

COMMENTARY ON THE BOOK "THE ART OF BEING".

SALVADOR MILLAN.

Erich Fromm
The Art of Being
Foreword by Rainer Funk
Continuum-New York. 1992.

I

When E. Fromm left Mexico in 1973, he had left behind two types of teachings: The direct one, which he transmitted with his daily fellowship with colleagues and pupils by his way of acting, by personal comments and by his systematic habits which he maintained in the seminars and in the cultural life of the university in which he participated, a teaching transmitted as spoken history -oral tradition- and also the teaching which issues from the books he wrote during his 25 years stay in the country which must be taken as the official, the academic one. Of the pragmatic teachings, which expose him to be the object of understanding and interpretation, since they are due to that systematization of his relationship with a group near to him, there exist testimonials, such as narrations and critiques (Millan 1980.), texts produced by people he analyzed and with whom he worked in social research.

Those of us who knew him in both circumstances can understand Fromm in two ways, for which reason it is not strange that the text now brought together and published by Rainer Funk make one think of a personal, intimate, persistent, self-made Fromm, who shows himself to be modestly trying to carry on the difficult art of living his life and a Fromm who is a profound connoisseur and synthesizer of two great thinkers who influenced a part of his life. The interesting thing about this text was that Fromm himself rejected the very rich personal part, an autobiographical account of his last years, for inclusion in the edition of "To Have or to Be?" (FROMM 1976²), a part which, even at that time, would have shown him in more personal, more intimate light, but which he preferred to eliminate in favor of the academic. These text shows an apparently dual human condition in Fromm; What he was like intimately and what he showed outwardly. In all this we see a constant struggle to grow, to learn to live and dedicate himself totally to this Task-Steps toward Being- and we also see an intense work of intellectual creativity, Freudian-Marxist synthesis. The book which has just been published is a sampling of these characteristics of Fromm's.



In chapters II to IV, which R. Funk rightly emphasizes as Steps toward Being, we find him being the pupil of people more immersed in the processes of concentration, meditation, physical exercises or practices, aspects permitting the amplification of sensitivity, which prove to be fundamental for Westerners interested in oriental philosophical practice and conceptualization, an apprenticeship which Fromm began at the age of 54. He was the pupil of Charlotte Selver, practiced the art of movement with Katya Delakowa and was with Zbynek Fiser in Buddhism and followed Nyanaponika Mahathera in deep meditation. These were teachers who, each in his own way, permitted an amplification of the consciousness and facilitated concentration. In 1957, he had a meeting with D.T. Susuki in Cuernavaca Morelos, for an understanding of Zen-Buddhism and the book which the Seminary published (3) tells of the differences between oriental and western thought and of the possibility of coming together thanks to the concept of psychoanalysis, so that the conjunction with oriental thought might come through the unconscious.

The Art of Being shows us a Fromm who at the age of 74 confesses his practices of recent years, relaxation and meditation. This is sufficient to consider it an autobiographical text, after "Beyond the Chains of Illusion" (1962). He tells us about his personal activity, his self-discipline and shows us a diligent and valourous effort to achieve change in himself, to be self-made. Fromm did not simply contemplate his destiny in the last years. After penetrating the unconscious, he attempts to understand existence, his existence, through the practice of oriental meditation and, in his self-analysis, he integrates both Eastern and Western currents. In this, without doubt, his attitude is the opposite of S. Freud's, who would keep his last years for contemplation; "Die Zukunft einer Illusion" (1927), when faced with his own destiny, as in the Greek tragedies, which motivated many of his writings and which tinge Western thought. This dramatic influence was played out by Anna Freud herself, when, between the years 1930 to 1935, as told to Esther Menaker (1989 4), in order to live out her Jewish identity, she had to accept the circumstances and stay in Vienna, despite the barbarism already running wild in the streets, in blind expectation, an attitude which alarmed Menaker herself, which she, nevertheless, displaces in her feelings and mind with the knowledge that she is an "American".

The autobiographical text shows us a Fromm struggling with his immediate destiny and applying his own analytic knowledge and that derived from his exercises and meditation to the extreme that, if necessary, there will be breaks with his own past, as when he breaks with the term "Humanistic Psychoanalysis" (p 64), which he had proposed and which would mark him as different from S. Freud in analytical practice. He makes this break to avoid the immediate destiny, which would have considered him a mythical



teacher and, at the same time, he does not wish to be an accomplice in the standarization of his own tasks and refuses to contemplate the proposed term being turned to a bureaucratic purpose, if it were used as the banner of a group of psychologists. Although finally Fromm (p 83-84) would not give up his profound belief in human condition and with a deffinition of the term different from the one he used in the sixties, which limited itself to saying that nothing about you is strange to me, he now proposes, besides, the possibility of transcending us and in this way shows himself.

