

..Nature Heals: The Psychological Essays of Paul Goodman



Paul Goodman at a street rally in NYC in 1968

Introduction to the Gestalt Journal Press Edition of *Nature Heals: The Psychological Essays of Paul Goodman (Natura sanat non medicus)*

Edited by Taylor Stoehr

Paul Goodman: The Poetics of Theory

by Michael Vincent Miller

Paul Goodman was unquestionably brilliant, prophetically ahead of his time, combined immense learning with a plain-spoken common sense rare among intellectuals. He was a social critic, poet, novelist and playwright, utopian city planner, educator, psychotherapist and psychological theorist, and he published books in all these areas. Yet he spent most of his days -- till he was 48 years old, at any rate (he died at 60) -- living the life of an impoverished artist-scholar. He was persistently undervalued and misunderstood throughout his writing career of some thirty-odd years. There was a notable exception: For a spell during the nineteen-sixties, he connected with a college generation that shared his alienation from the social mainstream and his hopes for social change. He had just published

Growing Up Absurd, the book that brought him a kind of fame, and many in this new generation found in it a convincing analysis of their experience. By the end of the decade, however, both the student radicals, frustrated and badly divided among themselves, and the counterculture, increasingly wrapped in a cloud of drugs and mysticism, mostly lost interest in Goodman. So his influence was once again on the wane.

Why did he have such a difficult time? Was his career another instance of the modern artist's plight -- a datum in the sociology of culture? Or was there something in Goodman's nature that was too jaggedly individual and thus succeeded in pushing people away? Was he too declamatory, too insistent in public about his anarchism and homosexuality, his feisty lack of reverence for authority and celebrity, even his tenderness and haunting sense of failure? Certainly his writing style is anything but distancing. He makes more lively reading than the ponderous abstractions of Herbert Marcuse or the arcane mythologizing of Norman O. Brown, contemporaries with whom he shared certain intellectual emphases. Goodman's writing, on the contrary, is highly self-revealing, which may be more than readers expect or tolerate from their prophets and radical theorists, even though we live in an age of confessional poetry, case histories by the patients themselves, novels that are barely disguised diaries of their authors' marital problems. There is personal drama in Goodman's writing, as well as intellectual drama. One feels always that he was discovering himself along with a new way of characterizing neuroses or another facet of social oppression.

Many people may have been put off by Goodman's salty personal presence, though I, for one, can't see why. I spent some time with Goodman on two occasions -- once in 1964, when we were both commissioned to write articles about the Berkeley Free Speech Movement *for Dissent*; and again in 1970, when he came to MIT, where I was teaching at the time, to give a poetry reading and address student radicals. I found him gentle and responsive, totally unpretentious, intellectually enthusiastic and open. It is true that some tones of bitterness entered his voice now and then at the later date. His son Mathew's death at 20 in a hiking accident three years earlier had left him deeply shaken. Moreover, the rift between Goodman and the students was widening, especially since Goodman deplored the recent drift toward violence of some factions in the student movement. At one talk I heard him give, militant student activists heckled him the whole way. I recall how patiently and thoroughly he dealt with their challenges. Anyhow, I felt an immediate affection for the man.

Indeed, I think that Goodman considered himself a kind of exile from every group, even at the height of his fame in the sixties. There is a very touching passage in an essay he wrote late in life, called "The Politics of Being Queer" (included in this collection of his psychological writings), that shows how penetratingly Goodman felt his isolation: "Frankly, my experience of radical community is that it does not tolerate my freedom. Nevertheless, I am all for community because it is a human thing, only I seem doomed to be left out." This from a social thinker who devoted himself to a utopian vision of free human beings living and working together in a fulfilling way!

It fits right into this pattern that Goodman is a relatively unsung founding father of Gestalt therapy, although he is still perhaps its most eloquent and important theoretical voice. Of course, everyone who had been in on mapping out the original terrain of Gestalt therapy -- Laura Perls, Isadore From, and others including Goodman -- tended to fade from public view in the shadow of Fritz Perls, who besides being a masterful, inventive clinician, was a shrewd publicist for his new therapy. Goodman's influence did not make its way far from New York among budding Gestalt therapists (except to Cleveland -- the founders of the Gestalt Institute there were trained by the original New York group). They were too impressed with Perls' charismatic genius; besides, many got swept away on the tides of "human potential" movement religiosity. Goodman's old-fashioned humanism -- his psychological writings are filled with references to Aristotle and Kant as well as Freud and Reich -- and his insistence on the political implications of Gestalt therapy did not much appeal to the inward-gazing spiritualism at Esalen, for example.

