A NOTE ON THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION IN MARCUSE'S SOCIAL THEORY

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TO REFLECT ONCE MORE on Herbert Marcuse and to think about his relevance for contemporary socialists, is to be struck by two contrasts between his work and the most recent socialist writing. First, there is Marcuse's focus on revolution. Marcuse thought differently at different times about the origins, character, and prospects of revolution, but he never wavered from the view that all understanding derives from a practice that is ultimately revolutionary, that everything else is ideology, and that consequently all problems must be comprehended by reference to their bearing on revolution. Even during his most pessimistic periods, it was the absence or failure or suppression of revolution that was revealed as the most palpable and essential property of things. At other times, the present reality of revolution provided the central theme. A striking feature of such diverse Marxist studies as Bertell Ollman's *Alienation* and John Holloway and Sol Picciotto's interesting collection of pieces from current German debates about *State and Capital* is the absence of orientation to revolution: the word is not even in the index. This contrast in starting points and emphases cannot be explained simply by differences in circumstances.

A second contrast has to do with the way Marcuse treats theory. Marcuse himself always insisted on the philosophical, rational, and even materialist character of his dialectical method. But reading over the texts, the most striking feature of his writings is their dependence on complex literary strategies, rather than stringent logical development, to advance his case. Especially evident are the prominent place given

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exchanges with earlier masters, the range of rhetorical devices, and the recurrent pattern of argument through the explication of aphorisms. Like Schiller in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, a constant source of inspiration for Marcuse, he seems always determined to invoke feelings as well as principle, to address the imagination as he speaks to reason.[1] To call attention to Marcuse's rhetorical and humanist way is not, of course, to deny it ordered design or to specify its place among the diverse approaches which share this general character. For the present, I would simply note the contrast with more recent inclinations among socialist writers toward rigorous model-building or care for empirical verification, not uncommonly justified in conjunction with revulsion against Marcuse's way.

One link between these two characteristic features of Marcuse's work is, of course, his emphasis on the aesthetic dimension in the explication of revolution. Art is the promise of happiness, Marcuse tells us again and again, and "the ultimate goals of all revolutions" are "the freedom *and* the happiness of the individual."[2] Emancipating revolution, whatever its material occasion and form, ultimately gains meaning only if and when it brings into being what Schiller had called the "joyous kingdom of play, in which man is relieved of shackles of circumstance, and released from all that might be called constraint, alike in the physical and in the moral sphere."[3] Art itself cannot, according to Marcuse, bring about this transformation; but the political actions which do have direct effects in the material world must be progressively informed by the promise and recollection and imaginary presence conveyed by aesthetic forms. It seems that theoretical reflection must somehow mediate between the material "law of revolutionary strategy", and the knowledge upon which it rests, and the ideal invoked by aesthetic creation and recreation;[4] or perhaps it is simply to be the field upon which these complexes interplay.

It will not suffice to invoke the word "dialectical" to characterize the relationship between the social and the aesthetic or Marcuse's way of relating them in theory. As Robert Cumming[5] demonstrates in his new book, Hegel's *Logic* does not have the last word on the structure of philosophical dialectics; consequently our interpretation of Marcuse must not be overquick to assimilate this erstwhile student of Heidegger to one of the contesting philosophical movements. There are too many features of his argument that confuse the sense in which it can be said to be dialectical. This is a problem deserving direct scrutiny, but I am not ready to proceed here in a direct way. I want to offer a different sort of

account. It is indeed derived from Hegel; but it is from a place where something less than the mode of thought appropriate to the philosophical system as such is being worked out.

We shall be looking to Hegel's *Aesthetics* for help in understanding Marcuse's way of conceiving revolution. This represents a departure from an earlier interpretation, which emphasized the structural parallels between Marcuse's account of revolution and the conception of a political state in the tradition of commentary that culminates in Hegel. That account of the matter proceeded by bracketing most questions about philosophical method, and it resulted in the paradoxical conclusion that Marcuse gave little reason to suppose that revolution would move beyond itself, although he obviously did not view it as a static state but rather as opening to a state of things that will be altogether different.[6] What is offered here is not so much a correction of that earlier reading as it is an alternate experiment in thinking about Marcuse.

