ROSENSTOCK-HUESSY AND THE GREEKS

Edward F. Little

One of the questions facing us here is: how academic should we be? Professor Bryant, to whom we are indebted for organizing this conference, wisely faced this question at the very outset, and suggested one and only one criterion for our papers and our discussion: whatever their form, let them only contribute to the understanding and critical assessment of Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy. If we accept this, one may be as academic as one wishes. I am not going to be academic, but I hope some others will be. It will certainly be a challenge to Rosenstock-Huessy. He was often very unacademic and against the academics. This is the message of his "conjuration," the letter of Heraclitus to Parmenides. It was the message also of his frequent allusions to the Greeks in his lectures in those old days some of you remember well at Dartmouth College in the 1930's and early 40's. He condemned Plato for his static idealism, and the Greeks generally for their academicism.

Why did he pick upon the Greeks and on Plato and Parmenides in particular? The Greeks, not just Heraclitus, could be very unacademic. That their wars and politics and religious observations were not academic matters, can be made obvious in short order. Consult Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon and latterly Jane Ellen Harrison. I will hazard a guess that either (1) the origin of this one-sided view of the ancient Greeks lay in an emphasis on this aspect in his early school and university training, or (2) he deliberately chose it, exercising perfectly proper poetic or artistic license, to illustrate his underlying thesis, the sterility of academicism, or (3) both.

Rosenstock-Huessy's little essay, "Akademik oder Argonautik?" (Mitteilungsblatt der Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy Gesellschaft, 1981), would seem to be evidence that he was quite well aware that there was much more in Greek history and classical studies than the academic side. That is what the "Argonautik" in his title stands for.

The actual progress of classical studies in the last half-century reflects just the progress that he asked for. In the field of history the scene has widened considerably "beyond Salamis." Witness A. R. Burn's two masterly books, The Lyric Age of Greece and Persia and the Greeks (N.Y., St. Martin's Press, 1960 and 1962). In linguistics the work of Michael Ventris and John Chadwick upon the linear B tablets at Pylos is famous. In archeology the discoveries from Schliemann to Blegen are finding their ways into the history books. Good popular presentations of all this are in Joseph Alsop's From the Silent Earth and Prof. H. D. F. Kitto's The Greeks. But perhaps better than all these are the marvellous

new translations of nearly all the main literary sources. When we were in school, what did we have? We had Lang, Leaf and Myers' Homer, Benjamin Jowett's Plato, and the like. They were repellant to the twentieth century ear, if not questionable in other respects. What would we not have given for a good and faithful rendering of Aristophanes? Now all this has changed, thanks especially to the leadership of the late Prof. E. V. Rieu, founding editor of the Penguin Classics. These are superb translations, easily available and relatively cheap. There is no excuse any more for not going beyond Salamis, each one of us, by ourselves, in the sources, whether in Greek or English.

In the field of philosophy the horizons have also spread. Plato, in much of the new Bollingen Series edition (The Collected Dialogues of Plato, N.Y., Pantheon Books, 1961) or in any of the Penguin editions of his dialogues, is revealed as something more than an academic philosopher, as a poet, a dramatist, a humorist at times, in all a thoroughly well-rounded man. The relationship of Plato and Aristotle, for over four centuries stereotyped as in Raffaelo Sanzio's The School of Athens, is being revised. The presocratic philosophers have received excellent new studies, individually and collectively, that have broadened and deepened our knowledge and understanding of them. Not the least of these studies are Philip Wheelwright's Heraclitus and The Presocratics, mentioned here because some of you knew Philip. I am myself engaged in a reassessment of Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle, that will be made available to those of you who are interested in detail and to an extent that time does not permit us here. Much has changed and is still changing in respect to our knowledge and understanding of the ancient Greeks. Rosenstock-Huessy's views may now seem out of date.

Rosenstock-Huessy was a very persuasive writer and speaker. His influence upon me was important in many respects, and I am grateful to him for it. But sometimes he would have made the Irish blush with his blarney, and I wish to challenge him on it. The Greeks are one such instance. They were much more than he sometimes made them out to be, and he showed evidence of knowing that himself. Then are we to accuse him of dishonesty? By no means. What we have to do with here is the old dichotomy of art and science, fiction and fact, poetry and prose. And also with the distinction that there are good and bad to be found in the academic world just as in all other walks of life. And again with the observation of the Preacher, the son of David, in 3 Ecclesiastes, that "to everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under the heaven." He might have included in his list "a time for academics and a time for action, a time for Paramenides and a time for Heraclitus.

It is no secret that many of us who knew Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, when we were young people in the late 30's and early 40's, were spellbound on the one hand, and had difficulty fitting him into our own lives on the other. This was due in part to our youthfulness and lack of experience and wisdom. Often we were unable to distinguish the poetry from the prose. But all this was and is our responsibility, not his. We now have the means to sort it out. The case of the Greeks is a case in point. I have endeavored to suggest some sources and some comprehensive studies available to the general reader.

Claremont, California
December, 1981

ADDENDUM

As examples of Rosenstock-Huessy's use of the Greeks I have cited two cases, (1) "Heraclitus to Parmenides," chapter seven in I am an impure thinker, Norwich, Vermont, Argo Books, 1970, p. 77-90, and (2) "Akademik oder Argonautik," in Mitteilungsblatt der Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy-Gesellschaft, 1981, p. 5-10.

(1) "Heraclitus to Parmenides" is vintage Rosenstock-Huessy linguistics. It is a superb essay contra academicos. It is true, as a valid imperative. But it is not history, and the knowing reader will not cite it as history. At least, of the Greeks. The close reader of the opening paragraph will observe that Rosenstock-Huessy reveals a quite different game. The object of his scorn is not the Greek philosophers, but our view of them. In "our time . . . we are taking it for granted . . . we are not surprised," etc. "The metaphysical prison in which subject and object, mind and body, nature and society were forever separated" is a prison only in the context of Rosenstock-Huessy's particular point: his battle with sterile academicism in our time. In other contexts it was a great liberation. His point may be quite justifiable, but it is not to be confused with source history. And on we could go, but it would be pedantic to do so, unless we wish to mistake the truth of Rosenstock-Huessy's diatribe against academicism for historical research.

(2) In "Akademik oder Argonautik?" Rosenstock-Huessy is explicit in his campaign for a Greek history that transcends the limits of vision of the nineteenth and early twentieth century academic world. He knew his Greek history, and anticipated the progress of the specialists in the mid-twentieth century, as we have already noted. Whether the general temper of our culture has caught on is another question. It needs time of course for the

Addendum-continued

circulation of thought to take place. But Rosenstock-Huessy was no fool. He made history sing his song when he wished, and we simply should not confuse the two. In my opinion, the only point he did not see, or at least state, was that even the most academic of the Greeks, Plato himself, and Aristotle, are due for a revised understanding on our part. But that is another story altogether.

In conclusion I wish to repeat that the purpose of this paper has not been to document all or even many of Rosenstock-Huessy's allusions to the Greeks. I have chosen two that are at hand that I believe are typical. My purpose has been to "contribute to the understanding and critical assessment of Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy," but this demands an understanding and critical assessment of ourselves. Am I prone to pick up the words without going back to the sources and making or not making them my own inferences? His outrage at academicism may well have been justifiable, but this did not slight his own research or excuse me from mine.