

WILHELM REICH  
AMERICAN  
ODYSSEY

LETTERS AND JOURNALS  
1940-1947

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WITH TRANSLATIONS BY  
DEREK AND INGE JORDAN AND PHILIP SCHMITZ

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*Love, work, and knowledge are the wellsprings of our life.  
They should also govern it.*

WILHELM REICH



## EDITOR'S NOTE

Created from Reich's journals and correspondence, this book is a direct continuation of *Beyond Psychology*.<sup>\*</sup> Its narrative begins in January 1940. Reich has been living in the United States for four months, teaching at the New School for Social Research in New York City, reestablishing his laboratory and cancer research, becoming acquainted again with his daughters, Eva and Lore, and involved in a new personal relationship with a German-born woman, Ilse Ollendorff.

<sup>\*</sup>*Beyond Psychology* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994).

# 1940

*“I am faced with the task of having to introduce something new; I have to adapt myself to the American mentality; I am struggling with my children, who up until recently were firmly convinced that I was mad; I am financially still not out of the hole; etc. The worst thing is the bitter feeling of being intellectually alone.”*

6 January 1940

Ilse tells everyone that I go this way → and the world goes that way ↺. How long shall I be able to keep on?

My state of mind is so burdened that I am really beginning to be concerned:

1. The children come as guests—are influenced by that narrow-minded woman.\*

2. I always understand people but am not supposed to react with normal anger.

3. The war.

4. Insight into man's incapability of being free.

5. Have lost Elsa† but still love her.

6. To be basically so right, but still see obstacles that are as insurmountable as Mount Everest.

7. Fenichel‡ is off on a tangent—says I'm insane.

When I listen to good music, resignation seems unthinkable. Then I feel I must carry on the struggle, bear it—somehow. I don't care about leading a quiet, orderly, bourgeois life. I have discovered the principle of life and must confirm it completely.

I am much too far advanced—must not lose touch!

Someday, when I die a lonely death, I shall know that I did not live in isolation, that I understood the world around me—or at least honestly tried to do so.

There is a certain logic in the human mind, even in the insane mind.

\*Reich's first wife, Annie, the mother of his two daughters. Annie and Reich were divorced in 1934 and she had tried to alienate the children from him.

†Elsa Lindenbergh, with whom Reich lived from 1932 to 1939. He considered her his second wife.

‡Otto Fenichel, Austrian psychoanalyst. Once a friend, he had become bitterly hostile toward Reich.

There is sense in all this nonsense. The world of mankind is causing its own downfall by selling itself into dependency.

It is my contention that a last remnant of the knowledge of life dwells within every individual. That is why life will triumph. It runs its course, the holy, truly holy course of meaningful productivity. And were a thousand Hitlers to corrupt it—to try, rashly and crudely, to solve the existential questions through anti-Semitic agitation—life would still triumph—would *give* of itself!—give without expecting a return—the *capacity* to give is the key.

I must not make stupid mistakes, or allow myself to be ensnared by fear—that perfectly simple, understandable, *animal fear of being alone*, deserted, slandered.

If God exists in the form of nature, then may God help me! Love, *truth*, integrity and a sense of life will win out, not people like Fenichel.

The following people are despicable—ought to be shot: businessmen, diplomats, sycophants, party big shots, tormentors of children, fake scientists.

*January 1940*

Science, *real, honest* science, should be the only dominant power in the world, securing life, guiding the course of human effort, protecting the newcomers to the human race from damage by false education and lack of knowledge!

Let us fight for this holy aim. There is no other meaning in human struggle!

❖\* 13 January 1940

Briehl and Wolfe† regard me as a poor political refugee, whereas I had pointed out, in letters and conversation, that I would not come to New York if I am not needed and wanted.

\*Indicates that the following was written in English.

†Walter Briehl, M.D., and Theodore P. Wolfe, M.D., American psychiatrists who had been in treatment with Reich in Europe.

❖ 15 January 1940

On my advice Wolfe stopped today. He is no fighter, is afraid of standing for sex economy—from his inner feeling and because of the danger from the scientific world. His rational fear was connected with irrational denial of sex. I gave him four weeks to decide further steps.

