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Dionysian Politics and the Discourse of Rausch

After two papers about the realization of *Rausch* in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, I propose to look back at the sources of ecstatic action, or trance. To understand *Rausch* we need to accept the inherent link between ecstatic action and transgression, the flouting of norms and boundaries. However, the link itself is a historical one; this paper would narrate a course conducted from three historical moments of Rausch and transgression: In early Romanticism, late Romanticism, and finally the 1920s conceptualization and politicization of both earlier moments.

In *The Destruction of Reason* Georg Lukacs pinned the blame for the rise of Hitler and the National Socialists on a group of neo-Romantic Lebensphilosophers [life-philosophers] who formed a discourse of “irrationalism and hostility to progress...an effective ideological defense of the social and political backwardness”. (64) Lukacs also presented the history of *Lebensphilosophie* that has dominated subsequent discussions, beginning with German nineteenth-century Romanticism and continuing to 1933, a history based on an absolute distinction between the instructive powers of enlightened reason on the one hand, and the distorting irrationality of Romanticism, on the other. But the life-discourse of the 1920s was essentially an aesthetic and apolitical movement whose leaders despised institutions and chose never to create any themselves, a fact Lukacs, and much of the historiography after him, chose to ignore. Furthermore, it is the argument of this paper that this very animosity towards politics that has attracted German fascists to *Lebensphilosophie*. As a result, life-philosophers found themselves being over-politicized in spite of their own refusal or reluctance to get involved. Over the course of that decade the movement shifted from an

avant-garde Dionysian aesthetics to a form of quasi-Dionysian politics, a violation of its own principles. In what sounds like a paradox, Nazi *Lebensphilosophie* never surrendered its anti-institutional rhetoric, its focus on *Rausch*, which proved a useful tool in building institutions.

The history of *Rausch* begins at the end of the eighteenth century. In 1789 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, at the crossroads where Enlightenment meets Romanticism, described it as an acceleration of movement leading to flowing joy, a subdued elation. Describing the Roman carnival he had seen a year earlier, Goethe wrote of a *vorbeirauschenden Freude* (the ecstatic passing joy) that had followed the “erasure of the separation between high and low Everything gets nearer and one takes what one likes.”¹ That, of course, usually meant alcohol.

Rausch reappeared in very similar terms in many examples of early Romantic poetry and prose: The Grimm brothers explained *Rausch* in their *Deutschen Wörterbuch* as “a new poetic talk, *Rausch* means also dizziness, the soul’s drunkenness, the delight of the inner faculties that lead to self forgetfulness.”² *Rausch* was evidently present also in the myths and legends recounted by Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, the poetry and magical tales of Ludwig Tieck and Josef von Eichendorff, and most significantly in the work of Friedrich Hölderlin, who emphasized his role as a poet in the same terms that characterize the god of wine Dionysus, insisting that writing poetry was the same as alcohol-intoxication (*Alkoholvergiftung*).³ Typical Romantic, so it seems, but the connection to the late nineteenth century is by no means obvious.

¹ “Der Unterschied zwischen Hohen und Niedern scheint einen Augenblick aufgehoben: alles nähert sich einander, jeder nimmt, was ihm begegnet.”

² “die neuere dichterische rede rausch auch auf den taumel, die seelische trunkenheit, das entzücken des inner bis zum selbstvergessen gewendet.”

³ In a poem written in 1798, entitled “Our Great Poet”: The young Bacchus came, with sacred /wine and woke the nation up. / . . . Give/ us life, let the heroes vanquish! Only you/ have the right to victory, as Bacchus does

