

PAUL GOODMAN AND THE POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF GESTALT THERAPY¹

Taylor Stoehr

(This article originally appeared in *The Gestalt Journal*, Volume XVI, Number 1, Spring 1993)

Although Paul Goodman's reputation among Gestalt therapists is understandably founded on his collaboration with Fritz Perls and Ralph Hefferline on the book which gave its name to the movement and is still its primary theoretical text, there are other sides to Goodman's career, and his decade of fame in the Sixties was based on his political and social commentary rather than his psychological thought. (He himself would have been satisfied if only his *belles lettres* — poems, fiction, plays — had found a wider audience. A number of these are available from Black Sparrow Press.) In the remarks that follow, addressed to therapists and others especially interested in his role as psychological theorist, I want to explore some of the more important connections between Goodman's work as a therapist and as a social critic, with the aim of enlarging the view the Gestalt community holds of him, hoping at the same time to suggest some larger dimensions of the movement, social and political concerns which in Goodman's own experience were part and parcel of the Gestalt attitude, and the responsibility of professionals everywhere in the society, men and women with the training and expertise to be our elders and model citizens.

After sketching out Goodman's career in the Sixties in this way, I will turn to his relations, at the end of the decade, with a few other members of the founding Gestalt Institute, particularly with Fritz Perls, who died early in 1970, and whose eulogist Goodman was at memorial services in New York. Although I will not directly engage the subject, reading between the lines those who are interested may perhaps catch a glimpse of the part that other Gestalt therapists played in the cultural upheaval of the Sixties. And the contrast between Goodman and Perls — offered here very much through Goodman's eyes, of course — may provide a new way of understanding their respective and joint contributions, not only to the Gestalt movement but also to the broader intellectual history of our times.

i

Growing Up Absurd, the book that made Goodman famous in 1960, was the first long work of nonfiction he had written since *Gestalt Therapy*, and in important ways it was a sequel to it. He spoke later of how, just as there was abnormal psychology, "the therapy of disturbances of creative adjustment," so too there was an abnormal sociology; "it is politics, to remedy institutions that hinder experience from occurring, e.g., roles rather than vocations, individuals or collectives rather than people in community, whatever prevents citizens from initiating and deciding, or makes it complicated for craftsmen and professionals to practice" (*Finite Experience*, pp. 39-41). *Growing Up Absurd* was his first large work in abnormal sociology.

He was not just carping. Goodman had a program, a set of therapies if you will. In his journal — which he continued to keep while writing the book — he congratulated himself on the strategy he used to make his proposals:

In the chapter on the Missing Community I accumulate the revolutionary aims that were compromised, and make a program for reestablishing social stability. Psychologically this has the advantage for me of making my radical rejection spectacularly conservative; it protects me from the danger of simple assertion. Metaphysically, however, two things: on the one hand there is the strength of the unfinished situation seeking closure (and all the better if the "present" is broadened out to include more past); but on the other hand, is there not in those accumulations the *built-in* factor of failure, impossibility? I choose among the events of history those impossibilities with which I can accuse those who are successful today. But saying this I am simply defining the artist; he who reacts against irremediable loss by denying it, and the question is whether or not he can make his denial stick. (*Five Years*, p. 208)

Here Goodman was artist and therapist and social reformer rolled into one, insisting on his unfinished or incomplete revolutions — so many of them already part of the American self-image — and showing how they were not simply the lost causes of our history but the ongoing neurotic problems of present society, demanding their solutions.

In *Gestalt Therapy* Goodman had criticized the orthodox Freudians for focusing too narrowly on recovering childhood trauma and failing to address the unfinished situation as it presented itself in ongoing behavior. Some of his own critics during the Sixties accused him of a kind of political Freudianism, saying that he wanted to go back to a romantic past, but his reply was always this:

I get a kind of insight (for myself) from the genetic method, from seeing how a habit or institution has developed to its present form; but I really do understand that its positive value and meaning are in its present activity, coping with present conditions. Freud, for instance, was in error when he sometimes spoke as if the man had a child inside of him, or a vertebrate had an annelid worm inside. Each specified individual behaves as the whole it has become; and every stage of life, as Dewey used to insist, has its own problems and ways of coping.

The criticism of the genetic fallacy, however, does not apply to the *negative*, to the *lapses* in the present, which can often be remedied only by taking into account some simplicities of the past. The case is analogous to localizing an organic function, e.g., seeing. As Kurt Goldstein used to point out, we cannot localize seeing in the eye or the brain — it is a function of the whole organism in its environment. But a *failure* of sight may well be localized in the cornea, the optic nerve, etc. We cannot explain speech by the psychosexual history of an infant; it is a person's way of being in the world. But a speech defect, e.g., lisp, may well come from inhibited biting because of imperfect weaning. This is, of course, what Freud knew as a clinician when he was not being metapsychological.

My books are full of one-paragraph or two-page "histories" — of the concept of alienation, the system of welfare, suburbanization, compulsory schooling, the anthropology of neurosis, university administration, citizenly powerlessness, missed revolutions, etc., etc. In every case my purpose is to show that a coerced or inauthentic settling of a conflict has left an unfinished situation to the next

generation, and the difficulty becomes more complex with new conditions. Then it is useful to remember the simpler state before things went wrong; it is hopelessly archaic as a present response, but it has vitality and may suggest a new program involving a renewed conflict. This is the therapeutic use of history. As Ben Nelson has said, the point of history is to keep old (defeated) causes alive. Of course, this reasoning presupposes that there is a nature of things, including human nature, whose right development can be violated. There is. (*New Reformation*, pp. 206-207)

After *Growing Up Absurd* Goodman's next book of social criticism was *Utopian Essays and Practical Proposals*, a work primarily written in the late Fifties and early Sixties and relying on the whole range of his expertise — politics and psychology, education, planning, literature, philosophy, religion. The title was accurate and revealing. Continuing in his new role as sociotherapist, Goodman was applying further ideas of Gestalt therapy to the social neuroses. It was important to recognize the unfinished situations he had listed in *Growing Up Absurd*, but merely drawing attention to them was not enough. His own psychology had always been quite actively pragmatic, not merely in the Jamesian tradition but literally a therapy of experiment and action, creative adjustments that took the world into account as part of what needed changing. Paying attention to the incomplete reforms and revolutions of history gave some indication of where the problems were. To solve them one did not turn to the past, however, but experimented practically and hopefully in the present. Goodman liked the word "utopian," a label his critics often used to throw cold water on his enthusiasms. If they called it utopian, he said, it meant they were afraid it might be practical; that is, people might regard it as desirable, the first step to action. He enjoyed thinking up little schemes that fit this model, and he was extremely fertile in them. "We could try this," he was always saying.