15 January 1940

This war is getting wilder all the time. But what has that to do with me? I didn't start it, did my best to prevent it. The human race has simply gone mad. Things are going to go completely berserk.

This American democracy is all idle talk. One is not allowed to champion the truth about life after all! And no one gets very far with the "Christian attitude."

The war will change everything—everything! How to hold out? Ilse is a welcome relief! Poor Elsa! She made a very stupid mistake.

I do not have the courage to admit that I have found the solution to the great mystery of life. Am too afraid of paranoia, of rumors, to do that—don't feel vain enough either. Nevertheless, I am completely aware of what I have accomplished and what I have grasped.

The joy of life will prevail, sooner or later, more likely later. For the moment it is destroying itself because it is not allowed to live. People are bursting for want of an outlet. *This abused life will take bitter revenge*—at first it may even destroy itself—but then it will break forth, in splendor, like a Beethoven symphony.

I must get hold of myself again, the person I once was, self-confident, trusting in truth. For a while I almost lost everything, was on the verge of losing my self-esteem.

Someone once said: As long as you trust in yourself and know what you want, things will go well with you. True indeed.

I lost myself in Elsa, in my colleagues, in my pupils. *I must be completely alone again.*

With only a loving woman who knows what I want—that's my one real weakness.

Once I am able to take risks again, there will be progress!

The issue is clear: *be destroyed* or *be proven correct*. There is no other alternative. Under no circumstances can I, at age forty-three,



after twenty-two years of the most intensive work, yield to a person like Wolfe or Briehl.

That would be a disgrace!! I'd feel like a coward.

17 January 1940

I am much quieter. Things aren't so bad. Only the war is bad. It is ghastly to know that people are fiery patriots only because they no longer *feel life*, because they have died a living death. Ghastly to know that and be unable to improve the situation.

❖ 24 January 1940

Yesterday I took heart blood from a cancer mouse, put it into bouillon + KCl, added dried serum, and autoclaved half an hour. Immediately afterward there were *only T-bacilli*\* and gram cells to be seen!

Why this time no bions,† but T-bacilli? (a) Cancer blood more apt to disintegrate into T than into blue bions? (b) Was it the serum that made it?

What significance does this experiment have?

❖ 25 January 1940

Today we autoclaved:

One 10 cc + serum

One 10 cc without serum to find out whether the T-bacilli were result of autoclaving (a) cancer blood or of the (b) serum added to blood. If (a), then very important to find out further.

❖ 31 January 1940

I don't understand New York. People promise much but don't keep the promise. They seem to show tremendous interest in new matters, but they don't do anything about it. As everywhere, not take and give,

\*T-bacilli (Tod = death) were first found by Reich in a culture of sarcoma tissue. They are lancet-shaped, gram-negative, and exhibit a zigzag motion. They originate from degeneration and putrid disintegration of living and nonliving matter.

†Energy vesicles representing transitional stages between nonliving and living substance. They form in nature by a process of disintegration of inorganic and organic matter, a process that can be repeated experimentally. Charged with orgone energy, they may develop into protozoa and bacteria. See *The Bion Experiments* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979).

but take where you get, and give where it is demanded, seems to rule. They talk so much about psychosomatic research. I believed in its seriousness. But when it comes, they don't seem to grasp it.

TO FRITZ BRUPBACHER \*

5 February 1940

Dear Dr. Brupbacher,

It was very nice to receive another letter from you. Despite the massive misfortune which has affected all our hopes, a nucleus of thought and manner of living which might prove valuable in the future has been preserved here and there. You are certainly right in saying that the disappointment in all kinds of parties and leaders is far too great for any rational action to be conceivable along traditional lines. Nevertheless, I personally remain optimistic. What you refer to as new individualism I believe I have, for my part, simply formulated under the concept of "work democracy."<sup>†</sup> However, since I do not have the slightest ambition to be regarded as a political leader, it is sufficient for me to use this concept merely to preserve some remnant of clarity within my working sphere and to distance myself from the general madness.

Please send me any new material which you publish. As for my own work, all I have to report is that, more by luck than by understanding, I am making some very fruitful progress in the field of cancer research. I wish I had the chance to have a really good chat with you again about everything.

