

## THE TEMPTER: BERGENGRUEN'S *GROSSTYRANN* AND THE HERMETIC TRADITION

Although some of the earlier works of Bergengruen have, not unjustly, been consigned to the womb of time, or as the author himself said, ". . . mit Recht vergriffen, verbrannt, vergessen," a brief look at these works, particularly *Das Gesetz des Atum*, reveals the poet's early preoccupation with a world-view which never lost its significance for his continuing development. The mottos of several of the *Nachwachen* point to the *Emerald Tablet* and the philosophical works of Jacob Böhme as the religio-philosophical context of the narrative action. Although the aesthetic value of the work is slight, the Hermetic tradition to which it points outlives the vehicle of its enunciation and eventually forms the metaphysical framework for the major fiction of Bergengruen. Several writers, particularly Ida Görres<sup>1</sup> and Hans Bänziger<sup>2</sup> have spoken in general terms of the importance of this tradition for Bergengruen's metaphysical orientation, but it has not been generally realized to what extent this influence has determined the detailed construction of the author's fictional universe, especially in *Der Grosstyrann und das Gericht*.

Bergengruen's creative assimilation of the central paradox, peculiar to the Hermetic tradition and the philosophy of Böhme, is by no means unique in this century. One need only point to the pioneering work done by Nicolas Berdyaev, or, less dogmatically focused, that of Martin Buber, both of whom show significant parallels to Bergengruen's own moral and metaphysical positions. It is this tapping of an ancient and yet surprisingly contemporary tradition which lends the seemingly conservative Bergengruen the aura of modernity which for Hermann Kunisch is characteristic of "der andere Bergengruen."

Although Bergengruen was converted to and sincerely professed the Catholic form of Christianity, he was clearly indifferent to the dogmatic furor characteristic, for example, of the development of Neo-Thomism in this century. One can only agree with Hans Bänziger's assessment of the poet's religious attitude:

Die Frage der Wahrheit erscheint ihm weniger vordringlich als die Tradition und der consensus omnium, persönliche Erleuchtung weniger wichtig als das historisch Gewachsene. Die Frage, ob im Geglaubten alles rein evangelisch sei, überlässt er den Protestanten. Seine Dichtung versucht nicht, die Wahrheit stets von neuem und mit neuen Mitteln anzugehen, sondern will Abbild der ewigen Ordnung sein<sup>3</sup>.

Bergengruen was simply not interested in dogmatic formulations as such. This indifference undoubtedly sprang from his realization that rational abstractions, no matter how theologically correct, were unable to do justice to the living paradox of the actual organic processes in human spiritual life. This basic attitude was plainly a major factor in Bergengruen's abiding attraction to the Hermetic tradition.

The Hermetic tradition traces its origin back to Hermes Trismegistos, the alleged author of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, including the *Emerald Tablet*. The squabbles over the historical authenticity of this attribution need not concern us here. It is sufficient to recall that many Christian thinkers of the Renaissance took the tradition seriously and made continual attempts to reconcile its tenants with Christian theology. Over the period of its development the basic ideas of this philosophy were expressed in a number of occult languages, including those of astrology, alchemy and the Cabala<sup>4</sup>. This entire tradition received its last monumental Christian formulation in the so-called theosophy of Jacob Böhme.

