

## THREE TYPES OF SELF-INTERPRETATION

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ASIDE FROM REJECTING psychoanalysis as a norm for evaluating the work of geniuses on the one hand and moral choices on the other hand, few pursuits seem quite so fascinating to the contemporary intellectual as his private interpretation of himself or others. Owing in large measure to Freud and his disciples, both dogmatic and sceptical, the plunge into the subconscious or the deeper-still unconscious has become identified with intelligent activity. No doubt in the majority of instances such radical humiliation is therapeutically motivated. We wish ourselves and our neighbors to enjoy the external world as freely as possible, a wish whose realization self-analysis or analysis of the self apparently accelerates by removing inhibitions. (Paradoxically a Freudian examines himself in order to live more harmoniously outside of himself.) Moreover, in order to be sympathetic we must understand the origins of mental conflicts, and it is impossible to forgive (though easy enough to forget) maladjustments without knowing something about the hidden fears and delusions which engendered them. Once the determination of the psyche is causally explained we are of course to look indulgently on all so-called misbehavior; in effect we shall have come to realize that were it not for the inevitable civilization of parents (among the middle classes in particular) love would reign supreme.

But whether we are pushed into introspection by a desire to improve our relationship with the opposite sex or by passion for truth, be the source of inspiration the writings of Sigmund Freud, D. H. Lawrence, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Marcel Proust, or Reinhold Niebuhr—it seems to me that at no previous time in the West have so many individuals even of antagonistic persuasions taken such an interest in what is essentially moral psychology. Much of the energy formerly expended on various sorts of divine speculation now goes into the construction of theories of human motivation and intentionality. This paper makes no attempt to explain the immense popularity of self-interpretation and its variants in our

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time.<sup>1</sup> It sets itself the more humble task of clarifying the nature of three classical types of self-examination which are ever present in influencing current thought: they are the Romantic, the Socratic, and the Christian. Such clarification, it is to be hoped, will be a corrective to the loose usage of terms like introspection, Romantic, and subjectivity. Nothing seems more fashionable in current American philosophical circles than for the hard-boiled positivist, naturalist, or realist to look down condescendingly on the tender-minded type of philosopher (symbolized by William James) with the implication that he was a good fellow to have had around, but we, knights of uncompromising objectivity, are really so much better. If the individual who strives for self-knowledge is to be called a subjectivist, the least his critics can do is to grasp the purport of the thought of the illustrious company he keeps. Since definitions obviate discussion, let us allow the character of these three classical types to become distinct as the paper proceeds. In conclusion I wish to suggest why one is superior to the other two and how each is subject to a special kind of abuse.

What makes any concept particularly attractive for a Romantic is its non-actuality. He delights in the tension between the possible, that which can best be felt through recollection and anticipation, and the already attained. The remoteness of the object of his affection instigates his enthusiasm for possessing it. Inasmuch as the act of commitment always implies the exclusion of at least one possibility, namely, the contradictory of one's choice, Romantics avoid obligation like the plague. They seek the ideal woman, knowing no such creature to exist; they long for eternal youth because every day they are growing older; they dream of a state of nature far removed from terrestrial strife, even though such conditions are never in fact encountered.<sup>2</sup> The Romantic is an Idealist

<sup>1</sup> All attitudes towards the self assume, obviously, its existence and, secondly, the individual's capacity to soliloquize while retaining a sense of oneness. The truth of these assertions is self-evident to every thinking person; or, at any rate, its establishment falls outside the scope of this discussion. More immediately relevant is the issue of whether or not self-interpretation is an activity confined to intellectuals. No one in his right mind would maintain that the proverbial man-on-the-street studies himself as if he were Dostoyevsky. On the other hand, it does not follow from the general absence of conscious self-examination that the majority of individuals is unconcerned about itself. In a sense it is true to say that everything we do, feel, will, and hope for constitutes self-interpretation.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Carl Schmitt, *Politische Romantik* (Muenchen and Leipzig, 1925), for the definitive treatment of the ethos of Romanticism.

to the extent that he directs his exuberance towards realities whose locus of existence is limited to consciousness; he is a lover of intimacy, communion, passions—values usually associated with spirituality. But he is not an Idealist in the classical German sense commensurate with the deification of thought and system.

