



The Philosopher Who Philosophizes, Henry Miller

## The Philosopher Who Philosophizes

AS A species the philosophers have always bored me to death. The profession has always seemed to me to be an unnatural one, an activity removed from life. (This is a criticism which does not come to my head, for example, when thinking of a Hindu or a Tibetan sage.)

At the same time philosophy itself excites me, much as good wine does: I accept it not only as a legitimate part of life but as a sine qua non, a without which no life. Nothing, however, is sadder, more dismal, dingy, mingy, picayune than the lives of certain philosophers.

It is as if they had become, or rebecome, queasy, quaky, archaic little men whose whole lives are mortgaged by the obsession for constructing miniature soul-houses to be occupied only after death.

The man can be one thing, a tiny louse, let us say, and the philosophy another, perhaps a crushing, devastating world conception which nobody can swallow, not even the philosopher himself.

The process of refining and segregating Idea, of making it "pure," so to speak, inevitably brings about a muddiness which is fortunately lacking in the original chaos. I have a mental image of the philosophic systems of the world lying like a net above the surface of human activity; from his remote and lofty perch the philosopher looks down through the curd-like net and discovers in the affairs of men nothing but dreck.

All this is not by way of saying that Keyserling is the first philosopher whom I can stomach. No, there are times when Keyserling too bores me to death. But with Keyserling there comes a new element, an heroic and adulterative one which, like the discovery of the microbe world in the human organism, stimulates and complicates the problem of health and clarity. Keyserling is the first philosopher to use a sky-light—or a periscope.

He may plunge as deep as the whale but he never forgets the sky above, nor the fact that it is the sky towards which men are turning instinctively for relief and assuagement. Keyserling comes at a time when both sea and sky are being heavily explored. He is the new type of spiritual adventurer, the Plutonic herald who faces both ways, who is at home above and below, who reconciles East and West and yet never loses hold of the tiller.

Built like a Viking, with an unquenchable fire in his guts and a pantheon for a brain, he has dedicated his life to quest and conquest. For me he represents the genuine metamorphic thinker, one capable of navigating in any medium. He is endowed with an indestructible skeletal structure and a crystalline transparency usually observable only in lower forms of life.

I first came upon Keyserling's vast symphonic musings at a fortuitous moment in my life. For forty years I had been sound asleep and thrashing about with furious activity. Life had become nothing but this noisy breathing which signifies nothing. Through a rencontre with an extraordinary person I suddenly awoke, looked about, and saw what I had never seen before—the cosmos.

And then, right to hand, was one of Keyserling's books—Creative Understanding—which I devoured ravenously. It was like the first mouthful of bread after a long fast; even the hard, tough crust tasted good. I allowed this food to roll about in my guts a long while before venturing to taste another morsel.

The next time I picked up Keyserling, I remember, was during a sea voyage. This time it was *The Travel Diary*. I did not begin at the beginning, but glanced here and there at the chapters dealing with those countries which most interest me—China and India.

I saw the philosopher in his undershirt, a frail weather-beaten man, puzzled, ravished, perplexed, roving amidst a fauna and flora which were constantly changing and shifting; I saw that he was most

extraordinarily fallible, permeable, malleable. I rejoiced for him, and even enjoyed his occasional discomfiture.

Another time, in bed, I began the great South American saga of the soul. I was privileged to experience that indescribable pleasure of being electrified in the midst of a heavy torpor. The whole cosmos suddenly began to wheel before me.

I felt the blood which the earth has given to man restored to earth to run in tumultuous subterranean rivers, to flow sluggishly among the constellations, to burst the trunks of fat tropical trees, to dry and bake in the peaked Andes, to slumber in the land-and-water beasts, the shell-backed monsters, the hypnotic and fatalistic ophidians: I saw a man take a continent by the scalp and wash it in the sea, shaking loose its hair-like dreams and silences, laying its blood out in thick slabs and dissecting it, selecting with a most dexterous digital manipulation its fragile, doomed inhabitants one by one, group by group, race by race, generation by generation, the whole multimillenary ancestral horde living and dead, ghastly and ghostly, full-blown, fly-blown, scoriated, striated, truncated, pulped, battered, a rich plasma of dead and living, of souls, ghosts, mummies, spirits, noumena, phenomena, succubi, incubi, and plough them through with the iron harrow of thought's brutal logic; then taking gold and dross together, with the goldsmith's finest balance, weigh, assay, test and attest, in order, like a dreaming Titan, to set moving in the sleep of thought a timeward litter of words which would arrange itself in the form of a significant whole.

This I glimpsed whilst felling asleep one night, and it was a special dress rehearsal put on for me by the same gaunt Viking in swallow-tail coat who prefers champagne with his evening meal, who gesticulates like a god of thunder, who strokes his beard meditatively and sits alone sometimes, oftentimes, to reflect, meditate and pray, or to gather back into him the vast sperm and spew which he is capable of ejecting on the slightest provocation.