The point, he would remind his readers, was not that his proposals were feasible (maybe they were) but that they gave hope and engagement. The chief problem was the feeling of powerlessness that modern conditions even at their best were likely to produce. Creative adjustment was never achieved by accepting some idea handed down from on high — not even if Uncle Paul was the one promoting it. There must be something to explore, some new possibility or attitude that would catch the imagination. People had to create their own solutions. A "utopian" proposal might not work, in the sense that it might not fit the case as it eventuated, and yet at the same time it might be quite "practical" as a means of stirring to action and discovery. This was exactly the approach he had taken with his patients. Let me quote from the essay on "Utopian Thinking" which began his book:

Utopian ideas may be practical hypotheses, that is, expedients for pilot experimentation. Or they may be stimuli for response, so that people get to know what they themselves mean. The fact that such ideas go against the grain of usual thinking is an advantage, for they thereby help to change the locus of the problem, which could not be solved in the usual terms. . . . Further, if a utopian expedient seems *prima facie* sensible, directly feasible, and technically practical, and is nevertheless unacceptable, there is a presumption that we are dealing with an "inner conflict," prejudice, the need to believe that nothing can be done, and the need to maintain the status quo. (*Utopian Essays*, pp. 19-20)

Change a few of the terms and this passage could have come out of *Gestalt Therapy*.

"Whatever the subject," he wrote, "I try to keep it *imbedded in its social-psychological causes*, relying heavily on the familiar authors in psychoanalysis, functionalist anthropology, and social history. . . . The reader will see that by and large I prefer the language of pragmatism and, best, an organism/environment psychology of novelty, excitement, and growth" (*Utopian Essays*, pp. xiv-xvi). This last triad, of course, was the title he gave to his volume of *Gestalt Therapy*.

Goodman's pragmatic utopianism was of a piece with his deep-seated conviction regarding all the humane arts and natural sciences — namely, that although there might be useful theorizing as well as conceptually valuable practice, there could not be any thoroughgoing systematizing that did not distort reality and rigidify experience. Thus the theoretical chapters in *Gestalt Therapy* were not an attempt to pin down human nature in some final definitions and norms, even though he believed there was such a thing as human nature. Similarly his anarchist sociology did not provide a *model* of the good society but an *attitude* toward political and economic life, one that was communicated more readily by example and rules of thumb than by logical analysis or the systematic elaboration of plans and protocols. "There is likely no possible sociology of creative action," he asserted (*Utopian Essays*, p. 112). It was precisely system, and especially "the Organized System," that created the problems we faced.

This is the crux of the argument over utopian thinking. It is true that the organized American system has invaded people's personalities, even though it protects every man's individuality, privacy, and liberty of choice. For the system has sapped initiative and the confidence to make fundamental changes. It has sapped self-reliance and therefore has dried up the spontaneous imagination of ends and the capacity to invent ingenious experiments. (*Utopian Essays*, pp. 9-10)

People had to learn how to do this once again, but not by the application of still more finely tuned institutions or shrewder planning by experts. As Goodman put it elsewhere,

My social ideas are temperamentally mine, but they do not derive logically from my biases, as a doctrine. I would abhor a politics, pedagogy, or town-planning deduced from metaphysics or epistemology, or even scientifically deduced, rather than being pragmatic and not immoral. One must not manipulate real people because of an idea or a confirmed hypothesis. Indeed, I say "not immoral" rather than "moral" because positive morality, when used as a principle for action, can be more abstract and imperial than anything. There are far too many missionaries among my friends. (*Finite Experience*, p. 43)

Goodman said that he believed there was such a thing as human nature, even if the "science" of it could not be like mathematics or logic, self-consistent and valid. Sometimes his critics put him in the tradition of Rousseau and charged that his view of human nature was foolishly optimistic, and many of his disciples did indeed defend optimism as a correct and healthy attitude toward humanity. The complaint usually came from the so-called experts, committed to varieties of positivism that regarded people as finished products and experimental data. But Goodman retorted, "I keep trying to see people whole and beginning — still growing — and then they seem less limited than they do to sociologists or psychologists, politicians or journalists. But it doesn't much matter whether one has an 'optimistic' or a 'pessimistic' outlook, for the question still remains, Now what?" (*Utopian Essays*, p. xiv).

Goodman's own outlook was in fact pessimistic. The decentralist strain in his anarchism was not just a function of his abhorrence of the doctrinaire, but also took into account that human nature and culture were a result of evolutionary trial and error — with lots of error. It was therefore risky to organize or standardize very much of life, just as it was dangerous to become too specialized. Some expert was bound to make a gigantic little mistake. Let it not be someone whose hand was on the levers of power! People are greedy and callous. Let them not be responsible for the welfare of others whose need or suffering is far away and may seem merely a jiggle on the dials of the social order!

During the early years of the Sixties Goodman was classified as an educator by those who wanted an easy label for him. It would have been more accurate to say that he had always been in love with the young. In any case, his educational views were certainly far from those of the academic educators. He thought most people would be better off without any schooling whatsoever, and his program of reform began by doing away with most of the apparatus and institutions. But there were some schools and teachers that Goodman approved of. Utopian *Essays and Practical Proposals* was dedicated to his friend from Gestalt therapy days Elliott Shapiro, now the principal of P.S. 119 in Harlem. His next book, *Community of Scholars*, was dedicated to Ben Nelson, whose immense learning and earnest teaching Goodman admired. *Compulsory MisEducation* was dedicated to his friend Mabel Chrystie, founder of the First Street School, where George Dennison (whom she later married) and Goodman's own daughter Susan were among the teachers.

