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A Commodius Vicus of Recirculation

Encountering Marx and Joyce

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> *"Arise ye workers from your slumber"*
>
> —The International

> *"Rise up, man of the hooth, you have slept so long!"*
>
> —James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*

In the mid–1990s, when I lived in central London, I used to walk past the British Museum nearly every day. More often than not, I would pop in, did so for years, getting thrilled by a couple of things. The first was entering the great Reading Room, for which I had a Reader's Card, glimpsing and even sitting in space G-7. I never ordered any books, had no need to order anything; all I wanted was to sit there, in Karl Marx's seat, and try to feel the vibe. Usually, there was no vibe, only the hushed shuffling and page turning of others close by, mixed with the odd cough and splutter. The atmosphere was bookish and musty. No personal computers were in sight. It was pencil and paper stuff in those days. I tried to imagine Marx scribbling away, muttering to himself, piling up those Inspectors' Reports in front of him, working frantically on *Capital*. Doing so, I remember, was strangely comforting.

Afterward, my other great delight was visiting the "old" Reading Room, with its permanent display of "literary treasures." Glass cabinets housed original handwritten drafts of Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, William Wordsworth's poem "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge," and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. But the treasure that thrilled me most was one of James Joyce's notebooks of *Finnegans Wake*—at that stage, in the 1930s, Joyce was still cagey about its title; for years he had called it simply "Work in Progress." The writing, in soft pencil, was chaotic and sprawling, and as mad as Marx's handwritten

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scrawl. Like the drafts of *Capital*, there was as much crossed out as left legible. Joyce used thick colored crayons (orange and green were favorites) to score out sentences, sometimes whole pages that he seemed not to want—until he informed someone that he crossed out what he *wanted*, but had already used elsewhere, in another more definitive version.

In those years, Marx and Joyce were my heroes; they still are. But it is perhaps only now that I realize curious similarities between them. After all, they both had an obsession with wanting to include *everything* in their work, constantly adding to it, expanding and inserting material, making it seemingly impossible for them ever to finish anything. Like Marx, Joyce was a publisher's nightmare, forever making last minute insertions into the proofs. After he had eventually published *Ulysses*, his benefactor Harriet Weaver asked him what he planned on doing next. Joyce responded that he wanted "to write a history of the world."

Marx had a similar lofty ambition for *Capital*, likewise attempting to write a history of the world, incorporating everything, seeking the same organic unity and wholeness that *Finnegans Wake* did. Capital circulated through Marx the same way the Liffey circulated through Joyce—"a commodius vicus of recirculation." Each book is a "hyper-text," a big, intricately entangled, introverted yet expansive text, historical yet somehow universal, exuberant and imaginative and at times colossally difficult to understand. Joyce said his principal character H. C. Earwicker was a "fargazer," whose "patternmind" dreamed the vastest dream, whose sigla HCE meant "Here Comes Everybody."

Capital was Marx's dreaming fargazing, his Here Comes Everybody, a condition, he thought, where *all* countries were headed, his image of everybody's future. He had sketched it out for us, the historical and geographical mission of the capitalist mode of production, with its need to create industrial cities, move mountains, dig canals, connect everywhere, nestle everywhere. Within it all, Marx thought that a physical and emotional proximity of workers would be created, workers beside one another, workers sharing a common experience, even if they were hundreds or even thousands of miles apart. This common experience would be a sort of cosmopolitanism, a common awareness, a global solidarity, a Here Comes Everybody.

One past summer, pre-COVID-19, I returned to the British Museum. A lot had changed since the mid–1990s; a big, postmodern overhaul had taken place there, a sparkling new design, a sort of canopy had been spread across Sydney Smirke's nineteenth-century Reading Room. Everything was now bright cream and a new skylight enclosed an open public forum—"The Great Court," Europe's largest covered square, inaugurated

in 2000—which was packed full with tourists. Dominated by a sprawling museum store, it felt like a glorified shopping mall. I tried to get into the Reading Room, through a puny little corridor, following the route I used to know, but barriers were placed across, preventing any public entrance; "No Entry" signs were emblazoned everywhere. In fact, everybody, staff included, seemed barred.