It is of course impossible within the limited scope of this paper to deal adequately with the Hermetic tradition as a whole. Nor is it necessary to do so with respect to its relevance to Bergengruen. It will be enough to review one major aspect in its most radical Western formulation. The influence of Jacob Böhme, the seventeenth century philosopher-mystic, on twentieth century thought has been most apparent in the discussions on the nature and meaning of evil. This is as true for Berdyaev and Buber as it is for Bergengruen. Berdyaev in particular has been the century's most vociferous critic of a Christian orthodox theology which is strongly inclined to absolutize that which can only be relative: good and evil, light and dark, Christ and Lucifer. In Berdyaev's opinion it is particularly the orthodox attitude toward evil which has given rise to the considerable movement of atheism in the last two hundred years of Western history. The God who has been absolutely dissociated from darkness winds up wearing the mask of Satan. The radical, and to orthodox Christians unacceptable, solution of Jacob Böhme was to place the origin of potential evil in the divine nature itself. To state Böhme's case rather too briefly: when the unmanifest brilliance of the divine unity moves to reveal itself, it can only do so by positing the realm of darkness as a background against which the divine light can become visible. This realm of darkness Böhme calls the First Principle of the divine essence, and it corresponds in all essentials to the negative aspect of manifest existence illustrated in occult symbolism by lead in alchemy, Saturn-Mars in astrology and *Binah-Geburah* on the Cabalistic Tree of Life. It is the realm of potentiality, conflict and karmic adjustment, all forming the necessary foundation for the revelation of God in nature. Contrary to, and yet linked in unity with, the First Principle of darkness is the realm of light and harmony which Böhme calls the Second Principle of the divine essence (likewise corresponding to gold in alchemy, Jupiter-Venus in astrology and *Chesed-Netzach* on the Tree of Life). These two Principles are entirely relative spheres of vision, each depending on the other for its manifestation. As Böhme so often insists, there can be no light without darkness, no yes without no. In the divine nature itself the darkness remains passive, functioning simply and solely as a means of manifestation. The three Spirits of darkness (*herb, bitter, Angst*) as well as the three Spirits of

light (*Liebe, Schall, Corpus*) confront one another in, and are transformed by, the fourth and central Spirit, the divine fire (Feuer). In human nature since the Fall, however, the darkness inclines to assert its independence from the light and to become active, transforming itself into a *monstrum*. Man's essential task, then, is to allow the darkness of his nature to be transformed in the divine fire, revealing himself and his world as an epiphany of God<sup>5</sup>.

When we extricate the fundamental notions of this philosophy from the mythical constructions of Böhme's cosmology, we are left with an essentially Hermetic view of man and his destiny in the divine order of the universe, an order which is likewise reflected in the major novels of Bergengruen. The poet's approach to this philosophy is, of course, neither technical nor dogmatic. He simply was not interested, *qua* poet, in the abstract formulation of truth as proposition, nor in the confrontation with orthodoxy which so marred the destinies of Meister Eckhart and Jacob Böhme. Rather, he was interested in the truth of the poetic image, in which the marriage of flesh and spirit, psychology and myth, individual and type reveals truth as living paradox beyond the limiting confines of rational categories. The following aphorism, for example, could, as a detached proposition, be quite disturbing to a certain literal-mindedness of orthodoxy, but, built into the universe of the poet's fiction, it justifies itself with an inevitable necessity:

Wenn etwas richtig ist, so muss notwendigerweise auch sein Gegenteil richtig sein; denn unsere irdische Welt wird von der Paradoxie regiert<sup>6</sup>.

One of the primary metaphysical ideas informing Bergengruen's narrative universe, from the *Grosstyrann* to the *Rittmeister*, is the Hermetic notion of the paradoxical unity of balanced opposites, a notion which is inimical to rational formulation, but which can be revealed in the organic structure of the work of art. Man's earthly existence, for Bergengruen as for Böhme, is suspended between relative opposites, light and dark, good and evil, justice and grace, both elements of which must be brought into equilibrium in the real but suprarational processes of life:

Das Geheimnis des Lebens will aber, dass jedem menschlichen Bestreben ein Gegenstreben der Schicksalsmächte beigesellt sei, und nur in diesem Gegensatz erhält sich die Welt<sup>7</sup>.

The critical opinions on *Der Grosstyrann und das Gericht* generally, if often simplistically, echo Bergengruen's own *Präambel* and the admittedly dark saying: *ne nos inducas in tentationem*, agreeing that the novel is basically concerned with the villainy of a despotic Renaissance prince who, arrogating to himself divine qualities, succumbs to the most base of temptations: the hunger for absolute power. Erich Hofacker, for example, asserts that "the common despot's inclination toward cruelty has been refined into a malicious desire to lead his fellow men, including

the old priest Don Luca, into temptation". Opposed to the Grand Prince, the villain of the piece, stands Sperone, "the humble lay preacher and only true Christian of them all," who "realizes that the whole city has been mentally poisoned. Seized by compassion, he accuses himself of the murder in order to save the city from moral ruin<sup>8</sup>."

