Frank Wedekind

Esthetics and Eroticism

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Leon Trotsky

Translated from the German and introduced by David Thorstad

This essay was first published in the February 14, 1908 issue of Neue Zeit, the most prestigious journal of the Second International, edited by Karl Kautsky, then regarded as its chief theoretician. The essay is of interest for several reasons—not the least of which is the fact that it was written by Leon Trotsky. This is its first publication in English.

At the time the essay was written, Trotsky was twenty-eight years old and living in Vienna, the place of his second exile. He had reached Vienna after escaping from Siberia in 1907, to which he had been deported in 1906 for his leading role in the 1905 revolution. The former president of the first soviet in St. Petersburg edited an illegal paper, Pravda, published in Vienna and smuggled into Russia, but he earned his living as a writer and critic of the political and cultural scenes.

In his autobiography, Trotsky explains that he undertook to write this "social-critical essay" on Frank Wedekind "because interest in him was increasing in Russia with the decline of the revolutionary moods." The "decline" refers to the reaction after the defeat of the 1905 revolution when not only the intelligentsia, but a section of the revolutionary movement, lost hope and turned to private interests or even mysticism. It is in this context that the intelligentsia, which two or three years earlier "was producing a demand for Kautsky" (that is, for revolutionary literature and Marxism), was turning toward interest in writers like Wedekind. Trotsky saw in Wedekind's popularity with the Russian intelligentsia a danger of nihilism and despair that needed to be combatted.

Those familiar with Trotsky's writings on literary subjects will not be surprised that his method for this task bears no resemblance to the sterile dogmatism of the Soviet school of "socialist realism" that was to develop under Stalin. They will recognize in this essay both the intelligence and the flair that characterize Trotsky's style.

Trotsky's assertion at the outset of his essay that "the Russian intelligentsia has brought Wedekind a popularity he does not enjoy in his own country" should not be taken to mean that Wedekind was unpopular in Germany. It is true that Wedekind's best play, Spring's Awakening, went almost unnoticed when it was first

David Thorstad's translations include Israel: A Colonial-Settler State? by Maxime Rodinson (Monad Press, 1973), and various articles by Leon Trotsky from the German and the Norwegian.

published in 1891, and that it was not staged until 1906. While it was to establish Wedekind as a precursor of expressionism, it was published at the peak of naturalism, which may explain in part why it took fifteen years for it to be acclaimed. By 1908, however, the year Trotsky wrote this essay, Spring’s Awakening was playing to full houses both in Berlin and in the provinces. In Berlin, it played the whole season, and was one of the biggest successes in years.

Even in 1891, however, when it was first published, Spring’s Awakening was not out of touch with contemporary reality. To be sure, its subject — the crisis of puberty and the first stirrings (both heterosexual and homosexual) of sexual drives — was daring enough. But this subject was in the air. Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s Psychopathia Sexualis had been published in 1886. And a wave of suicides among students had shocked German public opinion. Wedekind was really the first to treat students in literature as a serious subject, and with Spring’s Awakening it became clear that for young people, the age of sexual discovery was often one not of joy but of unbearable anguish. And if today’s high school students are not at all as naive as Wendla and Moritz, their anguish in a sexually repressive society is no less real. Moreover, the immediate agents of their oppression singled out by Wedekind as targets — the family and the schools — still retain enormous influence.

Frank Wedekind (1864-1918) was an ardent opponent of naturalism. Following the ephemeral triumph of naturalism in German theater, the expressionist movement hailed him as its master. He was an uncompromising enemy of bourgeois hypocrisy and the prophet of sexuality in the modern drama. It is perhaps this more than anything else that makes Trotsky’s essay so timely and relevant to our epoch of “sexual revolution.”

In this essay, Trotsky traces Wedekind’s sexual odyssey from the “first bashful movements” of sexual discovery in puberty so delicately portrayed in Spring’s Awakening to the destructive madness of sex in the “Lulu plays” (Earth Spirit, Pandora’s Box, and Death and the Devil). He analyzes Wedekind’s system of education, Mine-Haha, touching in the process on areas of contemporary concern such as the negative influence of the family, the attitude of bourgeois society toward women, and the often irrelevant nature of school learning. And while he genuinely admires Wedekind’s insight and fantasy, he is amused by his naiveté, and finally indignant at Wedekind’s inability to resolve in a positive way the conflict between his intense quest for sexual freedom and the pressures of conventional bourgeois morality.