Hegel begins his account of artistic beauty with the claim that representation of what he calls the ideal is the distinctive concern of art. The ideal, as he defines it, embodies a unique and complete independence; it unifies within an individualized entity the ultimate substantial rootedness in the universal sense of things with the unique distinctiveness which pertains to genuine independence. The artistic creation, when perfected, has a thousand eyes through which its soul shines forth; its inner being is so composed that its outer being comes fully to reveal it. Since Hegel patterns his account of the artistically beautiful on the model of Greek tragedy, he speaks about the aesthetic object in general in language peculiarly appropriate to tragic heroes as they are revealed in the action of such works. According to Hegel, then, such an ideal has its place in art and has no purpose in the prosaic world of the well-ordered modern state, except to satisfy a thoroughly valid but quite moderate special aesthetic interest. Where moral and political conduct are governed by general constraints which are objectively rational, as is the case in what Hegel calls contemporary prosaic conditions, the ideal is quite out of place in the ethical sphere: Civic-mindedness and attention to duty are all that is required. But in heroic ages, according to Hegel, things were different. Excellence and order depended directly on character, and the projection of ideals, which is the concern of art, also had direct political relevance. I would like to suggest first of all, then, that Marcuse's invocation of the aesthetic in political contexts has to do directly with his critique of the rationality of the bourgeois state and that it can be understood as being in contact with Hegel's argument on this point.

Marcuse's critique presupposes rejecting Hegel's reasons for considering the Christian redefinition of meanings an irreversible and irresistible historical and spiritual reality, as well as accepting the main points in Marx's more distinctive attack on Hegel's ethics. It is curious to consider that these epochal acts of violence upon the central elements in Hegel's system allow Marcuse to carry out what may well have been Hegel's own fondest hope at the beginning of his endeavors, and to provide satisfaction of the nostalgia which Hegel voices in the introduction to the *Aesthetics*. It is worth quoting him at some length, because the passage suggests so much about the inner connections between Hegel and Marcuse:

> The spirit of our present world—or, more precisely, our religion and the cultivation of our reason—appears to have passed the stage at which art is the highest mode of becoming conscious of the absolute. The distinctive form of artistic production and its works no longer satisfies our highest need. Thought and reflection have soared above art. If one likes to give oneself over to complaining and blaming, one can take this appearance of things as a corruption and ascribe it to the preponderance of passions and selfish interests which dissipate the seriousness as well as the delight of art; or one can protest against the necessity of the present, the involuted state of civil and political life which do not permit the sensibility, caught up as it is in petty interests, to liberate itself for the higher ends of art inasmuch as intelligence itself serves this necessity within sciences usable only for such ends and allows itself to be misled into committing itself to this arid place. However these things may be, it is nevertheless the case that art no longer provides the satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier times and peoples sought and found in it . . . the beautiful days of Greek art as well as the golden age of the late middle ages are over.[7]

Marcuse does complain and blame, considering the mobilization of the present against art as a corruption, in a deeper sense perhaps than Hegel intended, and indeed he considers the liberation of sensibility for art as tied to emancipation from the necessity of contemporary civil and political life. Marx frees Marcuse to move back to Schiller and the Romantics; or is it perhaps a move forward to Nietzsche? In any case, the problem for Marcuse is somehow to recollect the heroic age in which genuine, far-reaching, dramatic actions are in order, because only such can make a revolution. The contrast between prosaic and heroic modes becomes especially salient for Marcuse as he becomes convinced that revolution is not to be understood as a moment in the national development of history and that consequently the revolutionary actor cannot be understood in the manner proposed for world-historical individuals within the philosophy of history. The ideal, which is beautiful, must be brought into history.

But to say that the artistically beautiful may be pressingly relevant is not to say how it can become so. Schiller, contrary to Marcuse's occasional interpretations of him, insists that art can overcome the contradiction between natural force and rational freedom only by remaining strictly within its own domain. Individuals can be elevated by experiencing artistic culture, but the norms governing artistic creation must never be misapplied to the actual state of things.[8] Marcuse never simply equates political with artistic creation or revolutionary theory with art, but he clearly sees more intimate connections between their means than does Schiller, as well as convergence between their ends. Perhaps it will clarify our direction to restate the question in terms of the measure to which Marcuse aestheticized politics and social theory and the manner in which he did so. What has the projection of an ideal in the manner of art to do with social and political life and with theory about it?

