

Sure. I personally would have gone a long way to hear this pretentious nerd instruct Hannah Arendt in the niceties of Husserl's philosophy of meaning.

One of the themes of the book is Podhoretz's attack on the narcissism of the New Left and of the current Me Decade, a "plague" that "attack[s] the vital organs of the entire species, preventing men from fathering children and women from mothering them." Of course it never occurs to him that this very book is an exercise in narcissism more blatant than anything his opponents have ever come up with. At one point it does dimly enter Podhoretz's brain that the politics that *he* is promoting—the avid pursuit of narrow self-interest by such groups as labor unions and Jews—may also be attacked as selfishness and narcissism. A crucial point, which cuts to the heart of the Podhoretz world outlook.

His reply is instructive: His credo is not "a politics of selfishness" because "it is [being] pursued in the context of a pluralistic society like our own." Not only is this a whopping non sequitur, since pluralism in this sense is precisely the institutionalization of selfish greed and grab, but the Me Decade people are of course also pursuing their goals in the context of the self-same pluralist society. And so we are left with Podhoretz, when he rises from mindless chitchat to attempts at lucubration, demolished by his own hand. Since his final chapter is an attempt to psychoanalyze his opponents as really being consumed with suicidal self-hatred, the quick destruction by Podhoretz of his own thesis could be considered high irony—although the point is of course lost on the author himself, who is far more a plodding boob than a tragic hero.

In fact, there is a still greater irony in the Podhoretz saga. He jabs at Arendt's concept of the "banality of evil," but his very own life demonstrates that Arendt was right. For Norman Podhoretz has not only fostered evil by his corrosion of true intellectual standards, his ethnic narcissism, and his promotion of the statist status quo; he also represents banality through and through. Were this a just society, Podhoretz would be spending his years as a writer for some AFL-CIO sheet, trotted out at union conventions as one of their resident intellectuals. As it is, we all have to put up with the continuing infliction of this schmendrick upon our consciousness, and we will have to begin to brace ourselves for the inevitable next installment of the living legend of Norman Podhoretz. □

**WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT:
A Biography, Vol. I: 1767–1808,
by Paul R. Sweet. Ohio State
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Prussian freedom fighter

MAURICE CRANSTON

WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT is one of the most paradoxical figures in the history of European culture. Professor Paul Sweet's new biography, the first to appear in English for over a hundred years, serves mainly to demonstrate that the contradictions in Humboldt's writings were matched by contradictions in his character. And yet somehow those very contradictions are part of Humboldt's importance as one of the creators of nineteenth-century sensibility—first of the German mind, then of the whole "Victorian" mentality that prevailed not only in the British empire, but also in America and indeed almost everywhere except in France.

Humboldt, born in Potsdam in 1767, was a liberal who helped to turn liberalism upside down. His best-known essay in political theory, *The Limits of State Action*, is a vigorous statement of the case for liberalism in the classical tradition of Locke. Freedom is seen as something that stands opposed to the constraints of the state. Government is regarded as a more or less regrettable necessity that has to exist to protect the nation from foreign enemies, to maintain security at home, and to arbitrate between conflicting claims to rights. Beyond these functions, it is held that the state should not intrude into the lives of citizens. Private agencies, not the state, should be entrusted with such matters as industry, commerce, education, social relief, and medical services. The state should be designed to prevent harm, not to do good.

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Having written this book, Humboldt spent the greater part of his life in the service of the Prussian state, notably designing an impressive system of state-controlled higher education for the kingdom, and in general furnishing the ideology of a bureaucratic system in which the high ideals of the military were made those of the civilian community. All this was presented to the world as a gospel of higher freedom: of freedom understood as each man doing what he ought to do as opposed to doing what he wants to do.

