Master of the Orgasm

A fresh look at the laughingstock of psychoanalysis

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Few crackpots are exhumed and reinterred as regularly as the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. It is not clear why. One explanation is comedic: Reich was, and continues to be, an enormously entertaining figure. His early career, when he was still on cordial terms with sanity, was marked by pronouncements such as, "There is only one thing wrong with neurotic patients, *the lack of full and repeated sexual satisfaction*." These claims are best treated with restraint. Hal Cohen, in a fine resurrection of Reich that appeared in *Lingua Franca*, observed that "Reich was not the first to notice that having orgasms tended to have a positive effect on people, but never before had the orgasm enjoyed such a privileged place in therapeutic practice."

The later Reich requires not even that mild degree of comic exertion. By the end of his career, Reich was busy at his compound in Organon, Maine (or Rangeley, according to the post office), assembling "cloudbusters" of iron piping and rubber hoses that were intended not only to divert hurricanes but defend against alien attacks. His main terrestrial antagonist was a cabal he called Mojdu

(an amalgamation of Mocenigo, the party responsible for incriminating Giordano Bruno, and Djugashvili, Stalin's original family name), which acted in concert with *New Republic*, the FDA, and quite possibly Einstein, to persecute him. He was

right about the FDA, at least: Convicted and sentenced to a prison term after violating an injunction to stop selling his orgone boxes across state lines, he died in 1957 in a federal penitentiary in Pennsylvania.

Another explanation for the perennial interest in Reichiana is that some prominent writers and artists of the 1950s—Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, and William S. Burroughs among them—associated themselves with Reich's work. But Bellow invoked Reich as more of a character type than an influence, Mailer mined Reich for rather pedestrian ideas about sexual liberation that he might have sourced elsewhere, and Burroughs's pantheon also included Mayan codices, shamans, and Scientology.

But there have been plenty of lunatics, and plenty of writers willing to take those lunatics seriously; still, no explanation sufficiently accounts for why Reich enjoys his periodic character re-assassinations. The answer seems to have something to do with the lapsarian narrative his life has been rigged to fit. Here is Reich's story as told in the standard fashion: Born into a middle-class secular Jewish family in Hapsburg Galicia in 1897, Reich has a sexual upbringing one might call textbook fin-de-siècle problematic. At twelve, he witnesses his beloved tutor seduce his mother. He tells his father, inadvisedly. His mother commits suicide by drinking household cleaner. His tutor is fired and Reich is packed off to boarding school. Three years later, when Reich is seventeen, his father kills himself, contracting pneumonia after standing for hours in a cold pond, pretending to fish. Reich serves as an officer in the First World War, where his politics are radicalized. He settles afterward in Vienna and begins to study medicine. He soon becomes one of the youngest members of psychoanalysis' inner circle and gains a reputation for being one of Freud's model pupils. He publishes an eccentric book called *Die Funktion des Orgasmus* in 1927, in which he claims that all neurosis is a matter of sexual blockage. Over the next few years, he develops the therapeutic technique and understanding that culminate in 1933's *Character Analysis*, his great and enduring contribution to analytic theory.

Around the same time, Reich is among the first people to whom it occurs that there might be some profit in getting Freud together with Marx. He moves to Berlin and helps to open free sexual-health clinics, where he gives away contraceptives and gynecological advice. By 1934, he has been kicked out of the International Psychoanalytic Association for being a Marxist and the German Communist Party for being a Freudian. He leaves Berlin for Oslo, where he reinvents himself as an experimental scientist of the mad variety; the most notable (and, according to Reich, successful) of his Oslo experiments involved placing electrodes on his patients' genitals in order to quantify as "bio-electric energy" what Freud metaphorically called the libido. He is, in turn, expelled from Norway, catching the last ship out of Europe before war begins.

He arrives in America in 1939, where he teaches at the New School for two years before embarking on the path that would lead to the discovery of all of the secrets of the cosmos. His research in Maine leads him to an energetico-meteorological theory that clears up humanity's benightedness about intergalactic forces, cancer, and the aurora borealis; the gist is that everything emerges from and through a cosmic energy force called orgone, which turns out to be not only experimentally demonstrable but in fact visible. It has a bluish-green tint. A nice thing about orgone, in addition to its life-creating and sustaining properties, is that it can be handily accumulated in unassuming boxes made of layered zinc, burlap, and pine. Reich continues to market these boxes despite FDA fraud investigations, he is sentenced to two years' time in federal prison, and he dies of a heart attack shortly before he is to be paroled. Orgone boxes can still be purchased on the Internet.

