

JOHNSON, Thomas E
Philosophy 770 (Anton)
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MARX AND ART

Even though Marx never sat down and wrote out his ideas on art and culture per se in a systematic and cohesive way, it nevertheless seems possible to speculate on the broad outlines that such a work would have taken had he so put pen to paper. What relatively few allusions and references he did make to art and aesthetics in his voluminous literary output are generally fragmentary and of a parenthetical nature, as though perhaps hastily scribbled to flash a burst of fresh light on some point regarding the larger task at hand (the Industrial Revolution and 19th Century 'political economy'). It seems apparent that Marx was racing the clock the last 35 years of his life -- he died in 1883 at the age of 64, the later years in poverty -- to finish his central work, Capital, and thus lay the intellectual and philosophical bedrock on which the proletarian revolution might be erected. (Indeed, the last two volumes of the 3-volume Capital were assembled for publication by Engels in 1885 and 1894.) Though he is said to have wanted to write

systematically on the subject -- specifically on Hegel's view of art and religion and on the aesthetics of the ancient Greeks^{1/} -- he died without having done so.

That Marx had strong and well developed views on the place of art and culture in the overall scheme of human existence seems beyond any doubt, both from an examination of his published work and from any consideration of Marx the person. He read Homer and Aeschylus in Greek, was virtually an expert on Shakespeare in English and was fluent and well grounded in the classical and modern literature of the major European languages. Despite his poverty and lifelong activity on behalf of 'socialist agitation,' he was the quintessence of the cultured 19th Century European homme de lettres, d'honneur et du monde.

Any consideration of Marx involves a consideration of Hegel, to one extent or another. In the case of man's relation to art, the consideration seems very strong indeed.

The degree to which Marx remained a Hegelian after his Berlin University days is a matter of interpretation. Just when he 'really' broke with Hegel, to what extent and whether he later fell under his spell -- and again to what degree -- has been debated and is still being thrashed out by the linear foot in the world's libraries. With no eye cast toward the resolution of that rending issue, however, it must be stated at the outset that Marx derived both a critical insight and a critical method from Hegel. Whether the early Marx borrowed from Feuerbach or Bruno Bauer or both or neither in his attack on Hegel's 'subject-predicate inversion' is of little relevance here. What is relevant to this effort is what Marx said on the matter in the postface

to the second edition of Volume I of Capital in 1873:

'I criticized the mystificatory side of the Hegelian dialectic nearly twenty years ago, at a time when it was still the fashion...I therefore openly avowed myself the pupil of that mighty thinker...The mystification which the dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general forms of motion in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.'2/

In order to find an aspect of the Hegelian rational kernel ne plus ultra which lies at or at least very near the core of Marx's conception of art, we must take a temporal leap of 29 years back to the third of Marx's Economical and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844:

The importance of Hegel's Phenomenology and its final result -- the dialectic of negativity as the moving and productive principle -- lies in the fact that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, objectification as loss of object, as alienation and as supersession of this alienation; that he therefore grasps the nature of labour and conceives objective man -- true, because real man -- as the result of his own labour. The real, active relation of man to himself as a species-being, or the realization of himself as a real species-being, i.e. as a human being, is only possible if he really employs all his species-powers -- which again is only possible through the cooperation of mankind and as a result of history -- and treats them as objects, which is at first only possible in the form of estrangement.3/

Marx is here referring to the celebrated section on Lordship and Bondage in Hegel's first major work, the Phenomenology of Mind (or of Spirit), published in 1807. In so far as this relatively brief (10 pages or so) yet crucial section on self-consciousness is in a sense Marx's point of departure, it bears taking a look at in some detail.

Hegel begins the section with consciousness having passed through the stages of Sense-Certainty, Perception and Understanding, and having risen to the level of self-consciousness. But its 'I' is not fulfilled in having only determinate nature as its object, along with its own 'I'. It is only for-itself, yet it longs to be in-and-for-itself. But this requires acknowledgment and recognition of itself as self-consciousness; the only object or entity which can provide such recognition is another self-consciousness. So it finds the other to serve as its mirror, reflecting back its authenticity as free self-consciousness. However, it at the same time realizes that it, too, is being used in the same way by the other self-consciousness. But both want to be independent and use the other as a mere dependent object, serving only to reflect recognition. A life-and-death struggle takes place and self-consciousness slays the other to gain supremacy: but by winning the struggle, it loses its means of recognition and thus reverts to its earlier unfulfilled status. Finally it realizes that it must subdue the other and bring him under the chain of bondage. Thus is formed the relationship of Lordship and Bondage or Master-Slave.

Initially, the Master is satisfied with the relationship. Not only does he receive recognition of his status from the Slave but also he has interposed the Slave between himself and the object of his desire: the Thing (das Ding) in and of nature. It is the lot of the Slave to work on and fashion or cultivate the Thing to the satisfaction of the Master. That the Thing has independence equally with the Master is of no consequence to the Master, for whereas his desire alone cannot bring him the Thing, he acquires it nonetheless (for his consumption and gratification) through the labor of the Slave. The Slave cannot

overcome the independence of the Thing (nature) and must through its subservience continue to work on it.