It was by introjecting this new conception of freedom into liberalism, and then intimating that the state, far from being the enemy of freedom, could become the instrument of freedom, that Humboldt gave German liberalism a new direction. Such thinking enabled German liberalism to join forces with Prussian imperialism against conservatism to promote the institution of a united German national state. The mainstream of German liberal thought was henceforth, at least until the end of World War I, embodied in the "national liberal" movement. The "classical liberal" ideas of *The Limits of State Action*—a book that Humboldt left unpublished in his lifetime—were kept alive on the fringe of German liberalism by such groups as the *Fortschrittlere* and the *Freisinnigen*. In the meantime, Humboldt's earlier ideas were taken up by such writers as John Stuart Mill, so that when classical liberalism was revived in Germany after 1918 and again after 1945, it had a somewhat alien character; Germany's newest liberals can invoke the name of Humboldt, but the substance of their liberal program derives from British and American experience more than it does from Humboldt's theories.

Even so, it would be a mistake to think of Humboldt as important only in the sphere of politics. In philosophy, and in cultural history generally, he mediates in a significant manner between the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and nineteenth-century romanticism, between Kant and Hegel, between an aristocratic past and a bourgeois future. Ralf Dahrendorf has observed that the Prussian nobility did not open out, like the British aristocracy, toward the middle class to adopt many of their values; it recruited new noblemen as an army seeks commissioned officers, and required them to conform, and moreover to conform willingly. Since Humboldt forged the marriage of nineteenth-century Prussian *étatisme* with liberalism, the willingness of conformity was something he, more than others, stressed.

He was a man of very delicate sensibility—*Sinnlichkeit* is a word that recurs in many of his writings; a man also of deep culture—*Bildung* is another favorite word. He was also exceptionally intelligent. He not only read a lot of poetry; he spent a great deal of time analyzing his own feelings and emotions, and was commendably honest in his effort to understand himself. And yet there was a coarse side to his nature that prompted even Talleyrand, usually as tolerant as he was unscrupulous, to consider Humboldt a highly offensive individual.

Humboldt made no secret—and neither does his present biographer—of the fact that he was a constant client of prostitutes. He seems never to have enjoyed, in the upper-class eighteenth-century manner, affairs with women of his own rank and adventures with decent working girls; it had to be prostitutes. Moreover, we can tell from his records of sums paid to these girls (and the fact that he noted down such figures in his journal is itself revealing), that he must have used only the lowest type of whore. It is almost certainly this kind of thing (which Talleyrand, with his spy network, would have known all about) that earned Humboldt his bad reputation during the four years he spent in Paris.

entirely new dimension: It captured the leadership the French had lost. In this exercise Humboldt played a crucial part, and he was able to do so because he had made a thorough study of French thought, detecting, like a strategist, its weakness, and promoting a German system of ideas as a consciously designed alternative.

DURING HIS YEARS IN Paris, at the time of the Directory, he made the acquaintance of Napoleon. Humboldt felt none of the usual aristocrat's aversion toward that upstart; he describes him in his journal sympathetically, and notices (as I have never seen noticed by others) how badly Napoleon was treated by the intellectuals in Paris with whom he tried to make friends and even to establish himself as one of them. Nor did Humboldt find the kind of police rule that obtained under the Directory uncongenial. It was against the *idéologues*, the group gathered around Destutt de Tracy, that Humboldt chose to exercise his wits. Here he observed that several characteristic features of French thought were most conspicuously evident, among them belief in universal rules, in logic and system, in clear and distinct ideas, and generally in the supremacy of the rational mind over

seu it was seen as a sign of madness. The novelty of Humboldt's position was that it separated the soul from its basis in religion, and gave the soul, in effect, an independent metaphysical existence of its own. Humboldt did not personally effect this separation, for that had already been done by the German eighteenth-century enlightenment, but he did exploit its ideological potentialities.