Nietzsche took *Rausch* as one of his principal concepts, a thread that united all of his writing, beginning with the theory of Dionysian *Rausch* versus Apollonian order in his *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and still much in evidence in *The Twilight of the Gods* (1889), written in his final year of sanity. In that final work, *Rausch* is a key to the heroic storms of both the Dionysus and Apollo, uniting them rather than separating them. In the posthumously published *Nachgelassene Fragmente* (written 1884–85), Nietzsche talked about *Rausch* as “the result of all great enthusiasms . . . all the extreme movements; the *Rausch* of destruction, the *Rausch* of cruelty; the *Rausch* of meteorological influence, for example, the *Rausch* of spring; or the influence of narcotics.”⁴ If early Romantics presented *Rausch* as the transgression of all limits separating humans from nature or the rest of the universe and focused on the individual experience, late Romanticism epitomized by Nietzsche used the individual as a symbol of a cosmic unity (but not the human collective). For them, *Rausch* swept away all thought of boundaries, even the idea that one might transgress boundaries through a conscious decision—according to Nietzsche, there was nothing conscious, no choice about transgression. Rather, the forces of existence itself were leading back into the primordial, the animalistic roots, a prehistoric source, before the birth of modern civilization, before human pains and pleasures were first classified by Socrates and Plato.

In contrast to the historical critique that chains together early and late uses of irrationality, there are many distinctions between late and early Romanticism, even when using the same concepts. While the earlier known as Coleridge and Wordsworth put it, an “emotion recollected in tranquility,” the later is more often recognized through the immediate ecstasy

“Der junge Bacchus kam, mit heiligem/ Weine vom Schläfe die Völker weckend./ ... Gebt/ Uns Leben, siegt, Heroen! ihr nur / Habt der Eroberung Recht, wie Bacchus.”

of the *Übermensch*. The distinction between the pre- 1848 and post- 1862 was later downplayed by German liberals, but at the beginning of the 1920s Walter Benjamin tried to reconceptualize the differences between the periods, arguing that while the earlier Romantic focused on reflection—especially thoughts about the relationship between man and nature—for the late Romantic everything depended on love. “For late Romantics,” Benjamin wrote, “observation was a sun beneath whose rays the object of love opens up for further growth.” What was analyzed here was nothing short of the very roots of the historical method: “The philosophy of history,” Benjamin continued, “can be formulated as how it treats the problem of growth.”

Nietzsche and the other late Romantics who turned to *Rausch*—for example, Johann Jacob Bachofen—were writing within the German *Kulturkritik*, utilizing a highly symbolic and charged language of myths to criticize the Prussian *Über*-state and its self-prophecized (*Infallibility* as Arendt calls it) narrative of development and growth. In fact, both Nietzsche and Bachofen not only declared their hatred of everything Prussian but openly challenged the father of modern historicism, Theodor Mommsen, the Prussian court historian, calling him a “servant” and accusing him of abusing history and historical narratives to drum up Junker patriotism and benefit the Kaiser. Interestingly, both late Romantic critics and Prussian loyalists chose Roman history as a battlefield. While Mommsen focused on the earlier stages of the Roman empire and its aristocratic dynasties, Bachofen and Nietzsche—friends from their days in Basel—took a particular interest in the prehistoric roots of the Roman cults, particularly Dionysian carnivals and the pagan influences on their grandeur. They also lingered over Rome’s decay and fall, dedicating long and beautiful descriptions to the “actual” ruins of the Roman Forum. If there is a political message here, it has nothing to do

⁴ “Gefolge aller grossen Begierden . . . aller extremen Bewegung; der Rausch der Zerstörung; der Rausch der Grausamkeit; der Rausch unter gewissen meteorologischen Einflüsse, zum Beispiel der Frühlingsrausch; oder

with institutions of state and society, nor a Goethe-like temporary moment of exhilaration, it has nothing to do with political accommodation and military conquests, but with the rubble to which all such institutions and victories were inevitably destined.

Modernity proved susceptible to this late Romantic rhetoric of love and sensual disasters. At the beginning of the 1900s, Bohemians in Munich and Berlin tried to realize many Dionysian ideals by making them part of their daily habits and lives. It is well known that some of them, including the guru and poet Stefan George and his followers Alfred Schuler and Ludwig Klages, used to walk the streets of Munich disguised with Dionysian masks and robes, sometimes carrying knives. They enacted the rituals of the pagan cults, indulging in wild orgies, in potent Wagnerian drum and bass. The George circle revived Bachofen's ideas about a primordial and ecstatic matriarchy in the early 1900s, became embroiled in a lively debate on Bachofen in the mid 1920s, and offered a series of avant-garde readings of Nietzsche. In one marvelous episode, Schuler and Klages proposed to Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche that they cure her brother of his malady by performing an ecstatic dionysian dance around him. Unfortunately, in spite of her own involvement in the circle, she refused.