Instead he deifies the intangibles—his beloved, friendship, the variety of sights and sounds. Most of all he enjoys dwelling on himself.<sup>8</sup> His understanding of the egocentric is probably extraordinarily keen even though one-sided, for (and we find traces of this in as classical a figure as Goethe) he is so bent upon creating a mystical blend of unlimited diversity that in the process the individuality of the opposites is sacrificed. The Romantic interprets himself in relation to his own soul in order to effect a fusion of contraries which belies his actual situation. While his self-knowledge reveals a self essentially harmonious, standing out in relief against macrocosmic contingency (a self reliable to converse with in contrast to the world of things), absolute repose is ruled out. Of course he recognizes an ominous shadow and may even speak of two souls struggling within a single breast, but the demonic here is a mere outgrowth of beauty, the necessary accompaniment of a total aesthetic vision. The dark fairy in "classical" ballet, Goethe's conception of the devil (Mephistopheles), and Schleiermacher's awe for the blind forces of history exemplify this aestheticism.

Nothing like premeditated or positive evil (meanness) occurs in these basically monistic notions. Whereas Romantic immanence is susceptible to the delights of melancholy, the sweet horror of twilight and also the anxiety of self-despair, the truly monstrous side of man's nature is almost always suppressed. What little dualism there is contrasts the harmonious plurality of self-civilization with natural contingency, but far be it from a Romantic to dwell unsatisfied on his innermost soul. By interpreting himself he leaves behind a large number of worldly vanities; he escapes momentarily from being incessantly driven to discover the objectively perfect which will match his subjective projection. However, there is no guaranty, in Milton's phrase, that he will not become a dungeon to himself.

Socratic self-interpretation may be regarded as the antithesis

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, II, pp. 164 ff.

of the Romantic variant.<sup>4</sup> Its aim is ethical, its final discovery transcendent, and its method sublimely objective. Where Schleiermacher exhorts the individual to contemplate himself by turning away from external things, Socrates, in the role of midwife, brings to consciousness what is subconsciously present in each self. He proceeds from subjectivity to objectivity rather than retreating from the realm of actuality to that of the imagination. He engages in self-scrutiny for the sake of discerning the structure of thought or the depth of the ideal self. By subjecting himself to the demands of reason he makes it possible for himself to see the objectively good; and Plato was quite consistent with his teacher's position in so closely linking the destiny of the individual with his responsibilities to society. In opposition to the Romantic who has a proclivity to lose himself in his private microcosm and therefore rarely displays good citizenship, the Socratic man comes to take virtue seriously. He subordinates his self-interest to the idea of the good.

Ethical self-knowledge is wanting in imaginative speculation. The primary task of the Socratic method was the elevation of concrete living, to make man virtuous. In modern times this has frequently been confused with the cultivation of learning and sensitivity to loveliness. Divorced from good conduct Socrates' dictum "know thyself" becomes distorted. Virtue is still more important than the life of any one virtuous person. The maintenance of the ideal law takes precedence over the just fate of Socrates. Even though he ridicules the traditionalism which helped to convict him he will have nothing of law-breaking, for he could easily have escaped. In the last analysis, it is not the unique individual Socrates who matters to himself but the integrity of obedience to transcendentals irrespective of their particular manifestation. The good, the true, and the beautiful—we must learn to live and die for them.