Like so much else in his social thought, Goodman's educational views were grounded in his psychology. Although he was impressed by the Summerhill experiment of A. S. Neill, with its emphasis on the Reichian principle of self-regulation, his own bias was Deweyan, a focus on learning by doing. He had once taught at a progressive school in that tradition, as well as at the University of Chicago, New York University, Black Mountain College, and Sarah Lawrence — a wide spectrum of educational schemes, including some of the best. He had critical things to say about every institution he had worked for — primarily that they all paid too much attention to their own ongoing enterprise qua institution — curriculum, staffing, keeping order, licensing, etc. — and there was not enough concern with the interests and needs of the young. What he liked about Mabel Dennison's school was its benign neglect of the usual educational bookkeeping, and its engagement with the whole lives of its students, inside and outside its doors. George Dennison's account in *The Lives of Children* makes it clear that what was going on there was a version of group therapy, with private sessions for special cases, and "academic" subjects pursued not as tasks and goals but as practical experience in the actual culture surrounding them. And with plenty of physical contact and affection.

For schools on the usual model Goodman had little hope, though he characteristically proposed group therapy for the seniors as a utopian measure of minimal reform in the high schools and colleges. At whatever level, the usual curriculum made no sense unless it met student "need, desire, curiosity, or fantasy." All else was parroting and conditioning, either promptly forgotten after the examination, or worse, introjected as part of self-control and conforming to authority. And up to age twelve there was "no point to formal subjects or a prearranged curriculum. With guidance, whatever a child experiences is educational. Dewey's idea is a good one: It makes no difference what is learned at this age, so long as the child goes on wanting to learn something further" ("Freedom and Learning," p. 73).

None of this meant that Goodman had abandoned the arts and sciences. But it was not apparent to him that higher education actually taught these successfully, at least not to the majority

of students. Nor did he think that the academy was such a good home for cultural values and the liberal arts. Pedagogues should look again at the cultural justification for all education: "both youth and adults live in a nature of things, a polity, an ongoing society, and it is these, in fact, that attract interest and channel need" (ibid.). In the history of the world, very few societies had ever handed over their classics and wisdom to a mandarin class without paying a great price.

Goodman did not stand apart from the institutions he criticized, taking pot shots at them from the safe distance of *The New York Review of Books*. He accepted semester-long teaching jobs at a number of colleges during the Sixties, in addition to his constant round of lectures and panels on the campuses. Like his hero in *The Empire City*, he even joined the PTA and was elected to the local school board, where he helped prepare the ground for the decentralization of the New York City school system that began in 1970 and continues to this day. His favorite proposal, for "mini-schools" on the model of the First Street School — a couple of dozen children and a few teachers in a neighborhood storefront — has never been taken seriously by the public schools; but there is little doubt that he made a real difference in the education of the young in his native city.

Young people dissatisfied with lockstep education naturally gravitated to someone like Goodman, who understood their problems and made himself their advocate. He warmed to this role because he himself had refused to grow up, was noisy and rebellious, and angry that the adult world was in such a mess. But the mood of the decade changed as the Vietnam War became more and more the focus of all the discontents of the radical young. The violence of the state abroad produced violent reactions at home. For several years the pacifist leadership, which included Goodman, managed to keep the antiwar movement both nonviolent and activist, but this high ground slowly eroded as the war spread and escalated. There were calls for violent revolution.

For a time Goodman referred to himself as a "Dutch uncle" of the young, by which he meant to suggest the spirit of goodwill with which he gave hard advice or unwelcome criticism. He knew how he sounded to them. By 1968 the lines had been drawn more severely between revolutionaries and nonrevolutionaries: "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem!" Goodman never gave in to this all-or-nothing demand. Although in his younger days he had often fallen into a defiant antinomianism himself, and had thereby gotten himself blacklisted and shunned by respectable people, he had spent many years learning to be satisfied with less than Paradise: "though I am still not impressed by the wisdom or morality of righteous society," he wrote near the end of his life, "I am no longer tempted to deny what I think I do know, nor to act imprudently on principle" (*Finite Experience*, p. 83).

It was just his prudence and good sense that infuriated some of the young radicals who had once been his "crazy allies." He was *against* their revolution, nothing but a liberal, genre of Arthur Schlesinger Jr. In fact Goodman's hopes for a better society had never been based on revolutionary change, though he sometimes fell into that language in the early Sixties, before he saw how seriously the young took such rhetoric. His view of the society was much like his view of his patients when he was a therapist. There might be some dramatic breakthroughs now and then, but these were not to be relied on as new stages of health. Gradual changes over longer periods — new habits, more awareness, mutual aid, patience and fortitude — were what counted. In any case neither the patient nor the therapist could force a cure.

In politics Goodman's estimate of the possibilities was the same. The point was not to live in the Golden Age but in a tolerable society. To be sure, *society* was not tolerable if moral, cultural, and aesthetic affairs that belong by rights to the community were sold off as if they were merely commodities; "giving access to the young, conserving the environment, helping the needy . . . these are necessary for the society to be tolerable at all" (*Finite Experience*, p. 65). But it was not

required to turn society upside down to achieve these. Goodman began calling himself a conservative:

The great conservative solutions are those that diminish tension by changing 2 percent of this and 4 percent of that. When they work, you don't notice them. Liberals like to solve a problem by adding on a new agency and throwing money at it, a ringing statement that the problem has been solved. Radicals like to go to the root, which is a terrible way of gardening, though it is sometimes sadly necessary in dentistry. (*Finite Experience*, p. 77)

In fact Goodman said he was not a political person and had no utopian vision. All he wanted was "that the children have bright eyes, the river be clean, food and sex be available, and nobody be pushed around" (*Finite Experience*, p. 75). He titled the novel he wrote during the Sixties *Making Do*. That was the way he had been brought up, in "decent poverty" one of the things that the Organized System had abolished. By the same token, 2 percent of this and 4 percent of that might very well restore his minimal standards. When he said that a marriage was tolerable if there were three good hours a week, that was not an ideal marriage; there was no such thing. Neither was society likely to become the New Heavens and New Earth, though some of the young might think they wished it.

Goodman was not squeamish. The revolutionary fantasy did not repel him because he couldn't tolerate disorder. On the contrary, he liked a certain amount of chaos in society, and predicted more. He did not want to see useless bloodshed and repression, but there was already much too much law and order in the United States, and a need for more healthy confusion. It was not exactly the "safe emergency situation" of Gestalt therapy, but it had its therapeutic analogies. When routines break down, sometimes important discoveries are made, or at the very least there could be the wave of relief that comes from relaxing one's grip on things. This was a very deeply rooted tenet in the Taoist corner of Goodman's psychology.

