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The Rhetoric and Philosophy of Music in Ernst Bloch's *Geist der Utopie*

1. GU is a secret spring of German thought in the 20th century (and perhaps this is still continuing). The book was first published in 1918. A slightly altered second edition was published in 1923. As part of the Werkausgabe (WA), a third edition based on the second edition, but incorporating some further changes and additions, was published in 1964. The Werkausgabe contains also facsimile reprint of the 1918 edition (WA16). The changes are slight, but sometimes significant, and in general mirror a development in Bloch's work from an emphasis on the subjective to an emphasis on the objective. In 1963 Bloch describes GU as revolutionary romantic gnosis, "expressive, baroque, pious with central subject matter. Weaving music in the shaft of the soul, as Hegel says, but charged, a dynamite in the subject-object relation", its principle stating "the world is not true, but she wants to return home through human beings ("Menschen") and through truth". (WA3, 347).
2. It is perhaps not well understood anymore how big its impact was at the time of publication. Germany had gone to war, and a large proportion of its intellectuals had embraced the idea that Germany had to fight this war to defend its romantic, central-European culture against the West, against Americanisation and capitalism. The pathos that was wide-spread in the country at the time may be difficult for us to understand, but it was no less intense than the pathos in the West, the desire to fight the war that would end all wars.
3. In academic philosophy a late, stale neo-kantianism reigned, with Simmel and Weber's early sociology and Husserl's phenomenology as the only exceptions. But Simmel and Weber belonged only half-way to philosophy, and Husserl's light shone mainly, as the saying went, in the lecture theatre. The impact of GU is evident if we look at some responses:
4. Margarete Susman was the first to review the book, in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, writing: *Dem, der in einer eisigen Sturmnacht im Schnee verirrt ploetzlich vor sich ein einsames Licht aufblinken sieht, mag es aehnlich ums Herz sein wie dem, der in der finsternen, armen Sturmnacht der Kriegszeit ploetzlich im Herzen Deutschlands ein fremdartig gluehendes Licht aufgehen sah: eine neue Deutsche Metaphysik.*
5. Walter Benjamin wrote in an (unpublished) review: *Das buch heisst 'Geist der Utopie' von Ernst Bloch. Ungeheure Maengel liegen zur Tage. Dennoch verdanke ich dem Buch Wesentliches und zehnfach besser als sein Buch ist der Verfasser. Es mag Ihnen genuegen, zu hoeren, dass dies doch das einzige Buch ist, an dem ich mich als an einer wahrhaft gleichzeitigen und zeitgenoessischen Auesserung messen kann. Denn: der Verfasser steht allein und steht philosophisch fuer diese Sache ein, waehrend fast alles, was wir, von Gleichzeitigen, heute, philosophisch Gedachtes lesen, sich anlehnt, sich vermischt, und nirgends an dem Punkte seiner Verantwortung zu fassen ist, sondern hoechstens auf den Ursprung des Uebels hin fuehrt, das es selber repraesentiert.*

6. And Adorno, who was only 17 when he read GU, wrote later in life about his early encounter with Bloch: *Der 'Geist der Utopie' sah aus, als waere er von des Nostradamus eigener Hand geschrieben. Auch der Name Bloch hatte diese Aura. Dunkel wie ein Tor, gedaempft droehnd wie ein Posaunenstoss, weckte er eine Erwartung des Ungeheuren, die mir rasch genug die Philosophie, mit der ich studierend bekannt wurde, als schal und unterhalb ihres eigenen Begriffs verdaechtig machte. Ich hatte das Gefuehl, hier sei die Philosophie dem Fluch des Offiziellen entronnen. Es war eine Philosophie, die vor der avancierten Literatur nicht sich zu schaemen hatte, nicht abgerichtet zur abscheulichen Resignation der Methode. Das Buch duenkte mir eine einzige Revolte gegen die Versagung, die im Denken, bis in seinen pur formalen Charakter hinein, sich verlaengert.* For Adorno, as for Benjamin, Bloch remained a reference point, even if not without significant struggles and conflicts, and Adorno wrote he had to conclude *nie etwas geschrieben zu haben, was seiner, nicht latent oder offen, gedaechte.*
7. GU was a manifest of expressionism, which in this work takes the form of an existentialism expressed in Hegelian and Marxist terms. We live in an initial darkness of the lived moment – a “Dunkel des gelebten Augenblicks”, which we cannot “stand”. Expression is an outward movement, in which we seek an identity with objectivity, in which we come to “have” what we “are” and vice versa – an end to alienation. But for Bloch, and for expressionism, ending alienation was a matter of (moral, political and aesthetic) existential action, of praxis, rather than one of seeing the world in the right light – the latter is only possible on condition of the former. (This makes, even today, a philosophical engagement with the work to a demanding matter.) While the language is often Hegelian, Kant continuously “burns through” the surface of the philosophy, as does Kierkegaard:

