

**Poets of the
World Unite –
with Philosophers,
Against the
Capitalist State**

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Abstract: Poetry's current marginalisation as a cultural practice requires an explanation beyond the artform's economic value. If seen from a Platonic prism that separates it from philosophy, poetry can be seen in terms of its relationship with the political, a relationship which has been dramatically reconfigured and weakened during modernity. This essay is an investigation of the contentions and correspondences between poetry, philosophy and politics in the age of capitalism. My aim is to dissect this tripartite construct, and to conclude by proposing a way of thinking about poetry's – and also philosophy's – renewal in concert with a revolutionary opposition to capitalism.

Keywords: poetry, philosophy, the State, Plato, Hegel, Napoleon, capitalism

What more is there to be said about the abasement of poetry in the contemporary world? Poetry, an artform that used to be so central to the story of civilisation, has become, at best, a marginal literary genre. It is, as Alain Badiou has already observed, 'receding from us. The cultural account is oblivious to poetry.'¹ On the rare occasions that the cultural currents become less oblivious to poetry, they do so for reasons that have nothing to do with the artform. The news reports of the inauguration of a new President of the USA may note the identity (race, gender, etc.) of the so-called *inauguration poet*, without anything in the way of a commentary on the *inauguration poem* itself; and we, in the West, may read about the mistreatment of a *dissident poet* in a non-Western *tyranny* (Iran, China, etc.) and endorse online petitions demanding that poet's freedom, without being able – or interested – to read a single poem penned by the apparent dissident. And it is not only us in the US-aligned West who are party to a culture oblivious – if not entirely ignorant – of the poem. In a country like Iran, where poets seem to matter enough to arouse the ire of the State, such poets are proscribed and persecuted due to their public statements and ideological affiliations, and not because of anything to do with their actual poetry.

There is no reason to assume that the demise of poetry in the modern world is an altogether lamentable fact. Should those philosophers who have, à la Plato, accepted that 'poetry has no serious value or claim to truth'² not be pleased with this development? It is not impossible to imagine an avatar of the ancient philosopher taking pleasure at the modern and contemporary degradation of poets, those

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1 Badiou 2014 [1993], p. 21

2 Plato 1960 [375 BC], 385.

with 'a terrible power to corrupt even the best characters.'³ Such a pleasure, at any rate, cannot be anything but short-sighted; for the very qualities that Plato chastised in poetry are abundantly present in other, non-poetic forms of cultural production. In the aftermath of poetry's modern fall from cultural grace, novels, photographs, recorded music and movies (and streamed TV shows, video games, digital media, etc.) have proved more than willing to 'give full vent to our sorrows'⁴ via their up-to-the-minute aesthetic simulacra. Furthermore, philosophy has gained nothing from the demise of poetry, and it too is receding from us. It is almost impossible to detect the presence of philosophy in the main discourses of the contemporary world outside of (ever-shrinking numbers of) academic spaces where philosophy is often reduced to *theory*, or in commercial publishing trends such as self-help and self-improvement in which any remotely serious attempt at the pursuit of truths is eroded by solipsistic, quasi-mystical obsessions with self-fulfilment.

The demotion of philosophy in the contemporary world, as with the decline of poetry, is not necessarily an *a priori* undesirable occurrence. Let us recall, if need be, Karl Marx's famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach – 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it'⁵ – as an emblem of the revolutionary view, espoused not only by the young Marx, which sees philosophy as a mere interpretation not only divorced from and/or incapable of amounting to an attempt at changing the world but, even worse, as potentially averse to emancipatory transformation. Such a view is apparent in Robespierre's attacks on 'the arguments deployed against justice and reason' by the politicians who, influenced by the philosopher Montesquieu and his admiration for the English political system, had decided to emulate 'England and its depraved constitution' by limiting voting rights in France;⁶ in Marx's own additional, more elaborate deprecation of 'Hegel's one-sidedness and limitations' and the philosopher's 'occult critique';⁷ and in Lenin's disdain for reformist Eduard Bernstein's 'whole battery of well-attuned "new" arguments and reasonings' and the intellectualism issuing from 'university chairs, in numerous pamphlets and in a series of learned treatises.'⁸ Citing these views does not provide an account of a total antagonism between the revolutionary and the philosopher in the modern world – indeed, Robespierre, Marx and Lenin were and

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3 Ibid., p. 384.

4 Ibid.

5 Marx 1969 [1845], <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>.

6 Robespierre 2007 [1791], 8.

7 Marx 1967 [1844], 139-140.

8 Lenin 1961 [1902], <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/>.

continue to be disparaged for their own philosophising and theorising. Nevertheless, it may be concluded that, on the face of it, the current decline in the occult or at least specialised milieu of philosophical activity could free the political subject from a whole battery of one-sided, limited philosophical arguments and allow the subject to get on with the urgent task of changing the world.

