CHAPTER 7

Karl Marx’s Shandean Humour:
Scorpion und Felix and its Aftermath

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Marx is a very funny man, very comic in a very profound way.¹
— C. L. R. James

Introduction: The Funny Side of Karl Marx

Karl Marx is not normally credited with much of a sense of humour. If we think of the opening to Der achttzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte [The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte] (1852), then he is of course very well known as what one might call an ironic commentator on the unintentionally humorous outcomes of the world-historic process:

Hegel bemerkte irgendwo, daß alle großen weltgeschichtlichen Tatsachen und Personen sich sozusagen zweimal ereignen. Er hat vergessen hinzuzufügen: das eine Mal als Tragödie, das andere Mal als Farce.²

[Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.³]

But otherwise one is not often tempted to consider Karl Marx himself as a joker, a humourist (we have Groucho Marx for that, or at a push Slavoj Žižek, analyst of the ‘ticklish subject’);⁴ of the ‘masters of suspicion’ it was Freud who was the Jewish joke-merchant. In the Preface to the Phänomenologie des Geistes [Phenomenology of Spirit], Hegel writes of the ‘Ernst des erfüllten Lebens’, ‘Ernst des Begriffs’, ‘Ernst […] des Negativen’,⁵ and Marx, too, is usually viewed as entirely post-Hegelian in respect of this prototypically Germanic earnestness. After all, some of the most serious-minded politics imaginable have been conducted in his name.

On the other hand Marxist humour is certainly not a contradiction in terms, and some of the best jokes have been told about communism.⁶ Likewise Marx himself has often been the butt of others’ humour. Perhaps it is the bushy beard, which always lends him such an air of venerable gravitas but which in turn is only too susceptible to ironic debunking — as in the Monty Python spoof game show ‘World Forum’, where Marx, Lenin, Che Guevara and Mao Tse-Tung fail to answer questions about English football, and Marx misses out on winning a lounge suite in
the ‘special gift section’ because he does not know who won the F.A. Cup Final in 1949. The Monty Python team derive humour at Marx’s expense, from the absurd incongruity between his supposedly proverbial seriousness of purpose (bolstered by the starched-shirt Victorian formality of his appearance), and the slick, American-mannered banality of the quiz-show television format, with Eric Idle as sleazy gameshow presenter and Marx (a false-bearded Terry Jones) the uneasy contestant in a competition for apparently desirable commodities. Ironically, for such an eminently practical revolutionary, it is the bookish Marx — abstruse denizen of the British Library, author of supposedly dour, detached ‘grauere Theorie’ [grey theory] — whom British humorists have singled out to poke fun at, in more recent times at least. A decade after the Pythons the Not the Nine O’Clock News team produced a sketch (‘Marxists’) featuring members of a revolutionary cell who aim to read the whole of Capital together but get only a few lines in before their leader (Mel Smith) abandons the reading with ‘Oh, sod it! Let’s go and kill someone!’, thus turning against Marx his own celebrated eleventh

These über Feuerbach

(‘Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert, es kommt drauf an, sie zu verändern’ (MEW 3: 7) [The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it (MECW 5:3)].) This is, of course, cruel and unfair — in the Preface to Das Kapital, Marx warns readers precisely against the difficulty of the opening analysis of commodities (MEW 23: 11 / MECW 35: 7) — but it is no less well observed for all that. This is not the place to pursue possible Sternean parallels with or influences on the Monty Python and Not the Nine O’Clock News teams (although, that said, several of their number studied English literature at Oxbridge). In this chapter I want instead to focus on Marx, and explore the possibility that a certain kind of British humour, at least — ‘Shandean humour’, indeed — may not be so foreign to his work as one might imagine, especially in the early years.

