REVIEWS

Presenting Mr. Marx

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The Letters of Karl Marx, selected and translated with Explanatory Notes and an Introduction by Saul K. Padover, *Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979. xxvii + 576 pp. $19.95.*

FOR MARXISTS THIS volume, containing, in English translation, 366 of the 1,523 preserved letters in the *Marx-Engels Werke*, is something of an embarrassment. In a discussion of *The Letters of Karl Marx*, Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) thus accuses Professor Saul K. Padover of trying to "De-Marx" the letters by excising their political meaning, and angrily concludes that "This 'collection' is merely a bourgeois comment on Marx, extremely unfortunate since it interferes with our understanding of Marx himself."[1] The Marx who should be remembered is the Marx who constructed "a basic scientific Communist philosophy as a method of analysis and a means of action, in real life!" Only then, Baraka seems to be saying, will Marx be properly presented as a martyr and savior, as a modern dialectical equal to the Socrates of Hellenism and the Jesus of Christianity. And only then will we have the kind of icon appropriate to a revolutionary prophet and genius who achieved simultaneously "a critique of heaven" and a "critique of earth." Obviously what Baraka is demanding is that Marx should be presented as being more than a hero, or a fighter, or a saint (without God): that, in fact, he should be presented even in a form that accords with the canon of hagiographic scripture. One is reminded by such complaining remarks that the intellectual left, seeking incessantly to "demythologize" whatever opposes its dialectics, cannot tolerate any challenge of the myth of Marxism, even when, as it happens, Karl Marx damns himself in himself. In concluding, therefore, that an understanding of the real Marx will emerge only when a collection in English of the Marx-Engels correspondence is made by a Marxist, Baraka also reveals why it is fortuitous, for a change, that a radical doctrinaire is not the editor of these letters.

The personal side of Marx disclosed in these letters is not especially sympathetic or likeable. The softer, gentler elements that lend themselves to purposes of hagiography are precisely those that in Marx transpose into rancor, abrasiveness, pugnacity, self-righteousness; into a consuming aggressiveness that helps to explain why, for their books, biographers of Marx have used such subtitles as "a study in fanaticism," "the passionate logician," "man and fighter." Here it is worth noting that Marx was an admiring student of Epicurus, the materialist Greek philosopher; his doctoral thesis sought to show the differences between Democritus and Epicurus. Yet, even the little we know of Epicurus' life, as reported by a third-century Greek biographer, Diogenes Laertius, gives a picture of a man of "unsurpassed good will," gentleness, reasonableness. For these qualities one will look in vain in Marx's letters, most of them written to his intimate friend and collaborator, Friedrich Engels

(1820-1895), from whom, as Marx said, he kept no secrets. These letters help to give the reader an insightful profile of Marx's outer and inner terrain; the public man and the private man emerge monogenically, despite some scholars' insistence that there are "many Marxes." Such insistence tends not only to rationalize the flaws in Marx's character but also to disregard his brutal intellectuality. No matter how eclectic or protective his apologists may be, the Marx who reveals himself in these letters is precisely the Marx perceived with astonishing insight by Carl Schurz (1829-1909), the German-American political statesman and writer. In his autobiography Schurz recalls being present at a congress of democratic associations, held in Cologne in the summer of 1848, and goes on to pen this memorable sketch of Marx, one of the participants in the assembly:

> The somewhat thick-set man, with his broad forehead, his very black hair and beard and his dark sparkling eyes, at once attracted general attention. He enjoyed the reputation of having acquired great learning, and as I knew very little of his discoveries and theories, I was all the more eager to gather words of wisdom from the lips of that famous man. This expectation was disappointed in a peculiar way. Marx's utterances were indeed full of meaning, logical and clear, but I have never seen a man whose bearing was so provoking and intolerable. To no opinion, which differed from his, he accorded the honor of even a condescending consideration. Everyone who contradicted him he treated with abject contempt; every argument that he did not like he answered either with biting scorn at the unfathomable ignorance that had prompted it, or with opprobrious aspersions upon the motives of him who had advanced it. I remember most distinctly the cutting disdain with which he pronounced the word "bourgeois"; and as a "bourgeois," that is as a detestable example of the deepest mental and moral degeneracy he denounced everyone that dared to oppose his opinion.[2]