And yet, the modern political revolutionary's situation has not improved with the demise of the efficacy of philosophical pamphlets and treatises that so exercised Lenin. As with the philosophers who have gained nothing from the demise of their ancient poetic rivals, the political subject has not prospered at the expense of the philosopher. The modern world generally and, more specifically, the contemporary world in which both poetry and philosophy have been culturally decimated, is the world in which emancipatory politics too has been, at best, relegated to the periphery, at worst erased by the demands and practices of a techno-managerial political class. It would be unnecessary to state the obvious; that today's world is not one envisioned and hoped for by Robespierre, Marx and Lenin; that it is one in which politics has been distorted and disfigured into a professionalised milieu where our democratically elected representatives devote themselves to the interests of the economy to such an extent that politics has become practically indistinguishable from economics. Not only has the State been aligned with the dominant mode of production, it has also become participant in its own weakening. As Badiou has put it, in today's world

economic macroscopy trumps state capacity. This is what I call the weakening of states. Not only have states become what Marx already thought they were, namely 'the delegates of capital power' [...] there is increasingly a kind of discordance between the scale upon which large firms exist and upon which states exist, which makes the existence of large firms diagonal to that of states.⁹

What the modern world entails, then, is not only the dominance of economic power of global firms, but the corrosion of the entire field of politics – and not only of emancipatory politics – as a consequence or as a correspondence with this discordant dominance. And this subjugation of the political by (capitalist) economy is as much a feature of our contemporary world as are the decline and marginalisation of poetry and philosophy.

The dialectics of antagonisms between poetry and philosophy on the one hand, and between philosophy and politics on the other, have been annulled in the ascendance of the economy. The admittedly simplified accounts of these dialects which I have thus far presented –

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⁹ Badiou 2016 p. 9.

in which Plato has come to stand as an unflinching opponent of poetry and Marx as an opponent of philosophy – ignore that these oppositions are neither absolute nor irreversible. Plato's polemic against poetry was, after all, itself written in the mimetic, literary style of a dramatic dialogue; and Marx (as with Robespierre and Lenin), whilst opposed to a certain kind of overly speculative philosophising, was not at all averse to philosophy (and to much of Hegel's philosophy, at that) tout court. Furthermore, and more crucially for the argument that I wish to develop, these relative, contingent oppositions are superseded and overcome by the triumph of economy in the modern world. It is, after all, obvious that the instances of the concurrent degradations of poetry, philosophy and politics which I have briefly noted are not the consequences of the contentions within these fields, but the outcomes of the hegemony of the economy. Poets are trivialised as minor participants in the ideological operations of the capitalist-parliamentarian state (in the figure of the *inauguration poet*, the democratic panegyrist); philosophers, with very few exceptions, are segregated from society, relegated to the academy and reconfigured as careerists whose job is to overproduce monographs that disappear without a trace in their institutes' digital archives; and politics has become the weakened agent of capital power to an extent that, as Badiou has noted, even Marx could not have foreseen.

Why then am I evoking these quarrels – between the philosopher and the poet, and between the political revolutionary and the philosopher – if all I intend to illustrate is the hostile opposition between capital, on the one hand, and all aspects of human activity (such as poetry, philosophy and politics) on the other? I have two main reasons for developing my argument along this somewhat tortuous path. Firstly, I wish to avoid blunt arguments that limit the value of cultural and intellectual activities to a rather *vulgar* or deterministic appreciation of the parameters of capital's system of valuation. To observe, however sympathetically, that poets and philosophers in the modern world have lost their cultural prominence due to their inability to generate profits (on par with makers of Hollywood blockbusters, authors of children's books, etc.) would be to ignore both the ideological premise of cultural/intellectual production and the fact that, in our age of financial capitalism, direct, immediate surplus-value extraction is not the only phase of capital growth. Space research, as an example of a stupendously valued intellectual enterprise in the modern world, is also not commercially profitable (as of now) and yet it remains a site of abundant (over) investment due to its gargantuan ideological value. What needs to be accounted for, then, is why it is that poetry and philosophy – supposed antagonists, at that – have both failed to retain their ideological worth in the modern world.

Secondly, and following from the previous rationale, if the decline of poetry and of philosophy in the contemporary world is (the result of) an

ideological devaluation, then both fields of poetry and philosophy must be understood in terms of their relationship with the State and politics. I accept Louis Althusser's general theory of ideology – according to which ideology is seen, in the first instance, as 'an imaginary assemblage, a pure dream, empty and vain' etc.¹⁰ – but, also after Althusser, I claim that this general theory is specified and concretised via processes such as subjective interpellation which require the very real (as opposed to entirely imaginary and dreamlike) apparatuses of the State, such as legal and political codes and institutions. As such, it would not suffice to say that poets have fallen foul of capital because they have proved less (monetarily) productive than, say, filmmakers – not only because, as noted above, such a statement would be incorrect (far, far more money is lost by a single obscenely expensive, unprofitable film than all of that which is invested in hundreds of poetry publications) – since such an account would also ignore the role of the State in generating and promulgating the ideological conditions that situate the artform's effacement.