Goodman was not a quietist; his Taoism never had that tinge. He was a troublemaker. It appalled him that most people were so well behaved and content in their abstract idea of liberty. "It's a free country" seemed to mean "Don't bother me, I'm enjoying my privileges." Guarantees of freedom might be desperately needed in a totalitarian society where there was overt and brutal oppression, but the commodity culture of the free world seemed to make people their own jailers. Goodman's anarchism stressed autonomy more than freedom, and he thought it was more important to be able "to invent and initiate a task and do it one's own way" than to possess a set of abstract and unexercised rights (*Finite Experience*, p. 47). The analogy to psychotherapy was important here: How to make people more self-reliant and independent?

ii

The Gestalt Institute had persisted as a center for training and visibility in the profession, but like Goodman most of the original members had gone on to other things in the Sixties, with exceptions like Laura Perls and Isadore From, who guided hundreds of new therapists through *Gestalt Therapy*, Elliott Shapiro was devoting himself to school reform. One could read about him in *The New Yorker*, where Nat Hentoff published a profile of "The Principal." Shapiro still saw Goodman occasionally at "movement" rallies or on panel discussions of education, but they were in different worlds. In the middle Sixties, when a number of Goodman's young friends and disciples

asked his recommendation to a therapist, he sometimes sent them to Laura Perls, but most of them went to Shapiro. This was a kind of contact too, a bow from the distance.

George Dennison was another authority on schools whom Goodman rarely saw anymore. They had the same Gestalt perspective, they quoted one another, they even had the same publisher, but Dennison was going through his own *Sturm and Drang* and it entailed a great anger and bitterness toward Goodman, whom he seemed to feel had stolen away his youth. Although each of them made attempts to repair this breach, Dennison's struggle to reconcile art and love and domestic life kept him touchy and ready to explode. Sometimes he wanted to sweep Goodman out of existence with the rest of his wastrel past.

Goodman and Paul Weisz had also been cool toward one another for several years, but in the middle Sixties they made contact again, and seemed eager to take up their friendship, each of them hungry for peers. They were not young any more. The Goodmans had had another child, and their family life was happier with a merry little three-year-old to care for, though Paul was old enough to be her grandfather.

Paul Weisz died of a heart attack in the middle of a conciliatory dinner at the Goodmans' apartment. This was a few years before Goodman's own series of heart attacks, but he was well aware of the history of angina in his family, and Weisz's sudden death before his eyes gave him pause. He wrote a poem:

Tonight a man passed away
in my house, in my own bed.
He rather happily was playing
with my merry daughter
yet he was dead within the hour.
His heart broke. Now my own
body is like an enemy
waiting for me in ambush.

I am smoking the tobacco that he left
and picking up the shoes that he left.
Two men are carrying out
the body that he left.
My merry daughter is asleep
in the other room.
I must be deep in shock
for it is like a dream. (*Collected Poems*, 14)

Weisz had always worn a bow tie. When they carried him out, it was not just his tobacco and shoes they left behind, but also the bow tie. Goodman, who almost never wore ties, carefully put it away in a drawer.

Death. The end of every story. His colleagues, his dear ones, himself.

When the news of Fritz Perls' death reached Goodman in March of 1970, he was visiting one of the "institute-spas" of the Sixties — not the Esalen Institute in California that Fritz had made famous, but Ivan Illich's Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca, where he was giving talks on "free schools" and basking in the Central American sunshine — feeling his age at 5,000 feet. He had not yet had his first heart attack, but it would not be long now.

Laura Perls called to tell him the news and asked him to be the principal speaker at a memorial service to be held in New York in April. He wrote Sally that he wished she had "picked on somebody who had more empathy with him than I," but concluded, "I'll do my best." When the time came, there were others besides Goodman who wished Laura had chosen another eulogist, but in fact he did Fritz considerable justice.

Perls had gone on from New York to found one institute after another, first in Florida and then in California, where he became a kind of Pan among the redwoods in his goatish old age. By the time that he died there were two Gestalt therapies, East Coast and West Coast, and in his last writings — based on tape-recordings and soundtracks from films — he had all but repudiated the book on which they were both founded, and never mentioned his collaborator.

This parting of the ways is worth dwelling on, for it epitomizes the very different contributions Perls and Goodman made to Gestalt therapy and may help us understand the nature of its influence since then, which has been very great, far beyond the spread of its ideas within the profession.

The literal parting of the ways had not been abrupt or decisive. Although Perls was no longer living with his family in New York after 1955, he kept coming back, as if to touch base. For instance, there was a period in 1957 — it was while Goodman was on his European voyage — that Perls was in Manhattan again, considering a real estate investment that would include a performance hall for the Living Theatre. Had that eventuated, he and Goodman would have crossed paths many times. But the right deal never turned up, and Perls put his money in other schemes. Then he too left the country on a long foreign holiday, and he too returned to a new career in the Sixties. Yet what a different trajectory was his

During the winter of 1963-1964, when Goodman was a fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies, the radical think-tank for post-Kennedy politics in Washington, Perls was establishing himself at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, where he presided over the transformation of Gestalt awareness exercises into a panoply of demonstration techniques and cultish slogans — the hot seat, the empty seat, lifescrpt, top dog/under dog, mindfucking, elephant shit, and so on with help from mind-expanding drugs and audiovisual technology.

When the student movement erupted in Berkeley at the end of 1964, one could see elements of both Goodman and Perls in it, New Left and hippie sometimes in conflict but often happily coexisting in the same person. The tidal wave of youth rebellion pulled both of them into its currents; every campus wanted to hear how to reform the university and actualize the self.

