

Young Marx

Writings from Karl Marx before *Rheinsche Zeitung*

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A Book of Verse

Written: prior to April 12, 1837

Source: *Marx Engels Collected Works* Vol 1, pg 683-685.

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**of the year 1837
dedicated to my dear father
on the occasion of his birthday
as a feeble token of everlasting love
K. H. Marx, Berlin**

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Karl Marx's

REFLECTIONS OF A YOUNG MAN ON THE CHOICE OF A PROFESSION

Written between August 10 and 16, 1835

First published in the yearly *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung*,
Ed. K. Grünberg, Leipzig, 1925

Nature herself has determined the sphere of activity in which the animal should move, and it peacefully moves within that sphere, without attempting to go beyond it, without even an inkling of any other. To man, too, the Deity gave a general aim, that of ennobling mankind and himself, but he left it to man to seek the means by which this aim can be achieved; he left it to him to choose the position in society most suited to him, from which he can best uplift himself and society.

This choice is a great privilege of man over the rest of creation, but at the same time it is an act which can destroy his whole life, frustrate all his plans, and make him unhappy. Serious consideration of this choice, therefore, is certainly the first duty of a young man who is beginning his career and does not want to leave his most important affairs to chance.

Everyone has an aim in view, which to him at least seems great, and actually is so if the deepest conviction, the innermost voice of the heart declares it so, for the Deity never leaves mortal man wholly without a guide; he speaks softly but with certainty.

But this voice can easily be drowned, and what we took for inspiration can be the product of the moment, which another moment can perhaps also destroy. Our imagination, perhaps, is set on fire, our emotions excited, phantoms flit before our eyes, and we plunge headlong into what impetuous instinct suggests, which we imagine the Deity himself has pointed out to us. But what we ardently embrace soon repels us and we see our whole existence in ruins.

We must therefore seriously examine whether we have really been inspired in our choice of a profession, whether an inner voice approves it, or whether this inspiration is a delusion, and what we took to be a call from the Deity was self-deception. But how can we recognise this except by tracing the source of the inspiration itself?

What is great glitters, its glitter arouses ambition, and ambition can easily have produced the inspiration, or what we took for inspiration; but reason can no longer restrain the man who is tempted by the demon of ambition, and he plunges headlong into what impetuous instinct suggests: he no longer chooses his position in life, instead it is determined by chance and illusion.

Nor are we called upon to adopt the position which offers us the most brilliant opportunities; that is not the one which, in the long series of years in which we may perhaps hold it, will never tire us, never dampen our zeal, never let our enthusiasm grow cold, but one in which

we shall soon see our wishes unfulfilled, our ideas unsatisfied, and we shall inveigh against the Deity and curse mankind.

But it is not only ambition which can arouse sudden enthusiasm for a particular profession; we may perhaps have embellished it in our imagination, and embellished it so that it appears the highest that life can offer. We have not analysed it, not considered the whole burden, the great responsibility it imposes on us; we have seen it only from a distance, and distance is deceptive.

Our own reason cannot be counsellor here; for it is supported neither by experience nor by profound observation, being deceived by emotion and blinded by fantasy. To whom then should we turn our eyes? Who should support us where our reason forsakes us?

Our parents, who have already travelled life's road and experienced the severity of fate – our heart tells us.

And if then our enthusiasm still persists, if we still continue to love a profession and believe ourselves called to it after we have examined it in cold blood, after we have perceived its burdens and become acquainted with its difficulties, then we ought to adopt it, then neither does our enthusiasm deceive us nor does overhastiness carry us away.

But we cannot always attain the position to which we believe we are called; our relations in society have to some extent already begun to be established before we are in a position to determine them.

Our physical constitution itself is often a threatening obstacle, and let no one scoff at its rights.

It is true that we can rise above it; but then our downfall is all the more rapid, for then we are venturing to build on crumbling ruins, then our whole life is an unhappy struggle between the mental and the bodily principle. But he who is unable to reconcile the warring elements within himself, how can he resist life's tempestuous stress, how can he act calmly? And it is from calm alone that great and fine deeds can arise; it is the only soil in which ripe fruits successfully develop.