In getting to know yourself the ideal self is disclosed to you quite apart from your peculiarities. Socratic self-knowledge, while appearing subjective, invites in fact great sacrifices for objectivity. The Romantic self is not necessarily selfish, yet there can be no question about its refusal to recognize the infinite depths of spiritual pride. Consciousness of being conscious and all that that implies—a wealth of erudition, hypersensitivity, and exalted feelings—only

<sup>4</sup> For this interpretation of Socrates I am indebted to Professor S. Hartshorne of Colgate University.



vicariously command respect for neighbor. Not altogether misleadingly is the Romantic thought of as an artist who obtains a wealth of inspiration denied to the uncultivated soul; he does not believe that it is most urgent to get along with others as long as his intellectual activities yield him adequate satisfaction. Plato knew the guiles of this aestheticism and in the Platonic Socrates he kept alive for future generations one of its indefatigable foes. He who knows himself Socratically minimizes the significance of being *he*. His emotions are the servant of his intellect, which in turn is grounded in ideal necessity.

Christian self-interpretation though paradoxically more analogous to Socrates than to Schleiermacher, inasmuch as Romanticism in the West is unthinkable apart from Christianity and Socrates was of course a pre-Christian figure, is decisively distinct from both. In contrast to the former it concerns itself with the individual in his complete individuality, that is, without subsuming him under an intellectual norm like law. On the other hand, the orthodox Christian theist analyzes himself in relation to the living transcendent God, being keenly cognizant of his human guilt in the divine sight. In aiming to be released from the results of sin one finds that this reconciliation is consequent upon his discovery of self-despair. To know oneself estranged from God is already a tacit recognition of His sovereign existence.<sup>5</sup> Augustine makes his Confession in order that *he*, Augustine, may be saved; Socrates questions himself and others to disclose the universal essence of virtue; the Romantic introspects because the center of his existence is his private inwardness, often assessed, to be sure, as a miniature example of the whole world's riches. Like the earth he is content to rotate on his own axis.

It is truly amazing how Christianity at once embraces the immanent inwardness of Romanticism with its emphasis on individual diversity and the transcendent autonomy of Socrates with its subordination of the individual to the universal, and transcends them. Christian self-knowledge is a bittersweet cathartic which makes the individual aware of his proportionate greatness and misery. In the words of Luther: *A Christian man is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian man is a perfectly dutiful servant*

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Richard Kroner, *Culture and Faith*, III (Chicago, 1951), to which work in general I am greatly indebted for the ideas in this article.

of all, subject to all.<sup>6</sup> There is no principle of conduct in the world to which he need bow. Not only is he the paragon of nature but the image, even if corrupted, of God. He must fear and tremble before his Maker, and though up to an equivocal point he will obey the laws of the land, his heart is elsewhere. Neither he nor truth, goodness, and beauty are to be taken absolutely; he is absolutely responsible in relation to the living God, the one and only Absolute.

Thus, peculiarly enough, the uniqueness of the individual before God, which the Greeks never comprehended and which Romanicism has abstracted from its transcendent ground, is correlated with his intrinsic finitude in Christian experience of the self. The individual is worth much more than he was for Socrates because what is at stake in his self-interpretation is the redemption of a concrete soul rather than the vindication of a noble idea. It is the individual in his intangibility, with his feelings as well as thoughts, his accidents, who must be reborn. And there is no denying the proposition that the great Christian writers have told us more about themselves and therewith ourselves than the canons of classical taste would have considered proper and those of Romanticism, soul-stirring.

Besides Augustine—whose masterpiece bears the appropriate title *Confessions*—Dante, Petrarch, Luther, Montaigne, Pascal, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, not to mention such poets as Donne, Milton, and Blake, stress the individual egocentric in their works. Autobiography and psychology certainly are not Christian inventions, but they play a conspicuous role in the classics of the Christian tradition. For it is part of the paradox of Christian self-interpretation that those blessed with communicating it artistically are not at all the saintly type. Augustine's youth is legend; Dante saw his place in the hereafter with the souls of the Proud in Purgatory, Petrarch bathed in his own tears, Luther and Milton were not humble men, Dostoyevsky pined for self-confession, Pascal was addicted to the gentlemanly and Kierkegaard to the very "aestheticism" he "dethroned"—these men fall considerably short of Socratic virtue and Franciscan blessedness. Indeed there is a disturbing similarity between the spiritual crisis of a Christian and the ecstasy of a Romantic. But the difference bears scrutiny.