Their styles were as different as their messages, though it was all part of the same ferment. Goodman came with notes scribbled on the backs of envelopes. There was nothing flashy or arresting about him, he simply talked. Often he would get into dialogue with the audience, much as he had done in his Cleveland workshops. He enjoyed face-to-face polemics with hecklers. Perls also came "unprepared" — no notes at all — and he too thrived on interaction and spontaneity, but in his case it was more like a bravura performance in the theater. He would invite someone onstage, as a hypnotist brings out his subject, for a bout of instant therapy. "I feel best," he said, "when I can be a prima donna and can show off my skill of getting rapidly in touch with the essence of a person and his plight" (Garbage Pail, p. 2). The results were often breathtaking, so much so that people wanted to film these encounters and use them as training aids. They were high drama. But where did that leave the person after the show was over? Thank you; you may now return to your seat. By contrast, Goodman genuinely talked to his interlocutors, perhaps leaving them exactly where he found them, but with interesting results for others in the audience. His conversation "elucidated a habit of mind," as one observer put it. This was precisely his idea of both therapy and politics — to

convey an attitude, to try out another point of view. No astounding transformations but perhaps some insight into the here and now and next.

When Perls visited Manhattan his demonstrations were now media events. On one occasion he asked Elliott Shapiro to be the final commentator on a program with two or three hundred spectators. There were movies from Esalen and then a demonstration of the "hot seat" technique with a woman in the audience who had been one of the subjects in the film — and who was applauded just like a movie star. At some point a Reichian in the audience stood up and asked why there was so much attention to the upper part of the body and so little to the lower. Shapiro thought Fritz brushed the question off too dismissively, and he felt inauthentic in his own comments at the end of the evening, when he refrained from pointing out how much was being glossed over. That was obviously not what people wanted to hear. Where *did* this audience come from? he wondered. They seemed like a college crowd, well dressed, in their mid-twenties. Apparently they were Fritz's disciples, in a transference relation with him that he had no impulse to resolve.

There was a sense in which Perls' boast was true: "I believe that I am the best therapist for any type of neurosis in the States, maybe in the world" (*Garbage Pail*, p. 228). He certainly had a genius for bringing his patients to theatrical breakthroughs. He was no fool, however, and understood "that those so-called miracle cures are spectacular but don't mean much from the existential point of view" (*ibid.*). Although he couldn't resist performing them, Perls was more or less immune to the temptation to ask further questions about the source of his power or the nature of his feats. Such philosophizing, including "high level discussion on religion, Gestalt therapy, existential philosophy," was what he called *Geistscheissen* — "wisdom-shitting" (*Garbage Pail*, p. 210).

This skepticism may have had its virtues, but it also expressed Perls' awareness, while working on *In and Out the Garbage Pail*, that he was no writer. He was producing this testament in the late Sixties when Goodman went down to see him in his pastoral setting at Big Sur. The two famous men, shamans of separate tribes, displayed their feathers and avoided any serious confrontation. One of their younger colleagues from the early days of the Institute happened to be present, and was taken aback to see them in the same room together again — and so polite! The give-and-take of their work on *Gestalt Therapy* was long past, but so was the "hammering" at one another that had been characteristic of their interactions as colleagues. They were national figures now, with dignities to maintain, such as they were. And they were getting along in years, Perls already in his middle seventies; soon both of them would be dead. When Goodman next met Isadore From, he reported on their mutual friend and his book-writing activities. "Pathetic." A little later From had occasion to see Perls, who reported on Paul's visit. It too was, "Pathetic."

A restless bird to the very end, Fritz finally left Esalen and his weekend "circuses," as he called, them for a new experiment, a "Gestalt kibbutz" in the woods on Vancouver Island, where he planned to make more training films and fly in therapists for sessions of retreat and study. He himself would fly out periodically to make personal appearances at openings of his films, It had been a long time since he had taken on a private patient.

Perhaps this commune was for Perls what Goodman's old farmhouse in northern New Hampshire was for him, not just a refuge from the demands of fame and followers, but also a kind of shedding of superfluities. For Goodman at least, as he grew older the simpler satisfactions of life seemed more absolutely necessary — friends, family, work in comparative solitude, rural comforts and austerities.

The memorial services for Perls took place on April 5. These were the East Coast services; his West Coast followers had already put together a memorial based on specific instructions Fritz

himself left for the ceremony, including a performance by his friend and former patient Ann Halprin, who danced to his favorite composer, Mahler. The New York arrangements, which Laura had placed in the hands of Isadore From, would be very different. Most of the West Coast disciples were satisfied with their own services and did not come east for these, but the hall was full and the mourners included many of Perls' trainees, from before and after Esalen days, who identified with his brand of Gestalt therapy rather than with that of the New York Institute. It did not turn out to be an occasion of reconciliation.

When everyone was seated, the cello played Bach, not Mahler, followed by a showing of the movie *Fritz*, made at the peak of his fame. Then Goodman stepped forward, dressed in coat and tie, his hair combed — "handsome," said one observer. He spoke from a single page of typed notes. For those who knew the whole twenty-year history of Gestalt therapy, it was a telling moment, not merely the summing up of Fritz's remarkable career but of an epoch. You could see people reaching into their pockets for paper and pencil. Sally Goodman thought it was the best address she had ever heard Paul give. Yet others found it intolerable. There had been a plan to record what was said for a later radio broadcast, but something went wrong with the equipment. Some say that the tape was purposely destroyed by an offended "Fritzite." Nonetheless there were many present who never forgot what was said.

Goodman first spoke of the place of Gestalt therapy in philosophy and psychology; then he turned to Fritz as a figure in the history of modern times. What one could see immediately was that, although Perls had come close to disowning the book they had written together, for Goodman it was still the essential truth about psychotherapy and its possibilities. He described the "weak point" in psychoanalysis, as he and Fritz had agreed in 1950: the theory of the self. Freud, Reich, Adler, Rank — all had partial, limping views of ego and will. The contribution of Gestalt therapy was in its account of awareness "as a positive act, doing something," and in its locating this awareness at the organism/environment boundary, so that the self could be seen as the very process of creative adjustment, "contact" in this ongoing field. Goodman reminded his audience of the many ingredients and influences on their theory — Taoism and Yoga as well as Aristotle and Kant, Existentialism ("but practicable and in ordinary situations"), Zen ("with more than esthetic surface, including body and social scene"), and Pragmatism ("with passions and feeling").

