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THE REVIVAL OF MAX STIRNER

BY LAWRENCE S. STEPELEVICH

In November 1844, Engels wrote his second letter to Marx.¹ He reported first on a visit to Moses Hess in Cologne, and then went on to note that Hess had given him a press copy of a new book by Max Stirner, *Der Einzige und Sein Eigenthum*.² Johann Caspar Schmidt (1806–56), who wrote and was known as Max Stirner, had been a close friend of Engels during the year Engels spent in Berlin. However, both had arrived too late to meet Karl Marx. Engels must have been impressed by Stirner, who was his senior by a number of years, for Engels was able to render a pencil sketch of Stirner fifty years later, and recalled that they were “great friends [*Duzbrüder*].”

In his letter to Marx, Engels promised that he would send a copy of *Der Einzige* to him, for it certainly deserved their attention, as Stirner “had obviously, among the ‘Free Ones,’ the most talent, independence and diligence.” The “Free Ones,” in this case, referred to that group of radical Berlin publicists, poets and philosophers who gathered daily in Hippel’s *Weinstube* to prepare for the coming revolution. In effect they were the last remnants of Bruno Bauer’s “Doktorklub,” the same club which had once numbered Marx as a prominent member.

Shortly after having met Stirner in the Fall of 1842, Engels, in a crude ink sketch, gave a visual impression of what it must have been like during a typical evening among the “Free Ones.”³ The radical Hegelians, Köppen, Ruge, Rutenburg, and others, are seen in varying degrees of drunkenness and argumentation. In the confusion of the cafe, only the figure of Stirner is silent and withdrawn. This sketch of Engels has well captured the character of Stirner, for it is not the portrait of a serene spirit, but of a detached and reflective one, not angry but ironic, less bitter than satiric, and it is this same spirit which stands forth in *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum*, or as the major English edition would have it, *The Ego and His Own*.⁴

Among the “Free Ones,” Stirner was then known as the author of a few articles, and as a failed candidate for the doctorate at the University of Berlin. The appearance of *The Ego and His Own* came as a shock, for it immediately established Stirner among the most formidable opponents of the very people with which he had seemed to have so much in common. The communists, the critical philosophers, the humanitarians and reformers of every degree were assailed in Stirner’s philosophy, a philosophy which Engels labeled “Egoism.”

In the same letter to Marx, Engels was well aware of the extreme nature of this philosophy. Engels judged that Stirner had indeed captured “the essence of

¹Marx-Engels, *Werke*, XXVII (Berlin, 1956–68), 9.

²*Der Einzige und Sein Eigenthum* (Leipzig, 1845 [1844]).

³*Werke*, XXVII, 400.

⁴M. Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, trans. Steven T. Byington (New York, 1963). All citations are taken from this edition.

present society and present man,” and it called for an answer. The answer that developed was included within *The German Ideology*. This abusive and exhaustive rebuttal of Stirner’s book filled more pages than that book itself. And in the unpublishable *German Ideology*, as Isaiah Berlin has described it, Stirner “is pursued through five hundred pages of heavy-handed mockery and insult.”⁵

Besides Marx and Engels, a number of others hurried to publish a response against Stirner’s thesis. Among the young Hegelians, Bruno Bauer, Arnold Ruge, Moses Hess, and even the famous Feuerbach joined forces in order to combat Stirner’s menacing doctrine of Egoism. But the speculative excitement was as brief as it was furious, and the political events of 1848 obliterated the traces of those philosophical struggles which had preceded them.

And so, although Stirner’s work had not fallen stillborn from the press, it had certainly died in its infancy. Stirner himself died, in obscurity and poverty, a dozen years after the publication of his singular work. His later writings were both few and disappointing.

In 1887, thirty-nine years after the first appearance of *Der Einzige*, a Scottish poet turned Germanophile, John Henry Mackay, happened to read a brief citation regarding Stirner in Lange’s *History of Materialism*. In part it read, “The man who in German literature has most preached Egoism recklessly and logically—Max Stirner—finds himself in distinct opposition to Feuerbach.” Mackay’s curiosity was satisfied a year later when he managed to secure a copy of *Der Einzige*. He immediately became a disciple of Stirner, and almost single-handedly—as he later claimed—sparked what has since been called the “Stirner renaissance.” By 1900, Stirner had become something more than a philosophical fad, and yet he remained, as ever, much less than a major figure.