It is, obviously, a great story. It's just that it's only partially true. Or, rather, the parts that are too good to be true, such as the sex/death farce before 1915 and then all of the really deranged stuff after about 1934, are true, but the important and interesting parts of the story—the material that relates to Freud and the history of analytic thought—are almost always exaggerated. This is all made clear by *Sex! Pol! Energy!*, a current exhibit at the Jewish Museum in Vienna, whose charter presumably includes the provision that no loosely Jewish-Viennese figure is too outmoded or out of his mind to deserve three exclamation points of rediscovery.

(It seems not to matter to the show's curator, Birgit Johler, that one of Reich's central explanations for Freud's unresponsiveness to his earth-shattering orgasm theory of 1927 was that Freud's vestigial obligations to Judaism left him frigid, which is to say unimaginatively monogamous.)

What distinguishes this exhibit from other examinations of Reich is its credulity. A characteristic bit of wall copy reads:

> The spontaneously living bions [what Reich called the precursors of life; he discovered them in Oslo when he thought to water some old hay and examine the result under a microscope] already had their negative antagonists in the cancer-causing *T-bions* [that is, evil bions]. The preoccupation with *DOR* [Deadly Orgone Radiation] darkened Reich's worldview. Research involving *emotional pest*, desert formation and defense against extraterrestrial attacks characterized the menacing climate with which the scientist, human being and citizen Wilhelm Reich seemed less and less able to cope.

One installation includes a cylindrical fish tank containing some dirty cellophane clouds floating desultorily above a small lump of plastic coral and a meager scattering of what appear to be fingerling potatoes. The cellophane clouds, the placard explains, are "moon jellyfish." The moon jellyfish, it turns out, are meant as examples, which is to say evidence, of orgastic pulsation as nature's most basic kinetic unit. A portable orgone box, a condom drying rack, and a go-kart-sized cloudbuster are displayed in fiberglass cases. Nearby hangs an oil painting Reich did of Jesus. Jesus looks like Neal Cassady appearing as himself in Ayn Rand's nightmares. These fixtures are more than funny doodads; they are totemic objects of the Reichian faith. They attest to the very naivete that makes this exhibit unusually instructive.

An important part of the standard account of Reich's life was his role as Freud's pet disciple. The exhibit thus features photocopies of the dozen or so letters that Freud wrote to and about Reich over the course of their acquaintance. Freud certainly seems to think, intermittently, well of Reich, whom he at one point calls "one of

the ablest, eagerest, and most striving" and at another "the best head" of the younger generation of analysts. Perhaps Freud's kindest moment comes when Reich is suffering from tuberculosis at a sanatorium in Switzerland and is having trouble supporting himself there as an analyst. "I'd like to ask you," he writes on Reich's behalf to another analyst in Vienna, "if you happen to have the chance, to please send a neurotic to Davos." But Freud's tone seems more often distant. Upon receipt of *Die Funktion des Orgasmus*, which was dedicated to Freud on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, Freud's only response was, "So thick?"

The usual story suggests that the nuttiness (and broadly indifferent reception) of the orgasm book was redeemed, or at the very least offset, by the contemporaneous papers on technique that were eventually collected as *Character Analysis*. What the exhibit does not make clear is that *Character Analysis* was neither as original nor as important as subsequent commentators have made it out to be. That book's insight was that, as opposed to the early Freudian preoccupation with tics and parapraxes as symptoms of neurosis, character *was* neurosis—that we are who we are by virtue of our repressions and defenses, and that our neuroses thus manifest themselves on not only a verbal or symptomatic level but also on a physical and gestural one. If character is sickness, then all behavior is symptomatic and ought to be interpreted as such. But this development, as the analyst Charles Rycroft pointed out in a 1969 *New York Review* essay about the first wave of Reich rehabilitation, was implicit in Freud's work as early as *The Ego and the Id* (1923), and was farmed out for definitive formulation by Anna Freud in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (1936). The examples of character formation given in *Character Analysis* might have been particularly astute, but the basic point was well within the boundaries of Freudian orthodoxy. What was not within the orthodox tradition was the therapeutic method Reich went on to propose: Patients were to be seen in their underwear, and physical contact between patient and analyst was required for the penetration of neurotic "muscular armor." (On extreme but not infrequent occasions, unmetaphorical penetration proved unavoidable.)