Schurz's impression of Marx correlates with the overall impression that the letters in this volume convey. Neither apologetics, nor critical or biographical eclecticism, nor a psychohistorical approach can alter the traits that shaped Marx's character and defined his sensibility. It is Engels himself, in a short eulogy delivered in English on March 17, 1883, on the day of Marx's burial, in unconsecrated ground in Highgate Cemetery, London, who helps us to penetrate that character and to measure that sensibility when he asserts that fighting was Marx's element (*Der Kampf war sein Element*).[3] Any perusal of his letters corroborates precisely this belligerent aspect of Marx's life. Marx's was a life without felicity, or refining grace, without, in a word, *humanitas*; a life that lacked appreciation of music, sun, beauty, poetry. To be sure, in a letter, dated November 10, 1837, which has been preserved from his youth and which begins this collection, a nineteen-year-old Marx, then studying at Berlin University, writes at length to his father of his ambition to be a poet who wants to find "the dances of the Muses and the music of Satyrs." But he goes on to explain in this remarkable letter of self-examination and self-advertisement that his ambition "was purely idealistic," poetry "to be merely a companion." Marx gave up writing poetry after 1837, having written three volumes of poems in all, most of them of a romantic and uneven quality, disconcerting to his future disciples. In April 1841, Marx received the Ph.D. degree from Jena University. From early July to mid-October he lived in Bonn in expectation of securing a university appointment. But neither the vocation of a poet nor that of a teacher was to be Marx's. He began to turn his attention to journalism as a career, even as he now found the proximity of the Bonn professors intolerable: "Who wants forever to converse with intellectual stink animals, with people who study only for the purpose of finding new boards in all the corners of the world."

Cocksureness marks even his earliest letters, as does also a condescending and a choleric attitude. During his stay in Bonn he particularly vents his disdain on the theologians of Bonn University, singling out Friedrich Rudolf Hasse for special abuse: "...I never saw anything more in him than a big, booted provincial parson...[who] speaks of religiosity as a product of life experience, by which he probably means his flourishing pedagogy and his fat belly, for fat bellies undergo all kinds of experiences and, as Kant says, when it's behind it's an *F.*, and if above, a religious inspiration. The pious Hasse with his religious constipations!" Early on in these letters, in fact, Marx's scatological orientation takes hold and becomes at times as embarrassing as his anti-semitism: — "Many Jews and bedbugs hereabouts," he remarks at one point, completely disregarding the fact that he was descended from rabbis on both sides of his family. Indeed, as one continually encounters mean-spirited attitudes in Marx's letters, the reasons why he did not become a lyric poet or a *Dozent* ('rotten and rotting others') explain themselves without too much difficulty. In Marx some, like Amiri Baraka, hear the voice of "the new Moses."But the voice of Marx is unvaryingly grim, oppressive, unyielding, harsh. The so-called "many Marxes" speak in one voice, homogenous rather than resilient, strident rather than compassionate. To read Marx's letters is to be reminded of how far he is removed from, how much he is antagonistic to, the serene counsel of a Baruch Spinoza: "With regard to human affairs, not to laugh, not to cry, not to become indignant, but to understand." It is not understanding that one finds in Marx's letters; nor is it the virtue of equanimity, what Marx's "worthy Epicurus" spoke of as *ataraxia*, that informs his thought.[4] Rather it is the voice of a driven and possessed man that speaks with shrill intransigence, the voice of one who revelled in struggle. "It is bad to perform menial services even for freedom," we hear Marx screaming in one letter, "and to fight with needles instead of clubs." And again we recall the words in Engels' funeral oration: "Battle was his element."

