

Edited by TAYLOR STOEHR

CRAZY HOPE & FINITE EXPERIENCE

Final
Essays of
Paul
Goodman



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AND FINITE
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Crazy Hope and Finite Experience

*Final Essays
of Paul Goodman*

Taylor Stoehr, editor



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Cambridge, Massachusetts
June 1994

Taylor Stoehr

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INTRODUCTION

Taylor Stoehr

PAUL GOODMAN'S PERIOD OF FAME lasted twelve years, from the publication of *Growing Up Absurd* in 1960 until his death in 1972. He was celebrated as a social critic and the young radicals of the New Left read him for his "utopian essays and practical proposals," as the title of one of his books put it. Yet, whatever his public saw in him, Goodman considered himself primarily an artist rather than a political thinker or sociologist, and many of his books, even during the sixties, were works of poetry, drama, and fiction. Perhaps his greatest single work—certainly he thought so—was *The Empire City*, a vast comic novel he had devoted a dozen years of his life to. He had also written books of literary criticism, like *Art and Social Nature*, *Kafka's Prayer*, and *The Structure of Literature*, and toward the end of his life he produced *Speaking and Language*, a telling critique of the various linguistic theories then in vogue. He had collaborated with his architect brother, Percival Goodman, on numerous treatments of architectural topics, including *Communitas*, a lively study of community planning that has become a classic, still in print after forty years. Then again, he joined with Frederick (Fritz) Perls and Ralph F. Hefferline on

Gestalt Therapy, still the primary text of the new synthesis in psychotherapy that has become an international movement. Psychotherapy, community planning, linguistics, literary theory, philosophy, sociology, politics, education, media criticism, as well as poems, plays, and fiction—thirty or forty books, depending on whether one counts posthumously published works. With such a range it was fitting that Goodman insisted on calling himself “an old-fashioned man of letters.”

Very few writers in our age of specialization have taken so broad a prospect as their concern, and some of his critics thought Goodman spread himself too thin; but he never pretended to be an expert in all these areas, only an interested party, an artist with good habits of analysis and an inquiring attitude toward experience, and with a belief that “the nature of things is not easily divided into disciplines” anyway. He used to say that he really had only one subject, “the human beings I know in their man-made scene.” Or again, thinking of his work as a “program,” he said he was trying to understand “How to take on Culture without losing Nature.”

It should be added that Goodman was not a man barricaded behind his books, nor did he ever settle into the familiar routines of professionals. Although he sometimes taught for a semester or two—every age of student, he boasted, from six to sixty—he did not play the pedagogue cloistered with his pupils. He practiced psychotherapy for ten years, yet he was never booked all day with patients. And during the sixties, when he wore himself out giving speeches to New Left audiences on a hundred campuses, he was not one to beat the shortest track from airport to lecture hall to faculty club. Someone once dubbed him a “street philosopher,” and indeed he spent much of

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his ordinary day on the pavement of his native city, Manhattan, where he knew the “routes and courses,” as his college chums used to call them, like the back of his hand.

Goodman was a family man and raised three children, but he was bisexual, and in his psychic economy it was the homoerotic impulse that dominated his fantasy life and often drew him into the streets where he cruised for sex among friends and strangers. This was a passion that was out of control—not his sexual orientation itself but his obsession with the “hunt”—and yet the hunt provided occasions for many incidental and rewarding encounters. His life was certainly full enough without this neurotic search, “looking for love where it can’t be found,” as he characteristically phrased it. Besides his family and his art, Goodman had many satisfying pursuits of the sort that any lively bohemian of his day might have enjoyed, though perhaps the range of his friends and interests was unusual. He played handball with Puerto Rican teenagers on outdoor courts or against a convenient brick wall; he hung around the actors of The Living Theatre, especially if they were rehearsing one of his plays; he had a weekly poker date in Hoboken, New Jersey; he dropped in at the War Resisters League or the office of *Liberation* magazine where he was one of the editors; he walked the dog and sat on the local school board; he taught himself to play the piano and composed songs and dances; he summered at the beach or in the country, gardening and swimming; he motorcycled in Italy and Ireland and drank in the Vermeers in Amsterdam; he picketed the draft board; he ran therapy groups; he gave little talks on the radio and wrote angry letters to the mayor; he took lonely walks along the banks of the Hudson; if his friends stopped by, he was always free for their enterprises.