Marx and Sterne

In his very first contribution to the Rheinische Zeitung, published (anonymously) on his 24th birthday in May 1842, Marx tackles ‘die neueste preußische Zensurinstruktion’ [The Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction], and complains among other things that it cramps his style:

Ich bin humoristisch, aber das Gesetz gebietet ernsthaft zu schreiben. Ich bin keck, aber das Gesetz befiehlt, daß mein Styl bescheiden sei. [...] Soll ferner die Ernsthaftigkeit nicht zu jener Definition des Tristram Shandy passen, wonach sie ein heuchlerisches Benehmen des Körpers ist, um die Mängel der Seele zu verdecken, sondern den sachlichen Ernst bedeuten, so hebt sich die ganze Vorschrift auf. Denn das Lächerliche behandle ich ernsthaft, wenn ich es lächerlich behandle, und die ernsthafteste Unbescheidenheit des Geistes ist, gegen die Unbescheidenheit bescheiden zu sein.

Ernsthaft und bescheiden! welche schwankenden, relativen Begriffe! Wo hört der Ernst auf, wo fängt der Scherz an?11

[I am humorous, but the law bids me write seriously. I am audacious, but the law commands that my style be modest. [...] Further, if seriousness is not to come under Tristram Shandy’s definition according to which it is a hypocritical
behaviour of the body in order to conceal defects of the soul, but signifies seriousness in substance, then the entire prescription falls to the ground. For I treat the ludicrous seriously when I treat it ludicrously, and the most serious immodesty of the mind is to be modest in the face of immodesty.

Serious and modest! What fluctuating, relative concepts! Where does seriousness cease and jocularity begin?]

In this paradox-courting paean to anti-gravity, the young Marx both lays explicit claim to a humorous, jocular style and posts an explicit allegiance to Sterne in this respect. The definition of ‘gravity’ which he cites here is attributed early in Tristram Shandy to ‘a French wit’ (in fact La Rochefoucauld): ‘A mysterious carriage of the body to cover the defects of the mind’. As David Walsh points out, ‘the first significant literary reference in Marx’s initial effort as a revolutionary journalist (his comments on the Prussian censorship in 1842) was drawn from Sterne’s work’. Now scholars of Marx have known of his admiration for Sterne at least since the 1929 republication of this article in the first volume of the Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe, which in turn was republished in the 1975 second edition, just in time to be cited, along with other references to Sterne in Marx’s writings, in Siegbert Prawer’s classic 1976 study of Karl Marx and World Literature. Surprisingly, though, for all the immense amount of scholarly work that has been carried out on Marx, and for all the Marxist readings of Sterne, there has not yet been a single article devoted to Marx and Sterne, never mind a book-length study. Hegel’s interest in Sterne has been previously addressed, but Marx’s interest has been neglected, and there is certainly still work to be done in simply tracing Marx’s references and allusions to the novelist. For example, in June 1848, in his first contribution to the Neue Rheinische Zeitung, Marx recycles this selfsame Sterne allusion (if this time unattributed) in order to poke fun at Ludolf Camphausen, newly appointed presidential chair of the Ministry of State in Berlin. Then in his extended 1860 essay Herr Vogt Marx explicitly refers to Tristram Shandy’s chapter on noses; elsewhere he uses the Shandean term ‘Steckenpferd’ (‘hobby-horse’), and so on. There is not a huge amount of material, and Marx appears to confine himself to Tristram Shandy, for one thing, indeed to some of the most celebrated passages in it, but that is not to deny the evidently strategic importance of some of his references to Sterne, and of his programmatic confession of allegiance to Shandean humour, on which I shall concentrate in the remainder of this chapter.

