

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CULTURAL SUICIDE

CHARLES I. GLICKSBERG

AN age of war is an age of death. Millions of men and women the world over have been brought face to face with the ultimate issue of life. Death has become commonplace—and therefore all the more horrible. A bullet through the brain, the crash of a bomb, and the light of consciousness is snuffed out; the drama is ended! Out of this disillusionment with death is born a disillusionment with life itself. The ideal of the brotherhood of man is reduced to a hideous mockery. Promise of the future is obscured by the fiery flashes and acrid smoke of battle. War brings to a head the old question: What is man?

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The picture of man we carry inside our head is important in determining our behaviour. Most of us try to live up to the ideal we have formulated, especially if we are convinced that the ideal is in harmony with "the nature of things." I shall attempt to show that the Freudian interpretation of human nature has contributed in large measure to the philosophy of doom which is now in force. In the Freudian glossary, man is an animal. His innate evil propensities have been curbed, but not eradicated. Through him course elemental instincts, cruel and violent, which must be gratified. Outwardly conformist, modern civilized man is inwardly an untamed beast of prey. The ethical precepts of civilization are in conflict with the instinctive desires of men.

Nothing that man does surprises the psychoanalyst. What becomes of *homo sapiens* after the psychoanalysts have finished with him? He is stripped of all ideals, sunk to the level of a brute. He is no more than a bundle of warring appetites, a conglomeration of animal instincts. For the Marxists, economics is the generator, the motive force, of history. For the Freudians, the sexual instinct sets the pattern of human behaviour in its spiritual as well as biological aspects. Culture is a function of animal biology.

The psychoanalyst, in self-defence, declares that he is not condemning human nature. He cannot help it if his conclusions seem pessimistic. He is not passing value judgments; he is simply presenting a realistic, truthful, scientific account. The mind tends to revert to infantile and primitive forms. Even

intelligence is not sovereign and autonomous. Emotional compulsions control the flow of consciousness. The unconscious is the determinant of fate.

By virtue of its therapeutic function, Freudianism, at first tentatively and then dogmatically, set up criteria of normality. It consolidated its gains by formulating a philosophy of value, a psychology of human nature. It purported to offer a critique that would shatter all metaphysical systems of thought. It took the flower of literature and art and demonstrated how its roots were nourished by the compost of instinctive manure in the fertilized soil. Spirit had been derived from body; idealism was a form of sublimation; the martyr suffered from a disguised "Oedipus-complex!"

This was the spurious "normality" that psychoanalysts held up: a kind of negative ideal. If the patients that came for help were to be cured of their mental ills, they would have to adjust themselves to their cultural environment; but what was to be the standard of sanity, the guiding principle of adjustment? If society as a whole were neurotic, then adjustment consisted in taking over without protest the neurotic afflictions of the social order. To be like the others was a virtue. Obviously that was by no means a satisfactory cure.

Caught in this *impasse*, psychoanalysts themselves began to rebel against the implications of the Freudian doctrine. Trigant Burrow indicted the culture of his age; Alfred Adler developed the theory of organ inferiority; Carl Jung branched off on his own and constructed the metaphysics of a racial unconscious; Karen Horney sought to revise the teachings of Freud by including the social influence within the orbit of psychoanalysis. Jung, mystical and prophetic, sought to satisfy the all-too-human need for ideals. For man can be defined in a multiplicity of ways. If he is a featherless biped, a sex-charged animal, he is also a time-binding creature, as Korzybski points out, and ideals are as native to his way of life as hunger and sex. If during war he suffers nervous breakdown, it is not because at heart he loves to gratify his destructive impulses; it is because war is abhorrent to his ideal self. There is the root of his neurotic conflict: that he cannot, without damage to his integrity, abandon his cultural ideals. No man acts or lives or thinks as if he were nothing more than a bundle of raw, clamorous instincts. Freud's philosophy of the unconscious, his general conception of the mind, his laws of repression, his category of the *Id* and his hypothesis of the death-instinct—these are, for

the most part, metaphysical ghosts of the imagination. They have never been empirically verified.

Unfortunately, the teachings of psychoanalysis profoundly affected the thinking of our time. As a result of its preoccupation with the structure and function of the hypothetical unconscious, Freudianism encouraged an introverted and therefore distorted view of life. If the unconscious cannot be made to do our bidding, then it is clear that man is no longer a free agent. Everything pertaining to human nature is to be judged on the basis of instinctive drives. Whatever we do or think has its motive in unconscious desire to return to the womb.

Whether or not psychoanalysis is valid as a clinical method in the treatment of mental disease, it has done much to foster the solipsistic attitude. Its fundamental concept is that the world is the image of the unconscious. Objective reality does not exist. Eternal reality is a composite formation of instinctive drives and tyrannical fantasies that have their abode in the unconscious. Social realities were ignored. Economic problems, social institutions, political forces, war, revolutionary upheavals, reforms—these were products of the Machiavellian unconscious. The love of money, for example, is not a socially-conditioned manifestation, but an expression of eroticism.

