

Bert Schwitters, *Liberating Liberty - Life, Liberty, the Pursuit of Happiness and the Creator of Man*, De Fact Publications BV, Vreeland (The Netherlands), 2024, 591 pages + 30 pages of notes and index of names; ISBN 978 908 189 5941

Bert Schwitters' *Liberating Liberty* is not just an engrossing read, a spirited and eloquent meditation on and defence of the values and insights that once defined Western civilisation as the expression of a deep-seated *libido liberandi*, a longing for freedom. It is also a veritable tour de force; truly a magnum opus. Yet, as the author tells the story, it originated as a keynote address, delivered at an event to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a law firm.<sup>1</sup> The title of that lecture, “The Source from which Sprang the United States of America”, is explicated in the title of the book as the idea expounded in the Preamble of the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, viz. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The book expands on the central points made in the address—“All just powers of [political] government derive from the consent of the governed”, “The right to the pursuit of happiness is not an entitlement to happiness without pursuit”, and “Man is a spiritual being”—but it does more than that, much more.

The title of the book suggests that the reader will be treated to a discussion of the American Declaration of Independence and how the principles to which it appealed fared in the actual history of the United States of America. And, indeed, that theme resonates throughout the entire work. However, as the title also suggests, the book is not intended to seek a place in the extensive political-theoretic and legal academic literature on that subject. Without pretending or aspiring or to be a theologian, Schwitters particularly emphasizes the Declaration's reference to God, the Creator of Man. In doing so, he opposes the modern brutalism (my term, not Schwitters') that attempts to derive all truths about law and politics from a “human nature” that is nothing more than a particular, admittedly rather complex type of “animal nature” – in short, from a “human nature” that is to be thought of exclusively in scientific terms, as an object of one or other “natural science” (physics, chemistry, evolution by genetic variation and natural selection, behaviourism, experimental psychology, neurology ...). In opposing those still academically respected – and now, popular – brutalist approaches, Schwitters clearly positions his book in the classical traditions of the philosophy of law and politics, of Man as a speech- or Logos-enabled being, whose happiness can only be thought of in terms of the classical idea of *eudaimonia*. Those traditions invariably turned to the relations between the human and the divine without losing sight of the relations between human and brute nature. He frequently cites Plato and Eric Voegelin (his principal guide in critiquing the intellectual conundrums of Modernity) in support of his own arguments. He liberally sprinkles his text with references to and quotes from the Biblical Moses and the Christ Jesus to drive home the point that, for him, the Creator of Man is the God of the Bible. For him, as far as philosophy (and other expressions of high culture) is concerned, ‘old’ is definitely not a synonym of ‘obsolete’.

Schwitters identifies himself as a “Renaissance man”. Indeed, he may be read as speaking for the Christian humanism that came into vogue ca 1500 AD. More importantly, he speaks and pleads for a renaissance (“re-birth”) of the idea of Man as neither beast nor angel – an idea that was gradually, eventually almost totally eclipsed by the rise of brutalist thinking.

---

<sup>1</sup> The address can be viewed on <https://www.liberatingliberty.com/author/>; the website Liberating-Liberty.com is devoted entirely to the book

For Schwitters, man is neither angel nor beast. Man – i.e. every human being – exists in the ‘Great In-between’, which Schwitters calls ‘the metaxy’ (from the Greek ‘μεταξύ’, between, in between). “The metaxy ... engenders a gravitational interaction between its poles, a ‘pulling’ and ‘thrusting’ force, [the orientation of which] steers Men's search for order and meaning in the direction of their Beginning and their Genesis at the Divine Ground of Being.” (page 21) Philosophers who were conscious of that Great Between “observed that the metaxy becomes dangerous ground when the failure, incapacity or plain resistance to discover this divine source as the essential and indispensable element in the articulation of order and meaning brings the metaxic search to a halt. But because the thrusting force won't go away or wither, it will now ignite and feed a revolt” against reality. However, the revolt cannot resolve “the tensions of existence”.

Much of the book is devoted to a sustained critique of “second realities”, which are really *Ersatz* or pseudo-realities, “imaginary concepts construed by individuals” who “instead of confronting and dealing with these existential insecurities ... seek to circumvent them by creating an imaginary self, ego or identity” (page 24) that – as they imagine it – is the sole creator of a reality of their own making. From this, they derive justification of their insistence that they be respected and esteemed by all others and that all others, by force, coercion, persuasion or other means, be made to comply with their dictates. The “they” to which Schwitters directs his fire are primarily – no surprise here – “the murderers of God”, those who professed experiencing “liberation” in reading Nietzsche, Marx or utopian fantasies, or in watching the almost instantaneous transformation of “modern art” from an intentional affront to the cultural pretences of the bourgeoisie into a significant part of the twentieth-century “art market” (where the art is the art of making money out of the bourgeoisie's fallacious idea that culture is a commodity, and the market a market for painted, sculpted, staged or filmed illustrations of theories, propagated by professional “taste-makers and suitably enfranchised members of that ever-growing congregation, ‘the art world’ ” – Marcel Duchamp, quoted on page 157).