Goodman's own cast of mind is probably responsible in part for his lack of recognition as an innovative psychological theorist. Nothing he wrote fits neatly into the conventional categories. He ranges over the humanities and social sciences in his own idiosyncratic fashion and brings a great deal to bear on whatever subject he takes up. There is something a bit cranky and uncompromising about his citing everybody from Yeats to Federn to Gandhi in his treatise on Gestalt therapy, just as there was about his habit of invoking Socrates or Milton before an audience of student activists about to go get teargassed at the barricades (although Goodman also paid his dues at the barricades). Goodman makes a charming comment about this propensity of his in an essay concerning his own literary method. "I have found it delicious," he announced, "When I was being most outrageous, to be quoting Aristotle or Spinoza and feeling that I was most orthodoxly innocent." As usual, a serious principle lurks behind the casual tone. This was how he tried to get across to people his connection with the humanistic tradition that he always felt supported his radicalism.

So I suspect that most psychotherapists don't know what to make of Goodman's manner of presentation when he writes about therapy. On the one hand, I can imagine that the bureaucratic professionals of mental health would consider his psychological writing more "literary" than "scientific" and thus would have trouble taking it seriously. It's bizarre that such an emotionally engaging profession should enunciate itself, with few exceptions (Freud being one of them -- just read his case histories) in such cold, cumbersome terminology. On the other hand, the high-voltage energy-releaser therapists often seem more interested in new techniques for cheer-leading their patients on to victory than in enriching their theoretical knowledge. Goodman fits neither mold very well. More of his refusal to compromise.

Poetry is the mode of speech that fuses ideas with personal revelation of feeling, and Goodman's writing is never far from the act of making poems, even when he is grappling with an abstruse or subtle point about infantile character-formation. During his early Freudian phase, he wrote about the Oedipus complex in a manner

more related to the parables of Kafka than to the usual exegeses by psychoanalytic practitioners. (See "The Golden Age" and "Eros," or the "Drawing of the Bow" in *Nature Heals*.) Conversely, Goodman published a book in 1947 called *Kafka's Prayer*, a brooding psychoanalytic exploration of Kafka's works.

In fact, to my taste, Goodman's social criticism and psychological writings are more poetically satisfying than his poetry. His leaps are more inspired; he comes up with more far-reaching metaphors. As a social critic, Goodman has had few peers in America. He stubbornly held forth a vision of individual self-realization through love and work against the dehumanizing pressures that bureaucracy and technology were producing. This was not a Darwinian vision of self-reliance or American rugged individualism, however, but of anarchist community. Goodman believed that groups of people, dealing directly with one another on a small scale, could begin to hand craft a new and humanly decent community out of the sprawling over-centralized mass of post-industrial society. He wrote about these matters -- both the evils and the possibilities of correcting them -- with an intelligence that in its precision, common sense, and passionate conviction often rises to lyrical heights.

I do not mean to suggest in the least that Goodman was incapable of rigorous or systematic thought. Few could analyze the implications of Freud's model of the ego or Reich's "primary masochism" better than he could. His attack on the revisionist psychoanalysts -- Horney and Fromm -- is a beautifully sustained argument involving the relations among human instinctual life, psychotherapy, and the social order, and it's devastating to its targets. This essay was originally published in *Politics*, Dwight Macdonald's anarchist magazine of the nineteen-forties, and it prompted the new left sociologist C. Wright Mills and Patricia Salter to collaborate on an unusually nasty piece of invective against Goodman in the next issue. Goodman took them on and, as far as I'm concerned, made intellectual hash out of them. Luckily, Taylor Stoehr has reprinted the original essay, "The Political Meaning of Some Recent Revisions of Freud" and the subsequent debate in *Nature Heals*. I think it is one of the important debates in recent American intellectual history.

However, Goodman's central theoretical achievement, indispensable reading for Gestalt therapists, is the second volume of *Gestalt Therapy. Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality*, which Goodman wrote forty years ago. In it, he brought together his background in Freud, Reich, Rank, and the ego psychologists, his own innovations, and his collaborator Perls's new ideas and spun them into a dazzlingly original and comprehensive view of human nature and character development, healthy human functioning and psychopathology. This is still the definitive text to date on the theory of Gestalt therapy. Among other things, it carefully spells out the processes of growth and change, the resistances to them, and therefore makes clear what can be accomplished in therapy. These are pages that must be thoroughly digested by everyone who considers himself or herself a Gestalt therapist.