Such an experience is definitely not in the philosophic scheme of things. I had to recast my notion of "philosopher." I had to take the situation

philosophically. I had to admit, above all, that for the first time in my life I was witnessing a philosopher lose himself in the world—not only lose himself, but drown himself, and not only drown, but immolate himself: had to confess that more miraculous still was the sight of him rising from the grave with the stake through his body, the sight of him defiantly flinging it off—stake, world, water, waves, heavy ether, soporific excrescences, end dreams, blood vistas, horoscopic hallucinations, dead thought clinkers, social pus habits, all, all, the while making an airy music above in the pink clouds drenching the mountain top. Nor was I any longer surprised when I heard him blow the conch and roll the kettle drum, nor when whooping it up along the Appalachian spine he suddenly burst into the Rig-Veda.

This is what I call philosophizing. It is something other than making philosophy—something plus. Here the creative becomes the thing-in-itself, and not vice versa: the exercise of a faculty and not the product of the exercise. Living the every-day life whilst spinning the most tenuous tough web. Not the soul-house of incarceration but the light-meshed web of the divine diaphane.

In this transparent garb studded with dead flies, dead thought matter, dead meteoric systems, dead mouse-traps, dead pass-keys, we advance page after page, foot by foot, millimeter by millimeter, through the Keyserling underworld sea. At times we are lifted clean out of the waters and rushed aloft like a screaming condor.

The world systems pass in review, those already formulated and those not yet formulated. With myriad-minded mythological eye we pierce the stale imperfections that cement life to life and death to death.

We become habituated to all climates, all conditions of weather, all forms of blight, pestilence, sorrow and suffering; we peregrinate in non-peripatetic style, eschewing the perimeter, the axes, the hypotenuse, avoiding angles, squares, triangles: instead we adopt the lymphatic slide, follow the interstitial, interstellar parabolas.

In the deep-holed world conceptions scattered between star births and star deaths we shimmer with spangled webs, radiant, dewy, misty, effulgent with philosophic dust. Where now the god who was nailed to the cross? Where the man with the lantern? Where the ferryman, the fire-eater, the logos dealer, the lotus healer, the Gorgon, the flat-footed Moloch? What has become of man, mollusc of molluscs?

Keyserling's style . . . there is something prehistoric about it. Of a morning he awakes in a volcanic mood, and he erupts. What is terrifying and unbearable, in his style, is not the heavy Baltic or Pomeranian redundancy, but the inundating effect. We are enlightened, blessed, baptized and drowned.

There is every variety of inundation—by air, fire, earth and water, by lava, slag, cinders, by relics, monuments, symbols, signs and portents. The very secrets of the earth are belched forth and with them the scintillating pre-diluvial records of man.

Throughout the convulsive record there are pages of oceanic calm in which one can hear the breathing of whales and other leviathans of the deep; there are celestial sunrises too, as on the morning of creation when even the fledgling lark can be heard caroling in the blue. And there are great frozen tracts in which the air itself turns blue as a knuckle and the marrow of wisdom is held in icy suspense.

Keyserling is a sort of red-feathered giant from the tundras, a megalithic Mameluke of the Lemurian Age who has created his own polyphonic, polyphylacteric alphabet. His language is something forged by hand out of meteoric rock; there is no sensuality, no humor in it.

It contains the seeds of all that was dreamed of by man in the cataclysmic beginnings of the world: it is not a blood language but a schist-cyst-and-quartz medium. And yet, like all those of royal strain, he is capable of showing tenderness, humility, true humility.

He will take the pains, in a letter, to answer a microscopic point, if the point is worth answering. He will begin on a post-card and end by presenting you with an album. With the superabundant energy of a colossus he will uncover a ton of debris in order to bring to light an infinitesimal speck of radium with which to illumine the question.

He does not impose his verdict; he turns his searchlight on the problem. He is a visionary of heavy substance, a seer who looks into the bowels of the earth as well as into the blue. He is equipped with the most sensitive antennae and the boring tusk of a rhinoceros to boot.

The ordinary reader is killed off—not by the back-breaking longueurs à la Proust or Henry James, nor by the learned abracadabra of a Joyce, but by the unaccustomed variety of media through which the muscular flow of thought cleaves and surges. People have accused him of being derivative, assimilative, synthetic.

The truth is that he is analgesic and amalgamatic. As the thought flows it congeals, imprisoning in the most marvelous veined clots the hemorrhages produced by the terrifying lesions which his impetuous ardor opens up.

He is a thinker who attacks with the whole body, who emerges at the end of a book bleeding from every pore. With Keyserling the spirit goes berserker. It is the rage of the giants who, weary of earthly conquests, flung themselves at the heavens. He makes a blood marriage with the spirit: Apis the Bull goring the Holy Ghost in ecstasy.

Sometimes it seems more like God lying down on the operating table with his adopted son Hermann and exchanging vital fluids: a last minute operation in preparation for the final ordeal, the quest and conquest of death.\*

\* Written in Corfu as a tribute to Keyserling on the occasion of his 60th birthday this July 1940.

The end