It might seem bold for a Russian writer to present himself to German readers with an opinion on a German writer. But we live in an age of increasing internationalism. Within scarcely a year, the Russian intelligentsia has brought Wedekind a popularity he does not enjoy in his own country. And what is most interesting about this is the fact that it is for the most part the very same intelligentsia that two or three years ago was producing a demand for Kautsky. How fantastic this must seem to advanced, socialist Germany. The political development of Russia is reflected in this kind of ideological intermittent fever the way actual phenomena are reflected in the brain of a madman. We cannot pursue this matter any further here. We would merely like to make this point: The Russian intelligentsia is getting older and it is in a hurry to be in a position to apply to itself the words of that very poet who has achieved such unexpectedly high favor with it:
The passing of beautiful things
is a shame—
Your grandeur too. You’re just
the same
As other fools, thanks to puberty.
With fragrance gone, you’re be-
coming ordinary.

Transitoriness

Yet Wedekind, the cynic and skeptic, also
has his god. Not a social one, to be sure, nor
even an ethical one, but an aesthetic one. He
worships beautiful human bodies — or, to
be more precise, female bodies — a noble
bearing, a smooth execution of movements.
A worship of perfection in the human body
inevitably permeates everything Wedekind
ever wrote — inevitably and almost
monotonously. Nothing is vague for him in
this field. He has carefully studied his
thoughts down to the last detail. In his
works one can trace the tenacity with
which, over a whole series of years, he has
pondered the mechanics of walking.

Out of his esthetic ideal, Wedekind con-
structs a system of education. This, by the
way, is an overstatement: Mine-Haha is
something that lies somewhere between an
“education of young girls” and body-
building.

Until the age of nine or ten, boys and
girls live together. They sleep in a common
bedroom. Hour after hour they romp about
in a pond. The beautiful Gertrude teaches
them how to walk. And that is no simple
art. Gertrude gently lifts her knee and
thrusts forward the tip of her toes. She then
slowly lowers her heel, but she does not
touch the ground until her foot, all the way
to the tip of her big toe, forms a line
perpendicular to her shin. Her full, round,
yet tenderly shaped knee straightens out at
the exact moment her heel touches the
ground. The hips are the main thing,
however. They must remain completely
motionless during walking. Yet at the same
time, all movements — those of the upper
part of the body as well as those from the
legs on down to the tips of the toes — must
proceed from and be guided by the hips.
When walking, one should not be aware of
the ground under one’s feet, teaches the
beautiful Gertrude. Nor should one even be
conscious only of one’s hips. Gertrude was
herself the perfect embodiment of her art.
Whenever she approached someone, she did
not at all seem to possess a body of any

\footnote{From The Four Seasons, a collection of poetry by
Wedekind.}

\footnote{Heinrich Heine, “The Song of Songs.” Heinrich
Heine: Paradox and Poet, 2, Louis Untermeyer (New
York: 1937), p. 401.}
definite weight. One saw only forms. And the forms themselves were almost forgotten in the beauty of her movements.

When the girls and boys reach the age of ten, they are separated. Hidalla, who relates all this, now enters a huge park populated by girls between the ages of ten and fourteen. There are thirty small, one-story houses in the park, each one containing seven girls of different ages. They spend their time doing gymnastics and learning dancing, swimming, and music. The park is their world. What happens on the other side of its walls remains an absolute secret to them, as do the place they themselves came from and the way they came into this world. The harmonious calm that characterizes their life creates for the little souls a complete equanimity and allows them to refrain from raising any questions at all. The young girls spend four years in the park dancing, playing various instruments, walking on their hands, romping about in the brook — only the arrival of puberty disturbs the equanimity of their bodies and their souls. It is at this point, however, that their education begins. The girls are led out of the park; they meet boys their age and go off with them in pairs. Where to? Here Hidalla's account stops.