Hegel had “die Seele und Freiheit Gottes zerstoert, draussen, innen und oben, zugunsten eines ... nichts Neues bringenden Intellektprozesses mit restaurierendem, kalkulierbarem Ausgang.” (WA16 281) In Hegel fails

“die Tat, der Kampf, die den handelnden Menschen aufrufende Sorge oder Verzweiflung ... im Ganzen der Geschichte und Kultur. Darum wird, sofern der Begriff sich ueberschaetzt, wirklich zu sein, das Leid zur Wuerze und das Schmutzige, Sperrende des Lebens zur ungefaehrlichen Zeremonie.” (WA16 284)

The task of the new philosophy is a different one:

“Es ist die Aufgabe des subjektiven Denkers, sich selbst als existierend festzuhalten und sich selbst in Existenz zu verstehen. ... Es ist der Mensch das Erste, Letzte, Freieste, oder noch huellenloser gesehen: das Wir, das den Messias sucht und auf den Messias wartet.” (WA16, 277f.)

8. The spirit/spectre of utopia is our consciousness of what is not yet, which is at the same time not-yet conscious – so it is not the fantasy we imagine, but the front of consciousness itself, the threshold to the future, an aspect of lived awareness which

Bloch later often describes with the word “Ahnung” (hunch, premonition). Utopia, we might say, is not encountered in *longing*, but in the *hunch*. (Here the Chassidic story of the Rabbi who told his students that the messiah is not far away, nor the herald of a completely different world. It is this world that needs to be perfected, by the slightest of changes : that stone should be a bit to the right, that tree should be slightly taller, those words ought to have been said a bit sooner – and that is why it is so difficult. A similar point made by Brecht about communism – it is so difficult because it is about the slightest everyday occurrences.)

9. The 1918 edition has 445 pages of which 136 (one of the 7 chapters) contain a “philosophy of music”. Music is the “utopian art kat’ exochen”, the pre-eminent utopian art. Music speaks to us, but we do not understand it. “Fast koennen wir es verstehen” – we can almost understand it.
10. Music and the form of the unconstructable question.
11. Music already played a significant role in German philosophy already, of course. For Schopenhauer music was the primary language of metaphysics, expressing directly the metaphysical Will, a “completely universal language which clearly goes even beyond the observable world”, a thought re-interpreted by Nietzsche: “Die Musik kommt als die letzte aller Pflanzen zum Vorschein. Ja, mitunter läutet die Musik wie die Sprache eines versunkenen Zeitalters in eine erstaunte und neue Welt hinein – und kommt zu spät.” (Quoted in WA3, 105) Beethoven saw his art as higher than philosophy: “Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy – it is the wine that inspires to new acts of creation, and I am the Bacchus who presses out for men this glorious wine, and intoxicates their soul.”
12. The idea that music is associated with “a new world”, “a new act of creation”, an intoxicating rapture pulling us out of our world. Bloch defines music as a breakthrough, a “Durchbruch aus dem Irrtum der Welt”, a configuration we find back later in Adorno’s aesthetic of music in the contrast between breakthrough and “the course of the world” (“Weltlauf”) (J. Dunsby (1998), “Schoenberg and Present-Day Theory and Practice”, pp. 197ff.)
13. But in the case of GU, all this is part and parcel of an expressionist aesthetic – not the forebode of a negative dialectic salvaging faithfulness to metaphysics in the moment of its collapse, and capitulation for the equalising general concept, in art. For the early (and late) Bloch, as for Adorno perhaps, art simply *is* avant-garde – the threshold of the future is the only dwelling place it can have because it is precisely that locus which it tries to keep clear. But this is a no-place, an *ou-topos* (in a double sense).
14. GU had expressed an interpretation of existence, and through that of being as a whole – in a movement not unlike the one Heidegger would carry out later in SZ – our understanding of being starts with our understanding of our own existence. Our immediate existence, Bloch wrote, is characterised by darkness. There is a *Dunkel des gelebten Augenblicks*, a darkness of the lived moment, which is predominantly characterised by an urge to step outside of itself, to relate to an objectivity in order to come into its own. This basic pattern of the subject-object relation Bloch never abandoned. We see how it differs from the starting point of Husserlian phenomenology (there is no *epoche* here, rather the exact opposite), but also that Bloch does achieve a similar starting point for thought as Heidegger would later. There is a parallel (amid many differences to be sure) between the expressive

movement of the lived moment and being-in-the-world. Relation, in the full sense of the word, is to another, as a self, and to the self as to another. Bloch' early ontology is (Riedel) an *Ontologie des Anderen* as much as an ontology of the not-yet.