It is with the purpose of providing an account of the relationship between poetry and politics in the age of economic domination that I must also consider the (seemingly) oppositional relationship between poetry and philosophy. The (Platonic) philosophical perspective properly divides poetry from politics, which allows us to view the interaction between poetry and politics as a conflictual relation and not as a (Romantic) fusion. What will follow, then, is the tale of philosophy and poetry's rivalry; their mutual and simultaneous attempts to enlist politics as an ally in this competition; their mutual defeats due to economy supplanting both poetry and philosophy as the State's ideological companion; and, finally, economy's unstoppable rise under capitalism and its overcoming of the political. But this will not be a grim account of the total victory of capital – I shall conclude by imagining unity and solidarity, at long last, between poets, philosophers and revolutionaries, in anticipation of what I hope will be the final struggle – *la lutte finale* of the philosophico-poetic revolutionary anthem 'l'Internationale' – against capital.

Politics: an Unlikely Ally?

It is of note that Plato's most vocal opposition to poetry is found in the dialogue which is ostensibly about politics, the *Republic*. We may find an opposition to aestheticised language in an earlier dialogue such as the *Gorgias*; but it is the *Republic* which provides us with the strongest account of the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry. As such, I suggest that the key feature of Plato's strategy in delegitimising poetry resides in his determination to enlist the State in the philosopher's opposition to poetry.

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¹⁰ Althusser 2014 [1995], 175.

Note, for example, Plato's view that the poet possesses no 'practical skill' and can do 'no public service.'¹¹ Such supposed deficiencies are only so if viewed from the perspective of the milieu of public service i.e. from the position of the State (be it a well-ordered polity, as Plato would like it to be, or otherwise). Plato's critique of Homer, as Jacques Rancière has observed, is not aimed at the epics in their entirety: it is aimed at the moments within the poetic narratives in which the poet indulges in a 'deceptive *mimesis*' as opposed to the instances in which the poet 'tells the story in his own voice.'¹² What Plato disparages in the mimetic passages is that in these the poet mimics the speech of warriors – the political caste of the ancient Hellenic world *par excellence* – without the poet himself either belonging to this class or possessing the practical skills as a warrior. Anticipating an Aristotelian counterargument (which would defend such mimeses due to their potential to make accessible to the ordinary citizen via the affective 'delight' of poetry 'objects which in themselves cause distress'¹³), Plato warns against the deceptiveness of poetic images, irrespective of their accessibility, because they are created by an 'artist [who] knows little or nothing about the subjects he represents.'¹⁴

This lack of knowledge would not in itself pose an apparent problem for a viewer of a tragedy or a listener to an epic since such a person, as Aristotle would have it, is primarily drawn to the cathartic capacity of poetic representation; but delightful albeit deceptive representations – which may lead to an irrational and false understanding of a political activity such as waging and pursuing war – constitute a problem for the State, for the entity that must rationally and successfully engage in war when/if necessary. It is therefore the political, and not the philosophical, which stands as the ultimate arbiter of poetry's value; it is from the prism of the State that some varieties of poetry such as 'hymns to gods and paeans in praise of good men'¹⁵ may be accepted due to their ideological worth; and it is, finally, from the political territory of the Republic (and not from the philosopher's territory, the academy) that the majority of (ideologically worthless) poets are to be banished.

It is certainly true that Plato's antipathy towards poetry cannot be reduced to the political and that the philosopher has an *a priori* (ontological and/or epistemological) case against the poetic phenomena. But this opposition is dramatically enhanced and transformed *a posteriori* during the theoretical pursuit of an alliance between philosophy and politics, an

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11 Plato 1960 [375 BC], p. 378.

12 Rancière 2004 [1998], p. 11.

13 Aristotle 1996 [335 BC], p. 6.

14 Plato 1960 [375 BC], p. 379.

15 Ibid., p. 384.

alliance which is either aimed at or produces the exclusion of poetry from the proximity to the State. It is interesting to note that this anti-poetic philosophico-political alliance is theorised in the aftermath of the deadly conflict between philosophy and the State during Plato's youth – that is, the execution of Socrates by the Athenian rulers – and Plato's discourse may therefore be seen as, among other things, a gesture towards healing the wound of this conflict. It is equally interesting to note that in the ancient Hellenic world it is not Plato himself but his student Aristotle who enjoys the greatest proximity to political power by being a teacher to Alexander the Great and, allegedly, instigating and/or encouraging the young conqueror's desire for a war with Persia. Whatever the divergences and disagreements between the two philosophers – regarding, among other things, the value of poetry – both seem equally invested in affiliating philosophy with politics. And this is an affiliation which persists, to varying degrees, until modernity proper and into the early modern. One may note, among other famous instances, Seneca's acting as adviser to Nero; Machiavelli's proximity to the Florentine ruler Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici; Descartes' recruitment by Christina, Queen of Sweden; and Voltaire's correspondence with Catherine the Great and his patronage by Frederick the Great.

