Jelly Roll Morton Meets Prof. Rosenstock-Huessy

Norman Fiering (April 2012)

Jelly Roll Morton meets Prof. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy? Not exactly, but if we interpose Francis P. Squibb, Jr. (1927-2003) between them, the meeting comes close. Squibb attended Dartmouth College, majoring in philosophy, and while at Dartmouth became an admirer of Prof. Rosenstock-Huessy. Graduating in 1949, he went on to earn a Master's Degree in Philosophy at the University of Illinois. That is the start of one narrative of Squibb's life, which we will come back to.

The other narrative is that he was a jazz musician and promoter of that musical form. Following a stint in the U. S. Army from 1950 to 1952, Squibb edited and prepared jazz records for William Russell in Chicago and became known in the area for his musicianship. Then in 1954 began a twenty-five year hiatus that was more literary than musical, but from 1980 to 1985 Squibb returned to his first love: he was appointed Curator of Printed Music at the William Ransom Hogan Archives of New Orleans Jazz at Tulane University. The obituaries for Squibb in 2003 remember him mostly for his work on the history of jazz, mentioning among other things that he wrote liner notes for important jazz recordings, such as Jimmy Witherspoon's "Evenin' Blues".

In the same vein, the eighteen boxes of Squibb's papers held by the University of Chicago Library are valued because of his work in jazz history. The Squibb collection consists of discographies, printed and handwritten music, correspondence, interviews, songbooks, liner notes, photographs of black musicians, and so forth. Aside from letters to Squibb from other musicians, the collection includes valuable photocopies of correspondence and music by jazz greats. Prominent in the collection are items relating to Scott Joplin and Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton, d. 1941.

Now what about Squibb's day job? From 1954 to 1964 he was managing editor of the *American Peoples Encyclopedia*, a reference work published by the Spencer Press in Chicago and first copyrighted in 1948. Various revised editions

followed, for which it is hard to find precise documentation, but by 1957 the *American Peoples Encyclopedia* was published in twenty volumes. At some point before the 1962 edition appeared, the Grolier Company, publisher of U. S. family favorites like *Encyclopedia Americana* and the *Book of Knowledge,* acquired the *American Peoples Encyclopedia* and a comprehensive revision of the set was undertaken.

It was then that Squibb hearkened back to his old learned professor, commissioning Rosenstock-Huessy to write more than seventy entries for the 1962 edition of the encyclopedia. The titles of these entries are listed by Lise van der Molen in his indispensable *Guide to the Works of Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy* (Argo Books, 1997), pp. 140-145, and the texts of the entries are duly reproduced in the *Collected Works on DVD*, copied from the earlier microfilm. Van der Molen had to do a considerable amount of digging to determine which entries were by Rosenstock-Huessy, since not all of them are signed, and the surviving correspondence between Squibb and his revered professor is slim. Hence, the list published in the *Guide to the Works* cannot be considered complete. Dr. van der Molen has in hand the facts needed for a definitive list, which will one day be available. A few of the entries reproduced initially in the microfilm collection of works by Rosenstock-Huessy, and now incorporated in the *Collected Works on DVD*, such as the essay on the "University", are not listed by van der Molen, although from the content there can be no doubt of the authorship.

It would be tedious to list here all of the topics Squibb and Rosenstock-Huessy settled on, but the choices are highly revealing of Rosenstock-Huessy's deepest concerns, whether he viewed the subject positively or negatively: "Pierre Abelard", "René Descartes", "Dialogue", "Ralph Waldo Emerson", "Michael Faraday", "Name", "John Henry Cardinal Newman", "Friedrich Nietzsche", "Paracelsus", "Revolution", "Claude Henri de Saint-Simon", "Giovanni Battista Vico", "Walt Whitman", to cite a few. Some of the entries are about relatively obscure figures, leading one to guess that no one above Squibb was paying much attention to what properly belonged in an "American Peoples" encyclopedia: "Karl Sudhoff", "Johannes Vahlen", "Hans Vaihinger", "Valentinus", "Michael George Francis Ventris", "Karl Adolph Vernet". These entries were all necessary in Rosenstock-Huessy's view, however, because they reinforced arguments he

made in other entries. The story of Paracelsus cannot be told without mentioning Sudhoff, for example. In other words, many of the entries by Rosenstock-Huessy are interconnected and support one another by cross referencing.