The early 1840's were to signal the beginning of Marx's lifelong journalistic efforts, invariably revolving around his radical social criticism of political questions. His letters during this period provide an ardent revolutionary view of "the old world [which] belongs to the philistines." In a letter written in September 1843, while he still lived in Cologne, Marx speaks of the need to discover the new world from a critique of the old one, pleading for a "ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless also in the sense that criticism does not fear its results and even less so a struggle with the existing powers." The chief function of the critic should be the creation of a criticism of and a participation in politics, "in *real* conflicts, and in identifying with them." "The reform of consciousness consists *only* in making the world aware of its perception, waking up from its own dream, *explaining* its own actions," he writes with a Promethean defiance that anticipates *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848). From late October 1843 to mid-January 1845 Marx lived in Paris. These were decisive years which saw him associating with Communistic societies and calling for an "uprising of the proletariat." It was during his Gallic years, too, that he began his long friendship and collaboration with Engels and that he developed and defined his political and economic ideas. Following his departure from Paris, Marx went to Brussels. One of Marx's most important letters of his Brussels years was that of December 28, 1846, in which he discusses Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's book, *The Philosophy of Poverty* (1846). This long letter speaks volumes in communicating Marx's violent polemical manners, as well as signalling his materialist conception of history; it also looks ahead to Marx's destructive criticism of Proudhon, a libertarian socialist, in *La Misère de la philosophie* (1847). Contempt and controlled rage are evident throughout this letter; Marx, as Engels so well described his

friend's intellectual weaponry, "battled with a passion and a tenacity which few could rival."

Marx judged Proudhon's book as being "on the whole bad, very bad." He accused his socialist contemporary as failing to understand "the present social conditions in their concatenation" and as being incapable of comprehending economic development. Emphasizing that man's material relationships form the basis of all of his relationships, Marx goes on to charge that Proudhon confuses ideas with things and that, "incapable of following the real movement of history, gives you a phantasmagoria which has the presumption of being a dialectical phantasmagoria." As such Proudhon's is "Hegelian rubbish." The letter, as it goes on page after page, with increasing ferocity and abuse—"Mr. Proudhon has very well understood that men produce cloth, linen, silks, and it is a great merit that he has understood that little!"—underscores Schurz's belief that Marx distrusted the latter's authoritarian and centralist ideas, no less than he distrusted the Communism that destroys freedom by taking away from the individual control over his means of production.[5] Marx posits his arguments with savage force in order to paint Proudhon as a socialist political theorist who sought to equilibrate his radical, realist, and moralist orientations. For Marx, then, Proudhon accepts and even deifies economic categories which, as motive forces, express bourgeois relationships in the form of thought. That is, he believes that Proudhon operates with bourgeois ideas, that he supposes them to be eternal verities, and that he seeks a synthesis of these ideas. The error, or heresy, of Proudhon and his followers, according to Marx, "arises from the fact that the bourgeois man is to them the only possible basis of every society, and that they cannot imagine a state of society in which man has ceased to be bourgeois." That Proudhon is blind to the empirical fact that it is necessary to overthrow and change the categories in order to transform the practical life of society; that, in short, "you find in him from the beginning a *dualism* between life and ideas, soul and body...," are incapacities, social contradictions put in action, that make Proudhon "from head to foot the philosopher and economist of the *petite bourgeoisie*." In his eminently readable biography, which, upon publication, so angered the intellectual left, Robert Payne discerns the confrontation between Marx and Proudhon as an instance of the "first purge," and he goes on to observe: "The Purges were not invented in Soviet Russia. They appeared at the very beginning of Marxist communism, and were part of the system."[6]