Consistently carried out, the psychoanalytic doctrine leads to absolute skepticism. Nothing is good or bad, true or false, but the unconscious makes it so. Here is the source of despair that, like *angina pectoris*, attacks the heart of modern man. There is no measure of value. We act as we must, since we are at the mercy of the invisible but all-powerful unconscious. Our desires determine our philosophy and decide our fate. The faculty of reason was put out of commission, and the intellectuals were now at liberty to hunt for salvation in the most fantastic places.

What a curious variety of cults they worshipped! Some sought refuge in a mysticism that transcended the limitations of the senses. Others discovered the unspoiled virtues of the primitive, and turned to the Negro for the thrill of barbaric vitality which they could no longer find in themselves. Still others sought surcease from the fever of living by wandering up and down the face of the earth, looking for some Oriental retreat, some island of paradise, where they might attain the beatitude of self-forgetfulness. The queerest and most pathetic of them all were the pseudo-Freudians, who discovered the secret of the creative principle in the psychology of the neurosis. Art was

to the suffering, neurotic mind what the pearl was to the oyster. The poets and novelists brought their hidden conflicts into the open.

Freudianism, however, if taken literally, spells the death of art. It is not the theory of psychological determinism which is injurious to the life of art. That theory merely points out that in the psychic as in the physical universe every effect is determined by an efficient cause. There is nothing fortuitous about the operation of the mind, even when we are unable to trace connections that seem mysterious. The theory passes no judgment on the nature of the causes or the effects. It is the Freudian unconscious that proves a well-nigh fatal handicap to the creative personality.

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Here is a diabolical personification that contradicts the theory of psychological determinism. In the unconscious, as in alchemy, almost anything can happen. Free will is an illusion; caprice is king. All our impulses, whether we are aware of this or not, are controlled by the machinations of the unconscious. Even our philosophies are rationalizations of our all-too-human predicament. It is impossible, by some species of metaphysical magic, to spirit the demon of the unconscious out of existence. It is always there, even when we deny or rebel against its authority. If in despair we retreat to the unconscious for salvation, then we are guilty of regression. Either way we are damned.

Few intellectuals had the courage to challenge the Freudian conception of the artist as neurotic. What has art to do with mental disease? It is an affirmation of abundant vitality, an expression of wholeness and health, a profound creative acceptance of life in all its contradictoriness. True, some artists are neurotic, just as there are neurotics among people in all walks of life, and they often exploit the materials of their neurosis for creative purposes. The neurosis, however, is not the direct and efficient cause of their act. Why should a neurosis take this particular form of sublimation? Why not resort to alcohol or horse-racing or gambling or fornication? Where art exists, the neurosis is not. Art drives out sickness as the sunlight destroys germs. When the artist treats of the sick, the maladjusted, the epileptic, his creative activity transcends the sickness. Dostoyevski's fictional cosmos is not a madhouse.

If the artist is neurotic by temperament, than he is damned. But why, if he turns to art as an outlet for his sickness, should people take him and his work seriously, and why should he

attach so much importance to the creative function? On the one hand, he proclaims himself a prophet, an unacknowledged legislator of mankind, the conscience of his race; and on the other, he looks upon himself as a neurotic, morbidly sick, the victim of his unconscious fixations. There is a contradiction here that has not been resolved, but it serves to emphasize his confused and desperate condition at present. If he believes himself a neurotic, he will act and write in that fashion, and thus fall a victim to his own unhappy illusions. Like the mystic who forgets the world and loses his identity by fixing his gaze on his umbilicus, so the artist in his introverted individualism sinks into the unconscious and escapes from the responsibilities of social reality and the need for communication with his kind.

If we wish to trace the current of modern unintelligibility in art to its tainted source, we must seek it in the swamps of the unconscious. Subjectivity is rendered absolute. In the beginning was the unconscious, and the unconscious became art. Had not Rimbaud declared: "I end by finding the disorder of my spirit sacred"? Here we have it at last: the sanctification of disorder.

Out of the chaos of disorder after the First World War emerged the sphinx of unintelligibility. The new art was expressionistic, completely egocentric. The anarchy of the self was not only the essence of freedom but the truth of reality. Dadaism took delight in the projection of unrelieved chaos. There was no meaning in the destructive flux of contemporary life. Nonsense must be made supreme. By merging with the contemporary chaos, the writer's life could become meaningful. Where everyone is insane, sanity is abnormal. Dada developed paranoiac tendencies. One Dada poem, entitled "Paroxysme," consists of silence and meaningless ejaculations:

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 !!!! tsi—i—o—I”

In 1916 the first Dada Manifesto had declared its intention of spitting on humanity, of overthrowing all discipline, all morality, as a matter of necessity. These Dadaists were neither for nor against. They had lost the capacity for either affirmation or rejection. What they demanded was unremitting battle against the tyranny of good sense. The ego alone was sustaining and real.