Ludwig Klages, the subject of my dissertation, fascinated Walter Benjamin and Sigfried Kracauer, Ernst Cassirer and Karl Löwith, to mention only a few, because of his theory of ecstatic images, a "morphology" that identified extreme emotions with what he described as the hidden, dark forces of cosmological life. Identifying external bodily signs with the secrets of the cosmos, he developed in the early 1900s a system of handwriting analysis that won him much acclaim as the "Führer of German graphology." He was also the inventor of an anti-Freudian *Charakterologie* and theory of expression [*Ausdruckslehre*], and, most importantly,

unter dem Einfluss der Narcotica."

was one of the principal Lebensphilosophers, focusing on “naked life . . . as the means to an untimely and intensive experiencing in the present.” (H. Rickert, *Philosophie des Lebens*, 1920).

A well-known neo-Kantian complained bitterly in 1920 that *Lebensphilosophie* had pushed aside all rivals to become the most “fashionable” set of ideas of the time. Klages played the leading role in this philosophical coup. His ideas were retrogressive. In 1913 his arguments that modernity had destroyed Germany’s dark forests and with them the essence of the German principle of life made him the darling of the budding ecology movement, and his popularity among the youths who put their knapsacks on their backs and fled the cities every weekend to commune with mountains and rivers made him the object of envy to many more established philosophers. But the short manifesto in which Klages set down these ideas (later it became a much stouter book) took on not modernity as such, but its linearity and its evolutionary theory of time. These were the ideas that caught the attention of Benjamin, who traveled all the way from Berlin to Munich to meet Klages and invite him to lecture to his student organization, an invitation Klages accepted in 1914.

That same year, shortly after war broke out, Klages fled to Switzerland to avoid being drafted. There he worked on an ambitious theory of dream-images that celebrated the radical absolute inner-experiencing, a response to Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*. When Benjamin came across the first part of Klages’s theory in 1919 in a psychology journal, he sent Klages a letter to inquire about the promised second part. In 1922 Ludwig Klages published a book he called *Cosmogonic Eros*, a modern theory of cosmological *Rausch* and Eros informed by the reading he had done and the experiences he had had during his Bohemian life in Munich. When the book was published Benjamin sent Klages another admiring letter, thanking him for the great

pleasure the book had given him. In his warm reply, still unpublished, Klages proposed another meeting in Berlin that spring, and a list of further reading. Benjamin integrated it immediately to his writing, as can be seen in his fragments from 1922-1923, in his two articles about Bachofen, about graphology, and in his letters. Why was Benjamin so impressed by Klages? What made Klages, whom Thomas Mann and Georg Lukacs later dubbed “the father of fascism,” so popular in the 1920s among radical left-wing thinkers, many of whom were Jewish? Benjamin’s obsession with the concept of *Rausch* can offer a possible answer to the question.

On the first page of *Cosmogonic Eros*, Klages admits his great debt to Bachofen’s theories of matriarchy (*Motherright*) and proposes a connection between anti-patriarchic mythology, Eros and the immediate and uncontrolled feeling of love, which he conceives of as the fundamental life-form. —Like late Romantic writers Klages loved, he saw the creative forces of the universe working in human language and its unconscious perception of the world. Klages disdained the idea of a reality “as it really is,” insisting this was only a series of appearances and images. An Eros image, in that respect, must be related to its primordial forces, expressed in myth and folklore. For Klages the most basic constituents were life, the drives, and their image in the world. (8) In the distant past existed a pure life, *blossen Leben*, indistinguishable from the pure bodily existence one experienced in ecstasy, accompanied by the loss of all reflective perception of time and space. Contrasting this fleshly existence with the “modern Hellenistic consciousness,” Klages identified the root of modern degeneracy in the *Oikos*, that is, the ancient economical-political principle of family structure and patriarchy, which in its larger form became the *Polis*. For him, the *Polis* was a misguided attempt to “mathematize” the world (he had in mind Socrates’ geometry) that robbed humanity of its ability to explore a world of inner and pure experience. “In *The Birth of*

Tragedy,” Klages wrote in *Cosmogonic Eros*, “Nietzsche discusses *Rausch* as the ultimate Dionysian state of mind. Erotic, ecstatic and cosmic at the same moment, this was the ‘life of the elements.’ [*Leben der Elemente*]” (60).

