

# The Decadence Of The Shamans

or, shamanism as a key to the secrets of communism

Alan Cohen

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May 1990

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## Preface

This text was originally written for an academic conference held in Helsinki in May 1990: the International Association for the History of Religion regional conference on northern and circumpolar religions. But it is not written exclusively for an academic audience. On the contrary. Those who were most interested in the text at this conference were precisely those who, for one reason or another, find themselves on the margins of mainstream university thinking. This was no surprise. The text is written essentially for those who, in the manner of the shamans themselves, 'walk between the worlds' — for those who question the assumption that the present social order has completed the mapping of reality; those who may have had fleeting glimpses of other realities, but who are dissatisfied with or downright hostile to the wooly speculations of New Age philosophies; those who have understood that the revolution of tomorrow will create a new poetry; those who seek a convergence of hidden truths. I can only hope that this essay will provide such explorers with a starting point, a framework for discussion. And I hope that they will not leave me out of their debates: I can be contacted care of 234 Camden High Street, London NW1 8QS, UK.

Alan Cohen, May 1991

# **The Decadence of the Shamans**

# Part One: Interpreting the Myth of the Fall

## A Version of the Myth

*The first men were much more fortunate than we are. Their camps were very close to the great silver birch which stands at the very centre of the universe and holds up the sky; whose roots lead down to all the halls of the underworld and whose branches stretch up to all the seven heavens. Since it was but a short walk to the Tree, it was a simple matter for anyone and everyone to climb to the heavens or follow its roots to the realms below. The marvels of heaven and hell weren't hidden from our ancestors. Compared to us, they were like gods.*

*One day, however, a terrible thing happened. A man vowed to cut down the Tree. Perhaps he wanted to prove that he was as powerful as the gods. Perhaps he had learned something in his travels up and down the Tree which had turned him against the gods. No one can quite remember; it was a very long time ago. Anyway, he took his axe, and, summoning up all his strength, struck a great blow at the base of the Tree.*

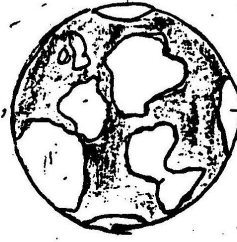
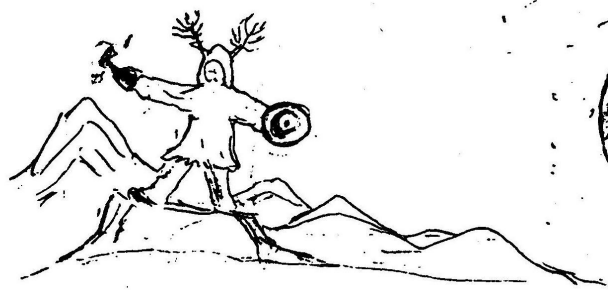
*At this blow, the entire universe shook, and all the inhabitants of all the different worlds were thrown into consternation. At the second blow, a tiny crack appeared in the Tree, and the gods called an emergency council. The chief of the gods declared that man had been given too much power and was now threatening the very order of the universe. If the Tree were to be saved, it would have to be veiled from human sight and sense. So the mighty gods combined their wills and, uttering spells of great power, they removed the Tree from the circles of the world. Even the paths that led to the Tree were hidden.*

*Since that time, only the dead and the shamans can find the paths that lead to the Tree. Some say that the shamans are the descendants of those human beings who were climbing the Tree when it was removed, so that they got stuck between the world of men and the world of the gods. Others say that they are the offspring of the man with the axe, since, like him, only the shamans have the gall to challenge the gods.*

*But unlike the first men, the shamans of today can't climb the Tree in their outward, bodily form. The barriers that hide the way to the Tree can only be passed in the spirit body that the shamans send out through a tiny crack in their skulls. In former times — perhaps soon after the Tree was removed, and when the barriers between the worlds were not so thick — the greatest shamans could go there bodily. Now they only go in trance, while their bodies lie immobile in the yurt. As for the rest of us, we have to rely on lucky visions that come unexpected, or on the words of the shamans, to know what the worlds beyond this one are really like.*

## The Universal Lost Paradise

This isn't a particular myth from a particular tribal group. It's an extrapolation from a number of archaic myths and legends, given a Siberian flavour for the occasion; but the particular form



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of the myth need not detain us here. For according to Mircea Eliade, whose book *Shamanism. Archaic Technique of Ecstasy* remains forty years after it was written the definitive survey of the phenomenon of shamanism, this myth of a lost primordial paradise is extremely widespread throughout the whole complex of archaic or primitive societies. Some versions of this myth refer to a time when the earth and sky were closer; some to a now-lost means of communication between the two (tree, mountain, creeper...). Some emphasise the immortality of the ancestors, others their friendship with the animals or their capacity to assume animal forms: in Siberia the Koryaks, for example, talked about “*the time of Big Raven*” in which “*there was no sharp distinction between men, animals and other objects; but what used to be the ordinary, visible state in his time became invisible afterwards*” (Jochelson, *Korvak Religion and Myth*. New York 1905–8, pi 15); others, particularly those living in the agricultural stage, sing of the time when they didn’t have to do any work, and found all the food they needed within easy reach.

In fact, it soon becomes apparent from studying Eliade’s work that he considers the lost paradise myth, the myth of the Fall, to be both universal and primordial in archaic society.

Universal, because, in his view, all archaic myths, even if they don’t always contain all the specifically paradisaic elements mentioned above, refer back to a primal age of wonders and marvels, to a ‘time before time’, a ‘dreamtime’ as the Australian aborigines call it, when the mythical ancestors of humanity performed their great creative labours. And, by the same token, particularly as he argues in his seminal work *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, he considers that all the periodic sacred festivals and ceremonies in primitive society had the aim of recovering the powers of the ancestors by imitating their deeds, of re-establishing the ancestors’ exalted mode of being – in other words, of restoring the dreamtime, which, in the words of the Australian anthropologist Elkin, is not just a by-gone age, but “*both a time and a state of life. It denotes the time and the power of the tribal cult heroes, who are still present, though they performed their mighty works in the long past*” (*Aboriginal Men of High Degree*. Sydney c1946, p 12). Or, as Elkin puts it elsewhere, this dreamtime “*is eternal, because it is the expression in time periods of that reality which is permanent, immutable, and timelessly Here and Now*” (*The Australian Aborigines*. Sydney and London 1938, p232): consequently, it is not lost forever, but can be reactualised in every sacred ritual.

Primordial, because, since it is precisely the primitive societies that most explicitly and poignantly express this yearning to recover the ‘original’ splendour of humanity, Eliade (eels justified in extrapolating backwards in time and concluding that the ‘nostalgia for paradise’ is a phenomenon that goes back to the very beginnings of the human race:

“If we take account of the fact that this nostalgia for paradise was similarly discernable in the general religious conduct of men in the archaic societies, we are justified in supposing that the mythical remembrance of a non-historical happiness has haunted humanity from the moment when man first became aware of his situation in the Cosmos. A new perspective is opened up, therefore, in the study of archaic anthropology.” (*Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*. London 1968, p 69)

The myth of the decadence of the shamans is, as indicated in our opening tale, itself an element of the lost paradise myth. Eliade again:

“...the supreme experience of the shaman ends in the ecstasy, in the ‘trance’. It is during his ecstasy that the shaman undertakes, *in the spirit*, long and dangerous mystical journeys even up to the highest Heaven to meet the God, or up to the Moon or down into Hell, etc. In other words, the supreme experience of the shaman, the ecstasy, is reached *beyond the realm of the sensorial*; it is an experience that brings into play and engages only his ‘soul’, not the whole of his being, body and soul; his ecstasy manifests the separation of the soul; that is, it anticipates the experience of death.