Although we cannot work for long and seldom happily with a physical constitution which is not suited to our profession, the thought nevertheless continually arises of sacrificing our well-being to duty, of acting vigorously although we are weak. But if we have chosen a profession for which we do not possess the talent, we can never exercise it worthily, we shall soon realise with shame our own incapacity and tell ourselves that we are useless created beings, members of society who are incapable of fulfilling their vocation. Then the most natural consequence is self-contempt, and what feeling is more painful and less capable of being made up for by all that the outside world has to offer? Self-contempt is a serpent that ever gnaws at one's breast, sucking the life-blood from one's heart and mixing it with the poison of misanthropy and despair.

An illusion about our talents for a profession which we have closely examined is a fault which takes its revenge on us ourselves, and even if it does not meet with the censure of the outside world it gives rise to more terrible pain in our hearts than such censure could inflict.

If we have considered all this, and if the conditions of our life permit us to choose any profession we like, we may adopt the one that assures us the greatest worth, one which is based on ideas of whose truth we are thoroughly convinced, which offers us the widest scope to work for mankind, and for ourselves to approach closer to the general aim for which every profession is but a means – perfection.

Worth is that which most of all uplifts a man, which imparts a higher nobility to his actions and all his endeavours, which makes him invulnerable, admired by the crowd and raised above it.

But worth can be assured only by a profession in which we are not servile tools, but in which we act independently in our own sphere. It can be assured only by a profession that does not demand reprehensible acts, even if reprehensible only in outward appearance, a profession which the best can follow with noble pride. A profession which assures this in the greatest degree is not always the highest, but is always the most to be preferred.

But just as a profession which gives us no assurance of worth degrades us, we shall as surely succumb under the burdens of one which is based on ideas that we later recognise to be false.

There we have no recourse but to self-deception, and what a desperate salvation is that which is obtained by self-betrayal!

Those professions which are not so much involved in life itself as concerned with abstract truths are the most dangerous for the young man whose principles are not yet firm and whose convictions are not yet strong and unshakeable. At the same time these professions may seem to be the most exalted if they have taken deep root in our hearts and if we are capable of sacrificing our lives and all endeavours for the ideas which prevail in them.

They can bestow happiness on the man who has a vocation for them, but they destroy him who adopts them rashly, without reflection, yielding to the impulse of the moment.

On the other hand, the high regard we have for the ideas on which our profession is based gives us a higher standing in society, enhances our own worth, and makes our actions un-challengeable.

One who chooses a profession he values highly will shudder at the idea of being unworthy of it; he will act nobly if only because his position in society is a noble one.

But the chief guide which must direct us in the choice of a profession is the welfare of mankind and our own perfection. It should not be thought that these two interests could be in conflict, that one would have to destroy the other; on the contrary, man's nature is so constituted that he can attain his own perfection only by working for the perfection, for the good, of his fellow men.

If he works only for himself, he may perhaps become a famous man of learning, a great sage, an excellent poet, but he can never be a perfect, truly great man.

History calls those men the greatest who have ennobled themselves by working for the

common good; experience acclaims as happiest the man who has made the greatest number of people happy; religion itself teaches us that the ideal being whom all strive to copy sacrificed himself for the sake of mankind, and who would dare to set at nought such judgments?

If we have chosen the position in life in which we can most of all work for mankind, no burdens can bow us down, because they are sacrifices for the benefit of all; then we shall experience no petty, limited, selfish joy, but our happiness will belong to millions, our deeds will live on quietly but perpetually at work, and over our ashes will be shed the hot tears of noble people.

Marx

Transcribed in 1998 for MEIA by srl@marx.org



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Karl Marx
EARLY LITERARY EXPERIMENTS

FROM THE ALBUMS OF POEMS DEDICATED
TO JENNY VON WESTPHALEN [1]

*

From the BOOK OF LOVE (Part I) [2]

CONCLUDING SONNETS TO JENNY

I

Take all, take all these songs from me
That Love at your feet humbly lays,
Where, in the Lyre's full melody,
Soul freely nears in shining rays.
Oh! if Song's echo potent be
To stir to longing with sweet lays,
To make the pulse throb passionately
That your proud heart sublimely sways,
Then shall I witness from afar
How Victory bears you light along,
Then shall I fight, more bold by far,
Then shall my music soar the higher;
Transformed, more free shall ring my song,
And in sweet woe shall weep my Lyre.

II

To me, no Fame terrestrial
That travels far through land and nation
To hold them thrillingly in thrall
With its far-flung reverberation
Is worth your eyes, when shining full,
Your heart, when warm with exultation,
Or two deep-welling tears that fall,
Wrung from your eyes by song's emotion.
Gladly I'd breathe my Soul away
In the Lyre's deep melodious sighs,
And would a very Master die,
Could I the exalted goal attain,
Could I but win the fairest prize --
To soothe in you both joy and pain.