15. Truth is not at first a matter of correspondence (later on we will see the place of truth as *adaequatio*) but of address and anticipation. To this correspondends a reversal of the primacy of sight over hearing to the primacy of hearing over sight.
16. So: an anticipatory, communicative concept of truth – truth is, has to be, partial, motivated, relevant to an occasion or situation – the attempt to rid truth of its life by making it into a general abstraction, correctness rather than truth, is the reification of life and knowledge, of being itself which we know from the Marxist critique of the commoditisation of life – and which has its roots in German idealism (Schelling); logicism turns into mythology, as Adorno said.
17. In the 3-4th century Pseudo-Plutarchian treatise *peri mousike* (on music), the author points out that the function of music is to hold humans to moral behaviour and the fear of God. Music orders the soul, we might say. This function of music in particular, but of all the arts in general, can be traced back at least to Plato's dialogues *Phaedrus* and the *Laws*. In the first, Plato places philosophy, as the search for knowledge based on reasons, under the sign of the muses, in the form of the myth of the grasshoppers.
18. The blistering mid-day of the Mediterranean, the hour of the siesta, is the hour of Pan. The Dutch philosopher Cornelis Verhoeven has given a beautiful description of the experience of the midday of the south, a time when all things seem to rest within themselves, even the sounds of nature and human affairs – the song of a bird, the sound of a door opening and closing etc. In the hour of pan, the sun is at its height, and a confrontation with the direct light and heat of it becomes a dangerous affair. Humans resort to sleep – shepherds lay in the grass by a creek, in de shadow of a tree. The shepherd's hour is the creation of a space in the shadow of the maddening brightness of the sun, a human space in an overwhelmingly objective world. When we leave that space, we risk to encountering Pan, the god of this hour, in all his furor and beguilement – erotic and musical: we risk panic. In the dialogue *Phaedrus*, a dialogue on erotic love, rhetoric and philosophy, Socrates and Phaedrus have taken a walk outside the city walls – a strange and unfamiliar place for Socrates, who, as he says, never leaves the city. But he is lured by this lovely boy Phaedrus, and perhaps even more by the speech Phaedrus is carrying in his pocket. It is morning. They find a gently sloping patch of grass underneath a tree, on the banks of a creek, and lay down to discuss the art of making speeches. Before they know it, the hour of pan has arrived, and it gets too hot to walk back. They stay:

Socrates: There is time enough. And I believe that the grasshoppers chirruping after their manner in the heat of the sun over our heads are talking to one another and looking down at us. What would they say if they saw that we, like the many, are not conversing, but slumbering at mid-day, lulled by their voices, too indolent to think? Would they not have a right to laugh at us? They might imagine that we were slaves, who, coming to rest at a place of resort of theirs, like sheep lie asleep at noon around the well. But if they see us discoursing, and like Odysseus sailing

past them, deaf to their siren voices, they may perhaps, out of respect, give us of the gifts which they receive from the gods that they may impart them to men.

Phaedrus. What gifts do you mean? I never heard of any.

Socrates: A lover of music like yourself ought surely to have heard the story of the grasshoppers, who are said to have been human beings in an age before the Muses. And when the Muses came and song appeared they were ravished with delight; and singing always, never thought of eating and drinking, until at last in their forgetfulness they died. And now they live again in the grasshoppers; and this is the return which the Muses make to them—they neither hunger, nor thirst, but from the hour of their birth are always singing, and never eating or drinking; and when they die they go and inform the Muses in heaven who honours them on earth. They win the love of Terpsichore for the dancers by their report of them; of Erato for the lovers, and of the other Muses for those who do them honour, according to the several ways of honouring them;—of Calliope the eldest Muse and of Urania who is next to her, for the philosophers, of whose music the grasshoppers make report to them; for these are the Muses who are chiefly concerned with heaven and thought, divine as well as human, and they have the sweetest utterance. For many reasons, then, we ought always to talk and not to sleep at mid-day.

Phaedrus: Let us talk.

(Jowett, 258e-259b)

18) the panic of mid-day is linked here to the muses and to an unthinkable time when human beings lived without the gifts of the muses. Of these music itself is only one, but it seems that the commonality that binds them together is the imposition of order on the movements of the soul, the protection from the maddening demon Pan, from the direct confrontation with the brightest sunshine, in a transposed rapture induced by harmony and rhythm (order). All human art, all music, Plato seems to be saying, is like the chirruping of grasshoppers in the afternoon sun – a somewhat futile raging against the sun, but also a lulling to sleep, an intoxication of the soul (Beethoven). Socrates does not hold still here. He invokes the image of Odysseus and the Sirens. Just as Odysseus listened to the Sirens but sailed safely past them, so Socrates and Phaedrus have to sail safely past the grasshoppers' singing, escaping their bewitchment, and continue to talk. The shade of the tree under which they are sitting will protect them from the sun and by talking the grasshoppers will respect them.