This is no more than we might expect: having already, in his initiation, passed through death and resurrection, the shaman is able to enter into the discarnate condition with impunity; he can exist, in his capacity as a ‘soul’, without its separation from the body being fatal to him. Every ‘trance’ is another death during which the soul leaves the body and travels into all the cosmic regions. Yet, although the shamanic ecstasy is universally regarded as the conclusive proof of ‘sanctity’, it represents, none the less, in the eyes of the primitive, *a decadence compared with the primordial status of the shamans*. Indeed, the traditions speak of a time when the shamans set out on their travels to Heaven *in concreto*: they claim remembrance of an epoch when shamans *really* flew up above the clouds. Moreover the ecstasy, that mystical ecstasy realised only in the spirit, is regarded as inferior to his earlier situation, when the shaman *in his own body* realised all his miracles — magic flight, ascension to Heaven and descent into Hell...

...The Chukchee, the Koryak and the Tongans, as well as the Selk’nam of Tierra del Fuego are all agreed that the ‘old shamans’ had much greater powers and that the shamanism of today is in decline. The Yakuts recall with nostalgia the time when the shaman flew right up to heaven upon his courser; one could see him, dressed all in iron, soaring through the clouds, followed by his drum.

The decadence of the shamanism of today is a historical phenomenon to be explained partly by the religious and cultural history of the archaic peoples. But in the tradition to which we have just been alluding, something else is in question; namely, a myth *about* the decline of the shaman; since they claim to know there was a time when the shaman did not fly to heaven in ecstasy but in physical fact. *In illo temore* this ascension was not made ‘in the spirit’ but bodily. The ‘spiritual’ state therefore signifies a fall in comparison with the earlier situation, in which the ecstasy was not necessary because no separation between body and soul was possible; which

means that there was no death. It was the appearance of Death that broke up the unity of the whole man by separating the soul from the body, and limiting survival to the 'spiritual' principle. To put it another way: for primitive ideology present-day *mystical experience* is inferior to the *sensory experience of primordial man*.

Indeed, according to the myths...the Ancestor or primordial Man knew nothing of death, suffering or work; he lived at peace with the animals and had easy access to heaven for direct encounter with God. A catastrophe occurred and interrupted communications between Heaven and earth; and that was the beginning of the present condition of man, limited by temporality, suffering and death.

So, during his trance, the shaman seeks to *abolish this human condition* — that is, the consequences of the 'fall' — and to *enter again into the condition of primordial man* as it is described in the paradisiac myths. The ecstasy reactualises, for a time, what was the initial state of mankind as a whole — except that the shaman no longer mounts up to Heaven in flesh and blood as the primordial man used to do, but only *in the spirit*, in the state of ecstasy.

We can understand, then, why the shaman's ecstasy is looked upon as something decadent; it is a purely 'spiritual' experience, not to be compared with the powers of the 'shamans of old' who, though they did not manage completely to surpass the human condition, were nevertheless capable of working 'miracles' and, in particular, were able to fly up to Heaven *in concreto*. Thus, the 'shamans of old' themselves were already representatives of a decadent humanity, striving to get back into the paradisiac state of things before the 'fall', (ibid, p 95f)

In sum, then, the myth of the decadence of the shamans is an aspect of a more universal myth about the decadence of humanity — of the tragic diminution of man's capacities in comparison to the marvellous powers enjoyed by the first human beings.

## Turning Eliade the Right Way Up

This discovery of the universal and primordial nature of the paradisaic mythos is Eliade's most important achievement, one that has posed fundamental questions not only for the study of archaic anthropology but also about the most profound needs and desires of humanity as a whole.

It is perfectly true, as for example Joseph Jablonski has pointed out in the American surrealist publication *Arsenal*, that Eliade himself, and any number of others working in his shadow, has drawn the most conservative conclusions from these discoveries, using them as a subtle apologia for religion (see Jablonski, 'Against the Academic God-Builders', *Arsenal* no.4, Chicago 1989). But this should not deter those of us who are involved with the struggle for a genuine human emancipation from drawing out the authentically emancipatory implications of Eliade's work.

What distinguishes Eliade from the general run of academic writers in the field of anthropology and primitive culture is his insistence on the necessity to draw general conclusions about the archaic stages of human history, indeed about human culture in general, from the mass of data deriving from the countless myths, rituals and religions that have existed in the various epochs of man's history. In a world where so many 'experts' in so many fields wear the most constricting





empiricist blinkers and jealously guard their own specialised boutique, in this case their own particular fragment of tribal culture, against any attempt to fit these fragments into a wider whole, reading Eliade is almost like going back to Hegel in reaction against the small-minded positivism that passes for philosophy today. Like Hegel, Eliade is an idealist; for him, history unfolds not as the product of men's practical activity, but as a history of ideas or beliefs. But as Lenin once said, better a good idealist than a bad materialist; and, as with Hegel, the task before us is that of turning Eliade's discoveries the right way up and setting them on the solid ground of material reality.

But let us first consider what answer Eliade himself gives to the meaning of the lost paradise myth, and, by extension, of the myth of the decadence of the shamans. As a matter of fact, most commonly he evades any attempt to interpret the myths in the light of any theoretical method – even the Jungian psychology towards which he seems to have a particular affinity. His last line of defence is very often to claim that as a 'historian of religion', his job is simply to describe and present his material as 'religious facts' which by definition cannot be reduced to any other category (see in particular his introduction to *Shamanism*). Thus Eliade falls back on the same academic specialisation that he attacks so eloquently elsewhere (of *Images and Symbols*, p27f, Sheed and Ward edition). But more than this: as Jablonski points out, this refusal to 'reduce' religion' to its essential components is actually an apology for religion, since it assumes that it is an immutable element in any imaginable human culture rather than the product of a particular stage in human history. This becomes clear when we examine the passage immediately following the previously cited long extract on the decadence of shamanism:

"This depreciation of the ecstasy accompanied by a high esteem for the 'powers' does not, in our view, signify any disrespect for 'spirituality' nor the wondering fear aroused by 'magic' (*Eliade is referring here to powers such as mastery of fire, which exhibit the shaman's capacity to work wonders in the flesh, and are thus especially redolent of the powers of the 'shamans of old' — AC*) but the nostalgia for a lost paradise, the longing to know Divinity, as well as the attainable realms of reality, *with our very senses*. In other terms, one might say that primitive man longs once more to meet with the sacred in the body... We have no right to infer from this any 'mental inferiority' on the part of the primitive, whose powers of abstraction and speculation have now been attested by so many observers. Die 'nostalgia for paradise' belongs, rather, to those profound emotions that arise in man when, longing to participate in the sacred with the *whole of his being*, he discovers that this wholeness is only apparent, and that in reality the very constitution of his being is a consequence of its dividedness". (*Myths. Dreams and Mysteries*, p 97–8)

"Theology...explains the origins of evil by the fall of man; that is, it assumes as a fact, in historical form, what has to be explained" wrote Marx against the bourgeois political economists who turned phenomena that were produced by history (in this case, the division of labour) into eternal and unchanging realities (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, henceforward EPM. New York, 1964, p 107). Similarly, in explaining the myth of the fall, Eliade offers us a purely theological explanation: man longs to know "Divinity" or the "sacred" but has somehow been cut off from it. But for us, as for Marx, "*the foundation of religious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man*" ('Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', in Marx and

Engels on Religion. New York 1964, p 41). Our aim in studying religion and mythology is to uncover what they reveal about man, not about a “divinity” who is only the estranged projection of man’s un-lived life.