In time, however, it comes to be realized by the Master that, although his physical desires are still being gratified by the Slave's working on the material of nature (das Ding), he has in this process lost the essential recognition for which the relationship was forged and imposed upon the Slave in the first place: for the recognition tendered by the Slave is that from a dependent, not an independent, consciousness, a consciousness which through its subservience seems to be akin to thingness (die Dingheit). The truth of the master has become the Slave, and the recognition is unequal and therefore unsatisfactory for the Master.

But what of the Slave?

Hegel says the Slave undergoes a transformation involving both the fear of death (possible at any time from the pique or whim of the Master) and the very nature of his bondage (labor itself and the sharpening of his skills) which ultimately breaks the chains which bind him.

The truth of the independent bondsman is accordingly the servile consciousness of the bondsman. This, it is true, appears at first outside of itself and not at the truth of self-consciousness. But just as lordship showed that its essential nature is the reverse of what it wants to be, so too servitude in its consummation will really turn into the opposite of what it immediately is, it will withdraw into itself and be transformed into a truly independent consciousness.^{4/}

Although the Slave has been 'seized with dread (and) has trembled in every fiber' of his being, and 'everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations,' his salvation through it all is to be found in his labor.

Through work, however, the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is...Desire has reserved to itself the pure negating of the object and thereby its unalloyed feeling of self. But that is

the reason why this satisfaction is itself only a fleeting one, for it lacks the side of objectivity and permanence. Work, on the other hand, is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work forms and shapes the thing. The negative relation to its object becomes its form and something permanent, because it is precisely for the worker that the object has independence. This negative middle term or the formative activity is at the same time the individuality or pure being-for-self of conscious which now, in the work outside of it, acquires an element of permanence. It is in this way, therefore, that consciousness, qua worker, comes to see in the independent being (of the object) its own independence.^{5/}

Thus, through labor, the Slave becomes 'someone existing on his own account' and the Thing, which he has created out of nature, is no longer 'something other than himself through being made external to him; for it is precisely this shape (which he has fashioned) that is his pure being-for-self, which in this externality is seen by him to be the truth. Through this rediscovery of himself by himself, the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own.'⁶

Through work, man has now made nature over to suit his own ends; since his very essence is seen now to be reflected back to him in the things he has made, he no longer requires another self-consciousness for recognition: he has objectified himself in the Thing. Hegel says the realm of things (die Dingheit) which received form and shape from man's labor is now no other substance (Substanz) than the consciousness which so formed them.

We are in the presence of self-consciousness in a new shape, a consciousness which, as the infinitude of consciousness or as its own pure movement, is aware of itself as essential being, a being which thinks...In thinking, I am free, because I am not in an other.^{6/}

Man has thus 'rediscovered' himself in his work on the Thing, which at first he felt only alienation toward. And so labor has bestowed upon man not only his physical freedom from bondage but also the infinite

freedom of the concept (der Begriff).

These very few pages in the Phenomenology, holding as it were the key to the world itself for Marx, are as unequivocal as they are transcendent. The major English translations, which vary widely at some points in Hegel's often abstruse syntax (he once remarked that he had 'taught Philosophy to speak in German'), are on track with one another here:

Through work and labour, however, this consciousness of the bondsman comes to itself...In thinking I am free...(Baillie)7/

Through work, however, the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is...In thinking, I am free...(Miller)8/

Durch die Arbeit kommt es aber zu sich selbst...Im Denken bin ich frei...(German text)9/

Marx of course will take this insistence on the fundamental importance of labor and literally transform the world with it. But he is not without his reservations pertaining to Hegel's keeping this insight bottled up in the realm of abstraction, rather than allowing it its full play through praxis in the 'real' world where in fact men sweat and bleed, live and die.

The appropriation of man's objectified and essential powers is therefore firstly only an appropriation which takes place in consciousness, in pure thought, i.e. in abstraction. In the Phenomenology, therefore, despite its thoroughly negative and critical appearance and despite the fact that its criticism is genuine and often well ahead of its time, the uncritical positivism and the equally uncritical idealism of Hegel's later works, the philosophical dissolution and restoration of the empirical world, is already to be found in latent form, in embryo, as a potentiality and a secret. Secondly, in the vindication of the objective world for man -- e.g. the recognition that sensuous consciousness is not abstractly sensuous consciousness, but humanly sensuous consciousness; that religion, wealth, etc. are only the estranged reality of human objectification, of human essential powers born into work, and therefore only the way to true human reality -- this appropriation, or the insight into this process, therefore appears in Hegel in such a way that sense perception, religion, the power of the state, etc., are spiritual

entities, for mind alone is the true essence of man, and the true form of mind is the thinking mind, the logical, speculative mind...The Phenomenology is therefore concealed and mystifying criticism which has not attained self-clarity; but in so far as it grasps the estrangement of man — even though man appears only in the form of mind — all the elements of criticism are concealed within it, and often prepared and worked out in a way that goes far beyond Hegel's own point of view. (1844 Manuscripts, pps. 384-5.)