I asked one of the museum ushers what was happening, "Why can't you access the Reading Room anymore?" "It has been closed for ages," he said. "Is it being refurbished?" I wondered. He did not know. "They don't tell us anything." I mused on who "they" might be. I asked someone else at the Information booth. She was sourly, seemed suspicious of my questioning, and did not know anything, repeating what I had earlier heard: "They don't tell us anything." I asked a third member of staff, at the "Membership" zone, who was friendlier. In her heavy Eastern European accent, she told me the Reading Room had been closed since 2000, since the time of the refurbishment. "For nineteen years!" I exclaimed. "Yes," she said. She did not know what was happening, either. I asked her who employed the staff at the museum and she said a subcontractor; only a minority of people actually work "in house" for the museum. Cleaners and other auxiliary staff are mostly outsourced labor.[1] I felt the alienation in the air, alienation in the place where Marx wrote about alienation, and departed despondent, struck by the irony, and disillusioned about the times in which we live.

The entire book and manuscript collection, once stored in the Reading Room, had been relocated in 1998, up the road, to the new British Library, next to St. Pancras Station. The pressing problem, apparently, was lack of shelf space at the old British Museum. It had been a "legal deposit," meaning it received every book published in the United Kingdom, including many overseas titles. It needed an extra two kilometers of shelving every year, which the new British Library, reputedly the largest national library in the world, can now offer. All the "literary treasures" have been transferred to the British Library, too, which got me wondering about my old *Finnegans Wake* treasure, those notebooks from years ago.

So, I wandered over to the library, but in the new display section, impressively organized and expanded—to include the *Magna Carta* and rare editions of *The Bible*—there was no Joyce. Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath were new additions, "younger" writers added to the modernist canon; yet it seemed Jim had been bumped off. Somebody told me at the Information desk that if he was not on display then he was probably in storage. Some texts, she said, needed a "rest," so Joyce was likely resting. *Finnegans Wake* needing a rest? It was about a sleeping man! No Marx's seat, no *Fin-*

negans Wake notebook; the times were a-changing, but it did not seem to me that they were moving in the right direction.

Marx and Joyce themselves never wanted to move with the dominant order. They were outcasts, living, as Joyce's Earwicker lived, "in the broadest way immarginable." Financially destitute, dependent on patronage, the pairing forever teetered on the edge of their respective societies. Part of this marginality stemmed from displacement. Marx was a political pariah everywhere he went, a stateless *persona non grata*, kicked out of Prussia and France, then Belgium, and then France again, before landing in London in 1849. He thought it just a temporary bivouac for a while; little did Marx know it would be his final port of call, his ultimate resting place. Joyce's displacement was freely chosen, self-imposed, exiling himself in Trieste and Paris, and then, as the Nazis occupied France, in neutral Zurich, where he would die in 1941. Displacement had lasting effects on each man, making them allergic to nationalism.

"Working men have no country," Marx famously said in *The Communist Manifesto*. "We cannot take from them what they have not got." He meant nationalism is something manufactured by the ruling class, who rule the roost and wave a flag that ordinary people salute. Marx, like Joyce, was a peripatetic cosmopolitan, a broad-minded internationalist. In *Ulysses*, Joyce's alter-ego Leopold Bloom confessed a preference for "a continental" rather than "insular manner of life." Bloom's open and secular vision of reality is most evident in "Cyclops" (episode 12), whose drama unfolds in Barney Kiernan's pub. There, Bloom stands up to the jingoism of the so-called "citizen," the aggressive and bullying Irish nationalist. If he were English, the citizen's rhetoric would not sound too out of place in Brexit Britain—or, if he were American, in Trumpland. Indeed, the citizen's ultranationalist types now have their platform, not on the fringes but unashamedly in the political mainstream. Bloom has none of it, though. "Persecution," he says, "all the history of the world is full of it. Perpetuating national hatred…isn't what life's about for men and women." So, what is it about? the citizen wonders. "Love," says Bloom. "I mean the opposite of hatred."

