

Marx's Literary Style

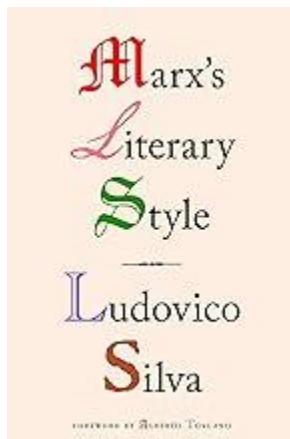
Ludovico Silva, with a foreword by Alberto Toscano

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Ludovico Silva (1937-88) was a Venezuelan poet, philosopher and literary critic who is perhaps best known for the current book, which was first published in 1971 but not translated and published in English until 2023. He is also known for his work in demonstrating the entrance of ideology into society through media and advertising (*Teoría y práctica de la ideológica*) and the conception of symbolic surplus value (*La plusvalía ideológica*). He was a man well-placed, therefore, both to appreciate the eponymous literary style and, also, to describe it. This short book demonstrates the truth of these assertions.

It might be mentioned at this point that there are translation issues involved in the book. Not problems but issues to consider. First, Marx wrote primarily in German – it is in German that Silva read him. Yet the German original (and sometimes the French) is translated into English for this text, which was itself initially written in Spanish, now also translated into English. These west European languages are not completely alien to each other but they do have their nooks and crannies which are worthy of thought. Consider the well-known metaphor of (economic) base and (cultural and social) superstructure, which is one of the most well-known of Marx's many concepts (but which Marx referred to rather less often). Silva points out that 'economic structure' is *ökonomische Struktur*, while superstructure is *Überbau* rather than *Superstruktur*. Silva comments (p.53): "It is symptomatic that in the scientific expression Marx uses *Struktur* – a Latin-derived word designating a *concrete epistemological concept* that has an enormous theoretical importance in Marx's mature works." It is necessary, in other words, to take some care in trying to tie down exact meanings, and that is without taking into account, on the one hand, the dialectical nature of

the writing in the ideological works and, on the other hand, the extensive rogue's gallery of political rivals and enemies that he devotes such energy to abusing and dismissing. With all of this going on, it is not surprising that criticism of his work has rarely gone beyond attempting to understand it on the surface and not onto its style and a mental map of the author based on his use and references and examples. There are two notable exceptions to this rule that spring to mind: the first is David Harvey, whose close readings of the early volumes of *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* do occasionally look up from the page to grasp a bigger picture and the second is China Miéville, whose deconstruction of *The Communist Manifesto* comes with a systematic attempt to understand the man and his life (doubtless they are many others too, perhaps not writing in English).

Silva devotes an introductory chapter to defining his project. He describes a conceptual skeleton of ideas clothed in an 'expressive musculature' (p.1) and that "Its scientific system is supported by an expressive system." Since this musculature is articulated in chosen words and phrases (as Hegel describes art as the science of beauty that shows how people understand things and themselves), it is appropriate to consider the ways in which these words and phrases are chosen and what are the aesthetic considerations being used.

A second chapter discusses Marx's literary origins. Apparently, the young Marx considered himself a poet and did, indeed, write a couple of volumes of verse, inspired at least in part by Eros and, Silva observes, they were pretty rotten. Nevertheless, the sensibility of trying to write poetry and Marx's obviously voracious reading equipped him with a copious amount of material to draw upon to illustrate his works with vivid and well-chosen episodes from the literary past, notably including Shakespeare and the ancient Greeks. Silva also locates Marx within a society in ferment, wherein words are a principal alternative to the violence of the state as it resists change. Pamphlets, newspapers and books were the expression of ideas during a time of possible revolution and the knowledgeable and persuasive revolutionary was one who was all the more formidable in battle.

The third section sees Silva really getting on with his work. Entitled The Fundamental Features of Marx's Style, it occupies the largest part of the text. Having surveyed some the texts to be considered in this chapter, he then engages with "The Expression of the Dialectic, the Dialectic of Expression (p.29)." Readers will be familiar with this approach from their own encounters with Marx and Silva describes it thus:

"It involves formulating a phrase and then following it up with another that says the inverse but that *uses the same words with inverted syntax*, and then, frequently, finishing it all off with a third phrase that also uses the same words but that also adds some new ones, thereby constituting a *synthesis* of the previously established antagonistic correlations (p.35)."

Silva then uses a graphical technique to demonstrate the various elements of an argument in opposition to each other in a striking manner. Subsequently, he moves on to "Marx's Great Metaphors (p.43)." Readers will perhaps be familiar with Marx's use of this technique and the issue of trying to establish what is metaphor and what is the conceptual formation that the metaphor is intending the reader to understand. This is another thorny issue. Silva concludes, along the way,

that a genuinely literary style exists with metaphors “... where there is no dissonance or disproportion between the signs displayed and their intended meanings (p.46).” This is an echo, deliberate or not, of T.S. Eliot’s concept of the objective correlative, which similarly argued that the language used to describe an emotional state (for example) should be of a magnitude and style that matches the stature of the state. King Lear’s madness on the heath requires the most elevated language available, while the mundane bourgeois life rather less so.

This section concludes with a section on polemics, mockery and other issues. The reader is inclined to wonder, at this distance, whether Marx might have been better off, so to speak, in investing a little less time on the personal attacks which now seem so trivial and more on finishing the substantive works. After all, he was also spending most of his working life on the journalism that was able to keep together the body and soul of his household. Further, he wanted to make sure that all drafts be subjected to a final process of editing to make sure all the literary stylistic elements were properly in place. However, it is done now.

Silva ends the book with a stylistic appraisal of Marx’s oeuvre and then an epilogue on irony and alienation, which he considers perhaps the most important concept in Marx’s work. Throughout, he has drawn on a pleasingly wide range of sources. *Capital* is prominent, of course, as is the *Grundrisse*, but we are also treated to *The Poverty of Philosophy*, *The Class Struggles in France* and *Reflections of a Young Man upon Choosing a Profession*, among others. It helps in convincing the reader of the quality of the analysis that as much of the totality of his work is included. The book is short but appears to be complete and to achieve its goal. It is a book worth reading.

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