## A Word From Peret

About the same time as Eliade was formulating his thoughts about myth and archaic society (i.e. in the dark years just after World War II, the surrealist poet and lifelong revolutionary, Benjamin Peret, was reaching similar conclusions, albeit from a very different vantage point:

“All myths reflect the ambivalence of man in the face of the world and himself; this ambivalence is the result of the profound feeling of alienation that man experiences, and which is inherent to his nature. He sees himself as weak and disenfranchised with regard to the natural forces which dominate him. He has the intuition that he could live a less precarious existence and feel happier. But he cannot see the path to happiness in the conditions of life which nature and society have imposed on him, and he consoles himself by situating this happiness in a golden age or in an unearthly future. The importance, then, of myths, resides in the hope for happiness which they embody, the belief in its possibility and the obstacles which lie between man and his desire. Briefly, they express a feeling of duality in nature which man participates in and which he does not imagine can be resolved during the course of his own existence...”. (from ‘The Heart of the Comet’, published in *Death to the Pigs. selected writings of Benjamin Peret*. London 1988).

It is no accident that this passage ‘came across me’ when I was beginning to write this essay; it seems particularly suitable as a key to unlocking the enigma of the paradisaical mythos. The attempt to apply the methods both of Marx and Freud to the problem of myth and of ‘inspired’ states of mind was always a central and specific element of the ambitious project that surrealism set itself, and I consider the present essay to be in essential continuity with that project. Peret in particular was not only the most consistent marxist militant in the surrealist ‘old guard’, breaking first with Stalinism and then with Trotskyism as they successively passed to the other side of the barricade; he also devoted a great part of his later life to studying the mythical and poetical creations of primitive humanity.

Peret’s treatment of myth in the above passage immediately takes us beyond Eliade’s theological explanations because it introduces the concept of alienation. And the theoretical concept of alienation is crucial to any serious explanation of the myth of the fall.

On condition, of course, that it is a marxist theory of alienation: because in our day, the term alienation has been trivialised beyond recognition by sociologists, industrial psychologists, academic marxologists and other hirelings of the dominant ideology. In the 60s and 70s, for example, how often were we informed that the cure for ‘alienation at work’ was for workers to be made to feel part of the job or the company through participating in production teams or talking to the bosses in ‘works councils’? Or, in the 80s, how often have we had to listen to lamentations about the unemployed and alienated -youth who inhabit our inner cities and have the regrettable habit of expressing this alienation in riotous outbursts against the police? In all these approaches, the great scourge of alienation, which from the very beginning Marx identified as an inherent and

essential characteristic of capitalist wage labour, is reduced to the size of an irritating pimple on the arse of an otherwise rational and humane system, something affecting only some of us and then only some of the time, and capable of responding to any number of quack remedies.

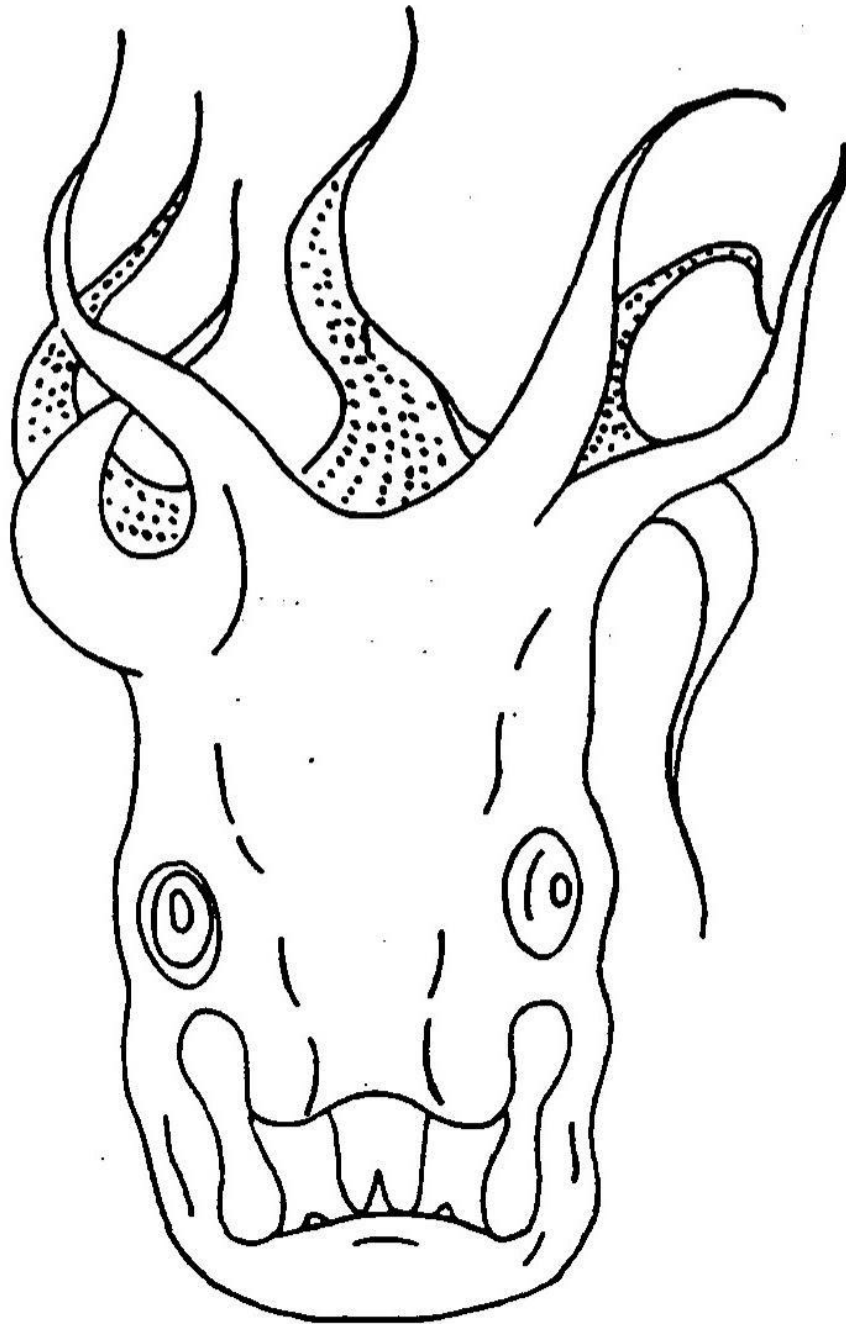
In Marx's day, or rather in the days of the young Marx, the combat was on another front: in the Hegelian milieu from which Marx had to free himself in order to find the road to communism, alienation was presented both as an eternal category of human existence and as something which arises in the abstract realms of pure thought or "self-consciousness". Marx, in trying to grasp the "rational kernel" of Hegel's system, to turn Hegel's dialectic the right way up, began his criticism of this outlook by developing certain passages written by Hegel himself, passages which already locate man's self-genesis in the labour process, in practical sensuous activity; but Marx then set out to show that the origins of alienation too must be located in the labour process — and more specifically in the capitalist labour process, in which the producer of wealth, the proletarian, is totally dispossessed, not only of the means of production and the products of his labour, but of his very life-activity. In short, against Hegel's windy abstractions, Marx demonstrated the concrete and specific sources of alienation.