Mine-Haha is the "physical education of young girls." This is the way Wedekind himself refers to his system. But what about spiritual education? Nothing is said about this. What is more, not even the slightest room is left for it. The whole time is taken up with physical exercises and music. There are no books, no paper, and no ink! It is no accident that, for Wedekind, a woman's entire education consists of an esthetic cultivation of the body. Whenever he speaks of a perfect woman, of a "thoroughbred" woman who "in the best sense of the word represents a work of art," what he has in mind is always only the perfect incarnation of the sex concept. "The woman who earns her livelihood through love always stands higher in my esteem than one who has so degraded herself that she writes feuilletons or even books." With these words, Hidalla is only expressing the basic ideas behind the entire system of Mine-Haha.

The woman who degrades herself through intellectual work is inferior to one who sells her hips. What audacity! But is it really audacity? Actually, of course, here, as with many other questions, Wedekind is only expressing openly, and with the moral cynicism of the esthete for whom everything is permitted, what just about every philistine thinks to himself.

To polemicize against these banal prejudices, whose affected, paradoxical form gives them the appearance of bold paradoxes, would be to sink into banality oneself. It is much more interesting to turn the system of Mine-Haha on its own axis, examining it from a completely different point of view.

Wedekind aspires to physical beauty. He does not find it in his environment. And so he sets up an ideal world; he writes Mine-Haha. The basic idea underlying his quest is, in the final analysis, very limited: He wants a woman to have resilient muscles, he wants her to keep her hips motionless while walking, and he wants her to extend her knee only after her heel has touched the ground. Wedekind's search for beauty in bodily proportions brings him to a complete rejection of the present form of the family, at least to the extent that it has any bearing on the relationship between parents and children. The picture he presents is that of a socialized education of children. As soon as they reach the age of five, the boys and girls are encouraged to take care of infants. After one to two years, each child is given its own pupil whom, under the guidance of a nurse, it has to keep clean, take to spend the entire day in the garden (or in the wooded promenade when it rains), and to whom it has to give a feeding bottle. In this way, the present generation is already involved at a very tender age in bringing up the next.

The same arrangement prevails among the girls in the park. Each group is headed up by a girl of thirteen or fourteen. She teaches the others physical exercises, and
she dishes out the food at the table and leads the conversation. In addition, each new arrival is placed in the special custody of one of the older girls.

Wedekind merely scatters these instructions in passing here and there among the painstaking and loving descriptions of clothing, eating, and dancing. Nevertheless, it is these observations that stick in one's mind. The image of this huge anthill of noisy children, where the young bodies and hearts grow up and develop in close contact and intimate study groups, where the first knowledge they acquire and the first assistance they receive lead directly from one stage of life to the next, like water flowing down a staircase — this beautiful image, despite the shortcomings in its perspective, causes us to open our eyes wide in amazement! What a difference when compared to our ordinary family, where two generations, separated from one another by the age of half a generation, are forcibly chained together by a common bond of economic dependency — generations who so often stand in each other's way.

The cult of the body and the struggle to perfect it lead the artist to call for socialist conditions of education. This fact says as much about Wedekind's artistic sensitivity as it does about the irresistible nature of socialist forms of existence. The question of the social surroundings into which the poet introduces his harmonious little world, however, still remains.

Wedekind touches on the question of productive child labor. The education of the younger children by the older ones is, above all, an enormous productive effort. Assigning this task to the children themselves will not only bring much more harmony into the life of the children but will also relieve the grown-ups of a burden by freeing their creative powers from the economic shackles imposed on them by the modern family — which is part kitchen, part hospital, and part laundry. But not only that. Hidalla relates in passing how children from eight to nine years of age would braid the fibers for their summer hats in front of the door to their houses while the very young children played in the sand at their feet. Yet what about the remaining tasks? Who prepares the meals? Who tidies up the house? Who does the wash? These tasks are not as elegant as the weaving of wide-brimmed hats, and in his embarrassment the author calls on two repulsive old women for assistance. Where do they come from? They are past pupils who have been incarcerated here forever for their infraction of the regulations of the park. Naive and silly, like the myth about the stork that delivers children. But what else can Mine-Haha offer? Still, even the old women cannot provide the answers to certain questions: How is the park linked to the outside world? Who provides the basic necessities? How is the entire institution able to survive? Wedekind builds a theater in his park. Every evening a ballet is presented. Under the guidance of their dance instructors, the unsuspecting little girls put on very daring pantomimes. Wedekind obviously needed this last detail in order to explain why the theater was always filled. If, however, one takes this system just the way it is — down to the fact that the little girls pay for their education by taking part in pantomimes straight out of the Moulin Rouge — one has to conclude that Mine-Haha can only represent an education for the few. Otherwise there would be too many ballets in the country and the "physical education of young girls" could only be made possible by making attendance at the ballet obligatory for the rest of the population.