The fact that most of these activities could take on an erotic aura at any moment was not necessarily a drawback. Goodman wrote the equivalent of a book a year during his adult life. His extraordinary literary output cannot be explained by any single factor, but eros surely played a part, as it obviously did in his overlapping careers as a teacher, a psychotherapist, and a public man. Success came slow and late, an uphill struggle. Perhaps it was because of his compulsive sexual longing that Goodman himself never doubted there would be energy for his next step, no matter how much the world might seem determined to thwart his desires. Near the end of his life, after he had had his fill of successes as well as failures, and his obsession was also much abated, he looked back and tried to make sense of it all, not in an autobiographical mood but rather as a veteran contemplates the past, thinking what lessons might be worth passing on to those who come after. Many years earlier Goodman had written a little meditation that he titled "On the Question: 'What Is the Meaning of Life?'" He had begun by saying that no one who is happy asks such a question, and then admitted that his own unhappy answer had often been that "sexual love is the meaning of life." Were he less miserable, he added, it was probable that he would be less likely to make that answer. He was right. When he finally came to setting down his last words on the meaning of life, sexual love certainly had its place but it did not usurp the whole of his imagination. There was much else to experience and to hope for.

The five essays in *Crazy Hope and Finite Experience* may be said to constitute Goodman's parting words to the world. Three of these essays originally made up the "Finite Experience" section of Goodman's posthumously published *Little Prayers and*

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Finite Experience, a hybrid work, half poems (“Little Prayers”) and half *pensées*. (The little prayers will soon be reprinted in a volume of Goodman’s selected poems.) The remaining two essays included here were written with the same intent as the essays of finite experience and at about the same time, a time when Goodman knew he was dying.

The last words of exemplary men and women are always of interest, in this case particularly so because Goodman meant to be offering us here an informal compendium of his ideas and attitudes, an account of how he held them and what they meant to him. He was not an old man when he gathered in this harvest, but he was wise in experience, proven by trials and deeds, and resolved to make sense of his story for those who wanted to hear it. To find near equivalents in American literature we would have to go back to the letters Thomas Jefferson and John Adams wrote to one another in their old age, or the twilight ruminations of Herman Melville in *Billy Budd*. Actually there is nothing quite like Goodman’s final thoughts in our short literary tradition.

In this introduction I want to say something about the circumstances in which Goodman wrote these thoughts and also to draw attention to certain themes in them, particularly the idea of finite experience itself and the notion that emerges as its concomitant, the other side of the phenomenological coin as it were, crazy hope. Finite experience is the titular subject of the core set of three essays, with which the present book begins: “Within My Horizon,” “Politics Within Limits,” and “Beyond My Horizon—Words.” In these essays, Goodman tells us that he is uncomfortable with abstraction and feels at home only in the here and now. His “politics within limits,” described in the second essay, is grounded in this pragmatism. Crazy hope enters

into the third essay's account of the world "beyond my horizon," where Goodman introduces the phrase to characterize kinds of transcendence that tempted him to abandon the finite and concrete in experience—love and art. Although he speaks of these longings in his three "Finite Experience" essays, a much fuller discussion of them is contained in the two others I have added, and so the new title, I hope, is appropriate.

Goodman was sixty years old, recuperating from a heart attack but aware that in his family they died young, when he turned to the task of summing up what life had taught him. Students often asked him, "How have *you* made it? How does one go about it?" Having agreed to spend the academic year 1971–72 at the University of Hawaii, he decided to offer a course in which he would try to describe his "way of being" for the students. Had there been no course and no students, he would have found some other excuse to set down these thoughts, for the urge was strong in him to pass on his lessons and say his farewells.

He wrote the copy for the dust jacket of *Little Prayers and Finite Experience*, speaking of himself in the third person as if already freed from the burden of being Paul Goodman, and describing himself as

an artist and a citizen, coping with life and now aging, in poor health, and not very happy. He sees his life as having been continually hungry, balked, and poor, but never starved, nor a total failure, nor with nothing. He has not had enough courage and patience to live this purgatory well, but he has had enough to survive and to feel tested rather than damned. He has faith that he has a world-for-him, such as it is.