There are also a few surprise entries by Rosenstock-Huessy: "Vampire", "Zen", and "Ludwig Wittgenstein", for example. The Rosenstock-Huessy Archive at Dartmouth even has a few manuscripts of entries intended for the APE that for one reason or another never made it into print. But perhaps understandably, there is no evidence that Squibb asked Rosenstock-Huessy to write on jazz or blues.

Most of the entries are just one or two pages long, in these large format books. Lise van der Molen sometimes listed Squibb as the "co-author", which he confesses was an arbitrary and perhaps unfounded assumption. Good editors are sometimes virtual co-authors, but these essays, although highly compressed and written in unadorned, straightforward prose, have Rosenstock-Huessy stamped all over them, and Squibb's contribution, if any, must have been minor and confined to mechanics. The requirement of merciless concision in composition of this sort forced Rosenstock-Huessy to single out quickly what he judged was the enduring significance of a life or what he deemed the essence of a topic, and predictably his judgments were often unconventional.

It is a bit surprising that Rosenstock-Huessy, the historian, was not asked to summarize and comment on at least a few major events in European history, but the entries for which he was commissioned are almost all biographical or philosophical. It is likely that some other editor of the encyclopedia, not Squibb, was responsible for entries on history.

Prof. Rosenstock-Huessy accepted this work not because he was struck by its enduring importance but because, like many retired academicians in those days, his income was insufficient, and Squibb was offering, at a few hundred dollars an essay, a respectable way to increase it, if only temporarily. Whatever the motivation, we have to be grateful to Squibb for eliciting this revealing writing by the great man. Indeed, if all of Rosenstock-Huessy's *American Peoples Encyclopedia* entries were to be collected into a little book, it would be a valuable, highly readable, trenchant sampling, in not more than 250 pages, of the author's stance on a range of subjects. Such a work is all the more needed because,

according to Raymond Huessy, who owns two sets of the APE, in editions after 1962 some of the more controversial of the entries by Rosenstock-Huessy were replaced with "standard information".

There is one more chapter regarding Francis Squibb and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy. In 1965 Squibb left the encyclopedia and moved from Chicago to Tuscaloosa, to be the editor-in-chief of the University of Alabama Press, where he remained for the next fifteen years. It can be deduced from that fact that the publication by Alabama in 1969 of *Judaism Despite Christianity: The "Letters on Christianity and Judaism" between Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and Franz Rosenzweig*, edited by Rosenstock-Huessy, was no fluke. In fact, it seems there was even talk in the 1960s of Alabama publishing the complete works, but the author, eighty years old in 1968, no longer had the stamina to oversee thousands of pages of translations and the like. The chance of a lifetime had thus come too late. Rosenstock-Huessy often mused about the significance of timing in life, quoting Shakespeare's "ripeness is all". "When", he said, is always the greatest of questions. How many worthy endeavors fail because they are simply too early, and how many opportunities are fatefully lost because the moment has passed. He called for a *science* of timing, that is, a more developed recognition of the "too early" and the "too late" as a recurrent element in the biographical study of success or failure.

During their many years of collaboration, Rosenstock-Huessy and Squibb must have talked about jazz. Did Rosenstock-Huessy appreciate Jelly Roll Morton? Alas, we know nothing about that. He was certainly devoted to music and referred to it in many different contexts. I once heard him say that his ideal retirement would be to live in Milan and regularly attend the opera at La Scala. Some of his favorite metaphors were drawn from music. He told his students that each should aspire to be a note in the great symphony that is the history of humankind—an elevating but far from easy demand.