The Stirner revival was concurrent with the discovery of Nietzsche, with Stirner playing the role of a proto-Nietzsche. As Karl Löwith has said, “Stirner has often been compared with Nietzsche, to the point of asserting that Stirner was the ‘intellectual arsenal’ from which Nietzsche derived his weapons.”⁶ Indeed, they have much in common. The public interest over anarchy also quickened the Stirner renaissance, for was it not Engels himself who, in 1888, declared Stirner “the prophet of contemporary anarchism?”⁷

The publication history of *The Ego and His Own* attests to the strength of the first Stirner revival. Forty-nine editions appeared between 1900 and 1929. Of these, there were fourteen German editions, the rest were in translation, with ten Russian editions, seven Japanese editions, and six English editions. The remaining editions were published in French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, and Polish.⁸

But once again, as before, interest in Stirner faded, and from the thirties to the present, he had remained virtually unnoticed. Even among the few who knew of him, opinion was radically divided. Most of these few must have agreed with

⁵I. Berlin, *Karl Marx* (New York, 1963), 143.

⁶K. Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche* (New York, 1964), 187.

⁷F. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (New York, 1941), 17.

⁸For a complete bibliography: Hans G. Helms, *Die Ideology der anonymen Gesellschaft* (Cologne, 1966), 510–600.

James Joll, who simply declared that "Stirner was not a very important thinker nor a very interesting one." But there were a few, during that period, who better understood the meaning of Stirner. In 1939, Sidney Hook indicated that the forgotten debate between Marx and Stirner involved "the fundamental problems of any possible system of ethics or public morality,"⁹ and in 1939, Isaiah Berlin noted that "the theory of the alienation of the proletarians was enunciated by Max Stirner at least one year before Marx."¹⁰ But these voices were in the minority of a minority.

Then, in 1968, a new German edition of *Der Einzige*, the first since 1929, made its appearance.¹¹ It had been preceded, two years earlier, by a full study of Stirner's thought and influence,¹² the first since Henri Avron, in 1954, had linked Stirner and Existentialism.¹³ Professor John Carroll of Cambridge has edited a new English edition,¹⁴ and Dover Press has reissued Byington's translation of *The Ego and His Own*.

The year 1971 saw the publication of the first comprehensive study of Stirner's philosophy ever to appear in English—R.W.K. Paterson's *The Nihilistic Egoist*.¹⁵ The few students of Stirner have also been encouraged by the publication of William Brazill's work, *The Young Hegelians*¹⁶ as well as David McLellan's recent work *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx*,¹⁷ both of which direct considerable attention to the thought of Max Stirner. Are we witnessing the beginning of another cycle of interest in Stirner?

As was noted above, the initial publication of *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* caused a great deal of excitement, but the excitement was still tightly contained within the narrow circle of the Young Hegelian school. To be sure, as Sidney Hook described it, the book "exploded like a bomb-shell among the ranks of his former comrades-in-arms."¹⁸ Its effects, particularly upon the work of Karl Marx, have yet to be fully assessed. The reappearance of Stirner's book at the turn of the century caused a more extensive, if less exciting, response. Its influence at that time was more political than philosophical as seen in the recent study of Hans G. Helms, *Die Ideologie der anonymen Gesellschaft*.¹⁹ That influence, particularly among the new right, or the libertarian movements, is still with us. Presently, the continuing interest in the early writings of Karl Marx might serve to occasion a reconsideration of Stirner's role in philosophic history.

However, although revivals of interest in Stirner's thought might well be provoked by any number of real or imagined connections with whatever or

⁹S. Hook, *From Hegel to Marx* (Ann Arbor, 1962; New York, 1936¹), 165.

¹⁰Karl Marx, *op. cit.*, 15.

¹¹Hans G. Helms, ed., *Max Stirner: Der Einzige und sein Eigentum und andere Schriften* (Munich, 1968).

¹²See above, note 8.

¹³H. Avron, *Aux Sources de l'existentialisme: Max Stirner* (Paris, 1954).

¹⁴J. Carroll, *Max Stirner: The Ego and His Own* (London, 1971).

¹⁵R.W.K. Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist* (Oxford, 1971).

¹⁶W. Brazill, *The Young Hegelians* (New Haven, 1970).

¹⁷D. McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx* (London, 1969).

¹⁸S. Hook, *From Hegel to Marx*, 173.

¹⁹H.G. Helms, *Die Ideologie der anonymen Gesellschaft, op. cit.*

whomever is of current concern, his thought has endured by reason of its intrinsic merit. He cannot be totally reduced to the level of a forerunner of either Marx or Nietzsche, anymore than he can be placed, *à la* Franz Mehring "as the last offshoot of Hegelian Philosophy."²⁰ Unless, of course, we understand this to indicate more than Mehring intends.

R.W.K. Paterson, in his extensive study, proposes that "Stirner's chief claim to our continuing attention arises . . . from his unique contribution to the development and self-understanding of radical atheism."²¹ This is a point well taken, for the atheism of Stirner forces a critical confrontation with all established thought, and it is in virtue of his capacity to compel us to look directly at the consequences of total atheism that Stirner can claim our philosophic attention.