Philip Rieff makes this point nicely in his discussion of Reich in *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*. "*Character Analysis* has been largely overpraised," Rieff judges,

"the more roughly to censure Reich's later books. His critics resort to the old and dubious interpretative trick of dividing a writer's earlier works from his later, so as to disparage the one or the other." What Rieff was noticing were the first (Reich had been dead for less than ten years) attempts to draft Reich's life story as it is currently handed down, where early brilliance gives way to apostasy and then lunacy.

The mild mockery to which Reich is usually exposed has the effect of giving him a doddering charm. (William Steig, his longtime friend and onetime illustrator, achieved this effect in interpreting Reich's claims as blueprints for Thurberesque cartoons.) But Johler's curatorial earnestness helps us see how truly unhinged Reich was; the Vienna Jewish Museum exhibit takes Reich seriously enough to find the sort of continuity in his work and thought that, as Rieff points out, his critics are so keen to disrupt.

In the discontinuous version of Reich's development, *Character Analysis* represents the finest of Reich's thought before his psychotic break. But if you, like this exhibit, do not believe that Reich went crazy, you have to find some way to commensurate the youthful exercises with the mature work. This commensuration, however, is as likely to diminish the earlier efforts as it is to shore up the later ones.

In this new continuous version, *Character Analysis* may have been an orthodox book in many respects, but it nevertheless contained the basis for Reich's subsequent divergence from Freud. Freud maintained that the problem with the instincts (or the desires) is that they are always in conflict, both with one another and with the outside world. This condition is insoluble, though Freud's hope was that through his talking cure we might better understand the sources of these conflicts and thus minimize our frustration. Reich broke with Freud in asserting that our instincts are in fact essentially good, and that it is only the blocking of their expression that causes unhappiness. Freud and Reich agreed on the basic point that character is neurosis. For Freud, that was *okay*: Character is just the name we happen to give to our strategies for achieving some satisfaction out of the mess of instinctual and social conflict. For Reich, these strategies are themselves

the problem. If you believe, with Reich, that the instincts are naturally *good* rather than neutrally *conflicting*, you must conclude that character itself, how we survive despite the frustration of unfulfilled need, is a bad thing.

For the early Reich, this insight cashed out in terms of orgastic potential, since it is only during orgasm that the constraining effects of character are exploded. This had the effect of lifting the problem of neurosis from a personal level to a social one: Society's repressive sexual mores thwart our instincts and thus make us fear and condemn our own orgastic potential. This was a political problem that could be analyzed and solved in Marxist terms. But Reich, like any figure who believes that political change might eradicate private unhappiness, was naturally disappointed by political developments; he may be known as one of the prophets of the sexual revolution, but for his part he deplored what he called the "free-for-all fucking epidemic." (And that was in the '50s.) For the later, antipolitical Reich, a retrograde belief in the natural goodness of the instincts meant that everything must consist of some oceanic unity that he chose to name orgone, and which had its complement in deadly intergalactic radiation. It was no longer a social problem but a cosmological one.

In trying to trace the concepts of orgone and bio-electricity to their source in Reich's disagreement with Freud over the valence of the instincts, Reich's career can be read as a sort of test case for one of Theodor Adorno's more fatuous remarks, that "in psycho-analysis nothing is true except the exaggerations." The case of Dr. Reich represents psychoanalysis at its most programmatic and quackish. It is the unexaggerating Freud who tells a circumspect but unsettling story about the id as a site of unconscious contest; it is the magisterial but faded Freud who postulates the existence of things such as Eros and Thanatos. Adorno saw something of provocative value in the amplifications of that latter persona, but Reich saw a truth not taken far enough. Reich turned from Freud on exactly Freud's most soberly threatening point: Where Freud believed that all we can really hope for are slight gains in control over internal discord, Reich went in for the overconfident elements of analytic theory that hold out some hope for the kind of instantaneous, total liberation—a final end to conflict and frustration.

Reich's preference for the exaggerated, at least in part, led him down the orgonomic path of starry-eyed prophetic cloud-busting. Reich's story can thus be read as kind of allegory about psychoanalytic thought itself. Reich took up the least appealing parts of Freud and pursued them to their most absurd ends. Our inclination to ridicule Reich every few years becomes a way of conducting proxy skirmishes in the perpetual debate about Freud's legacy and relevance. When we exaggerate the discontinuity in Reich's life, casting him in dual mythical roles as Freud's most promising student and Freud's most berserk deserter, we seem to be staking out our own ambivalence to Freud's discomfiting ideas. We incarnate in one person what seems most preposterous about psychoanalysis, and then we place that person at once as close to and as far away from Freud as we can.

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