Wedekind's restless esthetics, which uncovers a small corner of the future for him, nonetheless leaves him standing helpless at the gates of the park. A love of plastic forms is not enough to revolutionize the world.

I love love; the solemn art
Is a source of perpetual learning.

Lulu

I had hundreds of women in my pay.

4From The Four Seasons.
FRANK WEDEKIND

With whom my health and wealth I fooled away,
The finest nymths this Babylon could provide,
Yet I remained a hollow shell inside.

The Dead Sea

Wedekind has gone through an inner evolution — we are speaking here exclusively about his literary works — which is noteworthy for its definiteness and its social-psychological conformity to natural law. As both the premises and the results of all his spiritual experiences, sensual esthetics and social cynicism have completely exhausted their meaning and have turned into their opposite. The bold negator became the fearful mystic! In Spring's Awakening, one of the works of his youth, he listens to the first bashful movements of sex. Here everything is moving, awkward, and beautiful in its awkwardness because it is full of possibilities. Even tragedies such as Moritz's suicide and Wendla's murder do not interfere with the general impression of spring since they appear as external misfortunes brought on by a meaningless school and a loathsome family — this detestable dual chain with its rusty links. What esthetic lewdness it is to stage Spring's Awakening with middle-aged men, their faces closely shaven, having to fake the part of boys whose voices are changing!

But, once awakened, sex spread its wings. It has torn away the stale chains of the family (so it seems to him at least), and it has placed itself above social restrictions (at least he thinks it has). The entourage in whose company sex appears is neither religion, nor philosophy, nor a social ideal, but simply an uninterrupted series of esthetic experiences. Just one step further and it will have become an "earth spirit."

Now it is no longer the little Wendla asking someone to solve the mystery of the stork. Now it is Lulu, beautiful as sin. Supple as a snake, every movement quivering with sensuality, thinking with her hips and naked under her clothes, she knows no pity, no doubt, no remorse. She is elemental like sex itself and stands there facing the world as its incarnation. She is the evil earth spirit. Passively, the way a magnet around which iron splinters gather is passive, Lulu sows around her an infernal passion. She infects old men and young men alike with the unconquerable frenzy of sex and designates her triumphant path with ruined lives and bodies. Her first husband dies of shock when he surprises her with her lover, an artist. The artist becomes her husband and cuts his throat with a razor when Lulu's former lover, the editor Schoen, opens his eyes. Once again Schoen meets his wife in the company of a circus athlete, a school boy, and his own son, a writer. Lulu kills her husband with a revolver. Nobody and nothing is able to subdue this beautiful beast; the exhausted Wedekind turns her over to the police.

Yet even the police are not able to manage this “earth spirit.” Lulu escapes from prison so she can fulfill her destiny. We then meet her again in Pandora's Box. She seizes upon the writer Alva Schoen, her third husband's son, and hides out with him in Paris, surrounded by actors, coquettes, bankers, and detectives. Schoen's wealth runs out much faster than Lulu’s evil charms. She flees to London, lives in an attic, and sells herself on the street. Alva Schoen — a semi-rotted-away leftover from her past — has taken refuge with her. Finally, Lulu brings Jack the Ripper back with her and dies by his knife. She dies an untiring priestess of sex upon the bloody altar of a sensuality that has turned into madness.

The three dramas are three phases in sexual life, and three stages in Wedekind's creative production. At first shy, quivering, surrounded even in its morbidity by the fragrance of youth: Spring's Awakening, Wedekind's best work.

But this stage is soon left behind. The boundless power of sex takes its place. Wedekind carries a photograph of Lulu around his neck. Lulu dressed as Pierrot. Her little left boot is resting on the poet's

\*ibid.\n
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hand, which is lying on her knee. What instinctive assurance in her face, what cheerful submissiveness in his! Sex reigns. In new combinations it is inexhaustible. It knows only one morality:

Stretch out a fearless hand toward sin,
For out of sin grows pleasure.