But this does not mean that Marx's treatment of the question has anything in common with the latter-day imbecilities of an Althusser, for whom alienation is limited to the immediate context of the capitalist mode of production (and even then only in the west: it is common coin among the most celebrated marxologists to consider that wage labour in the Stalinist regimes has something 'socialist' about it). Precisely because wage labour is, in Marx's phrase in the *Grundrisse*, "*the most extreme form of alienation*", (London 1973, p 515) it shines a bright light on the manifestations of alienation in previous modes of production. In Marx's writings, alienated labour stretches back at least to the beginnings of class society, to the building of the temples in Egypt, India and Mexico, where the labour services apparently rendered to the gods were in reality rendered to an "alien being" who turned out to be none other than "man himself (EPM.pl 15). At the same time, since labour is the specific and central human activity, the consequences of alienated labour stretch outward as well, to all other spheres of human activity, giving rise to an increasingly impoverished human being, alienated from himself, from other men and women, and from his "inorganic body", nature.

We must take issue with Peret's formulation that alienation is "inherent to (man's) nature". If this is the case, we have gone full circle back to the Hegelians with their notion of alienation as an eternal category, or indeed to Eliade's argument that "the very constitution of (man's) being is a consequence of its dividedness". More important, if alienation is inherent in man, it can never be superseded. But this does not mean that the wall of alienation is a small one that can easily be leapt over: nothing is to be gained by underestimating its depth and its extent. And we do consider that the findings of comparative mythology, and in particular the discovery of the universality of the myth of a lost paradise, lead to the inescapable conclusion that the origins of alienation must be taken even further back than the rise of the first class societies and located within the period of primitive communism, which covers by far the greatest part of human history; indeed that the very 'ascent of man' through the labour process, his break with the rest of the animal kingdom, was also the 'fall' into alienation.



Black Elk  
Photograph by Joseph Epes Brown Courtesy the Smithsonian Institution



Cthulhu. dessine par un enfant de 10 ans.



Piret by Picnbia, 1921.

## Losing the Friendship of the Animals: The Origins of Alienation

Marxism is undoubtedly a theory of progress. It sees historical development as an overall forward movement based on the gradual accumulation of contradictions and sudden qualitative leaps onto new and higher levels: in broadest outline, from animal to man, from primitive communism to civilisation (class society), from the cycle of class societies based on natural economy to capitalism, based on generalised commodity production; and eventually, from capitalism to communism. At a time when a senile bourgeois order has lost any sense of historical progress, when the terrible events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the increasing decomposition of the dominant ideology has inaugurated the reign of nihilism, of disbelief in any future as well as innumerable desperate attempts to go back to the past, it becomes more than ever necessary to affirm this. As the theoretical outlook of the only class that can take society out of its present impasse, marxism alone can dare to look the present in the face and to hold fast to a vision of the future.

But whereas the progressivism of the bourgeoisie in its ascendant, optimistic phase was based on a linear view of an uninterrupted progress from the darkness of ancient superstition to the light of modern reason, marxism has always insisted on the *dialectical* nature of the historical process: advance through contradiction, through a series of catastrophes that may include profound regressions and the brutal destruction of previous achievements; consequently, the progress of civilisation is also progress in the alienation of man. This outlook is evident in Marx's writings about the birthpangs of capitalism, as for example in those passages in *The Communist Manifesto* where he talks about the bourgeoisie's ruthless destruction of the old "idyllic" feudal ties and their replacement by "naked self-interest" and "callous cash payment", but for the purposes of this essay it is even more relevant to recall what Engels, in his *Origins of the Family. Private Property and the State*, wrote about the dissolution of primitive communism:

"The power of these primordial communities had to be broken, and it was broken. But it was broken by influences which from the outset appear to us as a degradation, a fall from the simple moral grandeur of the ancient gentile society" (New York 1972, p 101).

By the same token, when Engels, Luxemburg and others describe the communism of the future as the restoration, on a higher level, of the communism of the distant past, they are again looking at history as dialecticians, and not as positivist apologists for the present.

Now, if we are to be consistent, if we are to find a coherent answer to the problem of the origins of alienation, it is necessary to apply this dialectical notion of an advance which is also a fall to the "moment when man first became aware of his situation in the Cosmos" — to the very beginning of the specifically human consciousness of the world.

From the marxist point of view, the 'positive' side of the transition from animal to man is easily summarised. Through the labour process, man raises himself above a life-activity dominated by instinctual responses, a life passively determined by nature, to a mode of being in which consciousness can direct action and thus shape the world according to human needs:

"The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from its life activity. It *is its life activity*. Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a deter-



mination with which he directly merges. Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity.” (EPM. p 113)

Man thus emerges as a distinct and separate being, no longer merged unconsciously with the stream of nature. And this human self-consciousness is also an awareness of time, a capacity to remember the past and to plan forward into the future. As Marx puts it in a well-known passage from *Capital*:

“A spider constructs operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this: that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour process we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement”. (*Capital*. Vol 1, London 1974, p 174)

It is this capacity for conscious, purposeful activity that also provides the key to human freedom, to man’s unlimited potential for development. The instinctually determined activity of the animals may give rise to products of an unvarying perfection, the bee may put the architect to shame, but, as Marx argues in the chapter on “estranged labour” from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*:

“...an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom. An animal produces only itself, whilst man reproduces the whole of nature. An animal’s product belongs immediately to its physical body, whilst man freely confronts his product. An animal forms things in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standards of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. Man therefore also forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty” (p113-114).

But it’s precisely this passage, which most clearly points to what it is that constitutes man’s advantage over the animals, that also takes us straight to the question of the other side, the shadowy side, of this advantage. For when Marx asserts that man “only truly produces in freedom from immediate physical need”, that man “forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty”, he can only be talking about man as he is at his most privileged moments — to be more precise, about man as he could be if his life were not ruled by the all-encompassing struggle for survival, by the dictatorship of “immediate physical need”. Since marxism is nothing if not an explanation of the historical process as the result of what is imposed on man’s productive activity by material necessity, by economic scarcity, it follows that truly human production, a truly human mode of life, has not yet existed. And in fact Engels confirms exactly this in a passage in a much later work, *Antiduhring*. when he insists that it is not until he has made the communist revolution and completed the leap ‘*from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom*’, not until he has become “*the real, conscious lord of nature*” who makes his own history in full consciousness of the aids he is pursuing — that it is not until then that “*man, in a certain sense, is finally marked*

*off from the rest of the animal kingdom, and emerges from mere animal conditions of existence into really human ones.*" (p 336, Moscow 1969)

In other words, as long as man's life activity is imposed on him by forces outside his control, as long as he has not yet realised his capacity for "conscious life activity", as long as he does not yet really make his own history, he remains alienated from himself and from his own most profound potentialities. This conception, moreover, accords perfectly with those passages in the EPM which define as alienated all forms of labour which man experiences as "*not the satisfaction of a need*" but merely as "*a means to satisfy needs external to it*" (pill), or indeed with the following passage from The German Ideology: "*...as long as a cleavage exists between the particular and the common interest, as long, therefore, as activity is not volumarify, but naturally, divided, man's own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him.*" (p54, Students Edition, London 1970)