Warmest greetings to you and your wife.

\*Swiss sexologist and author of *40 Jahre Ketzer (Forty Years a Heretic)*.

<sup>†</sup>Reich's concept of work democracy was "directed exclusively to the fulfillment of the biological life functions of love, work, and knowledge." Intrinsic to it was the capacity of each individual to assume responsibility for his own existence and social function. See *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970).

6 February 1940

1 a.m. Have had another very great success, a big hit! Held my first lecture, attended by ten psychiatrists from Columbia, students of psychoanalysis. I spoke English well—good contact—good questions from the students. They understood me completely. I've made a breakthrough.

The first complete happiness in a long time, enormous success—made contact—no isolation.

Perhaps, perhaps I will not die a lonely death. Careful, Willi, don't get carried away. *However, biogenesis has been established!*

❖ 14 February 1940

Today Wolfe told me what Dr. Tauber had told him about my first lecture: nine-tenths was not worth listening to. They (Tauber and McGraw) were not interested in protozoa. That had nothing to do with the subject.

❖ 15 February 1940

I am confused again:

It seems as if the body would mobilize its blood to destroy the ca tissue, succeeding partially. But in doing so, the ca disintegrates into T, *which kill the body in the process of cure.*

The tissue from the untreated ca mouse shows holes similar to those in treated ca. But the piece which showed masses of T-bacilli on the skin, but no ca cells in the living state shows, when stained, *ca cells organizing out of T-bacilli mass.*

Thus, it seems that:

1. Disintegrating tissue.
  2. T-bacilli from it.
  3. Ca cells organizing out of T-bacilli.
  4. Red cells entering to nourish and *to fight* against them.
  5. Destruction of both the ca and the red cells into T-bacilli.
  6. These destructive T-bacilli masses are killing the body by intoxication.
  7. Killed ca T-bacilli attract other ca to die.
- The fight of blood versus ca goes on normally without treatment.*  
Ca death seems intoxication death.


Therefore inoculation with autoclaved—not living—1 gram ca and red cells may kill the tissue and the T-bacilli.

❖ 16 February 1940

My suspicion that not the tumor but its destruction kills the body (except where the tumor penetrates important organs) seemed supported by one untreated Herrlein mouse today. She had about 12(!) pea- to bean-size tumors all over the body (subskin, abdomen, lungs) and seemed, when alive, very healthy, only a bit heavy as if pregnant.

How was it possible, so many tumors and not really ill?

The answer is the following:

1. The tumors were white, hard, not destructed.
2. Few T-bacilli in blood.
3. Yet the blood shows .
4. No tumors filled with bloody holes.

Following possibilities:

1. Tumors don't kill.
2. Destruction of tumors kills.
3. Destruction by red cells.
4. Lack of supply of red cells.
5. T-bacilli degenerates into ca cells → T-bacilli.

The ca therapy has to take account of the danger of quick destruction and has to fight against the living T-bacilli.

NEAR!

19 February 1940

This world is becoming more dismal all the time. The war will decide so much! Dare not voice the opinion, but logic demands it of me:

1. The “democracies” are lost.
2. The dictatorships are leading the masses, those millions of people who, as they become aware, feel socialism but do not know what it is.
3. Hitler and Stalin are the “best” that revolutionary sentiments in the masses were able to produce. Disgusting, these human hordes, frightful, and they alone will decide.

I am astonished by the feeling that this war has nothing to do with me. I'm not responsible for it—my task is only to protect a fragment of the truth and guard it from the war. I am confronted with the question of whether I should start an endeavor such as I had before. In which direction? This would mean:

1. The chore of publishing.
2. Raising funds for this purpose.
3. And in addition having to face the explosions.

The work on cancer is making good progress. I am surrounded by difficulties, but every few days or weeks it surges ahead. Am presently concerned with finding out whether autoclaved blood taken from cancer mice is capable of destroying ca.

Still suffering about Elsa—poor girl! But she would not be able to stand it here. How dearly I love her! How cruel life is! If I could have her with me for just one evening—but we are forced to be power politicians!

The situation with my children seems unalterable! Eva is sick and Lore is sweet but helpless, overpowered by old women.