_Earth Spirit*

And finally the last stage. Nowhere else, really, does the absolute power of sex reach the dimensions it does here. Sex has left esthetics behind, as it earlier did tradition and faith. Naked and grim, it seeks its prey in the streets and clutches at the clothes of passers-by. It wears itself completely out, and in its endeavor to start out on a new path, it arms itself with a knife and thrusts it into a woman's body. No longer is Wedekind a submissive pedestal for the queenly Lulu. He is now on stage in Munich playing Jack the Ripper.

Everything that there was to get along this path has been gotten. A line of blood is drawn underneath it.

What is there left for me when even sensual pleasure is nothing but hellish human drudgery, when even sensual pleasure is nothing but fiendish human butchery, like all the rest of earthly existence! So this is that one divine ray of light to penetrate the awful night of our excruciating life!

_Death and the Devil_

The true cause of this evolution is very elementary: the decisive role here is played by the physiology of life's different stages. The end result, however, is fraught with an incomparably greater significance. It is not simply the bankruptcy of esthetic eroticism; it is the collapse of an entire philosophy of life. What, then, remains? The psychological need to institute a certain control, an extreme censure over the elementary rhythms of life.

_Censorship_ is even the title of Wedekind's one-act "theodyssey" which has recently appeared in the weekly magazine _Morgen_ published by W. Sombart and G. Brandes.

"We need a spiritual bond between us," says the writer Buridan to his lover.

What is that supposed to mean, exclaims the beautiful Kadidja, that we should take up philosophy? "I haven't done that already for the simple reason that it doesn't suit me."

They have already been together for seventeen months. The initial period when passion watches out for nothing and asks no questions, is already over. It is already not unusual for him not to notice her, though she is quite close to him. Kadidja is Lulu ennobled and made more profound. For her the life of emotion is life itself. Poetic creation, from which he tore himself loose because of her and toward which he is now again being drawn, is felt by her to be an intrusion. Buridan, for his part, sees his relationship with Kadidja as an intrusion. He loves her. The very thought of losing her terrifies him. At the same time he feels physically tied down — less by the automatism of intimate domestic surroundings than by the automatism of the love relationship itself. He wants more freedom of movement, more freedom from that other being who only satisfies one side of his nature, yet who still claims him entirely for herself. And the same Wedekind who wrote that he still holds a woman who sells her body in higher esteem than one who degrades herself through intellectual work, who reduced the education of young girls to the harmonious exercise of the leg muscles, now tells Kadidja with a sigh: "We need a spiritual bond between us...

What's going on here? Is this rebirth? No, it is only defeat. Even Kadidja realizes this. After a desperate attempt to captivate him through her body, she frees him. "I have sown enmity between you and the world of your thoughts; I am going to give you back to your thoughts."

And then she hurls herself down onto the pavement. In doing so, however, she frees only herself, not Buridan:

_Deprive the soul of female company_
And all lamps soon will fade away.
For everything that still remains for me
Not even a penny would I pay.

I am identifying Buridan with Wedekind not only because Wedekind is the most subjective of writers, but because he himself assigns a personal character to his subjectivism: Buridan speaks of himself as he does of the author of *Pandora*. His fate is a tragic protest against the cynical Epicureanism which, for the author of *The Four Seasons*, takes the place of a philosophy of life. Even before Kadidia commits suicide, Buridan is making an effort to place his entire life under an extreme "censorship." And where does he look for this "censorship"? Not to science, not to social struggles, not to morality. It is to the church, with its Catholic god and Munich’s priests, that the cynic and negator looks for the deepest meaning of life. He invites a clergyman to his place so he can discuss with him the idea of having a church wedding. "In any case," he tells the representative of the church, "I know of nothing on this earth more deplorable than a fool who does not believe in God. Since my earliest childhood I have sought to reach an understanding with those who know eternal truths. . . . You will certainly not believe how passionately, how fervently my soul yearns for that realm in which you have the enviable fortune to work and do battle! What I would give at this moment if I could be in your place and you in mine!"

And as the intolerant priest pushes aside the hand that is reaching out to him for spiritualism, and as Kadidia is hurling herself from the balcony onto the pavement, Buridan, writhing like a worm that has been tread upon, cries out: "He does not permit his own to be mocked! He cannot be tempted! Oh God, oh God, how unfathomable you are. . . ." What a sob of destitute impotency! What cowardice and spiritual poverty! And that, after a century of destruction and negation. What a pitiful, wretched, humiliating end!