Both Bloom and Marx were nonobservant Jews who felt the wrath of anti-Semitism throughout their lives. When the citizen taunts "that bloody Jewman" Bloom, the latter reminds the former of the wealth of Jewish intellectual heritage: Felix Mendelssohn was a Jew, says Bloom, so was Baruch Spinoza, and so, too, was Marx. Like Bloom, Marx had his own encounters with drunken bigots in London's pubs. One time, drinking in a Tottenham Court Road alehouse, talking loudly with two German pals, locals growled "damned foreigners!" Several clenched their fists as the

Marx trio beat a hasty retreat, not before Karl taunted the homegrown cronies about the feebleness of English culture, fit only for philistines. Marx's pub experiences taught him that little Englanders did not take kindly to strangers with alien accents and looks; they still don't.

Bloom and Marx bonded because, as Everymen, they both knew about loss, about the death of kids. In Marx's case, he had four children predecease him. The passing of Edgar, the third born, at the age of 8, became Marx's greatest paternal suffering. Marx never got over it. Edgar – the impish, round-faced Colonel Musch – was his favorite. A sickly lad, whose huge head seemed too heavy for his ever-feeble body, Edgar was an inexhaustible source of drollery and high spirits; Marx loved the cunning little sly-boots. At the boy's funeral, where he was put to rest beside brother Guido and sister Franziska, a distraught father buried his head in his hands and howled, "You can't give my boy back to me!"

Rudy Bloom lived only eleven days, but the sense of loss gives *Ulysses* its ever-present emotion tug. Rudy is frequently on Bloom's mind; he even sees an apparition of the child in the book's Circe episode. That is why Bloom is often in mourning, taken by passersby as the "saddest man they'd ever seen." Mother Molly had also been deeply affected by her son's death. She and husband Leopold, like Karl and wife Jenny, imperfectly reconciled themselves to their tragedies. While Joyce and Marx were "fargazers" alike, visionaries carrying big universal ideas in their heads, they nevertheless affirmed an everydayness, both cherishing ordinary domestic family life, full of "children's noises." It was a "'microscopic world' more interesting than the 'macroscopic.'" The latter line does not hail from *Ulysses*, but comes from one of the founders of the global communist movement, in a letter Marx penned in 1882, a year before his eventual demise. Poorer people, often tragic poorer people – déclassé lower middle-class and working-class people – populate and animate this microscopic world. Above all else, they form the subject matter of Marx's and Joyce's imaginative dialectical universes, where "the coincidence of their contraries reamalgamerge in that identity."

In the end – or at the start of a new beginning – the riverrun of *Finnegans Wake*, like capital circulating in *Capital*, flows onward and forward, toward *progression*. Earwicker's night sweats are shrugged off by morning; his inner demons are overcome, his soul resurrected, refreshed and brought back to ordinary life, in broad daylight. As Edmund Wilson, one of the few great writers who appreciated Marx as much as Joyce, put it: "the Phoenix of Vico and the Phoenix Park [of Joyce's Dublin] has arisen from its ashes to new flight…the tumult and turbidity of Saturday night run clear in the peace of Sunday morning."[2] And so for Joyce, as

for Marx, the promise of peaceful human communion is the promise of Here Comes Everybody, an enlarged democratic vista, a vaster, more inclusive form of humanity; an affirmation and exaltation, an act of integration—not disintegration.

Finnegans Wake is a tragicomedy with a happy undertow, a "chaosmos" with a democratic ordering. Maybe it is possible to see Here Comes Everybody as a new kind of citizenship, Joyce's lifelong hope against hope, a sense of belonging in which being a citizen meant more than having a passport. (For the record, Joyce always held a British passport.) In another sense, this democratic constituency might also be read through Marx's lens, who, almost a century before *Finnegans Wake*, had conceived a "world literature."