It would not be difficult to see these rulers as exemplars of Plato's *philosopher king* (or *queen*) but, perhaps to Plato's hypothetical dismay, these powerful *wisdom-lovers* were also, by and large, poetry lovers. Alexander's particular hatred of Persia may have been influenced by Aristotle's xenophobia; but his belligerence and aggressiveness are alleged to have been modelled on wrathful Homeric heroes. Poets, it seems, would go on to accompany political power more frequently than philosophers, and much more persistently than Plato would have approved. The most important ruler of ancient Rome, Augustus, was tutored by Stoic philosophers prior to his rise to power; but, as Rome's first emperor, he had much more ideological use for poet-propagandists such as Ovid, Virgil and Horace than any philosopher. It was not a philosophical treatise but the violent epic poem *Chanson de Roland* which was, apparently, chanted to Norman fighters prior to their historic victory over the English at the Battle of Hastings; and Omar Khayyam became a favourite of the Seljuk ruler Malik-Shah – sitting in court, supposedly, next to the king's throne – not only as an astronomer, and certainly not as a philosopher, but as the composer of witty quasi-mystical quatrains. Even Frederick who may be viewed as a philosopher king par excellence, seems to have been as drawn to poetry as he was to philosophy. In the midst of setbacks during the Seven Years' War, the Prussian ruler 'fell back upon the ethics of the Stoics';¹⁶ but he was also, when not 'conscripting and training men, writing and publishing poetry.'¹⁷

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16 Durant 1967, p. 48.

17 Ibid., p. 59.

In the figure of Frederick – and of his protégé, Voltaire, who was both poet and philosopher – we may discern, if not an end, then something like a cessation in the Platonic war between poetry and philosophy. The philosopher king – who, in this case, is also very much a *poet king* – views, as an *enlightened despot*, philosophy and poetry as equally valuable: if philosophy (of the Stoics) provides the beleaguered ruler with an ideological discourse for accepting military defeats and maintaining his commitment to a difficult war, poetry provides the same ruler with an ideological (art)form which enables him to revel in the joy of military victories by writing 'in French – a poem expressing his pleasure at having given the French a kick in the *cul'* at the Battle of Rossbach.¹⁸ Here, at the outset of modernity proper, immediately before Europe and the world are transformed by the Industrial and the French Revolutions, poetry and philosophy are found in proximity to the State with more practical unison than perhaps at any other point since their theoretical falling-out in the *Republic*.

One could detect the signs of a genuine rapprochement in the aesthetic theory of many a philosopher of this era, such as Kant who credits an artform such as poetry with 'advancing the culture of the mental powers in the interest of social communication.'¹⁹ In Hegel, poetry, far from being an opponent to philosophy, becomes philosophy's nearest neighbour amongst all artforms, so much so that poetry may even be seen as pre-philosophy:

In poetry the mind determines this content [of consciousness] for its own sake, and apart from all else, into the shape of ideas, and through it employs sound to express them, yet treats it solely as a symbol without value or import. [...] . For this reason the proper medium of poetical representation is the poetical imagination and intellectual portrayal itself. [...] . Poetry is the universal art of the mind which has become free in its own nature, and which is not tied to its final realisation in external sensuous matter, but expatiates exclusively in the inner space and inner time of the ideas and feelings. Yet just in this its highest phase art ends by transcending itself, in as much as it abandons the medium of a harmonious embodiment of mind in sensuous form, and passes from the poetry of imagination into the prose of thought.²⁰

A number of points may be deduced from this important passage. One is that at this point in history poetry has assumed the role of a *phase*

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18 Ibid., p. 50.

19 Kant 2008 [1790], p. 135.

20 Hegel 1886 [1835], <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/ae/ch03.htm#44>.

through which art as such transcends or overcomes itself by becoming philosophy; and that, in this process, representation (the main trope of Plato's case against poetry) has been overcome by imagination, an aspect of the mind which is in close rapport with the intellectual premise of philosophy. It is therefore easy to see why a union or a suturing – as Badiou would have it – occurs at this point between the philosopher and the poet, during what Badiou has termed *the age of poets*, a period when poets 'assumed certain of philosophy's functions.'²¹

The overcoming of the Platonic suture between poetry and philosophy, however, is announced by Hegel as an act whereby poetry (of imagination) gives way to prose (of thought). This announcement may be seen as both an acknowledgement of poetry's capacity – contra other artforms – to transcend mere sensuality or aesthetics and therefore be freed from the philosophical suspicion of the sensual; but it is also an ominous warning to the poet: in the modern world, the world of which Hegel is a most prescient theorist, the poetic shall find itself at the mercy of the prosaic. If poetry is to assume (some of) the intellectual functions of philosophy, then its status as a literary artform is to be supplanted by prose, not only by the formidable genre of the novel, but also by other *naturalistic* – i.e. non-poetic – forms of linguistic creation, such as realist drama, comedy, journalism, etc. As for philosophy, and as Badiou would further have it, the unity with the poem, beginning with the first poet of *the age of poets*, Hegel's contemporary and university classmate Hölderlin, forewarns the eventual – and sophistic – degradation of philosophy by 'language and language games.'²²

Herein, then, we have something of an eschatological mutuality. Through the sublation of their opposition in Hegel, at the very moment of the triumph of modernity proper, poetry and philosophy are exposed to the risk of being qualitatively transformed – through poetry becoming philosophical and philosophy becoming poetic – and both becoming, therefore, weakened and, even more dramatically, both coming to an end. This analysis alone could go some way towards accounting for the question of poetry's and philosophy's concurrent predicaments in the modern and the contemporary, the question with which I began this investigation. And, in acknowledgement of this analysis, I shall suggest a revival of a (non-antagonistic) separation of poetry and philosophy at the end of this piece.