Nature Heals might be thought of as a diverse, highly readable supplement to the second volume of *Gestalt Therapy*. If *Gestalt Therapy* displays Goodman in the

midst of system-building, Stoehr's collection of psychological writings represents him in his most lyrical, angry, sensitive, polemical, and autobiographical moods, in addition to his theoretical ones. Written over a quarter-century, from 1945 to 1969, these essays, reviews, speeches, etc., are rarely limited to strict clinical matters. There are pieces on war, social powerlessness, racism, making films, the oppression of homosexuals, and the literary process, as well as on guilt, aggression, grief, child-rearing, sex, Freud, Reich, and Gestalt therapy. At times, it may seem as if Stoehr made some rather arbitrary choices by putting certain pieces that have a literary or political emphasis in this volume. But he thereby demonstrates the extent to which Goodman's thinking reached across disciplines.

I can think of three reasons immediately why every Gestalt therapist should read *Nature Heals*. First of all, the writings included in it give one a vivid feeling for the evolution of Gestalt therapy from World War II to the present. Secondly, they are crammed with deep, directly applicable insights into character and psychopathology that sharpen one's clinical awareness. And thirdly, they stretch one's horizons about the social ramifications of psychotherapy, at the same time as they chasten one by making as clear as any literature I know the limitations of therapy, given an unsatisfactory social environment.

Stoehr's excellent introduction is particularly useful for tracing Goodman's development among the currents and trends in psychotherapy after World War II. Goodman's own theoretical shifts -- from the Freudian unconscious to Reichian character-armor and sex-economy to the phenomenology of the contact-boundary -- recapitulate the development of Gestalt therapy itself. His changes of mind were a movement of intellectual integration, not the convert's jumping from doctrine to doctrine. He never dropped anything useful along the way, but added on, modified, and synthesized.

This is an important point. Goodman was clearly an innovative psychological thinker, but he never became unhinged from his post in a tradition. One can see in his pages even more clearly than in Perls's the debt Gestalt therapy owes to Freud. Perls, though trained as an analyst and close to members of the early Freudian circles, had complicated feelings about Freud; and after his first book, *Ego, Hunger, and Aggression*, which is still strongly psychoanalytic in many respects, he often pushed differences into divisions and apparent breaks with the Freudian tradition (like many other original and unorthodox therapists who grew up on a diet of psychoanalytic associations). Eventually, he chose to hook up Gestalt therapy with the encounter group movement at Esalen, where he was lionized.

But Goodman was free of Oedipal feelings about Freud, and thus having little need to reject him, tended to look for the best in him. He always insisted on the radical content of Freud's doctrines, though he maintained that Freud himself, beleaguered, protective of his young movement, growing weary and old, backed off from the revolutionary implications of his discoveries. In the first two essays in Stoehr's collection, Goodman treats this side of Freud with a lovely mixture of reverence and pathos. Goodman liked the **fact** that Freud had rooted psychology in biology, unlike behaviorists, psychoanalytic revisionists, and most social psychologists. As Goodman saw it, the implication was that humans come into the

world bearing an innate set of dispositions -- such as Freud's instincts of Eros and aggression -- and these dictate what people must get from the environment in order to survive and grow. Therefore human nature itself puts absolute constraints on the nature of community: A bad society is one that doesn't respond to or distorts the individual's natural animal rhythms and needs. This is a basic Goodmanian principle that appears over and over again in his writings. It is a source of his moral position about what the good society ought to be like and thus links his psychology to his politics. It is also an important value in the development of Gestalt therapy.

So Goodman went back to Freud to discover a theory of human nature compatible with his anarchism. In an ironic twist, Goodman was able in the essay on the revisionists to use Freud himself against those psychoanalysts and against liberal social engineers, certain sociological Marxists, and all those who maintained that human nature is indefinitely malleable and simply needs to be redesigned to fit a social order, itself assembled by experts in the masses' best interests.

Or take a point more immediately pertinent to the clinical practice of Gestalt therapy. Goodman was able to keep what's valuable in Freud's great discovery of the transference, that shadow that the unfinished past situation casts on the present. But Goodman extends the idea to indicate why interpreting the transference is not going far enough. Freud's notion implied, Goodman saw, that the lively present leverage for working in therapy is the compulsion to repeat. The trouble is that the patient keeps trying to finish up the old situation in the same ineffectual way, i.e., by having neurotic symptoms. Therein resides both the heart of the pathology and the innate surge toward health. The "cure," Goodman claimed, the true dissolving of the transference, entailed "a new experimental try with a real person." Here in a nutshell is the shift from the psychoanalyst's explication of the past to the Gestalt therapist's emphasis on the here-and-now.