Given that Marx himself lays claim to Shandean humour, what can it be said to amount to in his case? One answer has already been given by Marx’s most recent English-language biographer, Francis Wheen: an awful lot. As is perhaps only to be expected from the Deputy Editor of the leading British satirical magazine Private Eye, and a regular panellist on the BBC’s topical TV comedy programmes The News Quiz and Have I Got News for You, Francis Wheen’s prize-winning biography — dubbed by Robert Skidelsky ‘the first “post-Marxist” life of Marx’ — brings this aspect of Marx’s work very much to the fore, and it is this irreverent aspect that was most often picked up by reviewers. Specifically, both in his biography of Marx and in the spin-off book Marx’s ‘Das Kapital’: A Biography, both of which have been translated into German, Wheen advances the contention that Das Kapital
Karl Marx’s Shandean Humour

resembles nothing so much as ... Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, and needs to be read as an epic case study in Shandean humour writ large:

Like *Tristram Shandy*, *Capital* is full of systems and syllogisms, paradoxes and metaphysics, theories and hypotheses, abstruse explanations and whimsical tomfoolery. [...] To do justice to the deranged logic of capitalism, Marx’s text is saturated, sometimes even waterlogged, with irony — an irony which has yet escaped almost every reader for more than a century.24

I shall return to Wheen’s Shandean reading of *Das Kapital* in my final section, for as Wheen acknowledges, this kind of iconoclastic approach to Marx’s *Hauptwerk* in fact merely considers it to be a continuation and culmination of ‘his first youthful infatuation with Laurence Sterne’.25 And this was an infatuation which had already borne fruit when, by way of recreation, the young law student Marx had dashed off what he called a ‘Humoristischer Roman’ entitled *Scorpion und Felix*.26

**Scorpion und Felix: An Apprenticeship in Shandean Humour**

Marx wrote *Scorpion und Felix* in early 1837, five years before the *Rheinische Zeitung* article cited above. It is not clear how much of it he actually finished, because all that survives is a disjointed sequence of two dozen chapters given as a birthday present to his father in April of that year, as an appendix to an anthology of his youthful attempts at poetry. One might think that such a gift would be unlikely to find favour, yet (surprisingly) Marx’s father had in fact encouraged him to hone his literary skills. As Sam Stark explains, quoting a letter from father to son the previous December:

> Before Hallmark cards, poems were given in Germany as gifts, greetings, signs of affection or respect — general evidence of culture, an important thing for a provincial middle-class teenager looking for a patron. The right sort of poems could be the ‘first lever’ of a career, as Heinrich Marx put it, could have a ‘magic effect’, could help to ‘create prospects for a good situation and, eventually, to realise them’.27

Marx’s early poetry is mostly Heine-clone love poetry dedicated to his Jenny, future wife Jenny von Westphalen — indeed he had given one earlier collection the title *Buch der Lieder* (*MEGA*2 1/1: 555–613).28 From a Sternean point of view it is of some interest, perhaps, that these poems thematise stars, ‘Sterne’, to such an extent (two are entitled ‘Lied an die Sterne’ [Song to the Stars] (*MECW* 1: 608–09) and ‘Die zwei Sterne’ [The Two Stars] (*MEGA*2 1/1: 529, 530)). More pertinently, though, Sterne’s influence on the early Marx is palpable in the fragments from his ‘Humoristischer Roman’. It is not clear when Marx first actually read Sterne, and no copy of *Tristram Shandy* (or any other work by Sterne) remains in his (reconstructed) personal library, but the teenage Marx, at least, had already fallen under Sterne’s spell.29

Prawer describes *Scorpion und Felix* as ‘heavily dependent on Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and Heine’s *Pictures of Travel* in its over-all construction, the cadences of its prose, its sudden, deliberate let-downs, and its verbal cartoons’.30 Formally, Marx’s fragmentary novel clearly owes a huge debt to *Tristram Shandy*: ‘only’ two
dozen disjointed (non-sequentially numbered) chapters from ‘Book 1’ remain, totalling 5,500 words, but it is unclear whether there were ever any more, for much is in any case made of lacunae in a deliberate attempt to baffle the reader. Several characters are introduced, but character development is minimal and plot is effectively eschewed. There is a great deal of playful self-referentiality, including cross-references to missing chapters, and the typography is very ‘busy’ in the Sternean manner, including a line and a half of dashes in Chapter 35 to represent one of the frequent aposiopeses (MEGA² 1/1: 698 / MECW 1: 627). Non-sequiturs, interpolations, digressivity and bathos are the order of the day, and there is a self-conscious experimentalism about the great variety of themes and styles adopted. The chapters are mostly very short, ranging from the three-page Chapter 21 — subtitled ‘Philologische Grübeleien’ [Philological Broodings] and devoted to cod etymologies of the name of one of the characters (MEGA² 1/1: 690–93 / MECW 1: 618–21) — down to the two lines of Chapter 12, which in its entirety reads:

‘Ein Pferd, ein Pferd, ein Königreich für’s Pferd’ sprach Richard der dritte,
‘Ein Mann, ein Mann, mich selbst für einen Mann’ sprach Grethe. (MEGA² 1/1: 689)

[A horse! a horse! my kingdom for a horse!’ said Richard III.
‘A husband, a husband, myself for a husband,’ said Grethe.] (MECW 1: 617)

Two things are apparent from this sample of Marx’s text: firstly, there is much play with (more or less faithful) literary quotations and allusions in the tradition of learned wit. Here it is Shakespeare with whom Marx assumes (of course with every justification) that his reader will be familiar, elsewhere it is more Shakespeare, several passages from the Bible, a sizeable quotation from Ovid, a reference to E.T.A. Hoffmann’s gothic novel Die Elixiere des Teufels [The Devil’s Elixirs], and so on. And those are just the explicit literary references — Sterne, for example, is not among them, although stars/‘Sterne’ are mentioned three times (MEGA² 1/1: 688, 698, 702 / MECW 1: 616, 626, 631). Secondly, the kind of (en passant modishly sexist) humour on display in Chapter 12 is forced and just not funny: in Marx’s hands, Shakespeare’s horse (Marx’s hobby-horse) goes lame.

Thematically speaking, philosophical references in Scorpion und Felix include an attack on Lockean ‘Ideenassociationen’ [associations of ideas] in Chapter 16 (MEGA² 1/1: 689 / MECW 1: 617) and a chapter on knees which could hardly be more clearly modelled on Tristram Shandy’s chapter on noses (MEGA² 1/1: 694–95 / MECW 1: 622). A strong desire to épater la bourgeoisie leads to some incongruously high-flown descriptions of bodily functions, and the work’s parodic anticlericalism gives way in places to full-blown blasphemy. Some political themes are taken up which appear significant in the light of Marx’s later career: the (first remaining fragment of the) work opens with a reflection on the rightful ownership of a sum of money (MEGA² 1/1: 688 / MECW 1: 616), and Chapter 29 features an attack on the right of primogeniture (MEGA² 1/1: 696–97 / MECW 1: 624–25), but then this kind of knockabout political reference is par for the course in Tristram Shandy, too. Other obviously Sternean (or, perhaps better, would-be Sternean) features on display in Marx’s youthful attempt at a novel include a host of mock Latinate names
and a sprinkling of mock-scholarly references (MEGA² 1/1: 699 / MECW 1: 627), a narrative tone marked by self-deprecation, and a general indulgence of idiosyncrasy. The last chapter we have suggests that the whole novel will be a shaggy-dog story, for it ends bathetically, scatologically, with an apostrophic invocation of the constipation of a dog (‘o du fromme Verstopfung!’ [O pious constipation!] (MEGA² 1/1: 703, MECW 1: 632)).

So far, so derivative: on this evidence, Marx was no great loss to literature. Margaret Rose has attempted to salvage the work and sees it as a kind of exorcism, helping Marx to overcome earlier literary and philosophical models through parody. She suggests: ‘Scorpion und Felix […], in many ways, appears to serve Marx in bringing to the surface the concealed models of his youth at the same time as it frees him from them and from those openly imitated in the poems’.32 This would seem to me to be an overly generous interpretation, though, and others have been less charitable. Writing as early as 1940, H. P. Adams remarks: ‘In the humorous prose chapters of “Scorpion and Felix” the influence of Sterne is very obvious, but in the place of Sterne’s delicacy there is a too frequent and inconsequent recourse to calculated bathos.’33 Peter Demetz is even less indulgent:


[The crude jokes, the far-fetched literary associations, the entire chaotic tangle of word-games, scarcely deserve the subtitle ‘A Humorous Novel’ which Marx intended for his experiment. The dilettante wanted too much: as he sought to combine all the virtues of Sterne, Jean Paul, (early Sterne imitator Theodor Gottlieb von) Hippel and E.T.A. Hoffmann in one single imitative piece, his experiment had to remain lacking in order, power and effect.]