The power of music exemplifies the nature of authentic listening for Rosenstock-Huessy. Between the listener and the music there are no barriers. In a lecture to Barnard College girls in 1962, he said: " In music, the individual person is of no importance. And that's a condition of her listening to the music. It's the exclusion of the personal which makes music possible. . . . God created

one universe permeated by sound and swallowing up your little resistence. . . ." Music has nothing to do with the brain. "It has to *fight* the preconceptions of your brain." In general, "to listen means to break down the barriers of the visible world. And you cannot listen to God, or to religion, or to poetry, or to wisdom, or to a command given by a commander in the field, if you cannot for one moment deny that there is a wall between the speaker and the listener. For this one moment, the man who makes the sound, . . . and the man who intercepts it must be united." Thus, "in any speech recurs the musical experience that the listener and the speaker form one body politic. . . ." "God has given us this faculty of melting down—in humility, in obedience, in enthusiasm, in conviction—the walls of our being." The thought is as applicable to Jelly Roll Morton as to Janacek.

In *Out of Revolution* Rosenstock-Huessy addressed the mystery of how it was that Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, all arose in German-speaking culture. Why this particular unequaled concentration of genius? One answer is that the Lutheran Reformation, including Luther's own writing of scores of hymns, was among other things a reaction against the visual focus of Roman Catholicism. Sermons and hymns were the Lutheran way, or let's just say, listening in church, as opposed to looking. That insight holds even though Mozart was a Roman Catholic because of the overwhelming influence of Bach. Rosenstock-Huessy warned regularly against the perils in modernity of a culture so heavily centered on the visual, on what fascinates the eye as opposed to the more profound response we have from that we learn through the ear. Walter J. Ong's wonderful Terry lectures at Yale, published in 1967 as *The Presence of the Word*, took as its epigraph a quotation from Rosenstock-Huessy's *Soziologie*: "Experiences of the first order, of the first rank, are not realized through the eye."

Old encyclopedias, like old textbooks, are an extremely perishable genre of printed matter. Regularly revised to keep up with the latest information, the earlier versions are simply trashed as being superseded. Almost no libraries collect such works, and because their monetary value is nil they do not circulate in the used book market. There are a few exceptions, like the 9th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, published in the late 19th century, which will always be valued because of the brilliant scholarship of some of the longer contributions.

The *American Peoples Encyclopedia* can expect no comparable fate. It is doomed to oblivion.

Francis Squibb's devotion to Prof. Rosenstock-Huessy is notable but not altogether uncommon among his students. On the occasion of Rosenstock-Huessy's 70th birthday in 1958, Squibb sent to his mentor a letter so personal and private one hesitates to bring it to light, but I think it is relevant to an understanding of Rosenstock-Huessy as well as Squibb. The letter, undated, was probably written just after Sunday, September 21, 1958. A group of Rosenstock-Huessy's former students organized a three-day birthday celebration that weekend at the farm in Tunbridge, Vermont, of Bob and Anne O'Brien. Squibb seems to be alluding to that event in the letter. Rosenstock-Huessy lectured on each of the three days.

The italics in this transcription were converted from Squibb's underlining in the original. Brackets indicate my insertions. The letter is handwritten on both sides of a single sheet.

Dear Eugen, on your 70th

There is so much that I want to say, and *fortunately* so little space: a few words may be better. I do not feel you are retired, since in the many years since I was privileged to hear you, you have continued to live in my memory—that part of my memory that has led me into the best of which I have been capable. If I am ever able to say or do—in any way, to help some other person as you, perhaps without realizing it, have helped me: only then will I feel that I will have at least in part discharged my debt —my obligation. You are the most *honest* person I've ever met, heard, or read. I am profoundly grateful that I have known you, a little; it saddens me that I cannot be *more*, the better to do you honor—but I *try* to be better, & I try to understand, [—] too many words & not the right ones: I will never forget you, & you will be part of whatever I may become. I hope this may be something worthy. (over)

As my wife Mary could tell you, I have instantly "invoked" you at moments of importance—I am proud that in her brief glimpses of you this weekend she has [illeg., come?] to share my admiration and devotion.

