

HERBERT MARCUSE'S EROS AND CIVILIZATION AND THE ROMANTIC TRADITION IN GERMAN LITERATURE

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Among the most important reinterpretations of the work of Sigmund Freud are Norman O. Brown's *Life against Death* and Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*. Both have in common that they look on Freud's ideas not as therapy which returns people to the society which enforces their conflicts, but as a general theory of human nature.¹ While the significance of the thoughts of Romantic writers like Blake, Keats, Rilke, Schiller and even the mysticism of Jacob Böhme are recognized by Brown and used as examples for a desired *body* consciousness as opposed to that of sublimation — or, in Nietzsche's terminology, the Dionysian pole as opposed to the Apollonian —, he remains largely within the realm of the Christian eschatological tradition.² This tradition, of course, would have to be modified in that the promised resurrection of the body must not occur only after death. Nevertheless, he says with reference to Freud:

The Interpretation of Dreams is one of the great applications and extensions of the Socratic maxim, "Know thyself." Or, to put it in another way, the doctrine of the universal neurosis of mankind is the psychological analogue of the theological doctrine of original sin. (Brown, p. 6)

Marcuse's orientation is slightly different. His philosophical inquiry into Freud's metapsychology also knows the concept of an original sin, but this term would take on a slightly new tinge. The state of innocence was still part of the very

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- (*) Do Departamento de Línguas Germánicas e Eslavas da Universidade da Geórgia, Estados Unidos.
- (1) Cf. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and other Essays* (New York, 1966: Delta 0038), p. 268.
- (2) Norman O. Brown, *Life against Death. The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Wesleyan University Press, 1972: Wesleyan paperback edition), pp. 32-34. Henceforth short: Brown.

first conception of the world, Animism, because it was in itself a "psychological" one "which was in no need of science for its confirmation":

Animism, to primitive man, was natural and taken for granted; he knew that the nature of things surrounding him was consonant with his intuitive conception of himself (3).

The loss of innocence occurs simultaneously with the advent of civilization; in Freud's construction, this might have been brought about by the overthrow of the "patriarchal despot", the rebellion of the exiled sons, the collective killing of the father, the establishment of the brother clan, and the *self-imposition of taboos* with the implimentation of repression in the *common interest* of preserving the group as a whole. Marcuse explains:

Progress beyond the primal horde — i. e., civilization — presupposes guilt feeling: it introjects into the individuals, and thus sustains, the principal prohibitions, constraints, and delays in gratification on which civilization depends (4).

At this point we are, in effect, at the threshold separating two stages in the history of human development, the first, in which the *pleasure principle* ruled supreme, and the second, dominated by the *reality principle*. To quote from Marcuse:

The establishment of the reality principle causes a division and mutilation of the mind which fatefully determines its entire development. The mental process formerly unified in the pleasure ego is now split: its main stream is channeled into the domain of the reality principle and brought into line with its requirements.

From now on, it is that part of the mind which is subject to the restricting force of the reality principle which monopolizes the interpretation and manipulation of reality. But not only does it alter reality by "governing remembrance and oblivion", it even defines "what reality is and how it should be used and altered" (Marcuse, p. 128).

The layer of consciousness deriving its strength from the pleasure principle has been severely maimed:

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- (3) "Die erste Weltauffassung, welche den Menschen gelang, die des Animismus, war ... eine psychologische, sie bedurfte noch keiner Wissenschaft zu ihrer Begründung ... Der Animismus war aber dem primitiven Menschen natürlich und selbstgewiss; er wusste, wie die Dinge der Welt sind, nämlich so wie der Mensch sich selbst verspürte." Sigmund Freud, *Totem und Tabu*, in: S. F., *Gesammelte Werke* (Imago Publishing Co., Ltd., London, 1940), IX, 112. Henceforth short: Freud. All translations are mine.
- (4) Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*. *A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (New York, 1962; Vintage Book Edition V-209), p. 57. Henceforth: Marcuse.

The other part of the mental apparatus remains free from the control of the reality principle — at the price of becoming powerless, inconsequential, unrealistic. Whereas the ego was formerly guided and driven by the *whole* of its mental energy, it is now to be guided only by that part of it which conforms to the reality principle. This part and this part alone is to set the objectives, norms, and values of the ego; as reason it becomes the sole repository of judgment, truth, rationality; it decides what is useful and useless, good and evil. (Marcuse, p. 128 f.)

Those mental forces which oppose the reality principle are now operating mainly from the unconscious. Only one of these is relatively free to manifest itself: phantasy, which

... links the deepest layers of the unconscious with the highest products of consciousness (art), the dream with the reality; it preserves the archetypes of the genus, the perpetual but repressed ideas of the collective and individual memory, the tabooed images of freedom. (Marcuse, p. 127 f.)