Part of the answer is provided by Marcuse's discussions of art in the narrow sense, as noted earlier. Artistic beauty embodies the promise of happiness and complete art stands in an essential, if also tension-filled relationship to politics. But our present inquiry is more fundamental. It is about the consequences of these aesthetic encounters with art for the structure of Marcuse's social theory as a whole, about the extent to which Marcuse's theorizing itself takes on artistic mission and form. For help with this, we return to Hegel's *Aesthetics.*

Hegel moves from the initial characterization of the ideal to an account of its development through the actions which constitute perfected art. Hegel distinguishes two concepts as prerequisite to an understanding of action in the full sense. The first, the *world condition*, is objectively given and philosophically comprehensible; but it is nothing more than the ground upon which action may constitute itself and comprehending it tells us nothing more than how action is possible. Action derives much more directly from a *situation*, as Hegel terms this second concept. Situation refers to conditions as taken up by sensibility and passion. Once informed by feeling, the situation is revealed, and it comprises "conflicts, obstacles, complications and injuries, so that the sensibility which apprehends the situation feels itself called upon to act against the disturbances and obstructions which oppose its purposes and desires."[9] It seems to me that this moment of defining a situation is the moment of artistic creation to which Marcuse can be seen as assimilating his conceptions of theoretical work. He seeks to occasion revolutionary action by bringing a revolutionary situation to the minds of many, in the sense of translating world conditions so that they affect

sensibilities, and enlivening sensibilities so that people dare to feel injured and obstructed. So long as individuals accept themselves as simply a function of world conditions, which Marcuse sees happening in the prosaic order of what he takes to be an antihuman perversion of rationality, there can be no action of any kind.

It may seem curious to take this long way around to reformulate something very much like Marcuse's own concept of consciousness as the necessary constitutor of revolutionary action and as the objective of theoretical intervention. But we are following this route in order to get around some vastly complex philosophical issues about the relationship between theory and practice, and in order to characterize Marcuse's undertaking in terms which bring us a little closer to many readers' actual experience with Marcuse's more accessible writings, which come more clearly in view when his work is contrasted with the newest socialist writing. Many of the difficulties are simply postponed, of course, because an understanding of the *form* which Marcuse employs requires attention to the imaginative uses of theoretical language and operations. But there is gain, I think, in the postponement.

So, for example, this approach suggests solutions for some specific problems associated with his work. There appears to be a pervasive ambiguity concerning the power which constitutes the oppressive system which revolution is to displace. On the one hand, it appears as a system of constraints so pervasively internalized as to control those who are nominally rulers as well as those who are obviously ruled. On the other hand, it appears as a capacity to command in the hands of a calculating elite. The former conception connects more intimately with the exposé of the self-falsifying rationality of bourgeois society and with the theme which we have now specified as the failure to apprehend conditions as situations. (Compare one-dimensionality.) But the latter conception of power would seem to meet the dramatic need for actual conflict within the situation. Hegel insists that all the contestants within a situation must represent forces which are in some important sense justified, and thus remarks: "The devil is a worthless, aesthetically unusable character, because he is nothing but the lie in itself and accordingly a most prosaic person."[10] Marcuse needs at least a devil for revolutionary actors to oppose, and perhaps something more. I think that the prosaic character (in Hegel's sense) of the "system", as Marcuse's devil tends to be called, contributed to the ease with which his social criticism became clichéd, especially when taken up by his followers. Marcuse appreciated the superior dramatic possibilities of C.

Wright Mills's "power elite," even while he had to recognize the theoretical weaknesses of the design.

This reference to the continued relevance of theoretical criteria should remind us that our inquiry into the aesthetic dimension of Marcuse's theorizing is not reductionist. Marcuse is no manipulator of affective mythologies, unconcerned with anything but the effects of what he says. Our approach is meant to move behind such simplistic disjunctions between the cognitive and affective dimensions of these works even while it recognizes the interplay of considerations that enter into such structures as we are discussing. When Marcuse is speaking of complete works of art, he emphasizes always that it is form that constitutes the aesthetic and creates aesthetic worth. Marcuse's philosophical method, with its attention to reasoned debate with the humanistic masters as well as its distinctive forms of conceptual explication and reality-testing, will have to be studied in detail and then recognized as the form for the truncated, situation-defining artistic genre he is working to establish in these literary-philosophical essays. In other words, our interest in the aesthetic dimension is not meant in any way to prejudge the cognitive claims made on behalf of the work, although it may influence the ways in which we relate to them.