He then spoke of the intellectual milieu in which Gestalt therapy found its early nurture, noting that a good many of the original community of believers were in the audience, once unknown, now among the heroes of the Sixties in several fields besides psychotherapy. He drew attention to Fritz's own peculiar contribution to classical psychoanalysis, his specialty in "dental aggression" and the concepts of introjection and assimilation he had evolved on the model of biting and chewing. Goodman pointed out his advance on Melanie Klein's view of hostility: Fritz accepted aggression as part of health, the "normal destruction" entailed in growth and change. Here he compared Fritz's daring to that of Nietzsche, and praised him for his "callousness," his willingness to risk isolation and being frozen out of orthodox circles, for the sake of an idea.

These thoughts served as transition to the second half of his address, which began with a characteristic Goodman analysis of the current scene: "dehumanizing institutions, role-playing, impersonality, squeamishness and racism, lack of affect, fragmented community, generation gap," etc. All of this added up to a need for religious meaning, a view Goodman had been exploring in recent articles and was now about to publish in a book, *New Reformation*. People in general, but particularly the young, were desperate for some message to redeem what seemed a senseless world.

In his own opinion, this hunger translated into a passion for "answers" from those who had "made it," and helped explain the tremendous appeal of charismatic figures like Timothy Leary, the

Maharishi, D. T. Suzuki, Buckminster Fuller, and of course Fritz. It accounted for the enthusiasm for new sacred texts and holy sacraments, including some of Fritz's favorites — consciousness-expanding devices like audiovisual technology, nitrous oxide, or LSD on the one hand, and on the other, the techniques of psychodrama, encounter groups, and sensitivity training, which functioned like religious observances at Esalen and in every "free university" curriculum.

Goodman located such phenomena alongside other Sixties developments. Fritz's "hit-and-run" demonstration style had parallels in both education and theater. One might see in it a fusion of Elliott Shapiro's community-based pedagogy for the oppressed and the Living Theatre's theater of participation, the one with roots in Reich and A. S. Neill, the other stemming from Piscator and Brecht.

The trouble with Fritz's "educational guerrilla theater" — and it was a danger in others as well — was the lack of follow-through. It had to be said that Fritz's was not a physicianly character. His taste was for the one-night stand. And although his performance was "often beautiful," he could not bring it under continuous scrutiny, he could not "write it" — it was as if all tongues were foreign to him when it came to writing. Similarly he had "no memory," he was "not a scholar," and too often his "new discovery" was "said better 20 years ago, 10 years ago." In short, Goodman concluded, Fritz was a hippie.

But he had the virtues of these defects. After all, his freewheeling style constituted much of his attractiveness. Although he lacked the gifts of a leader, his admirers could not resist following him. The times brought him into prominence, and his own restless nature, his inability to be satisfied by what the world offered him, combined with his powerful sense of the moment, the here and now of every situation, made him the natural if somewhat unwilling guru of a very large part of the counter-culture. Like a "lonely, restless father," he could not show them the way," for to a great extent he had lost the way himself, but there was no doubt that the flower children were his children. He joined them, adopted their costume and their sacraments, danced their dance.

Goodman refrained from saying the word that had offered itself when he visited Big Sur — "pathetic" — but he might as well have said it in his closing remarks on the virtues of Fritz's failings. That was precisely Goodman's attitude toward the hippies themselves. His final view of Fritz was also colored by a good deal of projection from his own case — his own sense of restlessness, of being an unwilling guru, and of having failed,

Before he had finished there were already murmurs of discontent in Goodman's audience. Even among the old guard, the first and second generations of its founders in New York, there were some who thought he had made too much of the contributions of Paul Weisz and Laura Perls to Gestalt therapy, paring away at Fritz's primacy. He had specifically compared Fritz and Laura, saying that, after all, it was she who was the intellectual, as a way of characterizing Fritz's style, always leaping to the insight instead of patiently building a case. Even if this was true — it depended on what was meant by "intellectual" — some people took it as pointless degrading of Fritz to promote Laura. It is interesting that no one thought Goodman was running Fritz down in order to boost his own claims as the theoretician of the movement. Indeed, there were some in the audience who had never even read *Gestalt Therapy*, and whose sense of the rival camps had more to do with personal experiences than with ideas. Those who knew the history of psychoanalysis, and of Fritz in all his guises, were in a better position to understand the kind of justice being done to his story, but even among them there were some who were disturbed by the impropriety of speaking harsh truths of the dead. As the rustle of discontent grew in the room, one man rose to protest — he had been Fritz's first patient in the United States, and had therefore a special right to say it: "We all know that Fritz was a *character*," he said, "but that's not what we came to hear."

Many voices shouted their agreement, many others affirmed the truth of Goodman's assessment. He had taken the occasion as something more than a memorial ceremony, and the impulse of his audience was to debate the matter, as if it were now time for questions-and-answers. But Goodman sat down unperturbed, and the cellist and pianist now played the adagio movement from Beethoven's Sonata in D Major. Afterwards people stood and argued for a long time. Twenty years later the argument is still going on.

iii

The memorial service for Perls ended in controversy between two camps of Gestalt therapists, which we might roughly identify as the East Coast and the West Coast contingents. On the one hand there were those who adhered to the New York Institute and its original conception of theory and practice, developed both in the primary text and also in the early years of intellectual give-and-take among the founders. On the other hand there were those who adhered to the showier paradigm Fritz Perls had gone on to create at Esalen, with its elements of spiritual conversion and evangelicalism. To some extent these two camps have persisted ever since, though it is no longer defensible to distinguish them so crudely as East and West, or indeed by any other pair of terms. Over the years there have been various twists given to the division. In its most simplistic form it has been reduced to a dispute over who contributed the essential ideas of Gestalt therapy, Perls or Goodman. This can also be understood as a debate over what the core of the movement actually is — "whose ideas?" being a way of saying "which ideas?" At times the debate has become quite acrimonious, but by and large I think it has been fruitful, and in any case it is probably unavoidable,

Considering the dichotomy as it was formulated in 1970 when Perls died, one might take it as reflecting the split in the youth movement between hippies and political radicals. Although it is certainly true that there was such a split, then growing wider at every moment, and that the sides were justifiably labeled East Coast and West Coast, exceptions were everywhere apparent. In Berkeley, for example, both "Eastern" radicals and "Western" hippies could be found, a perfect microcosm of the national schism, including the plain fact that the factions were often seen coexisting in the same person. The crisis of the late Sixties tended to polarize people and to separate out certain issues as tests of allegiance, but at every stage of the movement, from its origins to its long-term legacy, in individuals and in groups, there was a fusion of political and cultural rebelliousness that marked the epoch as nothing else did.