Expelled from Germany, Belgium, and France for his revolutionary activities, Marx finally departed, in August 1849, for London, where he spent the rest of his life. The early years in England were for Marx, his wife, and his children squalid and distressing. "My situation is now such that I must under any circumstance raise some money in order to be able to continue working," he was to write of his besetting financial problems, which he likened to a small war that always threatened to defeat him. "One is stuck in the muck up to one's neck" becomes a common complaint in the letters. Illnesses were to join economic debilities in plaguing Marx and his family. The death of his eight-year-old son Edgar on April 6, 1855 was a heavy blow. "It is indescribable how we miss the child everywhere," he writes to Engels. "I have already experienced all kinds of ill luck, but only now do I know what real misfortune is. I feel myself broken down... I have had such wild headaches since the burial that I have lost the power of thinking, hearing, and seeing." Despite deprivations and heartache during his first twenty years in London, Marx worked on tenaciously: "I spend mostly from nine in the morning to seven in the evening in the British Museum." Withal, too, Marx had to live with the "secret" that the bastard son born in 1851 to Lenchen Demuth, the family's faithful servant, was his, whether by rape or seduction, though Engels, a

womanizer, willingly assumed the paternity. (For Marx's aristocratic wife, Jenny, this event, as she wrote in her memoirs, was one "which I shall not dwell upon further, although it brought about a great increase in our private and public sorrows.") Personal anxieties did not keep Marx from pursuing his work as the European political writer for the *New York Daily Tribune*, between 1851-1862, or from his systematic economic research, with his first major book on the subject, *Critique of Political Economy*, published in Berlin in 1859. Nor did adversity diminish an acerbic, arrogant temperament. His attacks on political enemies and deviators remained consistently vicious, as even one sentence from a letter of commination to an anti-Marx German journalist confirms:

> I await you on a different field, in order to tear off the hypocritical mask of revolutionary fanaticism, behind which you had known how to conceal cleverly your petty interests, your envy, your unsatisfied vanity and your malcontent vexation over the world's oversight in recognizing your great genius—an oversight that began when you failed your examination.

Marx perceived himself as a modern Prometheus: "...I who am engaged in the most bitter conflict with the world (the official one)," we find him writing to a correspondent in 1867. Yet, in the midst of continuing conflict, indeed, even in the midst of his active involvement in the International Working Men's Association, known as the First International and founded in 1864, Marx was not above adopting roles in life which he singled out for attack in the bourgeoisie. He invested in the stock market. He worried that expenses incurred during a prolonged illness would cause disastrous complications. ("...I am faced with a financial crisis in the *immediate* future, a matter which, apart from the direct effect on me and my family, would also be ruinous for me politically, especially here in London, where one must keep up *appearances*.") He considered becoming a British citizen, though his aim had other than patriotic or grateful impulsions. ("I am thinking of becoming *naturalized* as an Englishman for the purpose of being able to travel to Paris in safety. Without such a trip, the French edition of my book [*Das Kapital*] will never come to pass.") He felt that Paul Lafargue's attentions to his daughter Laura were "inappropriate," the unfortunate product of a "Creole temperament." (Marx called Lafargue, who had French, Jewish, Carib Indian, and Negro ancestry, "Gorilla" and "Negrillo.") "In my opinion," he wrote Lafargue on August 13, 1866, just prior to the latter's engagement to Laura, "true love is expressed in reserve, modesty, and even shyness of the lover toward his idol, and never in temperamental excesses or too premature intimacy." Ten days later, in a letter to Engels, Marx stressed that Lafargue's engagement to his daughter "is arranged to the extent that the Old Man [François Lafargue, Paul's father] wrote me from Bordeaux, asking me for the title of *promesso sposo* for his son and stating his very favorable economic situation."