The objective here is to clarify the initial question setting our topic, the question of Marcuse's present relevance, and so to say enough about the inner design of his work to help us decide what sorts of judgments we are called on to make regarding it, or whether our encounter with it must always be judgmental at all.

But the suggestion that the work be taken—or be *also* taken—as an artistic product opening toward action, which must transpire in actuality to complete the execution, ascribes to it an artistic form which Marcuse himself subjected to weighty criticism, for example in his comments on the Living Theater of the 1960s. His main charge is that such a mixing of artistically formal and historically determined elements renders the artistic too easily exploitable by the distorted immediate needs of the present as now constituted.[11] There are some reasons, after all, for wondering whether the uses of themes from Marcuse in the media, both over- and underground, may not give mournful support to such objections, as applied to his own works; but focusing on this does not give us the most just use of such insight into Marcuse as may be gained from awareness of the aesthetic aspect of his work.

Hegel talks about a different sort of artwork which does not itself eventuate in action. To assimilate Marcuse's work to this design instead

is perhaps even more ironic, since this is a type of art which Hegel sees as corresponding to a "specification of the situation in its harmlessness" and which, in his view, portrays the ideal without actually developing it through actions. The representative figure in such art expresses itself in ways which do not disturb its peace and happy blessedness, begin rather consequences and modes of being of that bliss. The activity portrayed by the artwork, then, is independent of subsequent complications and consequences of the sort that must ensue in any situations which are not "harmless." Hegel cites as an example of such an artwork fauns and satyrs in situations of play which require and desire nothing more as situations, and he instances the Vatican satyr who is holding the young Bacchus in his arms and contemplating the infant with infinite sweetness and care.[12] Since the other name for the infant in the Vatican statue to which Hegel refers is Dionysius, and since the satyr is the wise and drunken Silenus, it is tempting to let this be the shape of our monument to Marcuse. And perhaps we should do this, after amending Hegel's characterization of the satyr with the help of Alcibiades' depiction of Socrates as a Silenus who opens up to reveal a god.

Perhaps this chain of association comes too close to a humanist conceit. It must not detract from the principal point of this reflection on Marcuse: that his work stands for the problem of making revolutionary action credible, and that this problem cannot be avoided by socialist thought, however refined and accurate its theory of social structure may become. I feel justified in introducing the conceits because I want to bring into discussion the possibility of treating Marcuse as a monument—one of our classics—for admiring contemplation and a stimulus for reflection rather than as a master to be followed or an opponent to be overcome. Such discussion is essential because this is indeed what we ordinarily do, with Marcuse as well as others, when we examine theory by reflecting on theorists, and it may be time to come to theoretical terms with this aspect of our theoretical practice.

NOTES

1. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, ed. and trans. E. M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford, 1967), First Letter, pp. 3-5.
2. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston, 1978), p. 69.
3. Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, Twenty-Seventh Letter, p. 215.
4. Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 57.

5. Robert Denoon Cumming, *Starting Point* (Chicago and London, 1979). Especially pertinent is the discussion of Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel's aesthetics, pp. 399-464.

6. David Kettler, "Herbert Marcuse. The Critique of Bourgeois Civilization and Its Transcendence" in Anthony de Crespigny and Kenneth Minogue, eds., *Contemporary Political Philosophers* (London, 1976), pp. 19-21.

7. G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I* (Frankfurt, 1970), Theorie Werkausgabe, vol. 13, p. 24.

8. Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*. Admittedly, the passage is ambiguous. There are ways in which the aesthetic "third state" transcends the dynamic and ethical states, but it cannot be thought to do so in the sense of an Hegelian synthesis; each of the other states retains its good right. See the discussion of Schiller's method in the "Introduction," pp. xcvii-cxxxii.

9. Hegel, *Vorlesungen*, p. 282. This discussion draws primarily on pp. 233-315.

10. Ibid., p. 289.

11. Herbert Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (Boston, 1972) pp. 113 ff.

12. Hegel, *Vorlesungen*, p. 265.

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