No doubt we all know what Goodman meant in calling Fritz "a hippie" in his memorial address, yet at the same time it is evident that Perls was very much a product of the bookish and bourgeois Central European *Kultur* that invented both psychoanalysis and socialism. By the same token Goodman was in his own character not so much a fiery radical in the Bakunin or Kropotkin tradition as a sexy, mischievous street urchin living by his wits in the urban jungle. In short, neither Perls nor Goodman could be summed up in a phrase or category, even though they had come to represent emphases and perspectives that were potentially in conflict. And the significant fact persists: whatever their differences they were able to join in the creation of a new kind of psychotherapy and collaborate on its theoretical exposition.

Perhaps still more to my point, the collaboration of two such different intellects in the founding of a new school of psychotherapy has had the advantage of preventing the typical hardening of theory into a sacrosanct set of doctrines attested to by the seal of a single mind. One does not speak of Perlsianism or Goodmanism the way one speaks of Freudianism or Reichianism.

Another way of putting much of this would be to say that Gestalt therapy's central effort to avoid the traditional dualisms — mind/body, objective/subjective, self/external world, biological/cultural, and so on — depended in large part on emphasizing them, not in their characteristic form as abstractions from experience that pose significant problems as standing dilemmas somehow given in the nature of things, but rather as important clues to areas of life where a contextual and phenomenological approach can unbind energy held in polar tension and release the vitality of genuinely creative conflict. It is typical of Gestalt therapy that the healing of a "neurotic split" (as these rigid dichotomies are termed) is not simply a matter of discovering some new integration, though that may be the end in view, but depends first of all on bringing apparent incompatibilities into awareness and allowing "free conflict" to emerge; "since we work in the same world there must somewhere be a creative unity" (*Gestalt Therapy*, pp. 244-245).

I am conflating here, as Goodman and Perls also do at this juncture in their text, the treatment of "neurotic splitting" in theoretical thinking and in the theorists who think it. In their ad hominem universe the point was always to acknowledge conflict and to look for unity in the underlying experience — unity that would not be static or final but "creative," an aspect of ongoing "novelty, excitement, and growth," to borrow the title of volume II of their book.

With such a conception of conflict in mind we may regard the hubbub that followed Goodman's memorial speech as thoroughly appropriate. But let us go a little further into one particular manifestation of this conflict, for the sake of illustration; the dichotomy between, on the one hand, an emphasis on a single exemplary figure, a guru like Perls, and on the other hand, the valuing not of a person but a book, the "sacred text," *Gestalt Therapy*. Sometimes the debate between "East" and "West" has shaped itself this way, championing Perls the great Master of living technique, or Goodman the author of the illuminating Word. But is it that simple?

With such vivid and famous personalities as Goodman and Perls, there was a tendency for enthusiasts to treat them as "stars," objects of fantasy and cultish worship from afar. Both of them were somewhat safeguarded by their complete lack of interest in the mirror of fame. They had plenty of other foibles, but these too were more likely to undermine adulation and transference than to invite it. Nonetheless, in their different ways both Perls and Goodman had disciples — some of whom were like Zen acolytes trying to get the discipline into their bones, some of whom were Sixties "groupies," part of the chorus attracted by the limelight.

The Gestalt "Way" was not much in evidence or easily acquired in such circumstances, which provided neither the "safe emergency situation" nor the ongoing mutual aid of group therapy. Yet there was always the possibility of breakthrough and conversion for those already teetering on the edge. The question then would be what sort of support and follow-through the community of disciples and the teachings themselves might offer. The gurus themselves were too busy with their causes to be of much help, in front of audiences rather than running groups. Perls' workshops and Goodman's panel discussions were versions of "group demonstrations," not really of therapeutic use to most participants or observers, though of course one could learn something important from them.

Perls was charismatic, to be sure, but as Goodman pointed out in his memorial speech, he was no leader. In any interactive situation he liked to take control, but more for the excitement of the moment than to steer toward a goal or gather disciples. His was the fascination of breaking through facades and touching the quick of things. Although he needed an audience to shine in front of, Perls was neither posing nor crusading. In his own way he was a living embodiment of the Gestalt notion of the self as creative adjustment at the contact boundary: he came to life in direct

proportion to the life he could provoke in others. There was a good deal of Eros in this mutual excitement.

Actually Goodman was not so different, though more concerned with his message and its long-term effects than with his performance of the moment. Like Fritz, he had no desire to lead. Given Gestalt therapy's emphasis on the here and now, and its reliance on heightened awareness and ongoing creative adjustment — self-regulation and autonomy rather than system or dogma — the notion of a guru who isn't interested in leading makes a lot of sense. However, when one looks closely at Perls' personal style, one finds only part of the Gestalt attitude. In Goodman's view the here and now also implied a "next" — one thing led to another and the ground underfoot gave faith for a further step. Perls' aggressive, confrontational impulses were certainly true to the theory of dental aggression that was his primary contribution to psychotherapeutic thought, but physicianly compassion, respect for the autonomy of others, and even the habits of awareness and openness to experience were undeveloped in his character. There is plenty of testimony to his sharp eye and fearless pounce, to his relish for life, and to a streak of playfulness in him, all of which might well be qualities worth cultivating, but they do not add up to the attitude one associates with the Gestalt movement. Rather, these are the techniques and talents of psychodrama and the encounter group, Esalen-style shedding of convention and the plunge into role-playing and contact.

If we turn to the other pole of our dichotomy, the "sacred text," we find another mixed case. There has been some temptation among Perlsian adepts of the here and now to derogate the second and third generations of the New York and Cleveland Institutes who, in their view, treat *Gestalt Therapy* too worshipfully, as if it encoded all there is to know of theory and practice. "Religions of the book" are typically proselytizing and excluding, doctrine and conversion serving as gateways rather than paths, with much stamping out of heresy. However, it is doubtful that *Gestalt Therapy* has been used that way very often, nor have Goodman's and Perls' psychological writings been belabored with sectarian commentary in anything approaching the quantity or intensity devoted for instance to Freud or Reich.