3 March 1940

A possible letter to Elsa:

My Elsa: Your short letter was shattering. You wrote that I had ruined your happiness. No, not I, but *it* ruined your happiness. I still feel as though blocked, cannot find my old path or regain my previous temperament. Did I lose it—along with you? I don't know. True, I do my work each day, but in the past I actually lived outside of the daily routine. Now I do nothing! I would like to publish, but don't. I no longer have confidence in my future. It is as if something very important had crumbled in the forty-third year of my life. However, those sudden ideas still come to me in my work. They are so good and productive because they intuitively strike the mark as if they had been shot from a cannon. It happened just recently when I suddenly had the impulse to grow a tumor in a cancer mouse. Lo and behold, it contained blood from which I derived a serum, and this serum, in turn, is effective against cancer. Nevertheless, something has snapped. I began to fear new attacks by my enemies and wanted to hide. Am no longer the lighthearted man I once was! Deep in my heart I am convinced that you would not be able to stand it here, that I would

no longer be enough for you and that it would cause unhappiness. I would, of necessity, have to be your home, your shelter, while at the same time I have become extremely needful of shelter myself. I no longer believe in people. My ability to give, simply give, without fear of disappointment, has left me. Will it return? I don't know. You would no longer be happy with me. In addition to this, I am still convinced as to the nature of your secret. Don't be sad, darling! Your unhappiness is not my fault, and I would like you to be happy again. Should fate someday grant us another meeting, we shall be dear friends, like children who love each other.

I am very lonely, fighting a hard fight against myself, against aging or losing the zest of life too soon. I do not believe in America, nor do I believe in contemporary mankind. It is totally corrupt. I can no longer enter into this life and have but *one* task to do as well as I am able—namely, to dispel as much as possible of the darkness which overlays life's basic principles. In this respect I can still accomplish a great deal, but to do this I must shun today's conventions and views. I do not believe that I will hold out very much longer unless I receive material help or help of some other kind. This cannot and must not be expected of my pupils. They have their own troubles. As much as I trust in the future of mankind, I trust very little in my own personal future.

Ilse will not be lost here when I am no longer able to carry on. She has relatives and connections in America whereas you do not. You yourself wrote that you would be destroyed if I were suddenly to leave you. However, *I* would not do that, but *it* would. And therefore it cannot be. Elschen, please keep on loving me just a little. I have so few friends and I would like you to be one of them.

3 March 1940

12 *p.m.* Draft for my last will and testament:

In the event of my natural or violent death, I request the following stipulations of my will to be carried out:

1. At present I possess very little cash. Should there be more cash available at the time of my death it is to be used to pay for a modest funeral. The remainder is to be divided in equal parts among  
my wife, Ilse Ollendorff, and  
my two daughters, Eva and Lore.

2. My possessions further include my scientific library, my laboratory, my scientific archives, containing unpublished manuscripts, daily journals, personal diaries, my scientific documentary, films on the results of bion research, photographs and reproductions; the furnishings of my study.

If it is at all possible, the equipment constituting my laboratory is to remain intact as a complete unit. I request my pupils in Scandinavia and North America to see to it that the laboratory as a whole continues to be used for practical and theoretical research. At present I know of no one who could replace me in bion and cancer research work. My findings from cancer research have been compiled in a manuscript entitled "The Cancer Biopathy"\*—to the extent they have been validated. In the event that I should not succeed in preparing a drug against cancer, I request my followers in bion research to devote all attention to the T-bacilli, as *they contain the secret*.

My assistant, Gertrud Gaasland, is very well informed on all details. My thanks to her for her devoted help over more than five years.

3. Work with my instruments shall be bound to the condition that handling of the question of sex will not be altered in any way and will be continued along the lines I have set forth.

4. My physical remains are to be cremated. I do not wish to have a religious ceremony, because I believe in God only in the form of a law of nature which created living beings from lifeless matter. I request that during the burial Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony" be played, even if it is only a recording. I should like to recall to my friends' minds the Beethoven "Moonlight Sonata," and how, on warm summer evenings, in quiet conversations far from the politics of the day, it allowed us a glimpse of a better future for mankind. To have made a small contribution toward securing that future was a comfort to me in my most difficult periods. I shall list my most important discoveries and views, in abbreviated form:

The electrical nature of sexuality

The tension-charge formula

Orgone radiation

Bion development from cooked, prepared matter

\**The Cancer Biopathy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973).