But if the great dialectical engine created by Hegel was seen by Marx to run out of steam, the fault lay neither in the genius of its design nor in the perfection of its manufacture but rather in the fact that Hegel tried to force its power back down through the smokestack rather than shovel in coal through the boiler door. To the same extent that Marx gathered in and refined Hegel's penetrating insight into the essence of labor, he never let up in his attack on Hegel's Geist or World-Spirit, seen as a mystical substance which posited itself out of nothing, then took the form of its negative and finally realized itself in the superseding (overcoming) of the negation, yielding thereby the world's empirical reality in the form of the concrete universal. This abstract aspect, this ethereal Geist as counterfeit content, was the 'mystical shell' that had to be cracked so that the dialectic could be inverted and stood back on its feet. Hegel had started with the predicate, the abstract universal, in order to arrive at the subject, the concrete particular. Marx said the process had to be reversed, that the truth of the world could only be gotten at by starting with the empirical subject and proceeding to the universal by the determination of content. He saw the leading political economists of the day commit the same error in trying to justify the wretchedness of the industrial worker as being only the working out of natural 'laws' that could no more be contravened than could the Law of Gravity itself.

Political economy, too, was standing on its head.

The way to set things right and get the dialectic on its feet was to start with men, real men of flesh and bone, concrete particulars who wrung their physical existence from a nature that was just as concrete. Then it would be seen that the 'laws' of political economy as well as the philosophical justification of the Hegelian state — wherein concrete entities such as the family and private property are held to be nothing more than the 'realization' of the abstract 'divine Geist' — are really as man-made as is a loaf of bread. The totality of human existence is a human product, acquiring its characteristic form at any given time or place directly from how man conducts his labor vis-a-vis nature, which Marx often referred to as his 'means of production.' Regardless of the seeming complexity and sophistication of a given society — or its lack thereof — everything rests in the final analysis on man pitted against nature for life itself. Derivative of this eternal struggle are 'the ensemble of social relations.'

Marx put it this way in the introduction to his Critique of

Political Economy:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.10/

Marx called this passage the 'guiding principle of my studies' to date (1859). He never wavered from this central idea.

He says the mode of production determines all else, including 'social, political and intellectual life.' Somewhere in this super-structure, then, must reside the work of art, hewn as certainly by the miner's pickaxe as the lump of coal even if several labor-steps removed.

Had he written specifically on the subject of art and culture, Marx almost certainly would have bound it tightly to physical labor. It is interesting to note that the Indo-European prototypical root of 'art' is 'ar', from which also stem the English 'arm', the Latin 'arma' (arms), the Greek 'harmos' (harmony) and the German 'arbeiten' (to work). But very much aside from linguistic considerations, such a position would seem to follow from Marx's overall approach, his inherent methodology. For example, consider this passage wherein he is talking about labor in Volume I of Capital:

Leaving out of consideration such ready-made means of subsistence as fruits, in gathering which a man's bodily organs alone serve as the instruments of his labour, the object the worker directly takes possession of is not the object of labour but its instrument. Thus nature becomes one of the organs of his activity, which he annexes to his own bodily organs, adding stature to himself in spite of the Bible. As the earth is his original larder, so too is it his original tool house...As soon as the labour process has undergone the slightest development, it requires specially prepared instruments. Thus we find stone implements and weapons in the oldest caves...along with stones, wood, bones and shells, which have also had work done on them. The use and construction of instruments of labor, although present in germ among certain species of animals, is characteristic of the specifically human labor process, and Franklin therefore defines man as 'a tool-making animal'. Relics of bygone instruments of labour possess the same importance for the investigation of extinct economic formations of society as do fossil bones for the determination of extinct species of animals. It is not what is made but how, and by what instruments of labor, that distinguishes different economic epochs. (Emphasis added.)11/

This quotation as it stands goes far to further the idea that work and art must be very close in Marx. The discovery of weapons, bones as tools, etc., in early man's caves goes hand in hand with artistic findings. Paintings on cave walls, for example, serve as 'fossils' just as do weapons and other tools, such as jars and cisterns. It seems clear that the stage of artistic or cultural development parallels that of tools as such, and that art in this sense is a branch of the same tree as is the tool. But so rich was Marx's store of encyclopedic knowledge that he relegated the following to the middle footnote among three at the bottom of the page from which the above quotation is taken:

The least important commodities of all for the technological comparison of different epochs of production are articles of real luxury.

It is instructive to note that he does not classify art with 'articles of real luxury'.

The East German poet Ernst Fischer says in The Necessity of Art that art developed from magic but that magic in turn had developed from tools.