The point I wish to emphasise here, however, is less hypothetical and more historical. Neither Hegel's theoretical resolution of the philosopher/poet dialectic nor the hypothetical consequences of this resolution could occur irrespective of the State; for, as I have argued, it

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²¹ Badiou 1999 [1992], p. 69.

²² Riera 2005, p. 5.

is in relationship with the State that the contention between philosophy and poetry transcends simple rivalry and becomes antithetical. And it is not only against the backdrop or in the context of arguably the single most crucial transformation of the political in history, that is, the triumph of the modern capitalist polity – vividly illustrated by Napoleon’s crushing defeat of the proud Prussian army founded by the enlightened philosophico-poet king Frederick the Great – but as a result of this event (of modernity) that both poetry and philosophy, at the point of overcoming their animosity through Hegelian speculation and also through Hölderlin’s poetry, are condemned to abandonment and degradation by philosophy’s former ally against poetry – by the State which, from hereon, and as of now, is the delegate of capitalism.

The Emperor, the Philosopher and the Poet

It is well known that Hegel personally bore witness to the Franco-Prussian war of 1806. Upon seeing Napoleon pass through the philosopher’s hometown of Jena, Hegel described the French emperor as ‘the world-soul ... who, sitting here astride a horse, reaches out across the world and dominates it.’²³ Napoleon’s domination, if symbolised in the image of a military conqueror on horseback, would soon prove to be much more than martial. Upon decimating the Prussian forces at the Battle of Jena-Auerstädt and entering the Prussian capital, the French emperor issued the Berlin Decree, significantly expanding the pre-existing economic blockade against Prussia’s ally and France’s incorrigible nemesis, England. Whilst there is nothing particularly remarkable about two warring states engaging in economic hostility in tandem with their politico-military conflict, what seems remarkable about the Berlin Decree – and the ensuing Continental System, France’s attempt at imposing a Continent-wide sanction on British imports – is that this economic policy was specifically modern and capitalist; and that it came to have a determinist impact on the conduct and future of the short-lived French First Empire.

The policy, whilst putatively aimed at weakening France’s implacable, non-Continental opponent, can be seen as primarily a response to France’s own financial crisis of 1805 – in which the English had played no small part – which had resulted in ‘a tightening of credit and the growing importance of money lending.’²⁴ Whilst the policy would go on to have a negative impact on Continental importers of British manufactured and colonial goods – an impact which Napoleon and his economic advisers may have foreseen prior to issuing the Decree – its

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23 Qtd in Bell 2008, p. 237.

24 Lefebvre 2010 [1935], p. 201.

aim was to strengthen the Continent's ascendent industrial bourgeoisie (perhaps, however temporarily, at the expense of some of its mercantile class) by protecting industries such as textile manufacturing from competition with their more technologically advanced English rivals. Although it was known, from the outset of Napoleon's promulgation of the policy, that the Continent's 'manufacturing capacity was very much smaller than her need,' it was nevertheless hoped that 'production would achieve the requisite advances' through Napoleon's attempts 'in setting up in France the manufacturing of machinery for spinning wool' and his offer of 'a prize of a million francs to anyone who could invent a machine for spinning flax.'²⁵ The push for such inventions was in part necessitated by the blockade imposed on the import of cotton from British colonies; but the demand for both a protection against English textile industries and also State investment in a more advanced mode of producing textile out of raw material to which French and Continental manufacturers had greater access in lieu of British cotton (such as wool and flax) was aimed at increasing the productivity and profitability of French industries and, by so doing, rescuing France from her economic woes. It is therefore not surprising to find that, despite the growing frustration of the mercantile bourgeoisie who had grown rich from trade with Britain in the past, France and the Continent's 'leading industrialists' championed the policy, 'without much concern for its costs.'²⁶

Furthermore, the Berlin Decree also marks the moment at which Napoleon's wars against France's numerous enemies were transformed from territorial or geopolitical struggles into a politico-economic campaign. The Continental System, as Georges Lefebvre has concluded, 'started by being a symbol of the Grand Empire, but in the end became a reason for its extension.'²⁷ Napoleon's armies would hereon fight not only to protect France's borders or to pre-emptively subjugate potential threats to her sovereignty; they were now committed to an increasingly unending war in the interest of French and Continental industrial capitalists.

What we find in the figure of Hegel's *world-soul*, then, is the soul or ideology of a new world taking shape before the bedazzled philosopher's eyes: a world in which the State commits itself – to its detriment, as was eventually the case with Napoleon's empire – to the interests of leading capitalists. The French Revolution had already occasioned, as Jean Jaurès notes in his famous history, 'the political advent of the bourgeois class';²⁸ and it was this class – contra both the aristocracy and the proletariat –

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²⁵ Ibid., p. 336.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 337.

²⁸ Jaurès 2015 [1901], p. 1.

which ‘emerged victorious and established itself’²⁹ after its violent struggles against both the Royalist right and the Jacobin left. As a result of the triumph of the (bourgeois-backed) Thermidorian Reaction which toppled Robespierre, the Jacobin leader’s cherished philosophico-ideological trope of *virtue* was ‘replaced by a statist mechanism upholding the authority of the wealthy,’³⁰ and the nation, the post-Revolutionary France in its entirety, came to be seen, by the bourgeois-dominated State, as ‘an economic objectivity.’³¹ The Industrial Revolution had already begun to transform the world’s modes of production – and had provided the English with the techno-economic means to resist and ultimately subvert France’s attempts at subjugating *perfidious Albion* – but it was the French Revolution and its Corsican son which turned the economically ascendent class of the industrial bourgeoisie into a properly political and – via policies such as the Berlin Decree – politically dominant class in the modern world.

