([1867] 1976:96). Therefore, when Marx begins with the two-fold appearance of the commodity, wherein the value is determined by the labor-time expended on its production, he begins with Ricardo, the boundary marker of political economy, before his eyes. By repeating Virgil's words, then, Marx repeats his gesture of reassurance – "Trust me; be brave" – at the very same moment that he tells us we must enter Hell. As with Virgil, the two

¹¹ A.M. Prinz (1969) has done an admirable job highlighting the effects of censorship upon Marx's presentation in the 1859 Preface.

moments of this address can only reasonably coexist by way of Marx's knowledge that he can lead us out again.

The Interpellating Inscription (2nd Trope)

The foil for Virgil's shrewd rhetoric at the gate to Hell is the inscription itself, with its apocalyptic ending, "Abandon all hope, you who enter." If Hell's self-description is true, then Dante's journey would be doomed from the beginning. In fact, however, the gate has already been made a liar before Dante encounters it. Obviously, Virgil has passed out of Hell, and will do so again, but he is at least constrained to return to limbo. More troublesome for the gate's account is the story, related by Virgil, of Christ's harrowing of Hell, when "[he] led forth from here the shade of our first parent, [. . .] and many others, and he made them blessed." And Virgil does not rule out such a thing happening again; he only stresses that "*before* them no human spirits were saved" (*Inf.* IV.47-63; my emphasis). Even more devastating to Hell's self-conception, Dante has already admitted, before he enters Hell, that Aeneas and Paul – two mortal humans – have gone down and returned safely (*Inf.* II.13-30).¹²

But if so many have exited, then Hell's fearsome admonition seems less like fate and more like braggadocio. Hell *wishes* that entrants had no hope of leaving, but, with so many past exceptions, it might not get its wish. Paradoxically, the possibility that hope might be empirically warranted is good reason for Hell to so vehemently demand that all hope be abandoned. Hell can't very well be filled with hopeful souls. If hope might actually be reasonable for its guests – and even the slimmest odds are reasonable over eternity – then Hell *must* scare that hope out of them. Hell can only be Hell by successfully interpellating its denizens as hopeless. Thus, by reversal, that the gate to Hell has such a frightful inscription is itself evidence that Hell is not *really* so frightful as it claims. If Hell were really hopeless, it wouldn't have to pronounce it, but would welcome entrants mutely to their doom. The inscription seeks to construct a reality that *does not* exist, and *cannot* exist, but *approximates* existence only through the lie *that* it exists. It is this interpellating performance that Virgil disrupts with his demand that Dante abandon his suspicions and put his cowardice to death.

Political economy, according to Marx, performs the same interpellation as the Hellmouth.¹³ Bourgeois economics depicts itself as opening up the

¹² The descents of Theseus and Heracles are also admitted later in the *Inferno* (IX.54, 97-99).

¹³ I am indebted to Hasana Sharp for first drawing my attention to this parallel.

realm imposed on us by necessity and scarcity. It claims to establish justice in this world of necessity by showing how the market provides the most fitting distribution of goods. Above all, it claims its truths are eternal laws. As Marx transcribed from J.B. Say's *Cours complet d'économie politique pratique* in 1844; "It is the knowledge of natural and constant laws, without which human societies could not subsist, that constitutes political economy."¹⁴ "Abandon all hope, you who enter." According to what economics says about itself, the notion of passing through its world to a post-economic world is as fantastical as traveling through Hell and coming out the other side. Mirroring Hell's braggadocio, however, political economy is actually trying to produce the situation it claims to describe as always already the case, and by enlisting the reader's courage and trust, Marx attempts to disrupt this performance. Taken as performatives, or as productive acts, the claims of political economy are 1) effective forces in the creation and reproduction of a very particular and late-born system of human relations, but also 2) essentially and necessarily fragile and unstable in their "success" at performing this function.¹⁵

The Archaic Limit of the Inverted World (3rd Trope)