One more example of Goodman's reinterpretation of Freud. Goodman insisted against the customary view that Freud was a social psychologist, that all his basic concepts are drenched with social meaning. I think Goodman may have been stretching a little here -- of course, Freud knew there was a family and a culture out there that had impact on the shape of the young psyche, but his psychology did not portray them in very full dimension. However, it is important to see what Goodman meant by "social psychology," since his understanding differs from the behavioristic and role-theory definitions still current nowadays. For Goodman, all good psychology *must* be social in that it studies what happens *between* the organism and the environment. Symptoms, character-formation, growth all take place at the boundary between self and other. This was a crucial point for the development of Gestalt therapy's approach to working at the contact-boundary (a concept Goodman treats fully in his half of *Gestalt Therapy*).

If Goodman located the philosophical roots of both Gestalt therapy and his anarchist position in Freudian formulations, he turned to Reich for practical means to connect psychotherapy and social revolution. There was a contradiction, Goodman felt, between Freud's therapy, which tended toward liberation of the instincts, and his conservative politics, which proclaimed the need to keep them

repressed, so that they only trickled out in sublimations. There wasn't time to encourage sublimation, thought Goodman; the society had gone too far wrong. Reich showed more plainly than Freud how the industrial social order got under people's skins and colonized their psyches, chiefly through the family and the schools. Upbringing and schooling lead children to turn against themselves and bury their spontaneous animal needs -- thus far Freud and Reich were pretty much in agreement. This blocking process, Reich went on to indicate, has anatomical and physiological components: It is accomplished by holding the breath and tensing the muscles against the urge for instinctual expression. Once this becomes chronic, a rigid shell of personality forms, which Reich called the character-armor. The result was a passive, inhibited populace, its capacities to make contact through love and sex, anger and labor, left badly crippled. Such individuals were hardly in any shape to start building the new society Goodman dreamed of, much less realize themselves.

Here's where psychotherapy entered the picture. Goodman believed with Reich that good therapy could release people's creative energies from the bondage of wounding character-formation, and then these liberated individuals would spontaneously move toward social revolution. Effective psychotherapy can help one recover the lost aliveness, force, and spontaneity that characterize healthy human functioning -- in other words, restore the power to make good contact. But contact with what? Certainly with other individuals and one's work. One could have real friendships, fulfilling sex, do battle when necessary, finish up conflicts and move on, be productive. However, the sea in which these renovated beings still have to swim, in Goodman's (and Reich's) view, is still polluted by institutions based on sexual repression and distorted aggression, such as bureaucracy, advertising, and war. Obviously the quality of individual life cannot be isolated from what the surrounding culture makes available. Most people channel their loving and sexual feeling into marriage, but Goodman noted that monogamy under our social conditions more often becomes a mode of sexual oppression than a reflection of natural loving commitment. If one's choice is homosexual love, at least when Goodman was writing, one has to contend with the threat of jail, scandal, brutal attack, loss of employment. And as Goodman never tired of pointing out, one's livelihood, with few exceptions (the artist being Goodman's favorite) amounts to spending most of one's time at boring, empty, or immoral jobs.

In the face of this social situation, the path of individual therapeutic liberation is not easy, and Goodman commented on the dangers of undertaking it. He agreed with Reich that people who recovered anything approximating their full human powers would inevitably refuse to live in such a world. They would feel impelled to drop out and create alternatives or try to change the existing structure through social action. Since the social order has a stake in its own preservation, it could hardly be expected to respond amiably. "Aggressive psychotherapy is inevitably a social risk ...," Goodman warned, "society forbids what is destructive of society." It was the revolutionary message, if not the emphasis on therapy, contained in Goodman's analysis that made his thought so congenial to the sixties generation --

to young people trying to shape new lifestyles, forms of neighborhood community, alternative schools, and involving themselves in nonviolent protest against war and racism.

Goodman regarded Reich's tendency to make the therapeutic liberation of full orgasm the whole story as "excessively simple and Rousseauian," reductive of Freud's rich complexity. He points out several times in his essays on Reich that Reich's theory is an interim measure; nevertheless, Goodman adds, at this moment in history, "it has enormous revolutionary dynamism."

From this discussion, it comes as no surprise that Goodman's ideal of therapy is never restricted to purely individual psychotherapy but always includes what might be called the therapy of society through analysis, criticism, action. In this sense, his psychological writings are inseparable from his social thought, politics, and to some extent even from his literary criticism, as Stoehr's selection amply demonstrates. The way in which Goodman takes up a question of human development or psychopathology always involves the "Thou" as well as the "I," the surrounding social environment as well as the individual organism. This approach is fully compatible with the fundamental tenets of Gestalt therapy, for instance its stress on the contact-boundary -- that meeting place between self and other where they have impact on and change one another through collision, love, influence, struggle, reconciliation -- or its concept of the self as the structuring of the organism/environment field. But though Gestalt therapists have always declared these to be principles of contact and work with them in therapy, Goodman was one of the few who addressed their larger meaning with full seriousness.

Michael Vincent Miller