Art is almost as old as man. It is a form of work...Man became man through tools...Art was a magic tool, and it served man in mastering nature and developing social relationships...Clearly the decisive function of art was to exert power — power over nature, an enemy, a sexual partner, power over reality, power to strengthen the human collective. Art in the dawn of humanity had little to do with 'beauty' (but rather) was a magic tool or weapon of the human collective in its struggle for survival.12/

Marx would probably follow Fischer word for word.

In so far as art may be thought of as a tool, it serves as an element of mediation between man and nature. But this mediation, rather than securing for man his physical existence, secures for him his spiritual integrity.

In this light, art can be seen as the tool par excellence of man as species-being. Marx says in Capital that labor is 'a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature'(p. 283). The fact that early man's art did not completely die out when the tribal sorcerer became no longer needed as man developed agriculture and a more secure method for subsistence indicates that art in its own right was necessary. Though it no longer played a direct role in the physical struggle for existence — as it had in the decoration of shields, war dances, hunting chants and cave wall paintings — it nevertheless remained an integral part of the human situation. Indeed, as Marx quoted Franklin as saying man was the tool-making animal, man can also be classified as the artistic or 'aesthetic' animal. It would seem that art, which through the ages has defied all attempts at rigorous definition, is perhaps necessary in a way that cannot be grasped by rational analysis. As Knox says in the introduction to Hegel's Aesthetics, if what the physical work of art (e.g. the Mona Lisa or Beethoven's Third Symphony) 'is saying' could be described in words, then the work itself could be dispensed with. The work of art, then, must be physically experienced, sensuously apprehended, for its effect to be realized. Thus it is a concrete, physical particular which does not and cannot admit of generalization in respect of its essence. This aspect seems to be what Walter Benjamin had in mind when he talked of the 'aura' of a work of art in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. It would be difficult to see how Marx would quarrel with any of this. He would certainly position art in the trenches, at the cutting edge of man's total struggle with nature.

But while Marx saw this struggle as total in the sense that it literally fashioned the shape of man's social and material conditions in any epoch, he also had a respect for nature in so far as it is of course a necessary term in the human equation. The figurative obliteration of nature or its subjugation to the point of pure submission would give man the same kind of Pyrrhic victory that the Lord experienced in his absolute domination of the Bondsman: the loss of the very thing he sought. For the relation between man and nature is a natural one, requiring that a balance be struck. Man need only 'control the metabolism', and this by means of labor. In the same sense, he controls his spiritual or emotional integrity by means of art. As labor eo ipso mediates the metabolism between man and nature, labor focused to fashion the work of art mediates the spiritual metabolism between man's species-being and callous existence.

Marx did not like to wander too far afield from the particular, from the real world of concrete existence. In virtually the same breath that he lauds Hegel for having grasped the fact that man is the result of his own labor, he excoriates him for having presented the Lord and the Bondsman as forms of self-consciousness, or abstractions, rather than as real, existing creatures. Marx speaks of the 'real, corporeal man, his feet firmly planted on the solid earth and breathing all the powers of nature'. Where Hegel speaks of abstract thingness (die Dingheit), Marx speaks of the concrete thing (das Ding). But this does not lead to mechanism or world-as-the-Leibnizian-clock:

To say that man is a corporeal, living, real, sensuous, objective being with natural powers means that he has real, sensuous objects as the object of his being and of his vital expression, or that he can only express his life in real, sensuous objects...But man is not only a natural being; he is a human natural being; i.e. he is a being for himself and hence a species-being, (and) as which he must confirm and realize himself both in his being and in his knowing. Consequently, human

objects are not natural objects as they immediately present themselves, nor is human sense, in its immediate and objective existence, human sensibility and human objectivity. Neither objective nor subjective nature is immediately present in a form adequate to the human being. (1844 MSs. pps. 390-1.)

So while man is a natural as opposed to an abstract being, he is not just the smartest of the animals, whose distance from the ape might be reckoned in the same quantitative units as the ape's from the species below it. For the units which mark off man's distance from other primates are incommensurate to the task. While it is true that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny in human fetal development in the same way as it does in the embryonic development of all other animals, the human being finds its difference from all other forms of life to be qualitative rather than quantitative. The human condition is unique in all the world, and the ground of this uniqueness can be read from many different contexts, e.g., the ability to communicate by means of discursive language. Marx spoke of man as being 'equipped with natural powers, with vital powers (which) exist in him as dispositions and capacities, as drives.'

(But) the objects of his drives exist outside him as objects independent of him; but these objects are objects of his need, essential objects, indispensable to the exercise and confirmation of his essential powers. (1844 MSs. pps. 389-390.)

So man developed and refined tool-making to gain some mastery over nature and thus satisfy certain of his drives. But this was not all. Man is also a species-being, that is, he is conscious of himself as man; he is not just conscious of himself, the hollow 'I', but is conscious of himself as being a part of something larger than just himself, as being a member of an organic whole. And it is precisely the fragmenting and splitting apart, the atomization, of this organic

whole or natural community that Marx saw as one of the manifestations of alienation brought about by the capitalist system. The fact that he concentrated his efforts in Capital and other major works on the aspect of alienation wherein the product of man's labor is taken from him by another (the capitalist or factory owner) is understandable in that it bore more directly on political economy as such. But all the forms of alienation were interwoven and internally related to one another; they were all withering branches of the same malignant tree -- the institution of private property and its derivative social relations -- and would cease to oppress man and deflect him from his 'natural' course only when capitalism would be dismantled root and branch.