The *Inferno* does not paint overcoming Hell's interpellation through an awareness of the limit of the *katabasis* as an easy task. Dante does not fully comprehend Hell's limit until he has passed beyond it. His difficulty in coming to recognize this limit, even at the very moment of reversal and escape, surely has something to do with the fact that the limit is Satan himself. Satan's sin is the principle of all sins, which are arrayed within Hell according to their likeness to his traitorous turn from God. Satan is the *pros hen* of infernal cosmology, its spatial and temporal *arkhē*. But, precisely for this reason, when Virgil and Dante reach this *arkhē*, they have also reached the end of their journey through Hell. They encounter Satan as the ladder out of Hell, climbing down/up his flank to exit from his realm (XXXIV.70-93). Only through bodily intimacy with the foundation of Hell, only by clambering along Satan's loins, can Dante and Virgil escape. Dante's *katabasis* has a radical transformative effect only because it leads the pilgrim to confront and grapple with the origin of his sins, the treachery in his heart.

¹⁴ Marx and Engels (1975-:IV/2:331) (my translation).

¹⁵ Thus, Marx's analysis of political economy's "speech acts" both predates Austin's (1960) by almost a century and goes beyond it to prefigure Derrida's approach in "Signature, Event, Context" (1988).

This dynamic of radical confrontation and reversal is repeated in Marx's critique of political economy. Ricardo's formulation marks the end of political economy precisely because it also founds political economy. All of political economy is a premonition of – or reference to – the labor theory of value in its purity. As Marx writes; “[T]he historical course of all sciences leads first through a mass of crusades and diversions to its actual point of departure. Science, unlike other architects, builds not only castles in the air, but may construct separate habitable stories of the building before laying the foundation stone” ([1859] 1964a:42f). The labor theory of value that retroactively supports all of classical economics also provides the ladder by which Marx will deliver his pilgrims from economics, but this double function is only possible because the labor theory of value is nothing more than an ideal expression of a real form of activity that is similarly double in nature.

This activity is labor that posits exchange-value, what Marx first called “alienated labor”. Marx's *katabasis*, in order to be radical, must lead his readers from the outward appearance of this form of labor – the commodity – through all its more and more robust expressions – the money-form, capital, etc. – to a point of contact and confrontation with the *arkhē* of modernity itself, living labor in its self-abnegation. This point is reached, in *Capital*, when Marx confronts us with capital's original accumulation, the bloody expropriation of the peasants, and the creation, thereby, of a multitude of people with nothing but their labor-power. It is this multitude that created the modern world, for it had no choice but to sell its labor-power, to externalize it in “a monstrous accumulation” of exchange-values ([1859] 1964a:15; [1867] 1976:125), to create the “animated monster”, capital, that would rule over its productive powers ([1867] 1976:302). The incontinence of the market is only the most superficial appearance of modernity's treason against the multitude that created it, just as Dante's circles of incontinence punish the sins furthest removed from Satan's treason against the god that created him. What underlies the market, the production of surplus value, exploitation, the struggle over the working day, the adulteration of goods, the accumulation of capital, and the reproduction of capitalist modernity – what underlies this all is the “blood and fire” of original accumulation ([1867] 1976:875), the continuously enacted rebellion against the creative power of the laboring multitude. Only by confronting and overcoming this foundation can we escape from political economy and the world it expresses.¹⁶

¹⁶ This reading of *Capital* suggests that we have not yet thought through the problem of alienated labor, despite all the ink spilt over it since the 1960s. Why and how labor becomes alienated is as difficult a question as why and how Satan turned against God.

Ironic Materialization (4th Trope)

John Freccero has pointed out the poetic dilemma Dante faces in writing the *Inferno*. Within the Christian semiotics of spirit and letter, God is the ultimate signified, the spirit that animates every letter. Hell, being the furthest removed from God of any part of creation, is a place of hopelessness precisely because the “signifiers” there no longer communicate with the God that is the sole source of meaning. Depicting such a realm in words that operate according to the normal rules of signification seems to contradict precisely the hellishness of Hell. Dante’s solution, according to Freccero, is to mimic Hell in his poetry by means of ironic literalization, which substitutes something bodily for everything spiritual. Such literalization is ironic in Schlegel’s sense of *parekbasis*, for it steps aside from the signified in order to signify the signifier itself; it “turns words into icons, souls into bodies[,] the spirit into the letter, [and] rhetorical figures into things” (1986:106). The *Inferno* is thus the Hell of language, where what is meant is always meant at a remove, where every sign is a sign of a sign, where the channels by which a signifier normally signifies are multiplied into a labyrinth.