The self-decomposition of the human organism due to poor breathing, which serves to repress instincts

The T-bacilli as a product of self-decomposition and incipient cancer biopathy

The radiating SAPA bions

Vegetotherapy

The sociology of sex

In concluding, I ask that the following be noted: During my entire lifetime, I never consciously wished to hurt anyone. Whenever this occurred, it was because I was *constrained* to follow my path, to separate from a person I loved but who threatened to rock my convictions.\*

(signed) Wilhelm Reich

❖ 6 March 1940

Today I talked with Dr. Malcolm from Lederle, Inc., in Pearl River—a serum factory—about making serum.

TO DR. MALCOLM

❖ 8 March 1940

Dear Dr. Malcolm,

Referring to our discussion of 6 March, I met some difficulties to start new experiments on T-bacilli serum at your laboratories at once.

\*At this time it is also appropriate to consider a personal accusation raised by friends who are turning antagonistic. Professional rifts are usually blamed on difficulties in getting along with me. Supposedly, working with me is strenuous. I must reject this reproach. No one has yet proven that he is better equipped than I to captain such a scientifically laden ship on an everlasting voyage. Every rupture, whether of a personal or professional nature, has invariably revealed that the individual involved was not capable of walking the straight road which the cause required and which I felt impelled to follow for better or worse. In every instance to date, an attempt has been made to disguise this incapacity by claiming that I was difficult or impossible to deal with. It is correct that I was unyielding when people told me that the exclusion of sex sociology or the orgasm theory from my teachings would net me more friends and fewer enemies; unyielding when they said that "sex economy" is a concept which "provokes people unnecessarily." Yes indeed, I was unyielding in my refusal to follow the path of no responsibility; in that respect I was certainly "difficult." [W.R.]



To find out whether the colloid mentioned in our discussion would transfer its influence on cancer tissue to the blood, I would have to watch the process closely, I suppose every day, and that would be impossible at this distance. So I had to decide to try it out first on a small scale in my own laboratory. But I hope very much that our agreement will still be valid on a later date, when those complicated first steps in transferring the influence upon the blood will be made.

8 March 1940

The body undoubtedly exerts “action at a distance,” with orgone effect—i.e., specific excitation. For example, if the palms of the hands are brought together *slowly* from a distance of about 20 cm, an “air cushion sensation”—i.e., slight resistance—is felt at a distance of 1–10 cm, but at the same time a *magnetic* attraction is also present and this is particularly noticeable when the palms of the hands are moved apart. (They should not come into contact with each other!)

The palms of my hands exhibit this reaction when they are still about 15 cm apart. The magnetic effect is obviously linked with the iron in the hemoglobin. The orgone is transported in the body by the red blood corpuscles to the organs and cells by which it is taken up.

The orgone capacity of the body must be greater during a person’s youth than in old age. Death occurs when the cells lose their orgone. Cancer is the result of either excess orgone (proliferation) or a loss of orgone (T-bacilli). (Red blood corpuscles lose their radiation.)

❖ 9 March 1940

Anti-ca serum kills T-bacilli, protozoa, hence ca cells as well. Reduces size of tumors in mice. At last!

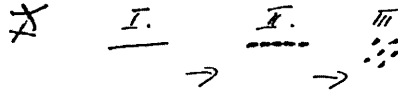
Wonder when I’ll heal the first ca patient? I am happy.

Just wrote a letter to Elsa. Either she responds or it is simply over. I will not give in. How difficult it is to face the truth.

❖ 15 March 1940

I don’t seem to like the idea, but I dare not fight against it any longer:

The T-bacilli are nothing else than degenerative products of quite simple rot bacteria like this:



That fits with the idea that cancer is a result of rotting tissue, and the cancer tissue degenerates quickly into rot bacteria, further T-bacilli, finally destroying the body. The cancer therapy would have simply to find a serum against rot bacteria and their product—T-bacilli.

Simple—stupid—but so it seems to be.