Perhaps the sternest critic of his early literary work was Marx himself, though, for he recognised that the project was ultimately a failure. In November of 1837 he wrote to his father, looking back on his literary activity earlier in the year:

Am Ende des Semesters suchte ich wieder Musentänze und Satyrmusik, und schon in diesem letzten Heft, das ich Euch zugeschickt, spielt der Idealismus durch erzwungenen Humor (‘Scorpion und Felix’), durch ein mißlungenes, phantastisches Drama (‘Oulanem’) hindurch, bis er endlich gänzlich umschlägt und in reine Formkunst, meistenteils ohne begeisternde Objekte, ohne schwunghaften Ideengang, übergeht. (MEW 40: 8)

[At the end of the term, I again sought the dances of the Muses and the music of the Satyrs. Already in the last exercise book that I sent you idealism pervades forced humour (Scorpion and Felix) and an unsuccessful, fantastic drama (Oulanem), until it finally undergoes a complete transformation and becomes mere formal art, mostly without objects that inspire it and without any impassioned train of thought.] (MECW 1: 17)

Marx is his own harshest critic here, and in retrospect it is ironic that he should
reach for the same term with which to chastise himself — ‘formalism’ — as would be levelled in intemperate criticism at so much Soviet literature and art during the century to follow. Marx himself admits that the humour of *Scorpion und Felix* is forced: it is clearly ‘Shandean humour’ after a fashion, but it clearly also tries too hard, going through the motions with what one might call a kind of external, tick-box approach to ‘Shandeanism by numbers’, a deliberate mimicry of the style which ultimately fails to rise above the superficial and certainly falls far short of capturing the spirit (by which I mean above all the humanity) of Sterne’s creation. The lesson of Marx’s abortive *Scorpion und Felix* — as of so many other Sterne imitations before and since — is that it takes a lot more than this kind of apparatus to be truly funny in a Sternean manner, that no amount of Sternean scaffolding will ensure that (anything other than low-grade) ‘Shandean humour’ results. Lesser literary writers of the late Enlightenment and Romantic periods persisted in churning out derivative pastiches of *Tristram Shandy* for an eager literary market; the best writers of this generation absorbed Sterne and were able to transform the Sternean impulse into something more truly productive by transcending mere imitation.

**Das Kapital: Marx’s Shaggy-Dog Novel**

As for Marx, of course after his youthful literary peccadillo he put away such childish things as poetry and humorous novels, and graduated to an illustrious political career. Yet such a pat encapsulation fails to do justice to what one might call the persistence of the Sternean impulse in Marx, too, for one might say that Sterne gets under Marx’s skin more subtly than that. In a very direct sense it does not pay to dismiss *Scorpion und Felix* too summarily, for as Francis Wheen points out, the famous 1852 opening to *Der achtzehnte Brumaire*, with which I began, is clearly anticipated in Chapter 37 of the abortive novel from fifteen years earlier:


([MEGA² 1/1: 699–700])

>[The first are too great for this world, and so they are thrown out. But the latter strike root in it and remain, as one may see from the facts, for champagne leaves a lingering repulsive aftertaste, Caesar the hero leaves behind him the play-acting Octavianus, Emperor Napoleon the bourgeois king Louis Philippe, the philosopher Kant the carpet-knight Krug, the poet Schiller the Hofrat Raupach, Leibniz’s heaven Wolf’s schoolroom, the dog Boniface this chapter. Thus the bases are precipitated, while the spirit evaporates.] (MECW 1: 628)