The French themselves, in the vulgar triumph of Napoleon, abandoned rationalism for the cult of the hero. But the French did not understand the metaphysics of heroism. They could not really fathom, as the Germans could, the depths of the human soul; their thinking (as Humboldt rightly recognized) was restricted by the very language they spoke. French had become the rigid language of rationalism, and it could not change. Metaphysics needed another tongue, and German, a hitherto neglected language, was there, ready to be put to that purpose. English, of course, was no use—it was too old, too used in the service of commonsense and down-to-earth empiricism to be of service to a new idealism. The opportunity for German was equally the opportunity for Germany, and Humboldt seized it.

Humboldt was not a philosopher like Kant or Hegel: He was a moralist, or ideologue whose aim was practical rather than theoretical. Logically, he was to have his most lasting monument not in books, but in institutions: the reformed Prussian universities and academies of which he was, as a functionary of the kingdom, the principal architect. And of course the Prussian model inspired not only German, but almost all Western conceptions of the ideal university. Arguably, the contradictions within that model were never suspected until the actual German institutions proved so suited to the purposes of the Third Reich, and are still not fully seen.

They are also the contradictions of Humboldt the man; the contradictions of one who was at once bourgeois and aristocratic, who believed in proud freedom and servile obedience, in the values of the battlefield and those of tranquil domesticity, in an institution dedicated to this world and the world beyond, assigning priority both to the carnal and the spiritual, to truth and to utility, to equality and to hierarchy, to man and to God—but it was all done behind a façade of such imposing splendor that no one at the time could doubt that by some miracle of the dialectic Humboldt had reconciled the irreconcilable in his work, as in his life. □

Wilhelm von Humboldt was a liberal who helped to turn liberalism upside down.

Even so, Humboldt was a happy man at home. Yet here again, in the contradiction between elevated love for his wife and children, and his exquisite feelings of friendship on the one hand and his cheap traffic with whores on the other, we can see in Humboldt a personality that was to repeat itself throughout the nineteenth century—the Jekyll and Hyde character is not exceptional, it is typical—and as decent girls became more tenaciously virginal and wives became more and more faithful under the influence of Humboldt's type of idealism, the kind of prostitution he patronized became more widespread.

When the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars alienated the rest of the world from French cultural values, from Cartesianism and the Enlightenment as much as from Robespierre and republicanism, German thought assumed an

the vague intimations of human feelings.

Humboldt challenged every one of those principles. He became the champion of particular, changing, and diverse customs against set universal principles; of the random consequence of nature as against the systematic ordering of logic; of inward understanding as opposed to the publicly demonstrable proof; in a word, of the soul as opposed to reason.

There was nothing very new in all this. The exaltation of the human soul as opposed to the human reason was central to the pietism that had been strong in Germany for several generations. Pietism was a Protestant heresy that meant nothing in a country like France, divided as it was between Catholics and unbelievers. Pietism reached France only in the very indirect form that Rousseau acquired through François Magny and Madame de Warens—and in Rous-

New York Film Festival II

STEPHEN HARVEY

TIME WAS, NOT SO VERY long ago, when the cosmopolites who annually flocked to the New York Film Festival did so in the fervent hope of being outraged by some obscure object of derision assailing them from the screen. In those days, a perverse part of the fun of attending lay in the prospect of witnessing some unheralded experimentalist diddle with narrative form in some new and inchoate manner, preferably while thrashing about in the shoals of sexual pathology.

Alas, that time is seemingly past. To be sure, the festival committee has tried to keep its end up in recent years with the likes of *In the Realm of the Senses* and *Salò*, but for the most part the audience is pretty shockproof nowadays. After all, many of the opaque gimmicks of yore have become the movie vernacular of the present, and those that haven't can be dismissed as the quaint clichés of a bygone movie time. Moreover, it's almost impossible to come up with a really scabrous subject anymore—most of the mild waves stirred up by *Luna* were ripples of mirth at its silliness, rather than horror at Bertolucci's presumed daring—incest or no incest. In any case, the regulars have had lots of time to get used to the festival's former *enfants terribles*: By now they know what to expect from the likes of Fassbinder et al. even before the lights dim.