These elements enable us to overcome the weaknesses in Peret's formulation of the problem. The alienation that man has protested against in his myths is not inherent in him in any ontological or biological sense, but it is inherent in any situation in which he is "disenfranchised" and "dominated" by "natural forces", in which brutal material necessity imposes on him conditions of life which are not at all of his own choosing. This situation spans the whole of human history up until now, because the whole of human history has been motivated by the struggle against economic scarcity. In the long epoch of primitive communism, therefore, a 'primitive' form of alienation is imposed on man by the prevailing conditions of economic scarcity — a form mediated not through a system of class exploitation, but through the domination of the individual by the tribal community. This is how Engels put it in his *Origins of the Family*:

"The tribe remained the boundary for man, in relation to himself as well as to the outsiders; the tribe, the gens and their institutions were sacred and inviolable, a superior power, instituted by nature, to which the individual remained absolutely subject in feeling, thought and deed. Impressive as the people of this epoch may appear to us, they differ in no way one from the other, they are still bound, as Marx says, to the umbilical cord of the primordial community" (p 101)

But the marxist treatment of this question goes further: it asserts not only that man's emergence in conditions of alienation means that he has not yet finally marked himself off from the rest of the animal kingdom; it also implies that in a sense he is worse off than the animals:

"In tearing away from man the object of his production, therefore, estranged labour tears from him his species life, his real objectivity as a member of the species and transforms his advantage over the animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken away from him." (EPM, p 114)

Thus, man's 'advantage' of being able to separate himself from the stream of nature, to orient himself as a distinct and self-conscious being, is transformed by alienation into the disadvantage that he now confronts "*the sensuous external world...the objects of nature, as an alien world inimicalty opposed to him*" (ibid, pill): his very separation from nature has become the curse of loneliness, the feeling of being a single particle in a world of competing and hostile atoms. And, extrapolating from the same passage, we can also say that the distinctly human awareness

of time, man's unique ability to purposefully plan his activity, is also transformed by alienated labour into a permanent sacrifice of enjoyment to the storing up of goods for tomorrow, into a perpetual sense of anxiety, an incapacity to live life in the present tense. The mythopoetic version of this paradox is the story of how man lost the friendship of the animals: he has raised himself above the other animals, but only at the price of losing his "inorganic body, nature", something that the animals can never be deprived of, because they are nature; unlike man, they are able to live to the full the life proper to their species.

## **The Shaman in History**

In the perspective outlined above, it becomes possible to grasp the real significance of primitive man's obsessive concern to re-enact the scenarios of the primordial myths.

Viewing this obsession from its 'negative' side, we are bound to agree with the hypothetical 'critique' of the primitive ontology that Eliade, in *The Myth of the Eternal Return* puts into the mouth of what he calls 'modern man':

"In this total adherence, on the part of archaic man, to archetypes and repetition, modern man would be justified in seeing not only the primitives' amazement at their own first spontaneous and creative free gestures and their veneration, repeated ad infinitum, but also a feeling of guilt on the part of man hardly emerged from the paradise of animality (ie, from nature), a feeling that urges him to reidentify with nature's eternal repetition the few primordial, creative and spontaneous gestures that had signalled the appearance of freedom (Princeton 1971, p 155)

Put in more explicitly marxist terms, primitive man's obsession with the 'beginnings', with the deeds of the 'ancestors', expresses the deep conservatism of societies whose outlook is moulded above all by the endlessly repetitive cycles of nature; primitive man's restricted ability to act upon nature, to transform it in his own interests, went hand in hand with an attitude of passivity in the face of nature's awesome power, a virtual incapacity to see himself as a historically creative being who can shape his future without perpetually returning to a mythical past. By the same token, the unquestioning obeisance to the superior wisdom of the ancestors represents the germs of religious alienation; unable to assume the responsibility for his own powers as a creator, archaic man projects these powers into beings above and beyond himself, when these powers really belong to him alone.

But while for Eliade, whose acquaintance with marxism is limited to its Stalinist caricature, the above critique is the beginning and end of what marxism has to say about the archaic world view, we must recall to mind that marxism does not simply exalt the superiority of 'modern man' over his primitive forebears; that on the contrary, it talks about the 'grandeur' of primitive man and sees in the communist society of the future a restoration, albeit on a higher level, of the primitive communism of the past. If we are to be consistent with this side of marxism's view of primitive society, we must apply it not only to the social forms of the primitive community, but also to the consciousness that emerged out of these social forms, in other words to what Eliade calls the "archaic ontology", seeing them as expressions not only of man's alienation, but also of his long battle to overcome this alienation and discover a fully human existence.

Long before Eliade formulated his ideas, the field anthropologists Spencer and Gillen noted with amazement the degree to which the material resources of the Australian tribes were channelled towards the re-enactment of mythical events:

“it is astonishing how large a part of a native’s life is occupied with the performance of these ceremonies, the enacting of which sometimes extends over the whole of two or three months, during which time one or more will be performed daily.” (Spencer and Gillen, *Northern Tribes of Central Australia*. 1904, p 177)

There is no doubt that these ceremonies had, for the primitives, a directly ‘economic’ meaning in that they were often seen as indispensable to the fertility of the natural resources (animals, plants etc) upon which the tribe depended; but it is also true that the degree to which these ceremonies were the central axis of the tribal life takes them out of the purely practical, economic domain. A member of the South American Uito tribe quoted by Eliade makes clear the relationship between directly economic activity and the sacred ceremonies, between work and play, in the primitive community: “*our traditions are always alive among us, even when we are not dancing; but we work only that we may dance.*” (cited by Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane*. New York 1959, p 103)

Since the primitive community is a true community, a society without exploitation, in which production is still geared towards the satisfaction of human needs, it is perfectly logical that such a large part of the material resources of these societies should have been directed towards the satisfaction of a need which is as basic and as universal as, indeed is the essential corollary of, the need to labour for food, clothing and shelter: that is to say, the need to set aside the immediate struggle for existence and participate in a mode of activity which is enjoyed for its own sake. Whether expressed by the Uito conception of the ‘dance’, or the Australian Njangomanda term for sacred ceremonies — widu win, ‘great play’, ‘big fun’ — the essential preoccupation is the same: work is suspended and life becomes play; the remorseless necessity to direct activity towards some future goal is replaced by an activity which has no end other than itself, an activity which attempts to be “in accordance with the laws of beauty” — and which thus suspends the tyranny of time and transports the actors into an ecstatic present. This is the mode of being enjoyed by the divine ancestors; and in the sacred ceremonies, the participants now remember that these divinities are not really remote and distant; on the contrary, by re-enacting their mighty deeds, the human actors once again discover their essential identity with the gods.

It is in this context that we must approach the problem of the shaman, that figure in the primitive community who “*more and better than other members of the tribe...can reactivate contact with the Dreaming Time and thus renew his world?*”, as Eliade puts it in his work *Australian Religions* (Ithaca 1973, p 157).

The shaman, according to Eliade, is the specialist in ecstasy; it is from his capacity for ecstatic vision, for journeying into the hidden dimensions of existence, that all his other skills and functions derive: healing the sick, preserving and enriching the tribe’s knowledge of mythical history and geography, guiding the community in times of difficulty and danger, and so on.

Since we are talking here of primitive communist society, when the division of labour is at a very simple stage, this term ‘specialist’ must be used carefully. One of the striking things about primitive society is the degree to which the capacity to enter ecstatic or inspired states is seen as an essential accomplishment of every member of the tribe. Among the Australians,

for example, every initiation into adulthood involved — through a series of punishing ordeals and terrifying, hallucinatory death/rebirth scenarios — the direct revelation of the secret identity between the initiate and one of the dreamtime ancestors: in other words, it conferred on the initiate the capacity to re-enter mythical time.