Surrealism carried on the work of Dada, but it was more principled in its espousal of disorder. The roots of its being were sunk in the soil of the unconscious. The meaningless is

made meaningful by placing within the depths of the fecund unconscious, the mother of the arts. The spirit of man is at last unchained. The outer world is dematerialized; the unconscious is all; hysteria is the fountainhead of originality.

These movements were expressive symbols of the cultural suicide of a generation. The Dadaists and the Surrealists represented but a small clique of irresponsibles; nevertheless, they are of the highest significance in explaining the metaphysical despair of modernity. Rightly they maintained that theirs was a pandemic movement. Writers and artists may run to extremes, but fundamentally they are giving creative expression to the inner life of their time. When these intellectuals committed *hari kiri*, disemboweling their unconscious in public, they were re-enacting the Passion of twentieth-century man. Out of the crucifixion of the unconscious would spring the miracle of the irrational.

In ousting meaning and order from literature, the Surrealists, like the Dadaists before them, confessed their impotence, the depth of their spiritual despair. This was the death-rattle, the last spasmodic twitch before the living body turned into a rigid corpse. Though the Surrealists exalted life above art, in practice they denied both life and art. Opposed to the rationalism of science, they gloried in the dream, the secret of the poetic imagination. Imagination not thought, the unconscious not logical order, was the road to creative salvation.

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The human personality was more profound, more complex, more inscrutable, than the rationalists pictured it. A new world of astonishing beauty burst on the world. By means of the Surrealist logic of the unconscious, the beautiful and the ugly could be conjoined to produce marvellous effects. Beauty, as Lautreamont defined it, is "the accidental encounter of a sewing-machine with an umbrella on an operating table." The juggling of these dream-fed images opened up dazzling possibilities. It was like standing on one's head and viewing familiar reality through freakishly distorted but novel perspectives. From this it is but a step to the Revolution of the Word. Complete freedom meant a break with the conventions of grammatical discourse. The poet was at liberty to invent a language of the unconscious, a language of dreams, hallucinations, paranoia, hysteria. The diabolical principle had triumphed. The flight to the unconscious was a symbolic form of dying. Individualism, before going under, was uttering its demented

swan song. The unconscious was God. If ever a generation had lost its nerve and gone mad, this was it.

Lest it seem that the intellectuals alone were responsible for these Surrealistic aberrations, it should be pointed out that the originally formulated theories were furnished by the psychoanalysts themselves. As an art student in Spain, Salvador Dali had read Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* with delight, and the experience encouraged his mania for mystical introspection. But Freud never countenanced the fantastic excesses of the Surrealists. Just before his death, he is quoted as saying that in classic painting he looks for "the sub-conscious": "in a Surrealist painting, for the conscious." That just about sums it up: the Surrealists are, like Dali, methodical in their madness.

The artist finds the disorder of his mind sacred. He takes pride in his sickness. Where others, dulled by routine, resign themselves to their miserable fate, he rebels by cultivating a beautiful neurosis. His neuroticism is the symbol of his genius. A Surrealist artist like Salvador Dali, who also writes novels and poetry, deliberately exploits the perverse, the inchoate, the pathological. His autobiography, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali*, is a delirious monologue, a nightmare of narcissism and sadism. With what exhibitionistic frenzy he describes his fetichistic impulses, his irrationality, his obsessions! Some Surrealists agreed that suicide was a way out and acted on this conviction. Not Salvador Dali. He believed too strongly in his divinely appointed mission on earth. He was too much the introverted egotist to be divorced from his art by the bloody convulsions of war. Let civilization perish; let mankind die. Long live Dali! Long live Surrealism!

Dali is the symbol of a sick age, the supreme expression of its will to disease. He has not only fed on the teachings of Freud; he has actively identified himself with all the clinical symptoms: polymorphous perverse, exhibitionism, dreams, the fantasies of the unconscious, the irrational but obsessive impulse to kill, the unbridled egocentricity of the child, the trauma of birth. It is more than identification; it is a dramatic reincarnation. He has a mania for discovering mysterious significance in the fortuitous. Food, sleep, dreams, reveries, objects, leaves, pieces of wood, clouds, towers, shoes, caverns, trees, especially certain kinds of trees, fascinate his inspired and unpredictable unconscious.