III

Ah! Now these pages forth may fly,
Approach you, trembling, once again,
My spirits lowered utterly
By foolish fears and parting's pain.
My self-deluding fancies stray
Along the boldest paths in vain;
I cannot win what is most High,
And soon no more hope shall remain.

When I return from distant places
 To that dear home, filled with desire,
A spouse holds you in his embraces,
And clasps you proudly, Fairest One.
 Then o'er me rolls the lightning's fire
Of misery and oblivion.

IV

Forgive that, boldly risking scorn
 The Soul's deep yearning to confess,
The singer's lips must hotly burn
 To waft the flames of his distress.
Can I against myself then turn
 And lose myself, dumb, comfortless,
The very name of singer spurn,
 Not love you, having seen your face?
So high the Soul's illusions aspire,
 O'er me you stand magnificent;
'Tis but your tears that I desire,
And that my songs you only enjoyed
 To lend them grace and ornament;
Then may they flee into the Void!

*

From the BOOK OF SONGS [3]

TO JENNY

I

Words -- lies, hollow shadows, nothing more,
 Growding Life from all sides round!
In you, dead and tired, must I outpour
 Spirits that in me abound?
Yet Earth's envious Gods have scanned before
 Human fire with gaze profound;
And forever must the Earthling poor
 Mate his bosom's glow with sound.
For, if passion leaped up, vibrant, bold,
 In the Soul's sweet radiance,
Daringly it would your worlds enfold,
Would dethrone you, would bring you down low,
 Would outsoar the Zephyr-dance.
Ripe a world above you then would grow.

TO JENNY

I

Jenny! Teasingly you may inquire
 Why my songs "To Jenny" I address,
When for you alone my pulse beats higher,
When my songs for you alone despair,
When you only can their heart inspire,
 When your name each syllable must confess,
 When you lend each note melodiousness,

When no breath would stray from the Goddess?
'Tis because so sweet the dear name sounds,
And its cadence says so much to me,
And so full, so sonorous it resounds,
Like to vibrant Spirits in the distance,
Like the gold-stringed Cithern's harmony,
Like some wondrous, magical existence.

II

See! I could a thousand volumes fill,
Writing only "Jenny" in each line,
Still they would a world of thought conceal,
Deed eternal and unchanging Will,
Verses sweet that yearning gently still,
All the glow and all the Aether's shine,
Anguished sorrow's pain and joy divine,
All of Life and Knowledge that is mine.
I can read it in the stars up yonder,
From the Zephyr it comes back to me,
From the being of the wild waves' thunder.
Truly, I would write it down as a refrain,
For the coming centuries to see --
LOVE IS JENNY, JENNY IS LOVE'S NAME.

(written in November 1836)

NOTES

[1] This section contains several poems from Marx's three albumn of poems written in the late autumn of 1836 and in the winter of 1836-37. According to his daughter Laura Lafargue and his biographer Franz Mehring, who had access to his manuscripts after his death, two of these albumn bore the title Book of Love, Part I and Part II, and the third, Book of Songs. Each had the following dedication: "To my dear, ever beloved Jenny von Westphalen." The covers of the albums were later included by Marx in his book of verse dedicated to his father. Recently a copybook and a notebook belonging to Karl Marx's eldest sister Sophie were discovered among the documents of Heinrich Marx's heirs in Trier. Alongside verses by different people they contain some by the young Marx. Most of them were taken from other copybooks, but some were new.

Marx was very critical of the literary qualities of his early poems but he believed that they conveyed his warm and sincere feelings. Later on, his view of them grew even more critical. Laura Lafargue, for example, wrote, "My father treated his verses very disrepectfully; whenever my parents mentioned them, they would laugh to their heart' content."

[2] This album contains 12 poems of which the ballads "Lucinda," "Distraught" and "The Pale Maiden," and the poem "Human Pride" were later included by Marx in the book of verse dedicated to his father.

[3] This album is the bulkiest of the three dedicated to Jenny von Westphalen. It contains 53 poems of which "Yearning," "Siren Song," "Two Singers Accompanying Themselves on the Harp" and "Harmony" were

included by Marx in the book of verse dedicated to his father.