The reality principle is responsible for the repressive utilization of the primary instincts, whereas phantasy (or imagination), in Freud's metapsychology, as a

... fundamental, independent mental process... has a truth value of its own — namely, the surmounting of the antagonistic human reality. Imagination envisions the reconciliation of the individual with the whole, of the desire with realization, of happiness with reason. While this harmony has been removed into utopia by the established reality principle, phantasy insists that it must and can become real, that behind the illusion lies *knowledge*. (Marcuse, p. 130)

According to Freud, the utopian step, with phantasy leading the way, can be taken only in art:

The analysis of the cognitive function of phantasy is thus led to aesthetics as the "science of beauty": behind the aesthetic form lies the repressed harmony of sensuousness and reason — the eternal protest against the organization of life by the logic of domination, the critique of the performance principle. (Marcuse, p. 130)

If one disregards that developmental stage characterized only by the existence of inorganic matter (cf. chart, Marcuse, p. 124), the history of life — especially as it applies to the human being — then comprises the stage of the pleasure principle, that of the reality principle, and a third one called utopia. But Marcuse suggests — and here he amplifies Freud's system — that on the basis of our historical presence and technological advances this utopia *might* be turned into a reality, the result being a non-repressive civilization, no matter how frivolous this idea may appear (Marcuse, p. vii).

In his essay *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud writes:

One is inclined to think that a rearrangement of human relations should be possible which would render the causes of discontent with civilization ineffective by dispensing with coercion and the repression of primal drives, in order for mankind to be able to dedicate itself to the acquisition and the enjoyment of goods untroubled by inner discord. That would be the golden age, yet it is questionable if such a condition can be implemented (5).

Marcuse does not agree with Freud's view:

The relegation of real possibilities to the no-man's land of utopia is itself an essential element of the ideology of the performance principle. If the construction of a non-repressive instinctual development is oriented, not on the subhistorical past, but on the historical present and mature civilization, the very notion of utopia loses its meaning. The negation of the performance principle emerges not against but *with* the progress of conscious rationality; it presupposes the highest maturity of civilization. (Marcuse, 136)

This new "turning point" would then be "located at the highest level of civilization" (Marcuse, p. 137).

Freud is convinced that the abolition of civilization would have disastrous consequences:

But what ingratitude, how short-sighted to even strive for an abolition of civilization! What remains in that case is the natural state, and that is much harder to bear. True, nature would not request a restriction of drives from us, it would leave us alone, but it has a particularly effective way of limiting us, it kills us, coldly, cruelly, ruthlessly as it would seem to us, possibly on the very occasion of the gratification of our desires. After all, because of the dangers with which nature threatens us, we have come together and created civilization... (6).

While it is correct that an instinctual liberation at an earlier time would dissolve the institutions of society in which

(5) "Man sollte meinen, es müsste eine Neuregelung der menschlichen Beziehungen möglich sein, welche die Quellen der Unzufriedenheit mit der Kultur versagen macht, indem sie auf den Zwang und die Triebunterdrückung verzichtet, so dass die Menschen sich ungestört durch inneren Zwist der Erwerbung von Gütern und dem Genuss derselben hingeben könnten. Das wäre das goldene Zeitalter, allein es fragt sich, ob ein solcher Zustand zu verwirklichen ist." Freud, XIV, 327 f.

(6) "Aber wie undankbar, wie kurzichtig überhaupt, eine Aufhebung der Kultur anzustreben! Was dann übrig bleibt, ist der Naturzustand und der ist weit schwerer zu ertragen. Es ist wahr, die Natur verlange von uns keine Trieb einschränkungen, sie liesse uns gewähren, aber sie hat ihre besonders wirksame Art uns zu beschränken, sie bringt uns um, kalt, grausam, rücksichtslos wie uns scheint, möglicherweise gerade bei den Anlässen unserer Befriedigung. Eben wegen dieser Gefahren, mit denen die Natur uns droht, haben wir uns ja zusammengetan und die Kultur geschaffen, die unter anderem auch unser Zusammenleben möglich machen soll. Es ist ja die Hauptaufgabe der Kultur, ihr eigentlicher Daseinsgrund, uns gegen die Natur zu verteidigen." Freud, XIV, 336.

the reality ego exists, the result at the height of civilization, according to Marcuse, may be different:

It would still be a reversal of the process of civilization, a subversion of culture — but *after* culture had done its work and created the mankind and the world that could be free. It would still be “regression” — but in the light of mature consciousness and guided by a new rationality. Under these conditions, the possibility of a non-repressive civilization is predicated not upon the arrest, but upon the liberation, of progress — so that man would order his life in accordance with his fully developed knowledge, so that he would ask again what is good and what is evil. If the guilt accumulated in the civilized domination of man by man can ever be redeemed by freedom, then the “original sin” must be committed again: “We must again eat from the tree of knowledge in order to fall back into the state of innocence.” (Marcuse, p. 181)

It is not by accident that Marcuse quotes from the conclusion of Heinrich von Kleist’s essay *On the Puppet Theater*, “We must again eat from the tree of knowledge in order to fall back into the state of innocence.”⁷ It is Kleist’s “circular world” which expresses a concept basic to German Romanticism and the tradition evolving from it, which is still very much alive today, deepened and reinforced by the work of Freud.

In his essay, Kleist describes symbolically three stages of human development. The first, embodied by the puppet and also exemplified by a fencing bear, represents nonreflective nature, obeying only an inner necessity. Humans enjoy this only as children or during an unconscious act. The second stage is that of awareness, the ability to reflect. The “soul” as *vis motrix* and the center of gravity are no longer located at the same point, and the result is the loss of grace, the separation of intellect and nature. The third stage is that of a reunification of the intellect and the natural center of gravity. Kleist calls this the return to paradise through a backdoor after a trip around the world. This is not *back* to nature, but a *forward* movement over the infinite detour of absolute consciousness. Perhaps one can liken this to Freud’s attempt to redirect one’s attention (i.e., conscious investigation) toward the world within a person and to bring into the open what culture has repressed. The great Romantic Novalis wrote in his fragments: “Man started with instinct — man shall end

(7) ‘Mithin ... müssten wir wieder von dem Baum der Erkenntnis essen, um in den Stand der Unschuld zurückzufallen.’ Heinrich von Kleist, *Über das Marionettentheater*, in: H. v. K., *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. H. Sembdner (München, 1965), II, 345. Henceforth short: Kleist.

with instinct. Instinct is the genius in paradise — before the period of self-separation (awareness)”; and elsewhere: “Adam and Eve. What was caused by a revolt must be neutralized by revolting. (Biting the apple)”,⁸ clearly a parallel to Kleist’s reference to renewed eating from the tree of knowledge in order to fall back into the state of innocence. Further, the terms “naïve” and “sentimental” as used in Schiller’s essay *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry* also stand for innocence and the loss of innocence by reason. Of the “naïve” person, Schiller says:

They are, what we used to be; they are what we are to become again. We used to be nature as they are, and our civilization is to lead us back to nature via reason and freedom. Thus, they are... representative of our lost childhood... At the same time they represent our highest perfection as an ideal... (9).

The paradox is, of course, that precisely that sin which caused the loss of innocence — the ability to reflect — is now the one and only means of regaining it. To neutralize the polarization on a higher plane of consciousness would be the last chapter of the history of the world. But this last step is utopian.

Following the Romantic tradition, this triadic structure is adhered to far into the twentieth century. When Rilke, in his essay *Über Kunst*, talks about art as a way of life like religion, science or socialism, but also as a *Weltanschauung* of the ultimate goal and as a sensuous possibility of new worlds and times,¹⁰ he envisions the utopian harmony of — psychologically speaking — the pleasure principle and the reality principle, of nature and the intellect (cf. Brown, p. 58).

But the utopian state defies a representation by literary or any other means. This becomes obvious in the works of Hermann Hesse who again attempts to go beyond the quest in order to close the circle. In his short story *The Difficult*

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- (8) “Mit Instinkt hat der Mensch angefangen — mit Instinkt soll der Mensch endigen. Instinkt ist das Genie im Paradiese — vor der Periode der Selbstabsonderung (Selbsterkenntnis)”; and: “Adam und Eva. Was durch eine Revolution bewirkt wurde, muss durch eine Revolution aufgehoben werden. (Apfelbiss)”. Novalla, *Schriften*, ed. Paul Kluckhohn with Richard Samuel (Leipzig, 1929), III, 111; II, 189.
- (9) “Sie sind, was wir waren; sie sind was wir wieder werden sollen. Wir waren Natur wie sie, und unsere Kultur soll uns, auf dem Wege der Vernunft und der Freiheit, zur Natur zurückführen. Sie sind also ... Darstellung unserer verlorenen Kindheit ... Zugleich sind sie die Darstellungen unserer höchsten Vollendung im Ideale ...” *Schillers Werke* (Weimar, 1969), I, 249 f. The use of the term “freedom” (*Freiheit*) in this context is, of course, problematical. Cf. Kant’s treatment of this theme in his *Grundlegung der Metaphysik der Sitten*, especially the chapter “Von der aussersten Grenze aller praktischen Philosophie.”
- (10) Rainer Maria Rilke, *Verses und Prose aus dem Nachlasse* (Leipzig, 1929), pp. 41-49.