Undoubtedly there are those who prefer to explain away the paradoxes in Marx's personal attitudes as being the derivatives of a normative-Victorian character or as the manifestations of a day-to-day struggle with, in Baraka's words, "deadly capitalism and its supporters, even with those who count themselves 'Communists.' " But that Marx could also be at once a bourgeois and a revolutionary prophet is corroborated by some of the letters. He speaks, for instance, of his need for the "absolute quiet" that he finds in family life: "Under 'quiet,' I understand 'family life,' the 'noise of children'—this 'microscopic world' that is much more interesting than the 'macroscopic' one." At the very same time he thrills to the severe consequences of the economic crisis which began in Europe in 1857. To Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864), the leading spokesman for German socialism, whom Marx distrusted and repeatedly mocked as

"Nigger-Jew," he wrote on May 31, 1858: "On the whole, the present period is agreeable. History has patently in mind to take again a new start, and the signs of dissolution everywhere are delightful for every mind not bent upon the conservation of things as they are." Marx's words here actually support Baraka's belief that picturing Marx as "the domesticated Marx" is an untruth. They also remind us that Marx was first, last, and always a professional revolutionary, finally and pitilessly preoccupied with the collectivist society of the future. His was a materialist sensibility, rooted in the cult of science and utopian socialism, that makes so devastatingly *apropos* Albert Camus' charge that Marx "found any form of beauty under the sun completely alien." In essence, then, Marx affirmed, in the transparent and yet subtle ways that his letters disclose, a system that is mechanistic and ruthless: a philosophical destructiveness. Whatever generosity of spirit he may have had was to be readily sacrificed to the laws of social necessity, and to the phenomenon of Marx himself. "Like the feudal magnates of old," Simone Weil declares, "like the business men of his own day, he had built for himself a morality which placed above good and evil the activity of the social group to which he belonged, that of professional revolutionaries."[7]

Not unexpectedly the letters underline the absence of an aesthetic sense. Neither painting nor music appealed to Marx. And though he admired Aeschylus, Shakespeare, and Goethe, his admiration was unremarkable in enthusiasm and ultimately subordinated to *primum vivere* as his first principle of determination. (In Marx's "Paris Manuscripts," in a short section on money, he quotes extensively from Goethe's *Faust* and Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* in order to stress that money, as the "bond of all bonds," destroys society.) "Bookworming" was, as he said, his most appealing occupation, but his conception of books had no aesthetic quality, or fondness, as he was the first to admit: "I am a machine, condemned to devour them and then, throw them, in a changed form, on the dunghill of history." During a walking tour to Canterbury, a city famous from ancient times as the see of the Archbishop and Primate of all England and as the site of the shrine of Thomas à Becket, Marx failed to see Canterbury Cathedral: "Happily, I was too tired, and it was too late, to look out for the celebrated cathedral." Which is equivalent to a double sin of omission and of commission for a man who, disdainful of pilgrimages and illuminations, just managed to spare Christianity from full condemnation on only one count: "After all, we can forgive Christianity much because it taught us to love children." (One can also recall, in this connection, Marx's remark in "On the Jewish Question" [1843]: "Christianity is the sublime thought of Judaism and Judaism is the vulgar application of Christianity.") In the end Marx's own explanations of himself, given in the Victorian parlour game of "Confessions," serve as the best way of presenting a man who sometimes signed his letters as the "Moor."[8] His favorite virtue, he said, was Strength; his favorite characteristic, Singleness of Purpose; his idea of happiness, To Fight; his favorite heroes, Spartacus and Kepler; his favorite color, Red; his favorite motto: *De omnibus dubitandum* ("You must have doubts about everything").

During his last years of life, Marx was excruciatingly sick and unable to work, suffering from chronic carbuncles, toothaches, hemorrhoids, liver disorders, bronchitis, insomnia, constant coughing—and, as Mrs. Marx exclaimed, "God knows what else." His family circumstances were equally depressing: his wife was to die of cancer in 1881; his oldest daughter, Jenny, was to die of the same disease in 1883, several months before Marx's own death on March 14, 1883. (Two of his other daughters, Laura and Eleanor, were to commit suicide, in 1898 and in 1911, respectively.) For him the most cheering news in the final phase of his life came from Russia. To a supporter in the United States, he wrote on November