<sup>6</sup> *A Treatise on Christian Liberty.*

Christian self-knowledge affirms the indispensability of the individual but not without delimiting its purgative efficacy. In the first place, it challenges the assumption that the antinomies of finitude can be entirely overcome by self-centered activity such as aesthetic or mystical contemplation; secondly, it recognizes the corruptibility of reflective enjoyment. The intellectual who makes self-interpretation his favorite amusement because he knows that sensuousness, wealth, health, and so forth are but snares and delusions is merely engaging in a subtler form of self-adoration. Furthermore, somewhere along the line sincere self-interpretation ought to offend the interpreter unless he is so perverse as to enjoy the discrepancy between his appearances and what he finds himself really to represent. In opposition to Romantic insatiability Christian self-knowledge always leads the individual to something better even than his tormented soul. When as far as he is willing he has examined himself he is dialectically repulsed by the very reality he strove so painstakingly to unveil. Instead of remaining fascinated by his curious variety of moods, he proceeds with Socratic objectivity to determine himself unsound if not self-repugnant. In Freudian terms, he is unwilling to continue the analysis; he projects himself on God or else represses his original intention to know himself.

Unlike the Romantic he cannot assume indifference while tasting the "flowers of evil"; unlike Socrates he cannot identify himself with rationality as such, or with abstract ideas. Because it is his whole being which has been shaken up he is committed to receive something entirely new or else revert to the familiar and unexamined. One hell which most Christians are in agreement on having visited is that of their innermost selves. The strange thing is that for a Romantic this always seems to be Paradise.

The concreteness of Christian self-interpretation lies in its refusal to fuse tensions, to substitute a love lyric or metaphysical treatise for the drama which defines human existence. Plato or the Platonic Socrates seeks refuge in the objectivity of abstract ideas, the Romantic glorifies his inwardness and lives as if this were sufficient. The Christian can do neither. To modify Pascal: as Socratic self-knowledge would transform men into angels and Romantic into spontaneous vegetables, Christian self-interpretation, on the other hand, preserves the existential tensions so poignantly symbolized by Job, a grain of dust arguing directly with the Lord. It can be

likened to a fugue whose first subject is repentance and whose counter-subject is freedom. Both are worked through together, but the unison of sound never blurs the distinctness of each line.

Thus we discern in the articulation of Christian self-knowledge an infinite plurality of unresolved contrasts. At once cold and ugly, sin is set over against the light and love of God; the very misery of the sinner who desires forgiveness suggests his courage to despair of himself without despairing of God. Similarly, in spite of accepting responsibility for his weakness a Christian must have faith that all he does, ultimately, mysteriously, is God-ordained. He finds himself only to lose himself and yet remain himself in being reborn whereas the Romantic lingers confined to the world of his private experience. In other words, far from being a guaranty for peace of mind, bringing forth the Socratic attitude towards death or the Romantic towards love, Christian self-knowledge is likely to leave the individual in a stage of despair whose existence he could never have suspected prior to plunging into the depth of his being. Precisely because Christians cannot lay claim to any Unconditional besides the living God, the only solution to their self-estrangement and alienation from God lies beyond the scope of knowledge.

Like every other kind of self-activity self-interpretation is subject to internal betrayal. Even although the self which analyzes itself can be ruthless with itself there is no double-check on its integrity as a critical apprehending instrument except again itself. Awareness of susceptibility to vanity, even in those very processes which to the self-inquirer cannot but appear directed towards its annulment, is undoubtedly the most distinguishing feature of Christian self-interpretation. Whereas the sublimely trusting Socrates hardly questions man's willingness to know himself, and the Romantic even if more distrustful will not understand what it means to offend God insofar as he identifies the ideal human with the divine, the Christian knows his own powerlessness to bridge the chasm between himself (whatever goodness his will may possess) and the glory of God. Adam and Eve before the origin of history were not like God in kind. Christian self-interpretation of which much western art is a form—Rembrandt's portraits or Bach's fugues, for instance—approximates closely the tensions of concrete existence owing to its affirmation of the primordial separation of the human as such from the divine as such. The ideal nature of man was created by God with time while God exists forever and ever.