As I have said to you before, you *are* (for me) DARTMOUTH—I cannot imagine the place without you. I cannot imagine *myself* without having known your words, & struggled (I still struggle) to understand & to *apply* them.

Although I was not privileged to share as much with you as many students, I regard you as my best friend— & I feel that this will always be so.

Perhaps all the above can be disregarded: it boils down to the *fact* that you made me aware of life & its potential as no one else, & for this I owe you my life itself!

Your devoted student & friend, Francis Squibb

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What follows is a single entry by Rosenstock-Huessy from the 1962 *American Peoples Encyclopedia*. This piece was not signed, for a reason that becomes evident in the text. I have introduced a couple of paragraph indentations not in the original.

EXISTENTIALISM, a poorly defined doctrine in philosophy. It is popularly understood to be a school of philosophy that began with the Danish philosopher Sören Kierkegaard's revolt against systematic philosophy as exemplified for him in the philosophy of Hegel; thought of in this way, existentialism is supposed to have reached its greatest development in Germany and France after World War I, with Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre among the major figures. Actually, however, existentialism is less a school than it is a tendency, or a manner of approaching philosophical problems, that has existed at least from the time of Socrates, and probably from an even earlier time. Thinkers, poets, and others not immediately identified with the intellectualized existentialism that gained popularity after World War II under the aegis of Jean-Paul Sartre are usually described as existential. Sartre himself has objected to being called an existentialist, since this word has been loosely applied to a wide variety of thinkers, many of whom completely disagree with each other on most issues.

At least four different approaches may be discerned in twentieth-century existentialism, with a considerable degree of interlocking among them. The most commonly noted division exists between the Christian existentialists and the atheistic existentialists. But both "Christian" and "atheistic" are misleading in this context: a leading Christian existentialist like Gabriel Marcel, for example, probably would feel a closer affinity to the atheistic existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre than to what he might call "conventionalized Christianity"; Sartre probably would feel a closer identification with Marcel than, for example, with the logical positivists who share his tendency to aggressive atheistic protest. Marcel, a Christian, probably would feel closer to Martin Buber, an existential Jewish theologian than to Jacques Maritain, a leading

representative of Neo-Thomism.

Neo-Thomism is the third existentialist group and involves an explication of what the Neo-Thomists consider the existential aspects of the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas; the other important Neo-Thomist is Etienne Gilson, the noted medievalist. Both Buber and Marcel are important exponents of the "philosophy of dialogue" (sometimes called the higher grammar and philosophy of meeting), a fourth major tendency in twentieth-century existential thought. The other major figures in this school are the Jewish philosopher and theologian Franz Rosenzweig and the Christian philosopher of history Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, who of the four was the most germinal since he was the first to explore this line of thought (in the essay "Grammar of the Soul," 1916, in *Angewandte Seelenkunde,* 1924) and was the most penetrating and versatile in applying it to his life and work (see DIALOGUE). With the exception of the Neo-Thomists, the philosophers of dialogue most successfully avoided the taint of cultism that characterized much of the existentialist movement after World War I, particularly in France after 1945.

Life as the Existentialists See It. Despite the immense areas of disagreement among existentialists, it is possible to discern certain themes which, however variously expressed, seem common to them all. All agree on the contingency of human life. Man shares life, but "life is that process which produces corpses" (as defined by the German physiologist Rudolph Ehrenberg) and "we think because we are going to die" (Rosenstock-Huessy). Death looms large: it is one of the "existential moments" (in Kierkegaard's phrase) that cannot be avoided or shared. Sartre is at some pains to stress the fact that no one can die for anyone else. Because of this, say the existentialists, it is folly for the philosopher or the artist to imagine that his system of thought or feeling is in any real sense objective. Objectivity is possible only for God; since the atheistic existentialists deny the existence of God, or even the possibility of His existing, there is for them no such thing as objective truth; for the Christian existentialists it is deemed presumptuous for any *man* to claim possession of objective truth. For Kierkegaard, Hegel was wrong in thinking that he was not himself a character in his massive system. René Descartes, the great "scientific rationalist," began his system with the single assumption, "*cogito ergo sum*" (I think, therefore I am). The "I"—Descartes himself or any other thinker—is presumed to be a constant: Descartes was ashamed of his pre-rational life as a child and he imagined that having reached rational maturity he could speak of himself as "I" with perfect objectivity. See DESCARTES, RENÉ.