(Marx also says in the introduction to the Critique of Political Economy that, while all other aspects of society are determined by the 'mode of production of material life', a point is reached 'at a certain stage of development' leading to 'revolution' and the 'transformation of the whole immense superstructure...' He goes on:

In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society. The bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production -- antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals' social condition of existence -- but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation.^{13/}

These remarks have been interpreted to mean that the capitalist system contains within itself 'the seeds of its own destruction'. But often violent efforts to further this revolution have been attacked as being self-contradictory, in that if the 'transformation' is historically

inevitable, it should be left to come about in its own due course, if it would come about at all. Marx was somewhat ambiguous on this question, perhaps appearing to leave it to history, confident of his ultimate vindication.)

Be that as it may, there can be no doubt of the moral outrage Marx felt over the wretched and inhumane conditions imposed by 19th Century capitalism on the laboring classes, which he pointed out constituted the 'vast majority of mankind.' The fervor of his invective directed at the reasons for this widespread suffering is matched only by the precision of his analysis in explanation of what capitalism is and how it came to be. To open Volume 1 of Capital to virtually any page at random is to bear this observation out. As was mentioned above, a buried footnote might contain within itself a staggering insight. For example, in the section on the labor process, the following is the third footnote at the bottom of Page 286:

The writers of history have so far paid very little attention to the development of material production, which is the basis of all social life, and therefore of all real history. But prehistoric times at any rate have been classified on the basis of the investigations of natural science, rather than so-called historical research. Prehistory has been divided, according to the materials used to make tools and weapons, into the Stone Age, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age.

And facing Page 725, which gives a detailed accounting of how surplus-value is reconverted to capital, is a footnote under a lengthy section on wages:

It will not be forgotten that, where the labour of children is concerned, even the formality of the voluntary sale (of one's labour) vanishes.

Marx let no opportunity slip by to impale the capitalist system on the facts of its inhumanity, facts often taken directly from official

documents produced by the British government. The fact of brutal child labor, paid for with pennies for its legal justification and thrown into the maw of the grinding machine to satisfy the unbounded greed of the capitalist, especially offended Marx, the more so because such a system was being passed off as having come about through natural 'laws'. Marx contended that there was nothing 'natural' to be found in or said about a system which reduced people to a status below that of animals. Even feudalism had had a human face.

Marx was of course not alone in his condemnation of and apprehension over the dark side of the Industrial Revolution. The increasing mechanization of life and fragmentation of society was the major impetus behind Romanticism, whose spokesmen all railed against the present and either harkened man backward to a more pastoral and idyllic feudalism or pointed him forward toward a socialistic future wherein man would be free of the physical and spiritual fetters clamped on him by the new industrial society. Quintessentially representative of this intensifying malaise, and a work almost certainly read by Marx, was Schiller's Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man (1795), a collection of 27 letter-essays commissioned by a Danish nobleman. In the Sixth Letter, Schiller addressed himself to the present day:

That polypoid character of the Greek States, in which every individual enjoyed an independent existence but could, when need arose, grow into the whole organism, now made way for an ingenious clock-work, in which, out of the piecing together of innumerable but lifeless parts, a mechanical kind of collective life ensued. State and Church, laws and customs, were now torn asunder; enjoyment was divorced from labor, the means from the end, the effort from the reward. Everlastingly chained to a single little fragment of the Whole, man himself develops into nothing but a fragment; everlastingly in his ear the monotonous sound of the wheel that he turns, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of putting the stamp of humanity upon his own nature, he becomes nothing more than the imprint of his occupation or of his specialized knowledge. 14/

Schiller said man must free himself from the mechanistic apparatus that was strangling him and choking off his Spieltrieb (play-drive), which was the source of artistic creation. For 'the aesthetic State alone can make (society) free, because it consummates the will of the whole through the nature of the individual.'^{15/} But while Marx no doubt agreed with Schiller (irrespective of whether he had read him), such sentiments fell somewhat wide of the mark because they remained essentially passive or in the repose of thought. It was on this basis that Marx formulated his famous criticism of Feuerbach.