It is in this world that we see the emblematic French Head of State and his armed forces march through the philosopher’s hometown. As Eric Hobsbawm would have it, the besotted thinker’s initial enthusiasm for the egalitarian sublation of the *ancien régime* master/slave dialectic in the figure of the bourgeois French *citizen emperor* cooled and Hegel ‘eventually became utterly conservative;’³² a conservatism which can be seen in his blaming Napoleon’s later defeats on the very bourgeois anti-aristocratic egalitarianism which had made Napoleon’s appearance in Prussia so startling in the first place; by saying that it was the ‘entire mass of mediocrity’ who ‘succeeded in bringing down what is high to the same level as itself or even below.’³³ Hereby an older Hegel arguably rejects the modern secular bourgeois state in favour of an aristocratic, religious Prussian state – much to the chagrin of the progressive followers of his earlier thought. But it should be noted that this rejection is preceded by an earlier one: Napoleon’s own rejection of philosophy. Note that the French ruler does not stop in Jena to converse with the German philosopher and is only seen from afar by the latter. In an attitude that would have infuriated Plato and all philosophers who had sought to become allies to the State, Napoleon shows not only utter indifference towards one of France’s own great philosophical minds of the era, Germaine de Staël, but he also has her exiled from the Republic after observing, disapprovingly, that the philosopher ‘teaches people to think who had never thought before.’³⁴

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29 Ibid.

30 Badiou 2006 [1998], p. 125.

31 Ibid., p. 129.

32 Hobsbawm 2014 [1962], p. 302.

33 Qtd in Dwyer 2014, p. 467.

34 Qtd in Rémusat 1880 [1879-80], p. 408.

We find here, at the historical moment when the State and capital merge, when war becomes not politics but (modern capitalist) economics by other means, an uncanny, ironic obverse to Plato's advice to the political forces of his own era. The modern sovereign, in the aftermath of a revolution that turned the bourgeoisie into the dominant political class, banishes not poets but philosophers from a state well-ordered by the demands of industrial capitalists. And does this exclusion of philosophy, of that which teaches people to think, from the political realm provide an opportunity for the philosophers' ancient rivals, poets, to assert themselves as the modern capitalist State's loyal ideological allies?

There is a potential for such an opportunity when we take into consideration the initial premise of the encounter between the French emperor and another iconic German cultural figure of the era, Goethe. The political leader does not accidentally cross paths with the poet, as he did vis-à-vis the philosopher, but he specifically summons the poet. Based on Goethe's own recollection of this 1808 meeting – taking place in Erfurt during an international conference that was meant to compel the rest of the Continent, Russia in particular, to abide by the Continental System – the French statesman's immediate response to receiving the famed poet was quite favourable. Upon learning about Goethe's advanced age, and seemingly impressed by the poet's posture, eloquence and stamina, Napoleon is supposed to have muttered 'more to himself than to this companions': '*Voilà un homme!*'³⁵ a remark that may be translated as 'What a guy!'

The conversation between Napoleon and Goethe was, perhaps surprisingly, neither immediately political nor ideological. Napoleon was keen to query what he saw as a flaw in the plot of *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, a novel which had made a great impact on him as a young man. Napoleon, very much the modern reader with a penchant for realist or naturalist prose narratives, saw the novel's suicidal conclusion as altogether too Romantic and too poetic. This criticism should not come as a surprise – despite the fact Napoleon himself would go on to attempt suicide in a few years – if we note that poetry 'mostly bored' the emperor whereas he viewed the novel as 'the most important creative literary form.'³⁶ Goethe's reply to this criticism is a cautious defence of poetry against the modern novel: 'a poet can perhaps be excused for taking refuge in an artifice which is hard to spot, when he wants to produce certain effects that could not be created simply and naturally.'³⁷ Napoleon, ever the utilitarianist modern politician, is happy to excuse the poet's resorting to an unnaturalistic artifice if this aesthetic can be put

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35 Ludwig 1943 [1926], 323.

36 Bell 2008, p. 202.

37 Selin 2016, <https://shannonselin.com/2016/10/napoleon-met-goethe/>.

to political use, and immediately requests that Goethe place his poetic skills at the service of the State by staying at Erfurt for the duration of the French emperor's negotiations with the Russian tsar, to either turn 'the great drama'³⁸ of the political event into a play, or to 'dedicate something [e.g. a poem] to [the tsar] in honour of Erfurt!'³⁹

What Napoleon has in mind, then, is an ideological function for the poet, and he expects that Goethe will assist him, as poet, in the project of flattering and hence seducing the tsar into accepting compliance with the Continental System, that is, with the economic policy instituted for the purpose of empowering the Continent's industrial capitalism. Goethe's response to this request, and the conclusion to the meeting between the politician and the poet is worth noting in a little detail, as narrated, somewhat melodramatically, by the 20th century biographer Emil Ludwig:

... the poet only smiles civilly and candidly declares:

"I have never done anything of that sort, Sire, and therefore I have never had occasion to repent it."