From Marx and Engels, COLLECTED WORKS, vol.1, Karl Marx: 1835-43.
New York: International Publishers, 1975.

This transcription is for the purpose of private study, research,
criticism or review.

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transcribed by jim.esch@launchpad.unc.edu

Karl Marx  
EARLY LITERARY EXPERIMENTS

FEELINGS

Never can I do in peace  
That with which my Soul's obsessed,  
Never take things at my ease;  
I must press on without rest.

Others only know elation  
When things go their peaceful way,  
Free with self-congratulation,  
Giving thanks each time they pray.

I am caught in endless strife,  
Endless ferment, endless dream;  
I cannot conform to Life,  
Will not travel with the stream.

Heaven I would comprehend,  
I would draw the world to me;  
Loving, hating, I intend  
That my star shine brilliantly.

All things I would strive to win,  
All the blessings Gods impart,  
Grasp all knowledge deep within,  
Plumb the depths of Song and Art.

Worlds I would destroy for ever,  
Since I can create no world,  
Since my call they notice never,  
Coursing dumb in magic whirl.

Dead and dumb, they stare away  
At our deeds with scorn up yonder;  
We and all our works decay --  
Heedless on their ways they wander.

Yet their lot I would share never --  
Swept on by the flooding tide,  
On through nothing rushing ever,  
Fretful in their Pomp and Pride.

Swiftly fall and are destroyed  
Halls and bastions in their turn;  
As they fly into the Void,  
Yet another Empire's born.

So it rolls from year to year,  
From the Nothing to the All,  
From the Cradle to the Bier,  
Endless Rise and endless Fall.

So the spirits go their way  
Till they are consumed outright,  
Till their Lords and Masters they  
Totally annihilate.

Then let us traverse with daring  
That predestined God-drawn ring,  
Joy and Sorrow fully sharing  
As the scales of Fortune swing.

Therefore let us risk our all,  
Never resting, never tiring;  
Not in silence dismal, dull,  
Without action or desiring;

Not in brooding introspection  
Bowed beneath a yoke of pain,  
So that yearning, dream and action  
Unfulfilled to us remain.

(written in October - December 1836)

~~~~~  
transcribed by jim.esch@launchpad.unc.edu

Karl Marx
EARLY LITERARY EXPERIMENTS

MY WORLD

Worlds my longing cannot ever still,
Nor yet Gods with magic blest;
Higher than them all is my own Will,
Stormily wakeful in my breast.

Drank I all the stars' bright radiance,
All the light by suns o'erspilled,
Still my pains would want for recompense,
And my dreams be unfulfilled.

Hence! To endless battle, to the striving
Like a Talisman out there,
Demon-wise into the far mists driving
Towards a goal I cannot near.

But it's only ruins and dead stones
That encompass all my yearning,
Where in shimmering Heavenly radiance
All my hopes flow, ever-burning.

They are nothing more than narrow rooms
Ringed by timid people round,
Where it stands, the frontier of my dreams,
Where my hopes reach journey's end.

Jenny, can you ask what my words say,
And what meaning hides within?
Ah! 'Twere useless to speak anyway,
Futile even to begin.

Look into those eyes of yours so bright,
Deeper than the floor of Heaven,
Clearer than the sun's own beaming light,
And the answer shall be given.

Dare to joy in life and being fair,
Only press your own white hand;
You yourself shall find the answer there,
Know my distant Heaven-land.

Ah! When your lips only breathed to me,
Only one warm word to say,
Then I dived into mad ecstasy,
Helpless I was swept away.

Ha! In nerve and spirit I was stricken,
To the bottom of my soul,
As a Demon, when the High Magician
Strikes with lightning bolt and spell.

Yet why should words try to force in vain,
Being sound and misty pall,
What is infinite, like yearning's pain,
Like yourself, and like the All.

(written in October - December 1836)

~~~~~  
transcribed by jim.esch@launchpad.unc.edu

WILD SONGS

Karl Marx

Written in 1837

First published in the Athenaeum.  
Zeitschrift fur das gebildete Deutschland,  
January 23, 1841

The poems were translated by Alex Miller in consultation with Diana Miller and Victor Schnittke, and can be found in Marx and Engels, COLLECTED WORKS, vol. 1, Karl Marx: 1835-43. New York: International Publishers, 1975.

This transcription is for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review.

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I.