During the Spring semester of 1827, both Feuerbach and Stirner had attended Hegel's lectures on Religion, and in the Fall they again enrolled for his lectures on the History of Philosophy. In time, they drew the same conclusion: Hegel was a theologian. Feuerbach's judgment of 1843, that "speculative philosophy is the true, consistent and rational theology,"²² supports the observation of Richard Kroner that "Hegel's philosophy is in itself a speculative religion—Christianity spelt by dialectic."²³

But whereas Feuerbach thought himself advancing by discovering Hegel's *Geist* to be God rationalized, and God to be Man alienated, Stirner drew another conclusion. Rather than advancing, Feuerbach had merely stumbled, and now looked up devoutly to another theophany, Man. To Stirner it really made very little difference whether the holy be called *Geist*, God, Man, or State, for the posture of all believers was the same. Stirner replied to Feuerbach:

The supreme being is indeed the essence of man, but, just because it is his essence and not he himself, it remains quite immaterial whether we see it outside him and view it as "God," or find it in him and call it "Essence of Man" or "Man." I am neither God nor *Man*, neither the supreme essence nor my essence, and therefore it is all one in the main whether I think of the essence as in me or outside me.²⁴

Stirner's egoism springs from a conscious and total atheism, with this playful indifference and apathy to any higher essence being the prerequisite for encountering one's own being, one's uniqueness, *Einzigkeit*. The pleasures of unalienated self-possession rests upon the degree to which the supernatural is rejected. Conscious impiety, rejection of the holy in any of its forms, irreverence, and amorality provide the key to self-contentment. The supernatural appears whenever the thinker disclaims ownership, *Eigenthum*, of his thoughts, with the result that these abstract essences are prepared to take upon them an ontological role. As psychologically concrete entities, these abstract essences such as Man,

²⁰F. Mehring, *Karl Marx* (Ann Arbor, 1962), 104.

²¹R.W.K. Paterson, *The Nihilistic Egoist*, 206.

²²L. Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (Indianapolis, 1966), 6.

²³R. Kroner's introduction to Hegel's *On Christianity: Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Gloucester, Mass., 1970), 53.

²⁴M. Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, 33.

God, Mankind, State, and Truth, stand over and against the individual thinker in their hostile demands to be served and worshipped. In short, they have turned against their creator. Feuerbach understood this principle when he described God as the alienated essence of Man, but he failed to pursue this logic to its final destination and assert that Man was the alienated essence of the individual ego. With Feuerbach, men were liberated from their servitude under God only to be pressed into the service of Man. From God alone, to Christ, the God-as-Man, to Feuerbach's Man-as-God, nothing had changed except the abode of God. As Stirner concluded, "The HUMAN religion is only the last metamorphosis of the Christian religion."

When the transcendent God of Aquinas became incarnate in Hegel and humanized in Feuerbach, it was left for Stirner to take the final step and declare the individual to be whatever God there need be. If to Aquinas God is the presupposition of finite being, and to Hegel the presupposition is featureless Being awaiting determination, and to Feuerbach it is Man, to Stirner it becomes the unique ego, *Der Einzige*.

I on my part start from a presupposition in presupposing *myself*; but my presupposition does not struggle for its perfection like "Man struggling for his perfection," but only serves me to enjoy it and consume it. I consume my presupposition, and nothing else, and exist only in consuming it. . . . I am creator and creature in one.²⁵

In short, as a good egoist, he serves only himself.

At this point one can agree with Mehring's judgment on Stirner—that he was "the last offshoot of Hegelian Philosophy"—but only if it be taken, as it was not intended, to indicate that the egotism of Stirner was both a destined upshot and negation of Hegel's dialectical inevitability. Karl Löwith's judgment is similar to Mehring's, but differs in connotation:

Stirner's book . . . has usually been considered the anarchic product of an eccentric, but it is in reality an ultimate logical consequence of Hegel's historical system which—allegorically displaced—it reproduced exactly.²⁶

Stirner, like Hegel, saw himself as the heir of a spiritual line which could be traced to the origins of conscious history. But whereas Hegel accepted this patrimony, becoming a dutiful servant of the *Geist*, Stirner rejected it. He chose to be without presupposition, without past value or vocation. The final paragraph of *The Ego and His Own* reads:

I am the owner of my might, and I am so when I know myself as *unique*. In the *unique one* the owner himself returns in to his creative nothing, of which he is born. Every higher essence above me, be it God, be it man, weakens the feeling of uniqueness, and pales only before the sun of this consciousness. If I concern myself for myself, the unique one, then my concern rests on its transitory, mortal creator, who consumes himself, and I may say: All things are nothing to me.²⁷

²⁵*Idem*, *Ego*, 150.

²⁶K. Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, 102.

²⁷*Idem*, *Ego*, 336.

This radical denial, the final demonic Nay-saying, can stand as either a beginning or an end. Stirner prepares for either Nietzsche's Yea-saying or the existentialist termination of the role of reason in history.

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