Nevertheless, even in the Australian tribes, which represent an extremely archaic stage of human culture, there was always a further stage of initiation for those who were called to become “men of high degree” (Cf Elkin, *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*) — those destined to delve deeper into the marvels of the Dreaming; and this distinction seems to apply to all the hunter-gatherer societies. Within these communities the shamans were the ones whose special abilities set them apart, and who were to some extent permitted to live outside the taboos imposed on other members of the tribe: the process of shamanic initiation often involved long periods of isolation in the wilderness, of bizarre, asocial behaviour; initiated shamans were often allowed to engage in unorthodox sexual relationships, and so on. In other words, in an age when the tribe was a “superior power” dominating its members, the shamans were the first ‘individuals’; and if, in the economy of the primitive community, the festival is the privileged moment when labour is superseded by divine play, then the shaman is the privileged individual, the one chosen to live a life closer to the true potentialities of humanity.

This view is diametrically opposed to that of bourgeois rationalism, which can only assimilate ecstatic experience to psychotic, delusional states, and for whom the shaman simply personifies, and even takes to its paroxysm, the morbid irrationality of primitive society. It is likewise opposed to the Stalinist anthropology which has been used to justify the destruction of shamanic cultures in Russia and China, and which, just like the bourgeois rationalists of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, presents the shaman as a conscious agent of mystification, whose tricks and feints are aimed solely at fooling the gullible masses and preserving their own privileges. Such interpretations are at best a crude caricature of marxism’s position on the role of religion and the priesthood in class society, but they are totally inappropriate to an examination of the dynamics of primitive communism, in which the shaman functions not as an exploiter but as a servant of the community.

If, on the other hand, the art of ecstasy is the expression of an immemorial human struggle to overcome the harsh limitations imposed on him by scarcity and the struggle for survival; and if, as marxism has always insisted, the advance of civilisation is also the advance of alienation, then we get a very different picture of the historical significance of this figure of the shaman. When we observe the development of civilisation in this context, we cannot fail to be struck by the fact that it has involved the gradual, but accelerating suppression of the shamanic art, the art of ecstasy; and thus, the degree to which this art has been lost, crushed, or driven underground by the advance of civilisation, and above all by capitalist civilisation, is one of the yardsticks by which to measure the alienation of man. Then the myth of the decadence of the shamans becomes a parable about the history and development of man’s self-alienation.

Already within the evolution of the primitive community, the myth expresses the development of the division of labour, since as the community becomes more complex and specialised, as economic divisions begin to appear within it, shamanism tends to become a veritable profession restricted to a small minority; there is a distinction to be made, for example, between the hunter-gatherer Eskimo and the pastoral Siberian tribes; in the former, the practice of shamanism seems to be very widespread throughout the community, albeit at different levels, whereas among the latter shamanism was more likely to be a speciality of particular families and to be a full-time occupation for its practitioners. But still among the Siberians, the shaman carried out

his ecstatic journeys in the framework of collective ceremonies, and through these journeys all those who participated in the ceremonies would be drawn directly into the mythical dimensions of existence.

With the rise of the first class societies, alienation takes on its open and undisguised form as the exploitation of man by man; now labour has truly become forced labour — it is no accident that the French word travail, for example, derives from a Latin word meaning an instrument of torture. With this step coincides the rise of religion in its strict sense: the old tribal myths are turned into an official state ideology justifying the domination of the possessing class. As Etiade shows in MERT the first class societies (Sumeria, Babylon, Egypt, etc) still operate within the horizon of archetypes and repetition; these are societies based on what Marx called the asiatic mode of production, in which a central state apparatus is grafted onto the old village communes, in which commodity relations have a very restricted function, and which have little historical dynamism; they therefore retain a conservative, cyclical view of time. But the periodic festivals of renewing the world celebrated in the urban centres of these civilisations are essentially priestly spectacles in which the emperors and pharaohs, “masters of cyclical time” (cf Debord, Society of the Spectacle) assume the role of the divine archetypes in front of a largely passive mass. The shaman has been supplanted by the priest — even if the old shamanic practices may continue to a greater or lesser extent within the villages and among the unconquered tribal cultures.

With the historical bifurcation between ‘eastern’ and ‘western’ civilisations, the shamanic tradition undergoes further transformations. In India and China, which are a more powerful and sophisticated example of the asiatic mode of production, the old cyclical vision is retained, but, projected onto a vast cosmic scale, tends to be viewed by the intellectual elite in an increasingly pessimistic light; it becomes the wheel of samsara, a cycle which brings more and more misery and suffering as it descends from the primordial golden age to the dark days of the ‘kali yuga’ (which we are unfortunate enough to be living through today). Through this elite, which in a historically stagnant society can see no escape from the wheel of samsara other than a flight inwards, there is a renaissance of shamanism in yoga, which systematises and refines the shamanic techniques to a degree never attained elsewhere. But these practices remain the privilege of a small minority. Even the Buddha’s rebellion against the caste system is unable to prevent the Buddhist monks themselves becoming a parasitic burden on the labouring masses.

In the west, the primitive commune is much more thoroughly pulverised by the development of commodity relations, and we see the emergence of societies with a far greater historical dynamic: slavery, feudalism and capitalism. The old cyclical vision correspondingly gives way to the religions of history (Judaism, Christianity and to a certain extent Islam); at the same time, “*unconscious-traditional myth-creation within the bosom of the community*” (Engels, Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy. Moscow 1946, p 16) is increasingly replaced by the philosophical and scientific enquiry made possible by the individual’s increasing estrangement from nature and the community. In this context, the remnants of the shamanic tradition tend to get buried deeper and deeper underground, to become an uncontrolled social force — hence their propensity to re-emerge in concert with radical social movements. As Engels pointed out in The Peasant War in Germany, outbreaks of ‘mysticism’ always accompanied the great rebellions of the mediaeval and early bourgeois period. The Christian society of the Middle Ages still had its ‘official’ shamans — the saintly mystics who were largely consigned to the monasteries and convents. But even these figures often found themselves in trouble with the ecclesiastical authorities, since it is a characteristic of the ‘mystical’ experience that it tends to

abolish the distinction between man and God, and in the 'wrong hands' this can lead to subversive and atheistical conclusions. The prosecution for heresy of Meister Eckhart is a case in point, and from Eckhart there descends a long line of radical figures: Boehme, Spinoza, Hegel...

But commodity production and the dissolution of all primitive communal ties between human beings only reach their full expression under capitalism. The 'great civilising mission of capitalism' is the unprecedented development of man's productive capacities and the creation of a world economy, laying the material basis for a truly global community founded on abundance instead of scarcity. On the intellectual plane, it signifies the breaking down of religious illusions and the full development of the historical, scientific world-outlook. But seen in its negative side, this momentous advance is accompanied by nightmares of suffering as the individual is dragged away from the protection of the traditional community and set 'free' in the market place, where he has the unprecedented freedom to work or to starve. It is the final triumph of alienation as human beings are reduced to isolated atoms, radically separated from each other and from nature, and as labour loses all its last characteristics as an art or craft and becomes nothing but the systematic mortification of mind and body. And to this phase of triumphant alienation corresponds the final downfall of the shamans.