It may be a big stretch to imagine a similarly alchemical transformation of *Scorpion und Felix* into *Das Kapital*, but that is precisely what Wheen claims when he stresses the continuity between Marx’s early literary attempts and later theoretical
masterworks, and reads Das Kapital as a glorious instantiation of that same (Sternean) ironic impulse which had characterised the earlier failed novel project:

It is surprising that so few people have even considered the book as literature. Das Kapital has spawned countless texts analysing Marx’s labour theory of value or his law of the declining rate of profit, but only a handful of critics have given serious attention to Marx’s own declared ambition — in several letters to Engels — to produce a work of art.39

Reading Das Kapital as literature is like reading the Bible as literature: the text has been treated as holy writ for so long and by so many that such an approach attracts deep suspicion in some quarters, especially given the longstanding suspicion of ‘formalist’ analysis on the part of Marxism itself. As a result, most commentaries on the text ignore its formal and stylistic qualities altogether, or at best include a cursory treatment of ‘The Structure of Capital’.40 In his recent study Representing ‘Capital’, Fredric Jameson stresses the text’s formal problems (as one would expect from the author of Marxism and Form), but seeks to resolve them by means of musical analogies and explicitly rejects literary readings as misguided (even if he cannot resist sneaking in parallels to Tolstoy and Keats himself in a later footnote).41 Louis Althusser at least appreciates the need to justify the lacuna when he explains at the outset of Lire le Capital (1965): ‘Nous étions tous des philosophes. Nous n’avons pas lu Le Capital en économistes, en historiens ou en littéraires.’42 David Harvey, likewise, introduces his highly regarded Companion to Marx’s ‘Capital’ by conceding that ‘when read as a whole, it is an enormously gratifying literary construction’,43 but then proceeds to ignore the text’s literary qualities for the rest of his study, in common with the other leading contemporary English-language commentators.44 Yet the literary treatment of Marx effectively began over a century ago with the article ‘Karl Marx und das Gleichnis’ [Karl Marx and Metaphor] by the man who coined the term ‘Marxismus’ and first edited Marx’s literary Nachlass, German Social Democrat and Marx biographer Franz Mehring.45 A notable early proponent of the literary reading of Marx’s Hauptwerk was the American critic Edmund Wilson, who in 1940 dubbed Marx the ‘Poet of Commodities’ and hailed him as ‘certainly the greatest ironist since Swift’.46 Since the Second World War, interest in Marx’s rhetoric has grown apace, with important work being carried out in recent decades by Hayden White, Jacques Derrida and other (post-)structuralist or postmodernist commentators.47 Moreover, several critics besides Wheen have focused on the literary ambition of Das Kapital, tracing its relation to literary models and to Marx’s own earlier literary efforts, ascribing it a literary form of its own (generally melodrama).48

Wheen’s approach to Das Kapital is nevertheless distinctive, for he combines an interest in the work’s literary qualities with an interest in its humour, linking both to the Shandean inclinations of Marx’s youth. In fact he proposes several styles of reading:

The book can be read as a vast Gothic novel whose heroes are enslaved and consumed by the monster they created […] or as a Victorian melodrama; or as a black farce […] or as a Greek tragedy […]. Or perhaps it is a satirical utopia like the land of the Houyhnhnms in Gulliver’s Travels.49
Ultimately, though, Wheen revels in ‘the absurdities to be found in Capital’, and finds parallels with Sterne’s ‘comic shaggy-dog novel’ to be the strongest. To support this claim, he adduces evidence from Das Kapital such as the ‘picaresque odyssey through the realms of higher nonsense’ provided by the description, early in Volume 1, of a coat and twenty yards of linen, or the rich irony of the ‘Digression: On Productive Labour’ from Volume 4. Following Edmund Wilson, Wheen highlights the comic figure of the vulgar capitalist ‘Mr Moneybags’ introduced in Chapter 6 of the first volume — although it must be said that here the standard English translation of ‘unser Geldbesitzer’ (MEW 23: 181) as ‘our friend Moneybags’ (MECW 35: 177) heightens the dramatic effect. After the manner of Gillian Beer analysing Darwin’s Plots, Wheen invites us to read Das Kapital with a literary sensibility, alert to cross-discourse questions of metaphoricity, characterisation and plot development. He dares to take another pot-shot at the po-faced revolutionary titan who figures in so much of the more adulatory, hagiographical reception, and definitively dispels Das Kapital’s reputation — ironically reinforced by the Not the Nine O’Clock News sketch which I cited at the outset — for being ‘long, verbose, abstruse, [...] one of the most unreadable books of all time’, ‘boringly literal in [its] scientificity’. Incidentally, of course, he also sends us back to consider the revolutionary nature of Sterne’s novel, not only in the aesthetic, formal sense but in the progressive political sense, too: to consider, say, the novel’s ‘labour theory of literary value’ or Uncle Toby as a ‘configuration of the nature and cost of social labour in the crucible of empire’.

In likening Das Kapital to a work of fiction, and playing up the comic aspects of ‘The First Marx Brother’, Wheen’s provocative biography has certainly invited criticism, and Robert Skidelsky, for one, rises to the bait: to treat Marx just as a black satirist, a pamphleteer in the tradition of Swift, or as a literary prankster — to analyse his work, that is, in purely literary terms — is, surely, as Wheen would say, ‘to miss the plot’. Das Kapital was not just a satire on ‘Mr. Money Bags’, but a call to revolution, based on what purported to be a ‘scientific’ analysis of capitalism.

Now this reductive characterisation is itself unfair, for Wheen does not analyse Das Kapital ‘in purely literary terms’, but it is true that he unrepresentatively exaggerates the importance of the book’s humorous aspects in the service of his own comic effect (so that one might term his a kind of meta-Sternean reading in this regard). After all, Das Kapital did not acquire its fearsomely rebarbative reputation for no reason: drawing heavily on government reports, it includes many passages of dry statistical and historical analysis which Marx makes no attempt to leaven with levity, and much of the story it tells is no laughing matter, anatomising as it does the grimly exploitative — if not outright murderous — practices of industrial enterprise in mid-century England.

The fact remains, though, that Das Kapital does tell a story, and it tells it well, bringing to bear a fine literary sensibility in the process. As Stanley Edgar Hyman remarks: ‘Like a poet, Marx strives to summon up an immediacy of sensation, to make the reader feel the experience itself.’ To this end, a key trope mobilised throughout the text is personification: Marx enlivens his subject-matter by focusing
much of the time not on capital but on the figure of the capitalist, who we are repeatedly told is nothing other than ‘personifiziertes, mit Willen und Bewußtsein begabtes Kapital’ [capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will] (MEW 23: 168, MECW 35: 164). The dialectic of capitalism is inherently dramatic, but Marx is not content merely to pit abstract forces against one other, and instead dramatises the contesting agents for stylistic effect, creating a series of what sociologist Max Weber would later call Idealtypen [ideal types]. Not only the capitalist but also the landlord, the worker and wage-labourer are admitted to be personifications of otherwise inanimate forces, and indeed Marx assembles a whole cast list of ‘character mask’-wearing antagonists which includes ‘der Geldbesitzer’, as we have seen, but also such specimens as ‘der Freihändler vulgaris’ [the Free-trader Vulgaris] (MEW 23: 190, MECW 35: 186), ‘die Herrn Fabrikanten’ [our friends the manufacturers] (MEW 23: 501, MECW 35: 479) and ‘der Vulgärökonom’ [the vulgar economist] (MEW 25: 826, MECW 37: 803). Moreover, capital has a life of its own (MEW 24: 156 / MECW 36: 158), and is variously ascribed a ‘Lebensgeschichte’ [life history] (MEW 23: 161; 24: 157, 194 / MECW 35: 157), ‘Lebensprozeß’ [life process] (MEW 23: 329 / MECW 35: 313) or ‘Lebenstrieb’ [life impulse] (MEW 23: 247 / MECW 35: 241), even outside its ‘investment’ in the figure of the capitalist. Like Hegel’s Geist, ‘Monsieur le Capital’ (MEW 25: 838 / MECW 37: 817) is accorded (grammatical) agency countless times in the course of the book, not least in the lurid guises of the ghosts and vampires which have dominated critical appreciations of Marx’s metaphorics in recent years. Like Hegel’s Phänomenologie des Geistes, Das Kapital has been likened to a Bildungsroman with capital as its ironic (anti-)hero, whose progress is staged for vivid effect in a series of vignettes, at least some of which are clearly humorous in intent (as is signalled surprisingly often by an ironic exclamation mark). At the very least, then, we can say, with Hyman, that ‘Capital is sometimes quite funny, in a sardonic fashion’, for among other things it is ‘a tissue of puns and word-play, most of them untranslatable.’