Written in 1845, Marx's Theses on Feuerbach compresses his belief in the central importance of work ('sensuous human activity', praxis) into eleven epigrammatic ripostes aimed at the author of The Essence of Christianity. Feuerbach had criticized Hegel's subject-predicate inversion before Marx had and on the same grounds, i.e., that abstraction as a starting point does not lead to truth. The place to start is with empirical reality, the particular subject. Feuerbach developed this attack into a loose system of ideas which came to be referred to as 'materialism'. But simply to shift the focus from abstraction to empirical reality was by itself not enough for Marx. Feuerbach was right as far as he went in recasting the true object as one of sense-perception; but what then? To leave the matter there was to revert to the sterile representationalism of Locke and Kant. Hegel to be sure had advanced beyond this petrification of reality by means of the dynamism of the dialectical movement but the object in his hands was but an object of pure thought, an abstraction, with 'no eyes, teeth, ears, anything'. Marx saw human activity or practice -- what real men really do with their hands, eyes and teeth -- as the essential linkage between Feuerbach's materialism and Hegel's idealism.

Marx puts the matter thus in Thesis I:

The chief defect of all previous materialism (including Feuerbach's) is that the object, actuality, sensuousness is conceived only in the form of the object or perception (Anschauung), but not as sensuous human activity, practice (Praxis), not subjectively. Hence in opposition to materialism the active side was developed by idealism — but only abstractly since idealism naturally does not know actual, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects actually different from thought objects: but he does not comprehend human activity itself as objective. Hence in The Essence of Christianity he regards only the theoretical attitude as the truly human attitude, while practice is understood and fixed only in its dirtily Jewish form of appearance (dirty-judaical manifestation). Consequently he does not comprehend the significance of 'revolutionary', of 'practical-critical' activity. 16/

It is important to note here that Marx is not talking about the activity of just a single individual in civil society (the phrase used by Hegel, Marx and other writers of the day to refer to the everyday world of commerce or of eking out a living, depending on one's social position) but also and perhaps primarily the activity of man as a member of the whole, as a species-being. Feuerbach had used and perhaps coined the term 'species-being' but Marx hammered out a connotation that was radically different from Feuerbach's:

Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the essence of man is no abstraction inhering in each single individual. In its actuality it is the ensemble of social relationships.

Feuerbach, who does not go into the criticism of this actual essence, is hence compelled

1. to abstract from the historical process and to establish religious feeling as something self-contained, and to presuppose an abstract — isolated — human individual;

2. to view the essence of man merely as 'species,' as the inner, dumb generality which unites the many individuals naturally. (Thesis VI.)

Marx is saying that Feuerbach's usage of 'species-being' was in the sense of a mere biological classification, after such classifications of birds, fishes etc. by a natural scientist. To use the term in that

manner is to speak only of a 'dumb generality' which has nothing to do with the essential and vital life of man. Feuerbach's usage is as sterile and frozen as a butterfly wing under glass. To pigeon-hole man in a dry and dusty category like a relic in a museum is to close one's eyes and ears to the essential dynamic relationship of man to man and of man to the whole, wherein lies his true being qua species-being.

The last four theses go on in this vein:

All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and the comprehension of this practice. (VIII.)

The highest point attained by perceptual materialism, that is, materialism that does not comprehend sensuousness as practical activity, is the view of separate individuals and civil society. (IX.)

The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society or socialized humanity. (X.)

The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is, to change it. (XI.)

(The words of the eleventh thesis are chiseled into Marx's tombstone in Highgate Cemetery, London.)

So Marx saw man's realization of himself -- his objectification of himself as man, as species-being -- as coming about only through his own labor, through purposeful human activity or praxis. But what is or should be the larger purpose of this activity?

Marx is very clear on this question in the section on 'Estranged Labor' in the 1844 Manuscripts:

The practical creation of an objective world, the fashioning of inorganic nature, is proof that man is a conscious species-being, i.e. a being which treats the species as its own essential being or itself as a species-being. It is true that animals also produce. They build nests and dwellings, like the bee, the beaver, the ant, etc. But they produce only their own immediate needs or those of their young; they produce one-sidedly, while man produces universally; they produce only when immediate

physical need compels them to do so, while man produces even when he is free from physical need and truly produces only in freedom from such need...It is therefore in his fashioning of the objective that man really proves himself to be a species-being. Such production is his active species-life. Through it nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labour is therefore the objectification of the species-life of man: for man reproduces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself has created. (pps. 328-9.)

In so far, then, as man labors and produces even when free from physical need, he is the artistic or aesthetic animal: for that is when he truly produces.

Man fashions tools to carve out from nature the basis of his physical existence; he then creates the work of art to bestow meaning on his life. The work of art for Marx is the concrete, particular, physically existing thing which objectifies the species-life of man. In this sense, art, along with the attendant culture that it spawns, is the ultimate object of human labor. While it may be true that Marx never got around to saying so in a formal and systematic way, it seems clear beyond question that this basic concept undergirded the works that he did write. Virtually the entire section on 'Estranged Labor' can be seen as an impassioned plea for man's restoration to his true course or 'real being', a course from which he has been deflected by the alienation or estrangement brought about by the fetters of the capitalist system.

How Marx viewed the future of art is not nearly as clear as how he saw its function. On one hand, he seemed to view the scientific revolution, which gave rise in the 17th Century to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th, with a somewhat benign eye. In the third of the 1844 Manuscripts, he wrote:

But natural science has intervened in and transformed human life all the more practically through industry and has prepared the conditions for human emancipation, however much its immediate effect was to complete the process of dehumanization. Industry is the real historical relationship of nature, and hence of natural science, to man...(Science) will become the basis of a human science, just as it has already become — though in an estranged form — the basis of actual human life. (P. 355.)