*Liberating Liberty* extensively discusses, sometimes in detail, the *Umkehrung aller Werte* of the second half of the nineteenth century, its manifestations in twentieth-century mass society (its mass markets for medical and other health care services, for schooling, entertainment and information, and the large private and public corporations and bureaucracies that dominate them); in the substitution of the Law of Rules (regulations, executive orders and “innovative”, unconstitutional judicial decisions) for the Rule of Law; in abandoning the policy of secession in favour of increasing centralization of power; and in nihilistic “Anything goes” and “Whatever” mentalities that constitute the false liberties from which true liberty must be liberated.

No doubt, numerous academic and journalistic aficionados of the *Umkehrung*—after more than a century of experiencing the existential confusions, malaises, calamities and wars, induced by their *libido dominandi*, they still typically self-identify as “progressives”—will take umbrage at the book, but Schwitters wisely keeps his focus on their acknowledged master thinkers and noteworthy legal victories in the areas of legislation and judicial verdicts.

Though engrossing, *Liberating Liberty* is not an easy read. The table of contents lists more than eighty unnumbered and ungrouped chapters, but it does not provide an indication of the underlying structure of the argument. Thus, reading the book may seem like taking a dizzying rollercoaster ride, full of accelerations and decelerations, twists and turns and changing outlooks. As the book cannot be finished in one session and does not have an index of subjects—there is only an index of names—it taxes the reader's powers of memory and synthesis to keep

track of the many diverse themes and lines of argument and to assess their weight relative to the basic idea of liberating “liberty” from the dross of fashionable (popular and academic) opinions that have turned the metaxy into a dangerous ground – dangerous to Man's soul and freedom. In fact, the reader may have to wait for the last four chapters – “The *libido liberandi*”, “Conscience is the most sacred property”, “Words, words, words”, “In God's image” – to find out not only why the rollercoaster ride was worth the price of the book, but also that the book delivers what it promised in the easily overlooked text which the author inserted right at the beginning, before the table of contents and the foreword, as if it were an anonymous quotation. That text, an apt summary of Schwitters' thesis, is worth quoting in full: “In the Beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God. The *Logos* exists to be lived. Living it doesn't change the *Logos*. To the contrary, by living the *Logos* it becomes distinct as eternally meaningful. The *Logos* is the immutable architecture of life in liberty. The *Logos* can be discovered through reason and revelation. Devoid of *Logos*, the ‘élan vital’ or life force becomes an erratic wildfire that consumes the souls in which it was ignited. Living in alignment with the *Logos* gives happiness or *eudaimonia*. In the pure state of *eudaimonia* one can experience the Cause of the *Logos* as the ineffable Ground of Divine Being, as the locus of one's Spiritual Self, of oneself as ‘I am’.”

Many readers may intuitively understand and agree with the identification or inextricable semantic relations of the terms ‘God’, ‘Creator of Man’, ‘Logos’ and ‘Ground of Divine Being’. However, many others may demand an explanation. It is doubtful that Schwitters' meditations (in the chapters “Quod deus dicitur?” and “Ego eimi”, and passim elsewhere) on the “original, revealed name of God”, viz. “I am” (as in “My name is *I am*”), will satisfy their request for clarification. They may get more help from reading the chapters “*Fides, intellectus* and *voluntas*” and “*Intellectus* in search of *Fides*”, which deal with the fundamental reciprocal implication of *Fides* (Faith) and *Intellectus* (Understanding, intelligence) as the eminent aspects of the quality of being human. That reciprocal implication is a familiar theme in Western Christian philosophy. It goes back to Saint Augustine and was expressed most fully and succinctly in Anselm of Canterbury's meditations *Monologion* and *Proslogion* (which Schwitters, inexplicably, does not mention). In those works, Anselm characterized faith as the search for understanding (“*Fides quaerens intellectum*”) and understanding as the reason for having faith (“*Credo ut intelligam*”). His aim was to distinguish clearly between living (true) faith and dead faith (merely going through the motions of certain customary, supposedly religious rituals). His conclusion: ‘God cannot be thought a mere figment of the imagination. He cannot but be thought real.’ By intellectually grasping God's undeniable reality man rises above the mere physical existence of beasts and becomes a personal being, actively participating in God's divine creation. In Schwitters' words, “The *Logos* exists to be lived.” However, Man is existentially primarily an animal, albeit a reason-enabled animal – *an animal rationis capax*. As such, Man is not forced by the laws of physical nature to seek understanding or to develop his powers to think rightly – cf. Bertrand Russell's quip “Most men would rather die than think. In fact they do.” This insight explains Schwitters' central message (repeated in the epilogue “What was it you were reading?”): Man is unique in the whole of creation in having the choice to be or not to be.