Wheen’s biography has the great merit of popularising the literary reading of Marx’s work and has itself found a receptive readership (in over twenty languages) in our largely post-Marxist age, in turn provoking further literary investigations. Like Sterne surveying the fictional world of Tristram Shandy, Marx finds many aspects of capitalism simply ‘laugh-at-able’, but it would be going too far to call Das Kapital a Sternean novel tout court, since its Sternean features form part of an eclectic ensemble of literary influences which also include, for example, Swiftian satire (as Wheen himself readily acknowledges). In reading Marx’s magnum opus against the grain and linking it back to the early humorous impulse of Scorpion und Felix, Wheen nevertheless alerts us to what one might call, in Sternean manner, some of the Eigenheiten [peculiarities] in Marx’s rambling, incomplete masterpiece, and confirms that there is Shandean humour to be found in even the unlikeliest of places.
Notes to Chapter 7

8. Jones reprised his role for the sketch ‘The Philosophers’ Football Match’, where Marx claims that Socrates’ late headed winner is offside (Monty Pythons fliegender Zirkus, Episode 2, first broadcast ARD, 18 December 1972).
10. Eric Idle studied English at Pembroke College, Cambridge; Terry Jones studied English at St Edmund Hall, Oxford; Griff Rhys Jones read History and English at Emmanuel College, Cambridge.
17. See also Tommaso Pierini’s contribution, chapter five in this volume.
20. See MECW 4, 192 (MECW 6: 221); MECW 14: 491 (MECW 17: 134).
35. Most notably, in 1936 Shostakovich’s second opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* was denounced by a *Pravda* editorial for its ‘petit-bourgeois formalism’.
37. This was the case with Goethe, who in the 1760s began showing his enthusiasm for Sterne by writing a derivative poem on noses, but much later on, at the end of his literary career in the 1820s, professed a continuing indebtedness to Sterne which can only be demonstrated much more subtly. See my article ‘Goethe, Sterne and the Question of Plagiarism’, in *Goethe at 250: London Symposium / Goethe mit 250. Londoner Symposium*, ed. by T. J. Reed, Martin Swales, and Jeremy Adler (Munich: iudicium, 2000), pp. 85–108.


51. Ibid., pp. 307, 308–09.

52. See Kemple, *Reading Marx Writing*, p. 221.


60. For the capitalist as the personification of capital, see also *MEW* 23: 16, 326, 328, 618; *MEW* 24: 120, 121, 131, 470; *MEW* 25: 274, 295, 300–01, 386, 827, 832, 886–87, 888. For the trope of personification, see I. I. Rubin, ‘Reification of Production Relations among People and

61. For the worker (Arbeiter), see MEW 23: 258; for the landlord (Grundeigentümer), see MEW 23: 16; 25: 802, 829, 832–33; for the wage-labourer (Lohnarbeiter), see MEW 25: 886–87.

62. For the image of the dramatis personae, see MEW 23: 125, 191.