Marx seems to be saying here that science affords man faith in the long run. He may mean that science will allow man to fashion industry into a sophisticated tool of such proportion that the aspect of labor that is sheer drudgery as opposed to creation might be lifted off man's shoulders. He would then have more freedom to 'truly produce' in a manner more commensurate with his essential nature. But Marx may not have foreseen the dark underbelly of science, its potential — realized in the 20th Century — for the enslavement of man in its own way, quite irrespective of the relations of property. It is not enough for spokesmen of Soviet communism today, who claim to bear the true and authentic inheritance of Marx's thought, to say that the specter of nuclear weapons would not be the terror to mankind that they are except that they were first developed under capitalist auspices. For they stem from man's basic tool-making capacity no less than does the combine or the plow. The finely machined steel-bladed knife has as little interest in the hand that grasps it as in the purpose for which it is wielded. And the knife is a very early tool indeed.

At any rate, Marx on the other hand had a clear eye for art's weak prospects in the throes of the Industrial Revolution to influence the processes that were alienating man from his essentiality through ever-growing fragmentation, finer and finer gradations of the division of labor and indeed the very dehumanization that he spoke of above. In

one of his few sustained comments on art, he wrote in the Grundrisse of the fact that certain classical periods of art stand in no apparent relationship to the general level of development of the society which produced them. Midway in this analysis, he breaks off in an example:

Let us take for instance the relationship of Greek art and then Shakespeare's to the present. It is a well known fact that Greek mythology was not only the arsenal of Greek art but also the very ground from which it had sprung. Is the view of nature and of social relations which shaped Greek imagination and thus Greek (mythology) possible in the age of automatic machinery and railways and locomotives and electric telegraphs? Where does Vulcan come in as against Roberts & Co. (blast furnace and steel mill), Jupiter as against the lightning rod, and Hermes as against the Credit Mobilier? All mythology masters and dominates and shapes the forces of nature in and through the imagination; hence it disappears as soon as man gains mastery over the forces of nature. What becomes of the Goddess Fame side by side with Printing House Square (the Times of London)? Greek art presupposes the existence of Greek mythology, i.e., that nature and even the forms of society itself are worked up in the popular imagination in an unconsciously artistic fashion. That is its material...[Is] Achilles possible where there are powder and lead? Or is the Iliad at all possible in a time of the hand-operated or the later steam press? Are not singing and reciting and the muse necessarily put out of existence by the printer's bar; and do not necessary prerequisites of epic poetry accordingly vanish?17/

He says in fact that the level of Greek art and epos was consistent with the development of Greek society, and that the only difficulty about them 'lies in understanding why they still afford us aesthetic enjoyment and in certain respects prevail as the standard and model beyond attainment.'

There seems to be an implied pessimism here, a premonition that perhaps great art can flourish only in inverse ratio to man's mastery over nature. He may have felt that the wellspring of the imagination dries up and withers in the desert of mechanization. It may well be that industrialism brings the mighty edifice of art crashing down when all awe and mystery are pounded out of man's imagination by the very machines he has created. Marx was not the first to speak of the high

price exacted from man in return for the material gains realized from industrialization. The handing over of the capacity for great art would seem to be a price man would be unwilling to pay. But as a matter of fact, the clock cannot be turned back, and whatever payment was demanded has already and irretrievably been remitted in full. It may be that the nature of the price, as well as the amount, has yet to be reckoned.

What Nietzsche and others called the 'death of God' in the 19th Century has perhaps led to the 'death of Art' in the 20th, or at least to the extinction of what had been thought of as art up till then. Although 'religious art' in the Middle Ages did not necessarily require a 'religious artist' to create it, it was supported by what might be called a generally religious tenor of the times. It was in that sense universal within Western society. Hegel, speaking in his Aesthetics of the art of Greece and the Middle Ages, said an 'innermost faith' pervaded the lives and consciousness of the population, providing the artist with 'a material with which he lives in an original unity.' But if an artist of the 19th Century set out to make the Virgin Mary the subject of a work of art, it would not do, because 'we are not seriously in earnest with this material. It is the innermost faith which we lack here.'^{18/} Tolstoy said in What Is Art?^{19/} that true art had to be grounded in religion or at least in some system of real belief or faith; otherwise the attempt at art becomes merely 'brain-spun' and a diversion or thing of affectation for the wealthy classes. He spoke of European art of the late 19th Century as mainly 'brain-spun' and unintelligible to most people, 'strange in its very nature, transmitting as it does the feelings of people far removed from those conditions of

laborious life which are natural to the great body of humanity.'