II

This book is not only important from an anecdotal point of view, so I should like to bring out three technical evaluations.

A) In the clinical Seminars of Cuernavaca between 1970 and 1973, Fromm told of his surprise at the assessment given by his orthodox analyst, Dr. Hans Sachs⁽⁵⁾, about how he hung his coat beside his in a little vestibule before a session, calling this "positive transference". Now it is known through psychoanalytic literature⁽⁶⁾, that there existed a current to assess circumstances, like hanging clothing on clothes racks, acts moreover very common in Europe, and that these were treated with an extreme orthodox point of view in Berlin as well in Vienna, and considered a positive transference. This cliché concerning transference, besides being conventional and anti-analytic is very far from the proposal made by Fromm in the text (pag 60-61) referring to the phenomenon of transference in a deep dimension, where we face the dilemma of freedom. We encourage our own growth when we face life's alternatives of being oneself, the one responsible and the author, or when we prefer slavery, wasting our faculties and alienating ourselves into the service of another longing that it will solve the problems of our own existence. In analysis, the therapist bears this responsibility and when alienated he encourages the dependency. This is a thesis, moreover, which Fromm sustained throughout his works and which is fundamental pillar of this book, besides continuing to interest Fromm to the end.

B) A second point is clearly what he proposes as Self-Analysis. Besides the knowledge of the unconscious via psychoanalysis, the amplification of consciousness was complemented with meditation exercises. He denies setting himself up as the guide, refuses to claim that his way must also be the way for the other. It is understood that this is refusal to indicate what it must be for everyone, since the way for each will always be each own. With his example, we see a searcher for his own well being, through self-development, the practice of various disciplines and with the intention of amplifying the field of consciousness, which in



his greatest attempt becomes his self-analysis, the Self-Analysis. A little before, in 1971, he wrote to Martin Jay (7) that people might be saved more through religious practices or procedures coming of their own efforts than by the socio-economic conditions of modern society and that the latter, on the contrary, does not offer any other way but the formation of the alienated man, which is why he was considered a moralist.

C) The third point is rather the reopening of a theoretical issue. The way he has followed in psychoanalysis, the duality which began with Eros-Thanatos, which Fromm himself converted into the struggle between Biophilia-Necrophilia and which he now reaffirms for us as To Be-To Have. A social historical analogy would say: In the age of Eros and Thanatos, the social conflict was due the blindness of sexual repression; in the age of Biophilia-Necrophilia, society was emerging from its necrophilous feast, a product of the wars. At the present time, after God has died and spirituality has been lost, even by the religious leaders, material profits take relevance, while a neoliberal solution and a free market do not precisely strengthen the spirit.

The Text which has now been published was necessary and we hope the other published in German by Rainer Funk will soon be available to readers in America. These are works of a brilliant, profound and humanistic thinker but at the same time no less readable.

Salvador Millán is a Psychoanalyst of the Mexican Institute of Psychoanalysis; co-editor of its publications and researcher of the Seminary of Sociopsicoanalysis.

1. MILLAN S. GOJMAN S. COMP. 1980 ERICH FROMM Y EL PSICOANALISIS HUMANISTA. Mexico: Siglo XXI editores.

2. 1976 To Have or To Be?. New York: Harper Row World Perspectives.

3. 1960 Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism D.T. Susuki. E. Fromm and R de Martino, New York: Harper.

4. 1989 Appointment in Vienna. Esther Menaker, Ph.D. Published by agreement with Lennart Sane Agency A.B. See Chapter 3

5. Erich Fromm Gesamtausgabe. Band VIII Psychoanalyse. Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag.

6. Op. Cit. Esther Menaker. See Preface.



7.1971 letter to Martin Jay May 14 1971.

Propriety of the Erich Fromm Document Center. For personal use only. Citation or publication of material prohibited without express written permission of the copyright holder.

Eigentum des Erich Fromm Dokumentationszentrums. Nutzung nur für persönliche Zwecke. Veröffentlichungen – auch von Teilen – bedürfen der schriftlichen Erlaubnis des Rechteinhabers.