Romantic inwardness is characterized by monistic-pluralistic polarity. It demands the fusion of opposites short of destroying the diversity which is its underlying incentive for fusion. On the other hand, Socratic inwardness is grounded in the subordination of the individual to the universal, of the emotional to the intellectual, of the concrete to the ideal. Christian inwardness attempts to coordinate these aspects, the richness of the mental life with the requirement of its commitment to truth, goodness, and beauty, without depriving the ethical and the aesthetic of their special attributes but delimiting their autonomy. Just prior to drinking the hemlock Socrates' attitude towards his wife, children, and friends, his heroic objectivity, produces a pedagogical effect unsurpassed in the whole (known) corpus of Stoic literature. He has mastered himself perfectly, but in the process part of his self has had to die. When Schleiermacher soliloquizes about religion, instead of stoical will power we are confronted by Romantic acquiescence, as if man, like a tree, could not act contrary to nature. In one case, all opposites are monistically reconciled, in the other, some are entirely suppressed. St. Augustine's description of Monica's death has the Socratic grandeur and yet it retains something besides sentimentality—for it does matter to him that his mother died. It is tragic that we become separated from those we love; even though Monica is destined to enjoy the peace of God, Augustine is unreconciled to his mother's earthly death. In oscillating between faith and sight he exemplifies the concreteness of Christian self-interpretation. While everything which happens stands under divine judgment we have no right to be indifferent to suffering. God Himself did not disguise His agony on the Cross.

Each of these three types of self-interpretation has its merits and pitfalls. The Romantic variant corresponds most truly to the diversity of experience—embodying as it were all the longings of heart and mind, looking at man from what is essentially his own point of view—but tends to celebrate him in excess. Carried away by his enthusiasm for the varieties of soul-communion the Romantic is too apt to lose sight of man's vanity lurking even behind his most spiritual ventures such as self-interpretation. This intellectual activity easily degenerates into a game wherein the participator finds it increasingly difficult to distinguish himself from his toy. As simultaneously observant and observed the Romantic subject feels disinclined to own up to his wilful limitation as a critic of

himself. Though at times he would seem to be justified in preferring the enjoyment of his own company to that of fellow human beings (it has to be admitted that more than anything else this helps characterize sensitive in contrast to dull individuals), his idolization of the aesthetic, losing himself in the spontaneity of indigenous inwardness, has often led to the grossest sort of immorality. It usually issues in demonic indifference or lackadaisical drifting. Names like Baudelaire, Leopardi, and Schopenhauer bring to mind this *mal de coeur* of modern man. It would be a mistake, however, to identify Romanticism merely with the hypersensitive intellectual. Surely the enjoyment of inner excitement, the longing for remoteness, and the love of diffuseness are part and parcel of Occidental restlessness in general.

Socratic self-knowledge can only be criticized from a Christian point of view unless the aesthete is deemed superior to the moralist. As already suggested, it is too prone to sacrifice the individuality of the individual to the general structure of thought which he discovers within himself. On account of its objectivity it serves as an antidote to Romantic egocentricity by implying moral action, a dreadful activity for the man who only knows the pleasures of self-reflection. Nevertheless Socratic faith in the powers of reason when professed by a modern man amounts but to another illustration of Romantic love for the remote. The bourgeois mind enraptured by Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* is quite likely to prove the one which talks itself into having successfully emulated the Socratic method. In rebellion or adherence, whatever the case may be, children of the Biblical tradition, we can learn a lot from Socrates but never become like-minded with him.