Philosophy – or: rational thought – supersedes the musical in the human confrontation with truth, but arises from the same source. Remember that Horkheimer and Adorno called Odysseus listening to the Sirens “the first concert-goer in European history” (Dialektik der Aufklärung), the birth of bourgeois mentality.

19) Implicitly Bloch stipulates a connection between the revolution from the classical view of music as ordering the soul to the modern view of music as break-through and the rise of polyphonic, and later symphonic, music:

“Die Perser und Aegypter, die Griechen und Scholastiker, allesamt ohne jede nennenswerte Tonkunst, diese Meister des Fertigen und Geschlossenen, der festen Figuren und Definitionen, der Abspiegelungen statt der Erzeugungen, haben ihren Lohn, den Lohn des bildhaften Hellsehens und des garantierten Himmels voll lauter Sichtbarkeiten und Objektivitäten dahin; aber den neuen Menschen ist statt des alten Bilderreichs, statt des alten heimatlosen Ueberschwangs der Trostgesang der Musik geschenkt worden. Darum wurden die grossen Musiker in dem Masse bedeutend, als sich die feste geistige Bindung des Mythos lockerte, und sie sind in dem Masse gewachsen und konstitutiv geworden, als auch die Philosophie gezwungen, begnadet wurde, auf Tathandlung, die Substanz als Prozess, die Wahrheit als Weltaufhebung auszugeben.” (WA16, 230f.)

20) Music expresses what cannot be said yet, as such it is a medium for what is not yet conscious, or what is conscious but still too fragile, too dangerous, or too joyous to say, either personally, or socially, politically or culturally. Music has to be heard – it is directed at an audience, and its meaning is relative to its audience. For Bloch the perspective is that of what music effects and what it expresses. Yet, music is not a form of art in which meanings that can be expressed in other media as well can be communicated – as in Schopenhauer, there is no room for figurative music in Bloch’s aesthetics, for what music expresses is, if it is anything, the truth about the world, the truth that is not-yet, never a picture of it. Music is *absolute*.

“Die Musik regiert schlechthin und will absolut werden, es gibt grundsätzlich keine andere als absolute und darin per se sprechende, rein nur noch spekulativ deutbare Musik. Das wahrhaft symphonisch Entworfenen und zu Ende Gedachten kennt auf die Dauer keine Zwischenräume seiner Welten, in denen nun, wie bei Epikur die

wirklichen Goetter, so hier die Goetter der Poetik ihr wie immer hermeneutisch ueberfluessiges Dasein fuehrten." (WA3, 145).

21) The myth of the grasshoppers stands in between the discussions of rhetoric and philosophy in the *Phaedrus*. At the end of the dialogue, rhetoric as manipulative persuasion has been discarded, and a true rhetoric, which is a speaking to lead the soul (psychagoge) and a dialectic, has been discovered. Philosophy and rhetoric merge, in what is, however, no more than a possibility, a utopian description of what a philosophical life could be. Its sign is that of the ordered emotional life, and rhetoric as practiced by the sophists is likened to a mental disorder, for which philosophy is the cure, the pharmakon.

22) The philosophy of music in GU changes this geography fundamentally. For Plato rhetoric and philosophy must merge in the ordered knowledge of the soul – and the fact that they have not might be called the fundamental disease of our culture. For Plato, music becomes the place where philosophy and rhetoric merge, but with a different horizon and a different prospect. Our thinking has to become rhetorical and our rhetoric has to become thoughtful if we are to take seriously the changed function of music:

“Denn wir tragen den Funken des Endes durch den Gang. Und zuletzt schlaegt deshalb auch das Denken gleichnishaft um ... Eine gleichnishafte Sprache kommt herauf, in ihren Bildern, in dem Tropus unserer selbst, nur weiter nach oben, wahrhaft ueber das menschenhafte Ich hinausgeschoben, als das, was in uns zuletzt verborgen treibt, als echtes ontologisches “Symbol” (WA16, 382f.)

23) The rapture of madness and order as the intoxication of the soul – the two faces of thought - find their destiny and their measure in music as the pre-eminent utopian art form, opening a perspective on “saying what is” what is as much philosophical as it is rhetorical. The two genres disappear in a new form of speech for which there is no name yet.

24) Thus, GU stands in history as an expressionist metaphysical aesthetic, but as an existential address it is, in my view as mysterious as when the young Adorno first laid eyes on it.