On the most material level, as Rosa Luxemburg demonstrated in *The Accumulation of Capital*, capitalism could only expand by devouring all the pre-capitalist modes of production around it; and since the primitive tribal communities could not even serve as an outlet for capitalist surplus value, being totally outside the circuit of commodity production, their fate was to be literally exterminated by the advance of capitalist civilisation. To the dissolution of the old communal ties within the boundaries of the capitalist countries there corresponded the destruction of all the vestiges of primitive communism on the peripheries of the system; by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only the most remote tribal groupings had escaped this holocaust. In the last phase of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the period which Marxism defines as that of the decadence of capitalism, the last tragic acts of the drama of the decadence of the shamans are being played out: today even the most remote Amazonian tribes are being wiped out by the 'development' of the rain forests, a development which, in a period where capitalism has become totally irrational, is posing a real threat to the very fabric of planetary life.

Chi the ideological level, this catalogue of destruction has passed through various phases and used various instruments, from the Christian priest to the rationalist anthropologist, but it has had the common characteristic of reducing the primitive world-view to a species of devil-worship, with the shamans being portrayed as the devil incarnate.

Capitalism's hostility to shamanism is thus very profound; the shaman represents or symbolises the world outlook of primitive communism, to which capitalism is the diametrical historical antithesis. It is thus entirely logical that within the parameters of bourgeois society there should have been an almost total elimination of any meaningful social framework for the cultivation and investigation of ecstatic experience. From the point of view of the dominant rationalism, such experiences are either dismissed as pathological mental conditions or ignored completely. Even the 'ordinary' experience of dreaming is, with a few notable exceptions, reduced to what Breton referred to as a "mere paranthesis" (*Manifesto of Surrealism*. 1924), a rubbish heap of the unwanted detritus of 'waking consciousness', which is considered to be the only 'real' state of mind. Official religion has been equally antagonistic to ecstasy.

The shaman's tree has very deep roots, and despite everything the desire to break out of the limitations of this restricted view of consciousness continues to manifest itself. But since

there is such a huge weight of suppression piled on top of it, it tends to emerge in a completely marginal form, as in the innumerable 'spontaneous' ecstasies of people who have been pushed onto the boundaries between life and death, and suddenly find themselves experiencing states of consciousness that are entirely outside their previous frame of reference (see below, section on the shaman's art). Or, if the desire for such states is cultivated socially, it tends to take on the most morbid forms imaginable: the downward flight into the oblivion of religious cultism or drug addiction.

Indeed today, when capitalism's great breakthroughs in science and technology are more and more serving only to accelerate this system's headlong flight towards the apocalypse, and as all the accepted values of bourgeois society collapse into a swamp of decomposition, it may appear that the dominant ideological force today is no longer rationalism but irrationalism, the desperate escape into religious fundamentalism, for example, or the nostalgic yearning to go back to the simplicity of primitive tribal life. This latter trend is most obviously illustrated by the 'hippie' phenomenon of the 1960s, but nowadays it is also being given a more 'theoretical' justification by certain tendencies on the margins of the revolutionary movement (the Detroit-based anarchist paper *Fifth Estate* being a prime example).

Within this last development, we also have seen over the past two decades an enormous surge of popular interest in shamanism; books on shamanism, especially 'introductory' compilations, have become quite commonplace; and now it is becoming increasingly possible to get involved with groups that offer a practical initiation into shamanic techniques and traditions, particularly in the USA.

In itself, this 'rediscovery' of shamanism could be eminently positive, and the present essay would hardly have come into being if it were not taking place. But it is not enough to halt the decadence of the shamans. We have said that capitalism can permit no social form to exist outside or alongside itself; this is why all attempts to set up utopian communities within the framework of a capitalist world system are doomed to failure. It is the work of a moment for capitalism either to destroy such attempts by violence or open corruption, or simply to absorb them and render them either harmless or positively vicious. If the new shamanic groupings in the USA are still too small and sincere to have become repulsive 'mass' movements, manipulated by the state and big business like the Moonies or the followers of Rajneesh, one is none the less struck by the degree to which they have imbibed the classical capitalist ideology of 'get rich quick': in other words, they tend to offer an easy, rapid and painless initiation into 'shamanic states of consciousness' which bears little or no resemblance to the ordeals and sufferings that the shamans of old had to go through in order to master their art. Or else, where an individual does seem to have gone through these ordeals, as in the writings of Castaneda (assuming them to bear some relation to an actual process of shamanic training), they are almost completely inaccessible to the vast majority, an esoteric path which can be followed properly only by those lucky enough to encounter their Don Juans in the Greyhound bus stations of their lives. In both cases, the fact remains that the real social context for the development of the shamanic art has been destroyed, and this 'new look' shamanism has accordingly become yet another way of drawing people into a purely individual 'solution' to an alienation that can only be tackled effectively at its social roots.

It is no accident that the attempt to restore this or that aspect of primitive communism within the framework of capitalist society is largely the work of the middle class and its rejects, of that disintegrating petty bourgeoisie which can only look backwards because it has no historical future; but for the revolutionary class in this society, the working class, there can be no going



back. The working class is centrally implicated in the contradictions of this system and it cannot escape them. It can only go forward, through a relentless struggle against the consequences of the decline of capitalism, to the ultimate overthrow of the system and the constitution of a world-wide communist society. In making its revolution, the proletariat will, in Luxemburg's phrase, "*call capitalism to account for centuries of crime committed against the primitive peoples*" (The Junius Pamphlet. Merlin edition, p 133); in creating the developed communism of the future, the proletariat, or rather the communist humanity into which it will merge, will reappropriate all that is truly human from the communism of the distant past. The real rediscovery of shamanism is yet to come.

## The Psychoanalysis of the Fall: Phylogenesis

If marxist theory is indispensable for analysing shamanism in its 'objective', historical aspect, then to go deeper into the inner content of the shamanic experience we cannot do without the contribution of psychoanalysis. But our use of psychoanalytic theory is highly selective; we are interested only in drawing out its revolutionary implications. Freud himself was no revolutionary, nor did he claim to be; and much of his writings express an attitude either of naive rationalism or bleak pessimism, both equally bourgeois in content. But the depth significance of his discoveries took him beyond these limits, compelling him to think dialectically, and to issue a fundamental challenge to the whole notion of civilisation as defined in the canons of bourgeois common sense. Since his death, 'official' psychoanalysis has largely passed into the hands of epigones and revisionists who have done everything possible to render Freud's theories as inoffensive as possible to the existing order. Or else the whole tradition has been relegated to the museum of historical curiosities by the proponents of modern, mechanistic psychology, who want nothing to do with disturbing notions like the unconscious (or even of consciousness itself, in some cases), and who consider Freudian theory to be no more scientific than the ideas of the alchemists.

Our standpoint, by contrast, identifies itself with those who have, usually against the stream of the conventional wisdom, sought to preserve and develop the most radical and uncomfortable aspects of Freud's theory: with the Marcuse of *Bros and Civilisation*, with Norman O Brown's *Life against Death*, and with the international surrealist movement. And from this standpoint, psychoanalysis amply confirms the marxist view of history as an advance which is also a fall into alienation. It does so through the theory of repression, which turns out to be a different path to the same basic conclusion.

Indeed, given the pessimistic strain within psychoanalysis, it tends to emphasise this dialectic of man's ascent/descent in a more explicit way than marxism, notwithstanding the linear, positivist conceptions contained in a work like *The Future of an Illusion*.