5, 1880: "In Russia, where *Das Kapital* is more read and appreciated than anywhere else, our success is even greater... Russia is to leap by somersault into the anarchist-communist, atheist millennium!" And to his daughter Laura he wrote on December 14, 1882: "Some recent Russian publications, printed in Holy Russia, not abroad, show the great run of my theories in that country. Nowhere my success is to me more delightful; it gives me the satisfaction that I damage a power, which besides England, is the true bulwark of the old society." No words could have been more aptly written as Leon Trotsky shows in his biography of *The Young Lenin*. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924), towards the end of the 1880's, was carefully reading and annotating *Das Kapital*, having just a few years earlier turned against religion, when, according to one Bolshevik, he denied the existence of God, tore the cross from his neck, spit on it, and then threw it to the ground (or in the garbage, as one variant of the story has it). "Vladimir studied *Das Kapital* so thoroughly," writes Trotsky, "that everytime he looked at it again he was able to discover new ideas in it. Even during his Samara period he learned, as he himself said later, to 'confer' with Marx."[9]

Whether one is presenting or conferring with Marx, he remains inescapable. "His name will live through the centuries and so also will his work." Engels was absolutely right in choosing these words for the last sentence of his eulogy at Marx's gravesite. No less right is Robert Heilbroner, Marx's American interpreter in the present day, who declares in his most recent book, "In our times and henceforth, change is upon the world, in large part inspired and guided by Marxism itself."[10] But neither in eulogy nor in interpretation is the full truth of Marx and Marxism to be fathomed. For *that* truth one needs to hear from the "victims of politics," from those who are witnesses to the destructive change that Marx caused. One of these witnesses, the press agency Tass reported, "has been conducting subversive activities against the Soviet state for a number of years" and has been repeatedly warned about their "impermissibility." His crime was that, in "alarm and hope," he was decrying the phenomena of decomposition in "a sick society": "The most refined form of totalitarian-socialist society [which] exists in the USSR." That witness is Dr. Andrei D. Sakharov, who only the other day, en route to sudden exile in the Volga River city, sent this message to his wife—and to the world: "Apparently I'm being sent to Gorky."

[1]"The Domesticated Marx," *Book World*, January 13, 1980, p. 8. [2]*The Autobiography of Karl Schurz*, an abridgement in one volume by Wayne Andrews, with an Introduction by Allan Nevins (New York, 1961 [1906-1908]), p. 20. [3]Quoted in full by Robert Payne, *Marx* (New York, 1968), pp. 500-501. [4]See George A. Panichas, *Epicurus* (New York, 1967). [5]Two important studies are Alan Ritter's *The Political Thought of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (Princeton, N.J., 1969) and Edward Hyams' *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: His Revolutionary Life, Mind and Works* (New York, 1979). [6]Payne, p. 168. [7]*Oppression and Liberty*, translated by Arthur Wills and John Petrie, with an Introduction by F.C. Ellert (Amherst, Mass., 1973), p. 193. [8]Quoted by David McLellan, *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought* (New York, 1973), pp. 456-457. More recent biographies are Saul K. Padover's *Karl Marx: An Intimate Biography* (New York, 1978) and Jerrold Seigel's *Marx's Fate: The Shape of a Life* (Princeton, N.J., 1978). For my discussion of the latter book see "The New Logos," *Modern Age*, Volume 23, Number 2, 184-188. [9]Leon Trotsky, *The Young Lenin*, translated from the Russian by Max Eastman, and edited and annotated by Maurice Friedberg (New York, 1972), p. 187. [10]*Marxism: For and Against* (New York, 1980), p. 174.

Corrigendum

In the Fall Issue of *Modern Age*, in the review entitled "Presenting Mr. Marx," on page 411, first column, lines 24-26, the phrase: "...underscores Schurz's belief that Marx distrusted the latter's authoritarian and centralist ideas..." should be corrected to read: "...underscores Schurz's belief that Marx was intractably dogmatic and supercilious. Proudhon, as an unforgiving Marx knew, distrusted the latter's authoritarian and centralist ideas..."