This year there's been a preponderance of films from *Mitteleuropa*, with divergent approaches to the medium

dividing neatly along geographical-political lines. Films from the East (specifically Hungary and Poland) are rather despairingly humanistic, and seek to grasp the audience's attention in traditional ways—involving us with a realistic, detailed plot and engaging our feelings for the characters. The West German entries by Fassbinder and Herzog, on the other hand, are glacially nihilistic, consciously setting up one barrier after another to keep the viewer from having any emotional identification with what's occurring on screen.

The Hungarian *Angi Vera* turned out to be one of the festival's most pungent surprises, coming as it did from a director, Pál Gábor, who was an unknown here. The title character, played by Veronika Papp, is an orphaned peasant girl coming of age at the dawn of the Communist era in 1948. Ostentatiously humble yet evidently eager to take part in the socialist tomorrow, Vera manages to win a coveted spot in a school that is supposed to mold the proletarian leaders of the future. From the outset, Vera shows a preternatural gift for making each politically correct move through the maze of Stalinist cant. She befriends a humorless informer with good Party connections, seemingly out of pity for the woman's isolation from her less dogmatic barrackmates. Vera then spurns the attentions of a handsome, unlettered coalminer in preference for her anemic young instructor in Marxism—only to publicly confess the liaison during the day of mass “self-criticism” that climaxes the school term, carefully blaming herself for her lapse (an obvious badge of sincerity). Said tutor suddenly disappears from sight, Vera is graduated with honors, and soon she is comfortably ensconced in the back of a sedan heading for Budapest and a cushy job in journalism; on the road alongside, one of her outspoken classmates with a true revolutionary past eats dust as she struggles with a rickety prewar bicycle.

What makes *Angi Vera* so intriguing is that you're never sure whether Vera's progress is due to coolheaded calculation or dumb luck. Veronika Papp adroitly makes her a creature of wistful glances and ethereal sighs; Vera's ingenious smile baffles both the viewer and

her comrades on screen. Gábor's presentation unstintingly records a system that exalted the mediocre while condemning the just for their alleged deviationist sins, yet the mood of this multilayered film is anything but harsh and didactic. With its hushed voices and amber-lit interiors, *Angi Vera* offers a succession of subtly telling moments that merge to create a chilling panorama of corruption.

THE EVER-PROLIFIC RAINER Maria Fassbinder was represented by two films this year. (One festival committee member informed me, no irony intended, that these were Fassbinder's best efforts *so far* in 1979.) *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, the more generally accessible of the two, could be seen as a kind of capitalist companion piece to *Angi Vera*. Its heroine likewise manages to prevail despite postwar upheaval, but the glint of ambition is ever apparent in Maria's amoral gaze. A conventional working-class Berliner, Maria (Hanna Schygulla) weds her soldier sweetheart Hermann while the world is literally falling down around them. With her husband missing and presumed dead on the eastern front, Maria blithely gains employment after the war at an off-limits dive frequented by the American army of occupation; here she attracts the eye of a homely but sincere black G.I. named Bill. Fond though she is of him (not to mention all those goodies from the PX), once Hermann unexpectedly turns up Maria doesn't hesitate for a second to unload Bill by whatever extreme means are necessary. Hermann takes the rap for Bill's murder, and Maria proceeds to cast her net over a repatriated industrialist whose occasional bedmate and right-hand executive she becomes. Maria grasps her share of the economic miracle of the 1950s, storing up her resources for the day of her reunion with the one man to whom she had ever really submitted her will. Yet the fate that had raised her to prominence is capricious indeed, and Maria must make her own postwar reparations at the film's (literally) explosive denouement.

Fassbinder clearly wants *Maria Braun* in general and its protagonist in particular to carry a hefty symbolic weight, not just as metaphors for the survival instinct, but for the fatal taint of materialism as well. Growing more self-absorbed at each stage in her ascent to bourgeois status, Maria is literally sickened and deranged by her exposure to affluence—before long, she's throwing up in chic restaurants, laughing to herself hysteri-

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