Not so, say the existentialists. Both Hegel and Descartes delude themselves into thinking that essence (the abstract it-ness of a thing, person, or idea) precedes existence

(the concrete thou-ness of a thing, person, or idea). For the existentialist, existence precedes essence, which means that a person lives (is involved in contingent change, and can himself change so as to be different than before) before he dies (is no longer able to change or to be changed, and is therefore knowable for what he is, or was). Until a person dies, he can always change his essence; hence his essence (his Being) cannot be known until after his death. Kierkegaard's title, *Stages on Life's Way* (1845) expresses the existentialist's awareness that the "I" of the thinker is not the same throughout his life: that the "I" changes as the thinker moves through the stages toward his own death, the awareness of which becomes the beginning of his thought. The interpretation of the Crucifixion is, in this light, important to the Christian existentialists. Throughout His life, Jesus never would admit He was the Christ; only on the cross would He admit that He was God; also, the "death" of Christ on the cross becomes the true beginning for any Christian—these are but two phases of the significance existentialists have seen in this important event in human and divine history.

Realizing that he will die and that at that moment he will cease to be a mystery and will become knowable (although perhaps with difficulty), the existentialist feels that everything he does, thinks, or says is of the utmost importance because by his actions, thoughts, and words he is creating in life what he will have become in death. The existentialists also believe that however they may strive, they will, in death, fail to "measure up"—either to God's wish, or to their own self-conception. Only God's grace could help, and this is denied by the atheists. Sartre's reaction to all this is nausea (the title of his first novel). Dread and anguish are felt by others. The existentialist maintains that the vices, the "seven deadly sins," the willful avoidance of life through alcohol and narcotics, and the like, are literally ways to avoid facing one's own death and its implications—for the existentialists believe that their doctrine consists of conceptions so fundamental as to be known intuitively by everyone.

What can man do in such dreary circumstances? It would be suicide to give up simply because the cause is hopeless. He must act. He must decide. He must commit himself. For the grammarians he must "speak himself into existence"—must enter into a dialogue, a meeting, with others of faith and so break "the chains of nothingness" (loneliness and estrangement). The slogan "*Cogito ergo sum*," which ignores time and contingency, is replaced (by Rosenstock-Huessy and others) with the contingent, time-conscious "*Respondeo ne moriar*" (I respond lest I die).

Influence of Existentialism. For the existentialists themselves existential thinking is considered the redemption of philosophy. Apart from the lunatic aspects of the Sartrist cult in France after World War II the movement had considerable influence,

although less in the United States and Great Britain than in Europe. If the influence of such existential non-existentialists as Friedrich Nietzsche, Franz Kafka, Rainer Rilke, Albert Camus, Miguel de Unamuno, André Malraux, Reinhold Niehbuhr, and many others were considered, the ultimate impact of the tendency might be considerably greater than the detractors of existentialism were at mid-twentieth century willing to admit. Existentialism also influenced formal philosophy, particularly metaphysics and ethics. Metaphysicians found refreshing the existentialist stress on "nothingness" as distinct from "being," and in existentialism's philosophy and theology of crisis and decision ethical relativism was formidably challenged.

At the end of this entry, as in all of the encyclopedia entries, there is a bibliography or list of references. About twenty titles are cited, which I am not reprinting here but which should be considered an integral part of the entry, even though we will never know to what extent the list represents actual preferences of Rosenstock-Huessy's or are merely standard sources.