It is just as in rotting moss:

- a. Swelling
- b. Protozoa and bacteria
- c. Complete degeneration of everything into bacteria.

❖ 16 March 1940

The orgone rays must be a magnetic power, and one opposite to usual magnetism:

- a. A magnet does not attract the leaf of the electroscope; the charged rubber does.
- b. If the Nordlicht is magnetic ray from the universe, attracted by the N pole, then those rays must be opposite to N magnetism, and yet no S magnetism, but something quite different.
- c. The orgone diminishes the magnet power of the N pole.

18 March 1940

I have now found a method for measuring orgone energy in amps or volts. The new problem is to make it usable—i.e., either to convert it into electricity or to find orgone-specific means for utilizing it.

21 March 1940

3 a.m. Can't sleep. It occurred to me that, before moving to New York, I was just about to plunge into a deep abyss. It was a time when I thought I could (or should) obliterate the past and make a new,

proper start. The debacle in Oslo hit me harder than I realized, especially in my academic vanity. I wanted fast, large-scale recognition from bourgeois academicians instead of simply bowling them over, conquering them along with their bosses. I was on the verge of becoming unfaithful to the cause which had guided me so faithfully. In other words, I was being a bastard. I was close to becoming an unsocialistic reactionary. The objective reason for this was my isolation in Norway, to which I yielded by “keeping quiet.” Keeping quiet doesn’t pay. The canaille in man scents the danger of truth no matter where it is hidden. It’s no use. Fight, come what may—that is the only right thing to do.

I tried to preserve my bit of comfortable life and was about to forfeit my backbone in the process. In my depths I felt guilt, thought it was sinful to fight for sexual order.

❖ 23 March 1940

All tumor mice treated. One or two with anti-ca Lorin\* serum from rabbits had the tumors diminished. T-bacilli mice were saved. Well! Go on!

24 March 1940

A lonely birthday. Ilse is touching, but I hunger for Elsa. It is tremendously difficult to know that this entire civilization, including myself, will fall, and why, and not be able to improve matters quickly despite my knowledge of how things could be. The least I can do is try to put into words the attitudes and errors of which one must be aware if one wishes matters to be different someday.

❖ 26 March 1940

Of two French Presbyterian mice, the one that was untreated died, the other, which was treated, lives. And now, after finding out which combination of serum will work best (serum + KCl; serum + blood + KCl; blood + KCl), the next step: *influence human blood—or blood which would not harm human beings—with Lorin, and inject into human being.*

\*A type of bion named for Reich’s daughter Lore.

29 March 1940

Yesterday a letter came from Elsa calling for help. She is on the verge of a breakdown. The situation is serious. I cabled: Ready to help, wire how. But it's perfectly obvious what kind of help she wants.

Inwardly I am furious about my cowardice. Here I sit, acting modest—I am not modest—playing the role of a “pure scientist”—I am not a “pure scientist”—inventing so many ways of proving that “people must find their own way!” I am simply evading the responsibility and unpleasantness of coming out into the open.

6 April 1940

Elschen dearest! I need to talk with you—just have a chat across the five thousand miles between America and Europe, after all the letters back and forth. I ask myself repeatedly why I am capable of all this, and it brings my spirits down. The world has become so mean and stupid, it's disgusting. That is why I often flee to the memories of those wonderful hours we spent in the Vienna woods, in the forests of Denmark, and on the beaches of Sweden. I am enclosing a short letter which I wrote in a small restaurant when I went into the city last night and drove around until 3 a.m. in sheer desperation. Viewed superficially, things have never been better for me, and yet I take no pleasure in all this. As long as rich, productive, crucial work lies neglected, as long as diplomats and clergymen hold sway, as long as lies are triumphant, I cannot find happiness.

TO ELSA LINDENBERG

5 April 1940

Darling! Elschen!

You write that I should decide between you and Ilse! I do not have to “decide” anything, with regard to either you or Ilse. In times of deepest distress, I have always been left to sort out my problems *by myself* and so I do not feel obligated to anybody at all. I am genuinely well disposed toward whatever is actually there—whether it is my work, a friend, or a woman! My first wife wanted to make me “socially acceptable.” Just take a look at her, how she sits there with a man