Although Perls was always willing to take credit for *Gestalt Therapy*, in his Esalen years he rarely mentioned it and clearly regarded the book as outmoded by his later work. Goodman, however, did not change his mind about the insights of their book, and in other major works *Growing Up Absurd*, for instance, or his last volume, *Little Prayers and Finite Experience* — he is still quoting *Gestalt Therapy* in formulations that he might now improve on, stylistically, but which suited his intellectual purposes as thoroughly as the day he first wrote them. By the same token, he wrote too many other books to worry about its status as a sacred text.

Has the book been used as dogma? It is certainly true that over the years some therapists from the East Coast camp, which might be called "the founding tradition," have complained about therapists of the "heretical" West Coast, that their ideas and practices are "not Gestalt therapy" implying deviation from some doctrinal norm — while those so accused have a similar perception, though viewed from the opposite heights. But all this is mere froth, even though it sometimes gets in people's eyes. In the first place, East and West are not serious labels, and whatever their local allegiances, advocates of Perls' primacy as the fountainhead of the movement are just as likely to claim a greater share of the book for him as they are to minimize its significance.

More to the point perhaps is the practical fact that for so many years the training of Gestalt therapists has been centered on a meticulous study of the book. Isadore From, who trained more practitioners than any other person, made a sentence-by-sentence discussion of the theoretical half of *Gestalt Therapy* his cornerstone. Whoever went through his mentoring would know that part of the book backwards and forwards. Yet his purpose was not doctrinal so much as pedagogical. Just

as the first half of the book with its sequence of "do-it-yourself" exercises had in view the assimilation of the Gestalt attitude, so the second, theoretical half was also conceived as a regimen. The authors themselves spoke of their approach as a kind of ad hominem argument designed "to bring into the picture the total context of the problem, including the conditions of experiencing it, the social milieu and the personal 'defenses' of the observer," with the goal of improving clinical practice while also providing "insights for us all toward a creative change in our present urgent crisis" (*Gestalt Therapy*, pp. 243, 250). That is, the method was indeed catechetical, but its aim was psychic revolution and autonomy rather than orthodoxy. As From saw it, a large part, of Goodman's achievement was to write about Gestalt therapy "in a way that reasonably prevents introjection" (*Oral History*, p. 36). It had to be worked through, and in the process a reader would be changed. This conception of the relation of the text to training and practice is completely compatible with the notion just offered of the Gestalt guru, whose stance toward disciples is that of a master craftsman, or perhaps an oriental sage, but not a systematizer or prophet.

The point is that one can find elements of the same attitudes in both East and West, Goodman and Perls, even though their primary dispositions are so obviously different. Much of the vitality of Gestalt therapy lies in these unresolved tensions and contradictions, which have kept the movement from shrinking in upon itself, and indeed, have left it prey at the fringes to hybridization, which one hopes is not sterile or monstrous but a healthy growth. While it may be that some of the faddish spinoffs are sheer quackery, the spread of basic Gestalt attitudes in the psychotherapeutic community and beyond is surely a favorable sign.

In general we may say that the contribution of Gestalt therapy to the psychoanalytic tradition has been primarily a matter of fusion and synthesis. Not only was its development full of eclecticism and cross-fertilization, but its place in history, at the moment of tremendous shifts in the intellectual relations of Europe and the United States, and at the point when the first generation of psychoanalysts was dying, guaranteed that many broken threads would be waiting to be woven into a new pattern, including some strands that would keep coming unraveled in any theory. *Gestalt Therapy* was an attempt to save as much of the conflicting appearances as possible in a new synthesis built on a phenomenological account of experience, viewed as prior to the awareness of subject and object. The self was conceived as creative adjustment of organism and environment, the here and now defined as a field for ongoing experiment with the unfinished situations of the character and the unfinished revolutions of the social order. In this new formulation Goodman and Perls had managed to set fire to one another, borrowing from the Gestalt psychologists, especially from

Kurt Goldstein, from Otto Rank, from Buber and Lao Tzu, from Aristotle and Kant and William James, as well as from the central tradition they saw themselves in, that of Freud and Reich. On the one hand they attempted to find ways of contextualizing and integrating the wisdom of these philosophers of human nature; on the other hand they affirmed an attitude to creative conflict, a refusal to systematize, that kept open new possibilities of insight and invention. As Goodman said, the goal was always to "take on Culture without losing Nature" (*Finite Experience*, pp. 37-39). That was a permanent task of the human condition, to be taken up by every generation. It is our task still.

References

- From, I. (1982). An Oral History of Gestalt Therapy; Part Two (Interview with Edward Rosenfeld). In J. Wysong and E. Rosenfeld (Eds.), *An Oral History of Gestalt Therapy*. Highland, NY; The Gestalt Journal.
- Goodman, P. (1962). *Utopian Essays and Practical Proposals*. New York: Random House.
- Goodman, P. (1966). *Five Years*. New York: Brussel & Brussel. (Page numbers from this edition are cited, but actual quotations are From the slightly different manuscript version in the Houghton Library of Harvard University, quoted by permission.)
- Goodman, P. (1968). Freedom and Learning; The Need for Choice. *Saturday Review of Literature*, 51(20), 73-75.
- Goodman, P. (1970). *New Reformation: Notes of a Neolithic Conservative*. New York: Random House.
- Goodman, P. (1972). *Little Prayers and Finite Experience*. New York; Harper & Row.
- Goodman, P. (1973). *Collected Poems*. Ed. Taylor Stoehr. New York: Random House.
- Perls, F. S. (1969). *In and Out the Garbage Pail*. Bantam edn. 1972. New York: Bantam Books.
- Perls, F. S., Hefferline, R. J., & Goodman, P. (1951). *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth In The Human Personality*. New York; The Julian Press.

¹ * The substance of this article was the opening presentation of the *Gestalt Journal's* annual conference, April 3, 1992, in Boston. Professor Stoehr has edited his speech for publication in the *Journal* adding brief remarks at the opening and a longer new section in conclusion. Professor Stoehr is Goodman's literary executor, and has edited a dozen volumes of his writings, including *Nature Heals: The Psychological Essays*, available in a new edition from the Gestalt Journal Press. He has also written a number of books on literary and cultural topics, and teaches English at the University of Massachusetts at Boston.