The convergence of Marx’s critique with this point is, in a sense, familiar. Within political economy, relations are “hidden under a thingly veil” ([1859] 1964a:21). This is a necessary feature of science, claims Marx, for, turning a Hegelianism to very un-Hegelian purposes, “Reflection only begins *post festum*” [. . .]

The forms which stamp products as commodities and which are therefore the preliminary requirements for the circulation of commodities, already possess the fixed quality of natural forms of social life before man seeks to give an account, not of their historical character, for in his eyes they are immutable, but of their content and meaning. ([1867] 1976:168)

That Minerva only flies at dusk means that science only encounters things it takes for dead. These corpses it inters within itself as its categories. In the same way that Hell seals off its inhabitants from contact with God, preserving their souls in bodily death, so, too, does political economy preserve social relations in a state of reification, severed from the historical forces that created them and will transform them anew. By addressing his critique to these reified categories, Marx, as much as Dante, is ironically doubling political economy’s own method, speaking nowhere of his actual historical and material object – the revolutionary activity of the laboring multitude – but everywhere only of its icon, giving us only signs of signs.¹⁷

¹⁷ Marx’s irony has been suggested before by Seery (1990), Wolff (1988) and LaCapra

The Danger of Phenomenology (5th Trope)

Returning to the *Comedy*, the dead materiality of Hell is tied to its visible appearance. The danger of Hell for the pilgrim – and of the *Inferno* for the reader – lies in the fascinating sights contained within it. In Canto IV of *Purgatorio*, Dante describes the way the sensuous soul can become fixated:

... whenever something is heard or seen,
That firmly keeps the soul turned toward it,
Time passes, and a man perceives it not. (*Pur.* IV.7-9)

If Hell should so captivate Dante's senses that his soul is wholly and firmly "turned toward it," he might not perceive the passing of time, even unto eternity.

This danger is driven home by Virgil and Dante's confrontation with the Furies, who threaten them with the coming of the Medusa. Virgil responds dramatically, ordering Dante to turn and close his eyes; "for if the Gorgon appears and you should see her, there would never be any going back up." Virgil doesn't wait for Dante to act, but grabs hold of him, turns him around, and covers his eyes with both of their pairs of hands. The Medusa never appears; instead, Dante opens his eyes to see an angel arriving to open the gates to Dis, and the duo proceeds downward (*Inf.* IX.34-63). According to Freccero, "the threat of the Medusa proffered by the Furies represents, in the pilgrim's *askesis*, a sensual fascination and potential entrapment precluding all further progress" (1986:126). The Medusa, if she were to appear to the pilgrim, would be the condensed manifestation of the visible surface of Hell that paralyzes, preventing all escape. The Medusa is thus Hell's attempt to make good on the gate's threat, to trap Dante for eternity.

The world of appearances through which Marx leads his readers is similarly threatening. Political economy, for all its faults, is an excellent phenomenology of the modern world. The categories of political economy "are forms of thought which are socially valid", as Marx puts it ([1867] 1976:169). That the world of political economy is, for Marx, one of phenomena is quite explicit from the very first lines of both *Zur Kritik* and *Capital*; the monstrous accumulation of commodities is how the wealth of bourgeois society appears (*erscheint*). Moreover, this mode of appearing of bourgeois relations of production is the *logos* of its appearance, the phenomenology of capitalism. Thus, Marx characterizes the commodity according to "the manner of speaking of the English economists,"

(1983), all for slightly different reasons. Wessell (1979) argues, as well, that Marx's discourse is ironic, but this claim is, for him, simply a slur, a weapon in the Cold War.

which, as he shows in *Capital*, amounts to “commodities speak[ing] through the mouth of the economist” ([1867] 1976:177). Political economy is the *Schein und Sprache*, the legible surface of the bourgeois world.

But this phenomenology of the bourgeois world is one that, like the Medusa, threatens a paralysis of fascination. Indeed, Marx uses precisely “petrification” to describe the phenomenon of hoarding, a paralysis of the movements of circulation in the face of money, the Medusa of capital ([1867] 1976:228, 243). But the petrification of the miser is only a particularly graphic exemplification of a general feature of mystification under capitalism. The thingly veil – whether the thingliness is that of a particular commodity, or of gold, money, capital, etc. – freezes the observer, especially the most intent observers, the political economists. A mobile relationship constituted by our common activity appears as an immobile thing, and the apparent immobility of the thing reacts upon us through our perception of it, petrifying our activity, engendering a repetition compulsion, an eternalizing of the present, a paralysis of communal action. All of the transient and partial forms of the bourgeois world are captivating in this way. We get caught up in them. Time passes, and we perceive it not.