For Marx of the *Manifesto*, "world literature" is what everybody and anyone can read. (Remember Joyce hoped *Finnegans Wake* was a book anybody could read; indeed, he said it was "written for everybody.") We all instinctively get world literature, understand it, because we have all somehow helped script it. It is literature that is translatable and communicable—notwithstanding our native tongue. It is not so much tabloid journalism Marx had in mind as the broadest of broadsheets, a global literature that hits the newsstands as popular samizdat. Invariably, this literature is a dialectical byproduct, an unintended good thing emerging from an intentional bad thing, a byproduct, Marx knew, of a bourgeoisie intent on business, tapping the world market.

Marx is adamant that this process is not only earth-moving (and earth-shattering) material production; it is equally earth-moving and potentially earth-shattering "intellectual production." In Marx's eyes, the "intellectual creations of individual nations" have the power to become "common property." World literature becomes a new sort of commons, a collective lingua franca, something we see today as an ever-emergent world culture—as use values ordinary people everywhere continually have to fight for and struggle to hold onto, especially as human value systems melt into air and get converted into hyperinflated exchange values.

Before us and inside us resides the real possibility for a truly cosmopolitan world culture, for our very own world literature, our Here Comes Everybody. Here Comes Everybody is what global citizenship ought to be about—thus the "normative letters" HCE—a citizenship conceived as something territorial, yet one in which territoriality is narrower and broader than "nationality"; a citizen of the block, of the neighborhood, becomes a citizen of the world, a universal person rooted in place, encountering fellow citizens across the corridor as well as at the other end of the planet, sharing world music together, reading

books in every language, watching world cinema, and now, increasingly, communing on Zoom. For good reason, then, did Joyce also offer a variant on his Here Comes Everybody thesis: Here Comes Everybuddy, in a wink to virtual users everywhere.

World literature has morphed into world culture, and this world culture is now the platform for a more advanced cosmopolitan citizenship—a Here Comes Everybody present at its own birth pangs. Or almost everybody, a 99 percent of everybody. In this citizenship, perception replaces passport, and horizon is almost as important as habitat; a perception and horizon simultaneously in place and in space, somewhere "remote" yet intimate. It is a space, in other words, in which Everybody meets Everybuddy, staving off Everybully (as Joyce cautions). Citizenship therein reveals itself through the negation of distance and the reaching out to distance, an opening up and a drawing in, a passionate embrace between bodies and buddies. It is the point of convergence of both, a dialectic of feeling and seeing oneself on the same plane as one's planet. This, perhaps, is the outcome of Earwicker's and Marx's great dream.[3]

It is a dream, too, in which there is reconciliation with Ann—that is, Anna Livia Plurabelle, the "bringer of plurabilities," the wife and mother of Earwicker's twins, Jerry (Shem) and Kevin (Shaun), and daughter Isobel (Izzy). Anna's presence flows eternally through *Finnegans Wake*; Anna is Dublin's Liffey River opening up the sea, Paris's Seine creating Being, washing away the grime of life. Both the Liffey and the Seine gush through Anna like a river of blood, like healing waters, like the ebb of death and the flow of renewed life. The "Sein annews," Joyce says: it is the sinew and core of his and HCE-Anna's very Being, their "Sein." (*Sein* is the German verb *to be*.) At the same time, the Seine "anews," is eternally reoccurring and constantly renewing, forever bridging the past and the future, like in Anna's beautiful closing elegy, expressing cleansing waters and the healing powers of reunification, a rising up to a new level, the expropriators being at last expropriated:

> Soft morning, city! Lsp! I am leafy speafing. Lpf! Folty and folty all the nights have falled on to long my hair. Not a sound, falling. Lispn! No wind no word. Only a leaf, just a leaf and then leaves. The woods are fond always. As were we their babes in. And robins in crews so. It is for me goolden wending. Unless? Away! Rise up, man of the hooths, you have slept so long! Or is it only so mesleems? On your pondered palm. Reclined from cape to pede. With pipe on bowl. Terce for a fiddler, sixt for makmerriers, none for a Cole. Rise up now and aruse!