Peter Meier agrees essentially with Hofacker. "So waltet der Herrscher denn allmächtig, allwissend, allgegenwärtig, aber ohne Liebe über Cassano, und zuletzt wagt er es, Cassano, das ihm auf Heil und Verderben ausgeliefert ist, in Versuchung zu führen, auf dass er über den Sündenfall des Menschen richten könne." Similarly Sperone is the "gleichwertige Gegenfigur", who by sacrifice and selfless love would save the city from moral ruin<sup>9</sup>.

Although, on the face of it, these interpretations are correct from the limited perspective of moral criticism, their failure to do justice to the cosmic order of the novel resides in the fact that the events and symbols are interpreted within the moralistic framework of an alleged Christian orthodoxy which is, without any hesitation, ascribed to Bergengruen. The world is neatly divided into two opposed camps. The good guys are obviously Christian, and the bad guys are condemned and dispatched to hell; and this without the slightest philosophical reflection on the unity of the cosmic order within which these characters are acting.

In numerous passages of his essays and aphorisms Bergengruen has sketched, in outline at least, the metaphysical and moral contours of the universe which lie at the basis of his fiction. One of the fundamental principles by which this universe is constructed is the distinction between the individual and the type:

Das Geheimnis jeder Menschendarstellung in der Dichtung ist der Eingang alles Individuellen in das Typische und die Fasslichmachung alles Typischen im Individuellen<sup>10</sup>.

Der Einzelfall . . . ist nichts als die Manifestation ewig gültiger Gesetze, und deren Offenbarwerden, nicht deren vordringliche Predigt, das, was ich als metaphysische Pointe bezeichnen möchte, scheint mir denn auch der Kern jeder erzählenden Kunst zu sein<sup>11</sup>.

Nowhere is this principle more apparent than in *Der Grosstyrann und das Gericht*. For behind, or rather in, the action of the novel lies the re-enactment of the essential Christian myth as ideally interpreted by the Hermetic tradition. To clarify this point we must begin by an examination of the mythical dimension in the figure of the Grand Prince.

It is generally agreed that the symbolic context in which the figure of the Grand Prince is drawn links him closely with the mythical figure of Lucifer. He is repeatedly associated with darkness, notably in the opening scene with Massimo, and even more significantly, in his conversation with Sperone when, being accused of culpable manipulation, he shades his face with his hand before the lighted candle. In his discussion of a

scene in the palace garden, Peter Meier calls attention to its similarity to the temptation scene in the Garden of Eden and comments, “Das Betasten der Frucht symbolisiert das Spiel des Herrschers mit der Versuchung: Er möchte vom Baum der Erkenntnis essen und werden wie Gott . . .<sup>12</sup>”. As a mask of Lucifer, however, the action of the prince points just as clearly to an identification with the snake who cunningly offers the fruit of temptation to his subjects. At any rate it is clear that little is gained from this symbolic connection if the mythical and metaphysical dimensions in the figure of Lucifer are obscured by a solely moral interpretation.

Compared with what is generally conceded to be the orthodox interpretation, the place of the snake in the Hermetic tradition is highly paradoxical. For the snake of temptation is also the snake of wisdom. Lucifer, king of darkness and light-bearer at once, has a tragic and necessary function in the spiritual development of man. Böhme, for example, unequivocally identifies Lucifer (at the deepest metaphysical level) with the First Principle of the divine essence. Without the darkness of involution and the expulsion from the garden of innocence there can be no rebirth into the joy of the light.

Bergengruen’s Grand Prince fulfills precisely this Luciferian function in the cosmos of Cassano. He would agree entirely with speaker B in the short piece “Ein Gespräch”: “Das Leben besteht nun in nichts Anderem als darin, dass, wer es leben will, Mut aufzubringen und Folgen hervorzurufen hat<sup>13</sup>.” The spiritual and moral development gained by Massimo, Vittoria and Diomedea in the course of the action is due largely to the wicked wisdom of the Prince, who forces them to experience the illusion of their innocent perfection. The Prince is, therefore, not just a wicked ruler, not just an individual adrift in a universe of moral absolutes. His individuality and function reflect the realm of divine order in which darkness is revealed as a necessary aspect of God’s creative and redeeming power, an aspect which compelled Bergengruen to rise from a moral to a tragic level in his search for an understanding of the human condition. The following comment of Martin Buber on the significance of the snake in Biblical symbolism is most appropriate to the figure of the Grand Prince as a mask of Lucifer:

Wer der Schlange die Macht der Zerstörung zuspricht, erhebt sie zu Gottes Nebenbuhler. – Das aber ist die Schlange der Schrift nicht. Sie ist kein Gegengott, sie ist nur die Kreatur, die den Menschen durch ihn selbst verderben will. Sie ist die listige Kreatur, die List der heimlich giftigen Kreatur, die Unordnung anzettelt, und aus der Unordnung wird die Geschichte, die tappend, versuchend, verfehlend sich um die Ordnung Gottes bemüht . . . „Gut“ ist die in die Richtung der Heimkehr gestreckte Bewegung, „Böse“ ist der Wirbel der richtungslos kreisenden Möglichkeitskraft des Menschen, ohne die nichts gerät, durch die, nimmt sie die Richtung nicht an und bleibt sie verfangen, alles missrät<sup>14</sup>.

When we understand the position of the Grand Prince in the integrated cosmos of Bergengruen’s “heile Welt”, we are also in a better position to put the character of Sperone into a more just perspective. To see in him,

with Hofacker, “the only true Christian of them all”, is to tear him out of the novel’s metaphysical context and destroy the unity of the poet’s universe. Bergengruen was never interested in pitting religion against religion, confession against confession nor, finally, good against evil as isolated and independent entities, but rather in revealing in a universal communal order the eternal laws of human spiritual development. All the characters in the novel are Christians engaged in the risky experiment of such a venture.

The figure of Sperone, just as that of the Grand Prince, has its prescribed function in the mythical drama. Opposed to, but intimately connected with Lucifer, the light-bearer, stands Christ, the Light. The dramatic development in the city of Cassano is arched between these two mutually dependent figures, just as the human soul in Böhme’s philosophy is suspended between the darkness and light of the First and Second Principles.

The action of Sperone is necessarily secondary to and dependent on that of the Grand Prince. As “der Einfältige”, withdrawing more and more from active life as his spiritual vision develops, he can manifest his strength only through apparent impotence. The hands of this man are pure, but their purity is coincident with their weakness. For it lies in the tragic nature of the divine order itself that strong hands are necessarily impure, pure hands necessarily weak. Sperone’s solution to the progressive entanglements in Cassano is inevitably a passive one, expressing itself as self-sacrifice, just as Böhme’s Sophia, the wisdom of love as expressed in the planet Venus, conquers the darkness and “Grimmigkeit” of Mars, not by violent resistance to its dry flame, but by surrendering its life in sacrifice, inundating the anguish with the Venusian water of life and turning the powerful force of conflict into the equally powerful force of joy. This solution is possible only if the hands remain pure. Sperone cannot initiate the action necessary to give birth to the light which is reserved for the strong hand of “der Zwiespältige”, but he alone can illumine the darkness with the radiance of his purity.

Bergengruen’s religious view of life is no more sentimental than is Böhme’s. Life inevitably involves conflict and any attempt to abolish the darkness, which is metaphysically impossible anyway, would disrupt the divine order and rob human life of all possibility of growth. This is precisely the temptation of which Sperone is accused. He is tempted to cut short the process of involution before it reaches the point of maturity when genuine rebirth becomes possible. Everyone in Cassano, including Sperone and the Grand Prince, must learn that all human perfection is illusory. The confusion in Cassano must be allowed to run its course until that illusion is destroyed. Thus Bergengruen’s *Präambel* to the novel is not so much a moral statement (but of course that also), as a metaphysical one. The novel itself illustrates the possibility of tragic risk involved in all genuine creation.

The figure of Sperone is one of Bergengruen's major statements on the nature of Christ and his function as savior. It is a firm rejection of any conception of spiritual comfort interpreted as a deliverance from the agony and pain of spiritual development. Man is not saved from the pain of life, but rather given the assurance and the courage to believe that it is possible to build a "heile Welt" on its necessary foundation. Bergengruen has nothing but scorn for the so-called "Lebensbejaher" who give comfort by blurring over "die Tragik der Welt mit rosenroter Schminke . . ." <sup>15</sup>.

