

Herbert Marcuse and the Vulgarity of Death

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I first met Marcuse in June, 1967, when he came to Berlin for a visit. After arriving at Tempelhof airport he immediately went to the opera, where a student had been murdered a few weeks before by a plain-clothes policeman during demonstrations against the visit by the Shah of Persia. That same evening he met with a small group of people for long discussions at his hotel in Dahlem. Enzensberger, Dutschke and Lefevre were there already when I entered the room. The first sentence I heard him utter was: "Our problem is that the very people who would benefit from the changes we wish to bring about don't want those changes at all." That wasn't exactly what we wanted to hear right then. Much later he told me that this meeting with German radical students on that night — especially their strong anti-fascism — meant some sort of a reconciliation with Germany for him.

About half a year later we found ourselves at the same university. Marcuse's study was two stories above mine, and so we saw each other almost daily during the last twelve years. The sentence I heard him say most often was: "We must do something about this immediately!" He felt the daily horrors too deeply and intensely and would never shield himself from them. One might almost say that his work, his writing, had to be fought for time and again in the intermissions, in those short stretches between the continual outbursts. Here it is important to stress that nothing was taboo for him. For example, he condemned the US attack on Vietnam, just as much as he criticized the Chinese attack on Vietnam. He declined an invitation to visit China with the remark: "I won't go through a door which has been opened by Kissinger!"

Almost all writers and philosophers whom I have met have developed in the course of their lives a skill or a system of excuses protecting their work from the recurring disturbances of their surroundings. This was not the case with Marcuse. What characterized him most was his sensitive reaction to occurrences around him, his capacity to be shocked even when the expected actually happened — a daily, painful realization of the context within which he worked.

As a youngster, I had always thought a philosopher was a person who was constantly astonished by everything, i.e., someone who took everything seriously. Marcuse fulfilled this youthful notion of mine with his careful

regard not just for ideas, but for everything which could be perceived sensuously, as for example a hippopotamus, a head of lettuce or a teaspoon from his parents' house — to name three objects he loved. Or recreational vehicles, portable radios and motorcycles — to name three things he hated and which we wanted to abolish right after the revolution. I admired his respect for objects. Thus he excused the military order in my kitchen with the quotation from Vergil that things also have tears — a right to their own space where they feel comfortable.

He hated death with an intensity that astonished me until I finally understood that only such a tremendous hatred could conceive the vulgarity and non-necessity of death. In December, 1972, I had invited him and his wife Inge, who taught me just as much as he had taught me, for dinner, but he called me the evening before to cancel: Inge had a stomach ache and could not come. During Christmas vacation, which I spent in Germany, I received a special delivery letter in which Marcuse wrote me that Inge was dying of cancer and would have no more than eight months to live. He concluded his letter with the words: “‘L’amour est fort comme la mort’ — what a disgusting, contemptuous swindle!”

In the last twelve months of his life Marcuse studied Bahro's *Alternative* thoroughly and wrote a profound analysis of it. But what occupied him most, even to the point where he began considering a revision of his previous aesthetics, was the public reception of the tv film “Holocaust” and its consequences, and, in connection with this, Adorno's famous question about the possibility of “poetry after Auschwitz.” He sought material on this subject, discussed and corresponded intensely about it. He had great difficulties with a literature which became a “privatization of Auschwitz” by portraying violence, but he also had difficulties with the new romantic trend in Europe in which there is no more memory of the horror.

His favorite living writers were Peter Weiss and Samuel Beckett, and he felt honored when the latter dedicated a poem to him last year upon his eightieth birthday. About a dozen times he asked me whether I thought it appropriate for him to write a thank-you note to Beckett. I encouraged him, saying that I could not conceive of a writer who would be offended by the fact that Marcuse had liked something he had written. He finally did write him.

Never, in all the time I knew him, was he so incapable of hiding his emotion as during our last lunch together in La Jolla. He stopped eating and told me that Beckett was once asked by a critic to explain the structure of his writing. “I can explain the structure of my writing to you,” Beckett answered. “I was once in a hospital, and in the room next door a woman, who was dying of cancer, screamed all night. This screaming is the structure of my writing.”