To the fundamental, erotic *Rausch*, Klages added a cosmic and a tragic *Rausch*; both existed at the border between life and death, death not as the end of existence but as the Dionysian halt on the path to revival. “Only pure ecstasy,” he argued, “carries within itself the complementary pole of its own existence.”⁵ (80) The other pole of *Rausch* is its physical state, in the body and the cyclical movement of the blood. *Rausch* is “the wave of life” (*Lebenswelle*), it is the “blood that surges not only to the crown but to the very roots” (82), making Eros “the ecstatic lived experience of names and emotions.”⁶ (83) In short, *Rausch* is the principle of life’s motion, symbolized most centrally by the circulation of the blood, which is cyclical and centrifugal. The discourse of life to which Klages was heir and disseminator began from the need to bend time, to deviate from linearity, in a cycle that over time grew more radical, more intense. After reading Klages’s *Eros* Benjamin decided to make experiments with drugs and wrote: “in the night the trance (*Rausch*) cuts itself off from everyday reality with fine, prismatic edges; it forms a kind of figure and is more easily memorable. I should like to say: it shrinks and takes on the form of a flower.” (Ref., 138)

Between 1929- 1932 Klages published his major work, the *Spirit as an Adversary of the Soul*. The principle opposition at the heart of the book, between spirit and soul, was accompanied by an explicit racial undertone. Geist—spirit, was pointing towards the Jewish component that caused the decline of the pagan Roman Empire, carrying with it the remnants of the Greek fallen democracy, the forged Christian principle of mercy, and “Mammon,” Jewish

⁵ “Ekstasis ist ursprünglich immer vollkommen Einsamkeit, . . . den ergänzen Pol in sich selber trägt.”

capitalism, in a mission to “annihilate” (vernichten) the soul, the Aryan element of life. In 1934 Klages became so identified with Nazi ideology that when Berlin University refused to grant him tenure the school’s Nazi Student Association joined forces with the Hitler Youth in a series of protests. His anti-Freudian psychology—a typology of character based on ideas drawn from *Lebensphilosophie*—seduced the professional psychologists of the Wehrmacht. Leaving his Swiss retreat for frequent visits to Germany, Klages became a hugely popular lecturer, and leading figures of the Nazi regime went to hear him speak. Historians of pedagogy recognized 1929-1930 as a turning point in education rhetoric which was now explicitly emphasizing the “vocabulary of life” together with the German, often Aryan values. *Lebensphilosophie* became identified with the formal discourse of the institution.

Accordingly, this led to the eradication of *Rausch*, which in Klages’s 1500 pages book, turned to *Entzauberung*, *Entzückung*, and *Ekstasy*. Klagesian ecstasy in 1930 was no more a medium of love, its direction now turned back to itself in a reluctant yet cruel way, predicting its end.

Epilogue: In 1934, after a long correspondence with Adorno and Horkheimer, Benjamin appealed to the Frankfurt School to finance a new project he proposed on Klages and Jung, whom he described as the key thinkers of the collective unconsciousness. Adorno was enthusiastic, but Horkheimer vetoed the plan. Benjamin, disappointed, went on to write his famous Baudelaire and Kafka pieces, weaving into these essays some of the ideas of Bachofen and Klages, which thereby became key elements in the most important theory of history and time of the twentieth century.

⁶ ekstatische Erlebnisse in der Sprache der Begriffe zu schildern, wo noch die stärksten Namen bestenfalls nur-Gefühle meinen