The Body as Reserve of Hope (6th Trope)

Happily, Dante is not lost in the confrontation with the Medusa. Hell’s attempt to make good on its threat remains only an attempt. Petrification – just like the gate’s pronouncement – is a damnation that never fully arrives.¹⁸ The petrifying face never actually shows itself, but always only threatens from the immanent future. The Gorgon may represent the threat of corporeality – Dante is threatened, on the basis of his embodiment, with a sort of absolute embodiment – but it is Dante’s very corporeality – the fact that he is a living body, whose sight can be blocked by his motion and by the opaque materiality of his hands – that also preserves him from that threat.

Likewise in Marx, materiality itself preserves us against the paralysis threatened by the appearance of reified relations of production. There is an admonition running throughout Marx’s corpus: don’t judge an individual, a class, an era, or a social formation by what it says or thinks about itself; judge it by what it does, by what it is in its effects (*wirk-*

¹⁸ For all its subtlety, Freccero’s interpretation of the Medusa does not account for this fact.

lich).¹⁹ Therefore, as much as the phenomena encountered within political economy may *say* to us, or however they may portray themselves (*sich darstellen*), Marx is not primarily concerned with this saying, with this way the phenomena set themselves forth in the speech of political economy. There is a level of effectivity or happening that exceeds the phenomenology of capitalism. Marx's aim, in escorting us through political economy, is to open us to the trace of this, the materiality of the world. The appearance of bourgeois wealth – the monstrous accumulation of commodities – is a petrifying appearance. It threatens to paralyze communal action with fear and suspicion. (This is the Hobbesianism that always haunts modernity.) But, just as Dante's body can always preserve him from the paralyzing appearance – *which is threatened but never actually appears* – so also in our relation to political economy, as long as we are embodied, as long as we are materially productive, it is never quite too late to turn our eyes from the always impending capitalist fantasia towards the coming force of transformation within ourselves. This is the empowering transformation promised by the *katabasis* through political economy. Our Virgil holds out to his readers this prospect of founding a fourth empire – to succeed the Roman, Catholic, and modern empires – the counter-empire of materiality, of revolution, of the multitude.²⁰

Conclusion

By pursuing Marx's references to Dante in this manner, I want to suggest primarily that, so long as we read Marx as a social scientist or theorist, we are misdirected by the ironic surface of his discourse, and that we thereby remain blind to his operations and to the effects he has on us (whether we notice them or not). Reading Marx simply as a scientist is, like seeing modern society simply as a monstrous accumulation of commodities, a paralyzing mystification. I have reached this conclusion by attending to Marx's reiteration of tropes from a Christian text, but this does not thereby pigeon-hole Marx as a religious thinker, as a prophet, or as a priest. He is, rather, a canny literary tactician, deploying and

¹⁹ Cf. Marx and Engels ([1859] 1964a:9) and ([1845] 1964b:64).

²⁰ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000) would be a critical text for elaborating this prospect of a fourth empire, and I have borrowed the phrases "counter-empire" and "the multitude" from there. Hardt and Negri seem, to me, to be the contemporary writers most concerned with thinking through both the productivity of the multitude and the materiality of production.

redeploying figures from multiple traditions in his campaign to change the world.

Marx is not interested in telling us the truth, in either a scientific or a religious register. He is attempting to change us, his readers, and, through us, the rest of the world, by inducing us to act in new ways. In his effort to so transform us, he must work with the materials at hand, the economic, philosophical, and religious forms of thought that weigh like a nightmare on his brain. That he used these materials does not reduce his work to these materials, any more than that he imposed a new form on them undoes his dependence upon them. My vacillation between past and present tenses indicates, I think, that Marx's work, and our work on Marx, is not done. We have yet to move beyond Marx in our efforts to negotiate the space between our past and our future. We have not yet completed the *katabasis* Marx prescribed for us.

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