The Dalinian philosophy makes neither rhyme nor reason, nor is it meant to express a coherent, ordered content. Even as

a child, if we are to believe his reminiscences, he was an unconditional anarchist, and he has remained one to this day. He had no desire to be other than he was, for he was God. What he did unconsciously in childhood, he did as a matter of principle later on in life. At all costs he must be different from others. "Before all and at whatever cost: myself—myself alone!" The absolute egocentricity of childhood is carried over by the artist into his mature work and exalted into a universal principle of art and life.

The irrational for the sake of the irrational—that was his slogan. His later slogan, more in line with what he calls the catholic essence, "The Conquest of the Irrational," was equally irrational. His solution was still to remain alone, a die-hard individualist, abnormal and unique. Dali was mad, but ever his madness was distinctive. The only difference between him and the madman, he asserted, was that he was not insane. Artists like Dali, writers like Henry Miller, are aware of their spiritual sickness, their moral nihilism. They know that Western civilization is doomed and, knowing their doom, they vent their hatred on the rational, practical world and seek to destroy it.

The writers deeply influenced by Freud learned more than the use of association writing, psychic automatism, the interior significance of nonsense, the enrichment that linguistic ambiguity affords. Freud, they found, was the most typical representative of a certain philosophy of life. They accepted his conception of the artist as socially maladjusted, and yet they also believed most fervently in the value of art to society. But how can a work of art that has its origin in a neurosis be of value to society? Psychoanalysis did incalculable damage by singling out works that were obviously pathological in substance and holding these up as models of the creative imagination in action.

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The theories of psychoanalysis divorced the writer from the world of experience; they denied the possibility of rational choice and self-determined values. Instinctive consciousness was opposed to intellectual consciousness. A writer like D. H. Lawrence argued that to depend on intellectualism was to set up barriers against the passionate consciousness. These repressions can stem the dark flood for but a short time; ultimately there is a crash, and then the flood. Lawrence was convinced that salvation for Europe lay in accepting the subrational impulses. Intellectual knowledge must be subordinated to the mindless ideals of the instinctive self. Instincts are better

guides to life than knowledge. If the European does not return to the primal source of life, death will overtake him.

D. H. Lawrence goes beyond Freud. The rhythm of the body, the blood rhythm, must destroy the tyranny of consciousness. In opposition to Freud, he maintained that the instinctive impulses are creative as well as sexual. The worship of reason is countered by the worship of unreason. The writer is interested exclusively in himself, his inner processes. An incorrigible individualist like Henry Miller has no faith in social or economic reforms. Salvation, if it is to be achieved, depends on each man alone. Each one must make peace with his own demon. As Henry Miller declares in *The Cosmological Eye*: "Since I have become God, I go the whole hog always. I am absolutely indifferent to the fate of the world: I have my own world and my own private fate."

This marks the end of an era. There have been periods of crisis in the past, ages when the thought of death brought terror to the hearts of men, but even the terror was mitigated by faith in a just if stern God. The promise of Providence lightened the burden of doom. Now it is different. The intellectuals have finished the journey to the end of night. They have made a covenant with the Prince of Darkness. Not to know, not to think, that is the supreme blessing. Reason is a curse, sanity a collective sickness. Dreams begin in irresponsibility. Dreams are the seed-bed of genius, the condition of creative growth for art. Not even in their maddest moments were the Romanticists of the past as mad as this. Here we have reached the lowest ebb of spiritual sickness and despair. The intellectuals not only resign themselves to their malady, but glory in it.

For if Freud would have nothing to do with the mysticism of the unconscious, Jung explicitly gave it his sanction. According to him, the unconscious has the power of forecasting the future. Dreams follow a pattern, and serve a purpose not known to consciousness. The laws of the dream are not subject to causality. The dream is a mysterious emanation from the night-life of the psycho. The demands of life, Jung insists, cannot be adapted to the rational attitude of consciousness, which is fragmentary and one-sided. One must return to the realm of childhood fantasy, and hold direct communion with the creative unconscious.

This is the source of the infantilism evident in so much of modern literature: the search for the Shangrila of fantasy. The unconscious is made the creative source of consciousness, the

dynamic principle that overflows into art. Hence a neurosis, according to Jung, is more than a sickness. It constitutes an effort to achieve self-realization and wholeness. Sickness marks the reaching out towards a goal, the desire to find a meaning and purpose in life. This emphasis on the instinctive, unconscious side of the creative personality was all that the intellectuals needed in order to embrace the cult of the irrational.

The discovery of the unconscious offered a way of escape into the depths. Since the unconscious was timeless, the Gorgon of Time could be slain. By returning to the Great Mother, the creative source of all things, one could achieve the illusion of immortality. The unconscious was to the *literati* what the cave and the desert were to the ascetic hermit: a way of escape. It was no longer necessary to commit suicide in a physical sense; one simply fled to the shelter of the primordial unconscious. For the past three decades, a number of writers and artists have, by their misalliance with psychoanalysis, confirmed the Spenglerian thesis that Western culture is decadent and dying.