Path (Der schwere Weg) a man has left his home (origin) and follows his leader (the Romantic double) uphill. Once on the top of the mountain, after climbing an *infinite* number of steep walls, he follows a bird,¹¹ flings himself down, falling through the infinite toward the bosom of his (earth) mother. The vision gained on the mountain top leads to reconciliation with nature in death. And in *Iris*, Anselm leaves the garden of his mother, his soul having begun "the long, difficult detour." He becomes a scholar, wants to marry, but *Iris* — symbol of Novalis' "blue flower" — turns him down, asking him to look for his lost memories. Dreams lead him on, forward, and not heeding the warning of a doorkeeper, he enters the utopian realm of the blue flower.

The most masterful treatment of this theme is to be found in the work of Franz Kafka. His *Report to an Academy* is the parallel to Kleist's *Puppet Theater* — with one important addition. The ape, after losing his freedom and acquiring the education of an average European, begins to stagnate. His feelings of discontent do not spur him on to a still higher development. He escaped his simian past in order to survive, and it would be folly now even to think of giving up the security provided by human society for a utopian journey. But in the novels, *America*, *The Trial*, *The Castle*, Kafka comes almost full circle. The arrival of Karl Roßmann in the new world (America) depicts his separation from the origin. Max Brod reports that Kafka had planned to let Karl find his home and his parents as if by a paradisaical miracle.¹² This failed, and the novel remained a fragment. In *The Trial*, Josef K. finds himself in a world in which the forces of the first stage suddenly manifest themselves, threatening his existence in modern society. He is unable to recognize the unknown court of law as that of unsublimated nature, the law of the universe. The conflict destroys him. In *The Castle*, K. has consciously left his family behind and completed the difficult, long, even infinite journey west to the border region of the third stage. He is caught between the forces of the village — primitive people with low foreheads and bulging lips, reminiscent of apes — and the officials of the castle whose foreheads are high and heavy or covered with the wrinkles of a thinker. The village and the castle belong together. Unsublimated nature and highest intellect supplement one another, are con-

(11) Nietzsche's dionysian bird as mentioned in the concluding sentence of section 23 of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

(12) In: Franz Kafka, *Amerika* (Frankfurt/Main, 1966), p. 356 f.

gruent. Only K. does not fit in — his perspective is still that imposed upon him by the second stage which compels him to think in the categories of good and evil. Even though K. advanced farther than any other person in Kafka's work, ultimate fulfillment cannot come.

The Romantic tradition is carried on even in most recent German literature. Heinrich Böll's novel *Views of a Clown* may serve as an example. The clown Hans Schnier, a naïve artist who derives his strength from his natural and sensual free-love relationship with Marie, loses his lover, his *soul*, to the forces of catholicism. The church, propagating abstract values, is viewed as a repressive force, more so because of its close relationship with the state and culture as a whole. In a conversation with his father, Hans Schnier takes issue with the suggestions of an art critic that he, Hans, should follow Kleist's scheme and first lose his soul completely in order to acquire it again on a higher plane. Instead, he tries to fight society on society's terms; after consciously forfeiting his (natural) grace, limping like many of Kafka's characters, he struggles for the return of his soul. At the end, we witness him at the railroad station, in the gutter, just as he had predicted: for an aging clown there were only two possibilities — the castle or the gutter; and he did not believe in the castle. He waits for Marie's (his soul's) return from Rome, but it is stated implicitly that he will commit suicide.¹³ The plot development is thus similar to that in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

Many authors of the twentieth century (such as Georg Kaiser, Heimito von Doderer, Christa Reinig and others) share the Romantic tradition as expressed by the triadic concept, even though the designation "Romantic" in this context must be understood in terms of a theme, not the form of writing.

The theories of Herbert Marcuse set forth in *Eros and Civilization* can thus be considered a non-fictional treatment of a theme dominant in German letters for over sixteen decades. This theme touches upon the fields of philosophy (*Fundamental-Ontologie* and cognitive theory as in Kleist and Kafka), aesthetics (Schiller, Kleist), art (Rilke), psychology (Kafka, Hesse) and even cultural pessimism and social criticism (Böll). It expresses, in a nutshell, a basic preoccupation of the human condition, perhaps even more relevant today when the repression of nature by reason and intellect *within* a person is concomitant with a destruction of nature *without*.

(13) Heinrich Böll, *Ansichten eines Clowns* (München, 1973: dtv 400). pp. 12. 28. 155 f., 230 f., 237.