A touch! A touch! The Emperor of the French cannot but feel it! Marvellous to relate, the son of the revolution tries to strengthen his position by referring to the Roi Soleil:

"In the reign of Louis XIV, our great authors held other views!"

"No doubt they did, Sire; but we do not know whether they may not have repented."

"How true!" is the Emperor's thought when he hears this sceptical answer, which is really a skirmisher's attack on the part of the German. Consequently, he makes no attempt to detain the poet when the latter, with a deprecatory gesture, himself closes the interview and bids the Emperor farewell – another breach of courtly tradition, with which Goethe is perfectly familiar.⁴⁰

Herein ends the *world-soul's* attempt at recruiting Europe's greatest living poet in the service of the Continental System. By rejecting the statesman's instrumentalisation of his art as a component of his empire's ideological apparatuses, Goethe absolves himself, in advance, of a political alliance which he may one day have to disavow and *repent*. Furthermore, he announces a clear breach with earlier, early-modern poets of the age of the Sun King. Whereas the latter were, supposedly, more than willing to play panegyrist and propagandist to the State, the modern poet is determined to avoid becoming *anything of that sort*. Goethe's refusal may be seen as a poet's Romantic or Idealist rejection

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38 Ludwig 1943 [1926], p. 325.

39 Ibid., p. 326.

40 Ibid., p. 327.

of poetry's reduction to any kind of vulgar instrumentality, in rapport with Hegel's view of poetry as *the highest phase of art*; but it is important to note that the poet's *deprecatory gesture* and his abrupt *breach* with the political is preceded by Napoleon's own rather derogatory assessment of poetry as an artform – or a genre of literary artifices – that obstructs the telling of a good (prose and naturalist) story in a modern novel. Would Goethe's response to Napoleon's request have been other than a curt rejection had the latter appeared initially as sincerely appreciative of the poetic qualities of the former's popular novel? And, had Goethe then accepted to take part in Napoleon's attempt at wooing the tsar, could his involvement have put a stop to Napoleon's future, catastrophic invasion of Russia?

Such questions are, of course, unanswerable. What can be observed is that in the modern world, in the world in which economic objectives of the capitalist classes dominate the ideals and operations of the State, neither the philosopher nor the poet can participate in the political milieu. Both philosophy and poetry seem destined to lose their cultural and ideological worth.

What (if Anything) Is to Be Done?

I have evoked these historical vignettes – of Hegel's non-encounter with Napoleon and of Napoleon's failed encounter with Goethe – not so much to exemplify an anti-*ménage à trois* – or perhaps a *méfiante à trois* – between politics, philosophy and poetry, but to provide a glimpse into a concrete moment in the formation of the modern State, a moment which presages and prepares the future subservience of politics to economy and also the gradual and concurrent declines of poetry and philosophy in cultural and ideological significance. If it is at all possible to historicise the origins of these diminishments, then it would seem that these are related to another origin: the historical event of the hegemonic ascendance of the political bourgeoisie – an ascendance both occasioned and aided by the Industrial and the French Revolutions – which would bring about, at various velocities in various parts of the world, the domination of capitalism both as a mode of production and also as the sole environment for the development of the modern (liberal, egalitarian, democratic, etc.) State.

Revisiting the initial concerns of this essay in the light of these historical vignettes, we may conclude this investigation with four observations. Firstly, when we talk about the public value of cultural/intellectual activities like poetry and philosophy, we are not talking about their immediately economic or monetary (exchange-)value, and we are instead addressing their ideological value for the State. Napoleon's distaste for philosophy had nothing to do with the profitability of a philosophical publication or such like and was instead occasioned by a

(rather conservative) thinker such as Madame de Staël's capacity to *teach people to think*, and it seems that a *thinking subject* would interfere with the modern state's mission to enact, without any hinderance, the dictates of the capitalist classes. Furthermore, the contemporaneous exclusion of poetry from the ideological apparatuses of the State was occasioned by both the (seeming) aesthetic shortcomings of poetry in the age of prose and also by the poets' own reluctance to objectify and instrumentalise their art in the service of the State.

Secondly, although economy is not the immediate or sufficient milieu for the cultural depreciations of poetry and of philosophy, it is, nevertheless, the necessary and contingent condition for these devaluations. Although Marx and Engels note, in *The Communist Manifesto*, that the victorious bourgeois 'has stripped of its halo' the work of the poet, 'hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe' as it has 'converted' the poet into one of 'its paid wage-labourers',⁴¹ we should not see this *being stripped of a halo* as directly related to *becoming a wage-labourer*. (By noting, for example, that in the world of capitalism it is perfectly possible for a cultural wage-earner – albeit an obscenely overvalued one – such as a movie star to be looked up to with worshipful awe.) We must instead understand what Marx saw as capitalist production's 'hostility' towards poetry⁴² as an indirect and meditated antagonism; one which is an outcome of the process of dominant (State) ideology – i.e. the bestower of a cultural *halo* in the first instance – becoming one with the economics of the capitalist mode of production; and it is only then, via the mediating process of the State becoming the state of capitalism, and its ideology becoming indiscernible from political economy, that the poet (and the philosopher, too) are no longer viewed with reverence.