The most glaring fault of Christian self-interpretation is expressed by remorseful Samson in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*: "Thence faintings, swoonings of despair, / And sense of Heaven's desertion."<sup>7</sup> The Christian is always tempted to subject himself to excessive self-humiliation. Not only will he despair of himself, but relapse from faith in divine providence to preoccupation with his personal inadequacies, presumptuously assuming that God is as helpless—to help him—as himself. Accordingly he develops a compulsive appetite for self-torment even to the point where like Augustine, Petrarch, and Kierkegaard, his nothingness in the sight

<sup>7</sup> L.L. 631-632.

of God becomes an obsession with him. He would rather be a beast than between the angels and the beasts. This is the joy of being in despair, a vice which Christian writers have disclosed if not always successfully combated in themselves, and which the Romantics with few qualms of conscience have incorporated into their *Weltschmerz*. The man of faith should only despair of himself to the extent that he is alienated from God, but he sins again when he forgets that he was created in the divine image. Whereas Romantic writers take the Nativity and neglect the Cross, their Christian brothers do exactly the opposite. The glory of man should never be divorced from his wretchedness and vice versa.

Though undoubtedly subject to the faults of the other variants plus its own, Christian self-interpretation is superior in being concrete where they respectively are predominantly ideal or emotive. It does not shrink from coming to grips with the disquieting aspects of the inner life nor is it content to revel satisfied in sweet melancholy. With Socrates it accepts responsibility, by an act of faith which points from the irreconcilables of private experience to the peace of the transcendent God. Without being left to prey on himself the individual is not subordinated (as in Socrates) to general principles. Miraculously the transcendent living God comes to the rescue of man, the magnificent sinner. By knowing ourselves we come to grasp our despair, to recognize our ultimate helplessness in attempting self-reconciliation on our own terms alone. For the problem of self-reconciliation is fundamentally the same as the forgiveness of sin. No man can be at peace with God without being at peace with himself, as witnessed to by tough-minded dogmatic sceptics who betray their anxiety when the most trivial disturbance in their routine sets off a towering rage.

The temptations of Christian self-interpretation have already been indicated. Its intensity (there can be no question about the passionateness of such natures as Augustine's, Pascal's, Kierkegaard's, Petrarch's, Dostoyevsky's in contrast to the nature of the exemplary Stoic sage), coupled with the Romantic disposition native to Occidentals who set out to interpret themselves articulately in the first place, often leads to an exaggerated form of self-laceration and a suspect delight in self-confession. The above-mentioned writers may indeed be charged with the abuse of sensibility, for in reacting against Neo-Platonism, Cartesianism, Hegelianism, medieval realism, middle-classism and, in Luther's case,

decadent scholasticism, they invariably espied the whore in reason and appeared to revive a Christian Dionysus. In essence they were merely pointing out that the logic of the heart is not the logic of propositions. But (as so many superficial critics have done) not to distinguish between the evocation of a violent shock for the sake of awakening sleepers and an aesthetic irrationalism as exemplified by Mr. Hemingway's love for the romance of bull-fighting is simply naïve. One of the antinomies of the human situation, especially for the thinker, is the determination of his creative works as much by the situation with which he finds himself out of joint as by the character of his genius. It is rewarding to speculate on what Pascal and Kierkegaard might have written had they not had to settle polemical accounts with Descartes and Hegel respectively.

Suppose the presence of three girls gazing into a mirror to discover the cause of their not looking well. One blames her unsympathetic environment: no one bothers to understand her; if she could only dwell in a more beautiful world how less unattractive she would seem to herself. A wistful tune passes through her mind and she proceeds to hum it. The second young lady promptly admits that she fails to satisfy the standards set by Cleopatra, Florence Nightingale, and the heroines of Jane Austen. How insignificant she feels beside them! She resolves to emulate their example, but in her heart she knows that that which matters is what they represent rather than herself. The other girl is deeply disquieted by her appearance. To be sure, she remarks to herself, of late life hasn't been kind to me, but I too am at fault. From now on I shall reflect less dogmatically on myself and instead pay more attention to my vocation. Paris, at any rate, knew all the time that he had to award the golden apple to one of the beauties whereas the contemporary philosopher would prefer to remain neutral, as if the absence of self-reflection were not a reflection on the self. Here none of us can afford to run away from that mirror which best reveals why we are indisposed.