But if art is an important matter, a spiritual blessing, essential for all men ('like religion,' as the devotees of art are fond of saying), then it should be accessible to everyone. And if, as in our day, it is not accessible to all men, then one of two things: either art is not the vital matter it is represented to be or that art which we call art is not the real thing. (P. 70).

Tolstoy echoes Hegel with his contrast of the Middle Ages with the 'unbelief' of his own day:

The artists of the Middle Ages, vitalized by the same source of feeling -- religion -- as the mass of the people, and transmitting in architecture, sculpture, painting, music, poetry, or drama the feelings and states of mind they experienced, were true artists; and their activity, founded on the highest conceptions accessible to their age and common to the entire people, though for our times a mean art, were nevertheless a true one, shared by the whole community. (P. 57.)

Johann Gottfried von Herder, an historian and philologist who exerted a strong influence on German thought of the early 19th Century, said the art of classical Greece expressed a 'youthful jollity' which was 'scarce conceivable to us, exhausted and diseased.'

The first essays of ancient art, in which it learned as it were to go, were principally images of the gods...(And) as the gods of the Greeks were introduced by poetry and song, and animated them in majestic forms, what could be more natural, than that the imitative arts should become the nurslings of the muse, who poured into their ear those splendid forms?... (Greek mythology became) a lively superstition, which filled every town, every spot, every nook, with the presence of an innate divinity.20/

Marx may have been speaking specifically of Greek art when he juxtaposed Vulcan and the modern blast furnace. He says Achilles is not possible 'where there are powder and lead.' Greek mythology had to be alive in the Greek imagination in order for there to be Greek art. He probably would have agreed with Hegel and Tolstoy vis-a-vis the Middle Ages, when the Christian religion gave rise to Christian art; both the artist and his public at least shared a common imagination and were looking at the world from the same general perspective. But he

certainly seemed to be implying if not saying that a common imagination was a necessary prerequisite to art, perhaps in the sense of being a condition for the setting up of what is sometimes called the 'aesthetic field' between the work of art and its perceiver. Greek art vanished when the gods of mythology ceased to exist in the Greek imagination. The Christian God suffused the imagination of the Middle Ages and was alluded to if not made visible in the immense cathedrals and other workings of the Catholic Church. But that form of art began to die away with the Reformation as man entered into a new relationship with Christianity. The scientific revolution of the 17th Century followed by the Age of Enlightenment in the 18th saw the God of Christianity rapidly lose ground as a vital force in men's lives, supplanted perhaps in the imagination by the supposed wonders to be wrought by Science in the form of Progress. But Marx spent his life showing that this Progress -- as it had manifested itself -- was a false god, that it had only alienated man, not liberated him. What constituted the common imagination of Marx's times? What could be said to be the common imagination of the Western world in the latter part of the 20th Century, given the massive slaughter in the trenches of World War I, the 'civilized' genocide of World War II and the existing terror of nuclear weapons? Can a nihilism infused by cynicism substitute for the god of Greek mythology as a wellspring of art? Marx asked: What chance the Goddess Fame side by side with Printing House Square? What chance Printing House Square side by side with satellite television?

Marx perhaps did not foresee that a new form of alienation would come about: the alienation of man from his own imagination and thus his final and complete dehumanization.

- End -

NOTES

- ¹ Marx and Engels on Literature and Art, Bazandall and Morawski, Telos Press, St. Louis/Milwaukee, 1973, p. 5.
- ² Capital, trans. by Ben Fowkes, Random House, New York, 1977, pp. 102-03.
- ³ Karl Marx Early Writings, Intro. Lucio Colletti, trans. by Livingstone and Benton, Random House, New York, 1975, pp. 385-86.
- ⁴ Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. by Miller, Oxford, 1977, p. 117.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 118.
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 120.
- ⁷ Phenomenology of Mind, trans. by Baillie, Allen & Unwin, London, 1955, pp. 238, 243.
- ⁸ Miller, op. cit., pp. 118, 120.
- ⁹ Phänomenologie des Geistes (Sämtliche Werke), Band V, Felix Meiner, Hamburg, 1952, pp. 148, 152.
- ¹⁰ Critique of Political Economy, trans. by E. W. Lyuzanskaya, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1981, pp. 20-21.
- ¹¹ Capital, op. cit., pp. 285-86.
- ¹² The Necessity of Art, by Ernst Fischer, Penguin, Baltimore, 1964, pp. 15, 35.
- ¹³ Op. cit., p. 21.
- ¹⁴ Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man, trans. by Wilkinson and Willoughby, Oxford, 1967, p. 35.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 215.
- ¹⁶ Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society, trans. by Easton and Guddat, Doubleday, New York, 1967, p. 400 ff.
- ¹⁷ Marx and Engels on Literature and Art, op. cit., pp. 134-35.
- ¹⁸ Hegel's Aesthetics, Vol. I, trans. by Knox, Oxford, 1975, pp. 603-04.
- ¹⁹ What is Art?, by Leo Tolstoy, Bobbs-Merrill, New York, 1960.
- ²⁰ Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind, Herder, University of Chicago, 1968, pp. 180-81.