Thirdly, seeing as this entire analysis has been premised on an *a priori* Platonic separation of poetry from philosophy, I should maintain the separation of the two despite their speculative immersion in Hegel's aesthetics or their shared misfortunes in the age of capitalism. As such, we must make note of the fundamental difference in how poetry and philosophy have each been sidelined and humiliated by the capitalist state. Philosophy, after its initial fascination with the modern Republic – as seen in a youngish Hegel's infatuation with Napoleon – has come to be highly critical of modern politics because modern politics has forsaken the philosophical pursuits of truths and wisdom in the interest of economic success. As such, we may say that the philosopher's misfortune resides in the State's abandoning philosophy in favour of economics. Poetry's core grievance against the State, on the other

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41 Marx and Engels 1986 [1848], p.82.

42 Marx 1968 [1863], <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1863/theories-surplus-value/ch04.htm>.

hand, is structurally different to that of philosophy. Whilst the poets know very well that their literary medium has been superseded by the prosaic (fiction, theatre, cinema, etc.) their frustration resides in the consequences of their diminishment that results, in part, from this supersession. Deprived of the aesthetic mastery in the cultural scene, poets are expected to perform sycophantic ceremonial roles – as seen in Napoleon's asking Goethe to *dedicate something* to the tsar – and therefore, instead of being unintentionally excluded by the State, poets recoil from an inclusion occasioned by the State's openly insincere and condescending exploitation of the poetic. Philosophy's predicament has been its abandonment by the State in favour of the economy; and poetry's tragedy has been its justified disillusionment with the State's adoption of an economic ethics.

Finally, it seems inconceivable to me that either philosophy or poetry could make anything like a lasting or meaningful cultural comeback in the modern world (despite the ephemeral popularity of trends such as *Instagram poetry* or the sophistic fetishisation of *theory* at elite universities) for as long as the State remains the state of capital. And if anything is to be done about this situation, it can only be done in response to or in the context of modernity and capitalism, without any recourse to (a fantasy of) a regressive and utterly impossible return to the *ancien régime* enlightened despotism of poetico-philosopher kings and queens.

The task – which, I admit, is not an easy one, seeing as so many contemporary poets and philosophers are pathologically preoccupied with the misfortunes of their marginality – is to begin with recognising that the State's usurpation by capitalist economics has had consequences far exceeding those which feature readily in the grievances of poets and philosophers. It is unnecessary to list the key tropes of a Marxist opposition to capitalism in the final remarks of this essay; it should suffice to say that capitalism and its corresponding political, cultural and social advents and projects which, in the first instance, liberated – or sought to liberate – humanity from feudalism, absolutism, religious fundamentalism and the like, have, in the course of their historical development and domination, themselves become feudalist, absolutist, fundamentalist, and oppressive. There is now more economic and social inequality in the world and a far greater concentration of wealth in the hands of a smaller portion of the global population than at any other point in our history; the devotion to the market and sanctified ideals such as GDP far exceeds the fidelity of bygone political classes to any organised religion; and so on.

It seems to me that the struggle against capitalism – which, as I understand it, is both a struggle for the advent and propagation of a mode of production independent of capital as well as a struggle for the liberation of the State from politico-ideological co-optation by capitalist

economics – is, in the final analysis, the very same struggle in which poets and philosophers must participate if they are to oppose their increasing triviality in the modern world. The aim of this struggle, again, would not be to retrieve the poet's – and philosopher's – purloined halo or to have either poets or philosophers elevated to the position of the State's favoured ally; the aim of this struggle would be nothing other than ending capitalism through overcoming it. This universal struggle will certainly not be led by either poets or philosophers, irrespective of their political commitment and intellectual radicalism, and will be launched and led – as far as I am able to foresee it – by revolutionary wage-labouring classes who, not so unlike the modern bourgeoisie's own victorious uprisings against the aristocrats of the *ancien régime*, will rise up against the bourgeois neo-aristocracy of our own world. And for poets and philosophers, the only viable path out of their current insignificance, would be participation in this historical event.

One last remark: in joining a future social revolution against capitalism, poets and philosophers should resist the temptation of forsaking the fundamental (Platonic) differences between both each other and also between them and the political. A universal struggle does not require homogenisation or an eradication of difference between the ancient rivals. Far from it, poets, philosophers and revolutionaries can only collaborate if they do not try to fuse and, as a result, inadvertently submit one group's identity to that of the other. Past fusions of poetry and philosophy have either resulted in the submission of the poetic to the *prose of thought*; or have mutated philosophy into linguistic sophistry. (And fusions of politics with either philosophy and/or poetry have been properly catastrophic.) If poetry and philosophy are to play their part in our final struggle against capitalism, they must do so as poetry and philosophy, as nothing other than a literary artform in the case of poetry and nothing other than the pursuit of truths in the case of philosophy. As such, the poet and the philosopher will no longer see each other as competitors and politics as a potential ally that they must win over to undercut their competitor; they must instead see the other as a comrade committed to a collective, universal struggle for emancipation.

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