Notes

1. Until quite recently, a lot of museum staff were Carillion employees. In early 2018, after the giant management and construction services company went belly up, with £7 billion in liabilities, some of the staff were brought in-house again. But only because of loud public outcry and a series of workers' protests outside the museum. The dispute brought to light the deeper concern of the privatization of Britain's cultural institutions and the misguided decision made by the British Museum's trustees–the "they" in question, presumably. Since 2013, Carillion had negotiated a controversial deal at the museum, where it had been instrumental in offering zero-hours contracts and slashing staff benefits.

2. The U.S. critic wrote groundbreaking essays on Joyce's *Ulysses* (in *Axel's Castle*, 1931) and on "The Dream of H. C. Earwicker" (in *The Wound and the Bow*, 1941), doing so while working on his epic socialist tome, *To the Finland Station*, published in 1940. "Bunny" Wilson's best friend from his Princeton years, F. Scott Fitzgerald, of *The Great Gatsby* fame, also worshipped Joyce at the same time as he endorsed Marx. After Fitzgerald's death in 1940, Wilson describes in a letter (to Arthur Mizener, November 10, 1949) his friend's first meeting with the Irish writer–at a dinner party on June 27, 1928, organized by Shakespeare and Company bookstore owner Sylvia Beach. Fitzgerald addressed his hero as "sir," knelt before him, and suddenly announced that, as a tribute to Joyce's genius, he was going to jump out of the window. Joyce managed to catch hold of Fitzgerald, held him back from falling, from disappearing over the apartment's fourth-floor window sill, saying afterward: "That young man must be mad–I'm afraid he'll do himself some injury." As for Marx, eleven years on, Fitzgerald wrote his daughter Scottie, then a sophomore at Vassar College: "Some time when you feel very brave and defiant and haven't been invited to one particular college function, read the terrible chapter in *Das Kapital* on *The Working Day*, and see if you are ever quite the same."

3. It was a great dream that the Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein also wanted to bring to cinema. Throughout the 1920s, Eisenstein conceived a film about Marx's *Capital*, framed around *Ulysses*–particularly, Eisenstein said, "the remarkable chapter" *Ithaca* (Joyce's personal favorite), "written in the manner of a scholastic catechism." Alas, Eisenstein's project never materialized, even though the fated film was to be "dedicated–officially–to The Second International!" "The formal side," said Eisenstein, would be "dedicated to Joyce." The nearest we can get to glimpsing what Eisenstein had in mind is Alexander Kluge's nine-and-a-half-hour epic montage *News From Ideological Antiquity* (2008), with sequences on "Marx and Eisenstein."

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As time passed, Marx and Engels began to feel that perhaps there was more potential in the anti-colonial struggle than they had originally imagined.… With the consolidation of colonial power in the 1860s and 1870s, Marx and Engels gradually became convinced that colonialism was turning out to be something quite different from what they had expected. In practice, it was nothing more than a vicious system of oppression and exploitation. In recognition of this, Engels in 1857 in an article on Algeria wrote:

> From the first occupation of Algeria by the French…the unhappy country has been the arena of unceasing bloodshed, rapine and violence.… The Arab and Kabyle tribes, to whom independence is precious, and hatred of foreign domination a principle dearer than life itself, have been crushed and broken by the terrible razzias.… The tribes still assert their independence and detestation of the French regime.…

One of the first espousals of the principle of self-determination can be found in the writings of Marx and Engels on the cause of the Irish.

– Earl Ofari, "Marxism, Nationalism, and Black Liberation,"
Monthly Review 22, no. 10 (March 1971): 20–21.