THE FIDDLER

The Fiddler sees the strings,
His light brown hair he tosses and flings.
 He carries a sabre at his side,
 He wears a pleated habit wide.

"Fiddler, why that frantic sound?
Why do you gaze so wildly round?
 Why leaps your blood, like the surging sea?
 What drives your bow so desperately?"

"Why do I fiddle? Or the wild waves roar?
That they might pound the rocky shore,
 That eye be blinded, that bosom swell,
 That Soul's cry carry down to Hell."

"Fiddler, with scorn you rend your heart.
A radiant God lent you your art,
 To dazzle with waves of melody,
 To soar to the star-dance in the sky."

"How so! I plunge, plunge without fail
My blood-black sabre into your soul.
 That art God neither wants nor wists,
 It leaps to the brain from Hell's black mists.

"Till heart's bewitched, till senses reel:
With Satan I have struck my deal.
 He chalks the signs, beats time for me,
 I play the death march fast and free.

"I must play dark, I must play light,
Till bowstrings break my heart outright."

The Fiddler sees the strings,
His light brown hair he tosses and flings.
 He carries a sabre at his side,

He wears a pleated habit wide.

II

NOCTURNAL LOVE

Frantic, he holds her near,
Darkly looks in her eye.
"Pain so burns you, Dear,
And at my breath you sigh.

"Oh, you have drunk my soul.
Mine is your glow, in truth.
My jewel, shine your fill.
Glow, blood of youth."

"Sweetest, so pale your face,
So wondrous strange your words.
See, rich in music's grace
The lofty gliding worlds."

"Gliding, dearest, gliding,
Glowing, stars, glowing.
Let us go heavenwards riding,
Our souls together flowing."

His voice is muffled, low.
Desperate, he looks about.
Glances of crackling flame
His hollow eyes shoot out.

"You have drunk poison, Love.
With me you must away.
The sky is dark above,
No more I see the day."

Shuddering, he pulls her close to him.
Death in the breast doth hover.
Pain stabs her, piercing deep within,
And eyes are closed forever.

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transcribed by jim.esch@launchpad.unc.edu

Karl Marx  
EARLY LITERARY EXPERIMENTS

TRANSFORMATION

Mine eyes are so confused,  
My cheek it is so pale,  
My head is so bemused,  
A realm of fairy-tale.

I wanted, boldly daring,  
Sea-going ways to follow,  
Where a thousand crags rise soaring,  
And Floods flow bleak and hollow.

I clung to Thought high-soaring,  
On its two wings did ride,  
And though storm winds were roaring,  
All danger I defied.

I did not falter there,  
But ever on did press  
With the wild eagle's stare  
On journeys limitless.

And though the Siren spins  
Her music so endearing  
Whereby the heart she wins --  
I gave that sound no hearing.

I turned away mine ear  
From the sweet sounds I heard,  
My bosom did aspire  
To a loftier reward.

Alas, the waves sped on,  
At rest they would not be;  
There swept by many a one  
Too swift for me to see.

With magic power and word  
I cast what spells I knew,  
But forth the waves still roared,  
Till they were gone from view.

And by the Flood sore pressed,  
And dizzy at the sight,  
I tumbled from that host  
Into the misty night.

And when I rose again  
From fruitless toil at last,  
My powers all were gone,  
And all the heart's glow lost

And trembling, pale, I long  
Gazed into my own breast;  
By no uplifting song  
Was my affliction blessed.

My songs were flown, alack;  
The sweetest Art was gone --  
No God would give it back  
Nor Grace of Deathless One.

The Fortress had sunk down  
That once so bold did stand;  
The fiery glow was drowned,  
Void was the bosom's land.

Then shone your radiance,  
The purest light of soul,  
Where in a changing dance  
Round Earth the Heavens roll.

Then was I captive bound,  
Then was my vision clear,  
For I had truly found  
What my dark strivings were.

Soul rang more strong, more free,  
Out of the deep-stirred breast  
In triumph heavenly,  
And in sheer happiness.

My spirits then and there  
Soared, jubilant and gay,  
And, like a sorcerer,  
Their courses did I sway.

I left the waves that rush,  
The floods that change and flow,  
On the high cliff to crash,  
But saved the inner glow.

And what my Soul, Fate-driven  
Never in flight o'ertook,  
That to my heart was given,  
Was granted by your look.

(written between November 1836  
and February 1837)

~~~~~  
transcribed by jim.esch@launchpad.unc.edu



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