It is significant that Bergengruen made this statement in a discussion on the work of art as a vehicle of spiritual comfort. In the same address he confesses that Kafka is one of the few writers from whom he receives real comfort, because here there is no attempt to cover up those "Abgründe, die nicht nur schrecklich, sondern zugleich fruchtbar sind . . . aus denen das wirkliche Leben sich zeugt und nährt". Both Böhme and Bergengruen share an essentially tragic view of life where, as in all genuine tragedy, hope and joy are born only out of defeat and imperfection. A solely moral approach to the works of Bergengruen simply misses the point. Praising Sperone or condemning the Grand Prince without realizing that both figures are interdependent aspects of a higher unity destroys the divine order of the cosmos, to reveal which was Bergengruen's primary purpose as an artist.

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#### Notes

1. Ida Friederike Görres, „Werner Bergengruen“, published as a *Geleitwort* to Werner Bergengruen, *Das Geheimnis Verbleibt* (Zürich, 1952). „Darum, scheint uns, ist Bergengruen den Alchimisten und Astrologen hold und der Weisheit der alten Naturdeutung von Hermes Trismegistos bis zu Jacob Böhme mit ihrer Lehre der Entsprechungen von Oben und Unten, weil sie diesem Geheimnis der Einheit so innig nachgetrachtet haben, das sie wie Mondesspiegelung auf dunklen Wassern schauen.“ (p. 148.)

2. Hans Bänziger, *Werner Bergengruen: Weg und Werk* (Bern, 1961<sup>3</sup>). „Das Problem der magischen Bindungen, naturkundlich und religiös verstanden, beschäftigte nicht nur Paracelsus, sondern auch Jacob Böhme, den Bergengruen verehrt. Die Mystiker und Theosophen des sechszehnten und siebzehnten Jahrhunderts trachteten nach Aehnlichem wie Bergengruen. Sie wollten, vielleicht gerade weil sich mit dem Beginn der Neuzeit so vielerlei entzweit hatte, dem Menschen wieder das Geheimnis der Unio mystica und die Allgegenwart des Schöpfers offenbaren. Sie erkannten die Verwirrungen des Makrokosmos, die Turba der satanischen Kräfte; sie erkannten aber auch, dass alles Dunkle, Grimmige gottgewollt sei.“ (p. 12.)

3. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

4. Although the term Hermetic has, since the Renaissance, often been used to designate all the so-called esoteric traditions of the West, this use is not strictly accurate. Hermetic should designate only the secret oral mysteries of the Graeco-Egyptian tradition. The Cabala, on the other hand, is a distinctly Jewish development.

5. In each successive work Jacob Böhme repeated detailed accounts of his cosmology. For one of the most concise formulae see particularly the first chapter, „Der erste Punkt“, of *Sex Puncta Theosophica* in Jacob Böhme, *Sämtliche Schriften*, Faksimile-Neudruck der Ausgabe von 1730 in elf Bänden, ed. Will-Erich Peuckert (Stuttgart, 1957), IV.

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6. *Das Geheimnis Verbleibt*, p. 67.
  7. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
  8. Erich Hofacker, "Justice and Grace as presented in Bergengruen's Fiction", *Germanic Review*, 31 (1956), 102–103.
  9. Peter Meier, *Die Romane Werner Bergengruens* (Bern, 1967), p. 10.
  10. *Das Geheimnis Verbleibt*, p. 121.
  11. Werner Bergengruen, „Bekentnis zur Höhle“, in *Die Feuerprobe* (Stuttgart, 1955), p. 72.
  12. Meier, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
  13. *Das Geheimnis Verbleibt*, p. 38.
  14. Martin Buber, „Die Frage an den Einzelnen“, in *Werke* (Munich, 1962), I. p. 260.
  15. Werner Bergengruen, „Trost und Geborgenheit in der Dichtung?“ in *Mündlich Gesprochen* (Zürich, 1963), p. 225.