To begin at the beginning: Freud did not doubt that the onset of repression coincides with the emergence of human beings (cf *Civilisation and its Discontents*. London 1973 p36), indeed that the price paid by man for acquiring his specifically human endowments (ie, his conscious life activity, as Marx put it) was the repression of his bodily instincts and the resulting tendency towards neurosis. Freud clearly writes as a dialectician when he says:

"A dissension of this kind (*Freud is referring to the conflict between the sexual drive and the necessity for self-preservation*) may perhaps only occur in human beings, and on that account neurosis may, generally speaking, constitute their prerogative over



A Teleut shaman's drum. From Ivanov (Nbahob [1954] p.655)

the animals. The excessive development of their libido and — what is perhaps made possible precisely by that — their development of a richly articulated mental life seem to have created the determinants for the occurrence of such a conflict. It is at once obvious that these are also the determinants for the great advances that human beings have made beyond what they have in common with the animals; so that their susceptibility to neurosis would only be the reverse side of their other endowments” (*Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. London 1973, p 463).

Elsewhere, Freud’s line of thinking about the origins of repression reveals its kinship with what we have observed about the marxist theory of the beginnings of alienation

“The motive of human society is in the last resort an economic one; since it does not possess enough provisions to keep its members alive unless they work, it must restrict the number of its members and divert their energies from sexual activity to work. It is faced in short by the eternal, primaeval exigencies of life, which are with us to this day.” (*ibid*, p 353–4)

This passage also accords with a suggestive phrase in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* : “*labour is desire checked and restrained*” (New York 1967, p238); Marx would only have added that it is alienated labour that is posited on the frustration of desire. In other words, under the hitherto prevailing conditions of scarcity, man’s labour, his specifically human blessing, appears as a curse demanding the repression of his erotic desires — the latter being understood in the widest sense, as the active enjoyment of all the bodily senses. In the biblical version, labour is what awaits man as a punishment after being expelled from paradise; in the marxist and Freudian version, however, it is labour itself which expels man from paradise, that very same labour through which man constitutes himself as man.

Thus human history is the history of repression. And just as marxism sees the historical process as the progressive accumulation of alienation, so Freud saw the historical process bringing with it an ever-increasing burden of repression and neurosis:

“If civilisation is a necessary course of development from the family to humanity as a whole, then — as a result of the inborn conflict arising from ambivalence, of the eternal struggle between the trends of love and death — there is inextricably pound up with it an increase in the sense of guilt, which will perhaps reach such heights that the individual finds hard to tolerate...the price we pay for our advance in civilisation is a loss of happiness through the heightening sense of guilt.” (*Civilisation and its Discontents*. London 1973, p 70)

It follows from this that for Freud as for Marx, primitive society and modern bourgeois civilisation are the two opposite poles of this process: repression, and its concomitant “sense of guilt” has reached its peak in a society where the individual is thrust alone onto the market place of competing egos; it is less advanced when man is still “tied to the umbilical chord of the primordial community”. Freud was, again, quite explicit about this:

“We have reason to suppose that the part played in the life of the instincts by the active impulses in their original form was greater in primitive times than it is on average today.” (*Instincts and their Vicissitudes*, *Collected Papers*. Vol IV, p 14)

In another passage, Freud argued that, for primitive man, the opposition between labour and Eros was not so sharp as it has become today: primitive man “*made his work agreeable, so to speak, by treating it as the equivalent of and substitute for sexual activities*”. (General Introduction to Psychoanalysis. New York 1953, p 175)

In *Life against Death*. Norman O Brown, who once described himself as Eliade’s “*disciple from the extreme left*” (Eliade, *No Souvenirs*. London 1978, p 185), applied Freud’s position on the structure of repression in primitive times to Eliade’s distinction between archaic and modern time, the first being, as we have already seen, “*cyclical, periodic, unhistoric... based on a religion of periodic redemption*”, the latter “*progressive (historical), continuous, irreversible., based on a religion of ultimate redemption at the end of time, Hebrew in origin and given classical reformulation in Christianity*” (*Life against Death*. London 1968, p 240). For Brown, the significance of Eliade’s contribution is this: Freud’s demonstration that “*unconscious mental processes are in themselves timeless*” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. London 1950, p 33) is the psychological equivalent of Einstein’s theory of relativity, overthrowing any notion of time as an absolute yardstick. Eliade has confirmed this by showing that different cultures (or rather different stages of human culture) have had different experiences and conceptions of time. But since the time sense belongs to that part of the ego whose function is to sustain and endure repression, since “*time, both archaic and modern, is like money, neurotic and correlative with instinctual repression*”, then “*what the cultural relativity of time concepts really signifies — and it is a hopeful sign — is that the structure of basic repression is not immutable. What Eliade really discovered is a significant difference in the structure of repression between archaic and modern man.*” (*Life against Death*. p241)

In primitive society, since repression is less advanced, since there is a less rigid distinction between the waking ego and the timeless world of the id, it is easier, relatively speaking, for human beings to enter into ecstatic states of consciousness, to activate the dreamtime, which, as Carl Jung noted in a perceptive passage, is “*a concretisation and projection of the unconscious with all its characteristic qualities — its dream manifestations, its ancestral world of thought-forms, and its timelessness*” (*Psychological Commentary*’ to *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*. Oxford, 1954, pp xiv-xv).

By the same token, since “*repression (on the inside) is separation (on the outside)*” (N O Brown, *Love’s Body*. New York, 1966, p 148), primitive man did not yet perceive the external world, the forms of nature, as something totally opposed and inimical to him, but tended to see himself extended into the objects of nature; it is this fundamental mode of experience, rather than any process of intellectual deduction, that is the psychological basis for the belief-system known as ‘animism’. ‘Modern man’, which always means man in bourgeois society, has by contrast developed a ‘hard’ ego which is much more sharply demarcated from the id within and nature without.

The ‘modern’ sense of time as a remorseless and irreversible movement partakes of the same syndrome, appearing in its negative side as the final subordination of the pleasure principle, of activity for its own sake, to the implacable command to accumulate wealth in the abstract, ghostly form of value: capitalism is the postponement of satisfaction in its most acute form. This is where Eliade’s observation that “*the true fall into time’ begins with the secularisation of work. It is only in modern societies that man feels himself to be the prisoner of his daily work, in which he can never escape from Time*” (*Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, p 37) coincides with Marx’s dictum that in capitalist production “*time is everything, man is nothing*”.

As we have already seen with the marxist theory of alienation, psychoanalysis thus uncovers the grain of truth in the myth that sees human history as a misfortune and as a fall from grace.

Simply to remain at the level of this myth would be to fall in line with the most reactionary doctrines; later on, therefore, we will have to show how, both for marxism, and for any consistent application of Freudian theory, the historical accumulation of alienation/iepression, far from being a mere misfortune, is a precondition for the true emancipation of man and for the fulfilment of his most profound dreams and longings. But we have not yet gone deeply enough into the 'psychoanalysis' of ecstasy; to do this, we shall have to turn from the origins and history of the species (phylogenesis) to the origins and history of the individual (ontogenesis), since we cannot understand the question of ecstasy without going to the concrete level of the individuals who actually experience it.



## The Psychoanalysis of the Fall: Ontogenesis

Psychoanalysis can add weight to the marxist view of history but it can't replace it; it doesn't explain the social/economic dynamic which brings about cultural change and thus alters the basic structures of repression. But when we move from the dimension of phylogenesis to that of ontogenesis, psychoanalysis can investigate areas about which marxism can only have the most general conceptions; and it is precisely these areas which are most crucial to our understanding of ecstasy and 'mystical' experience.

The proper starting point for a psychoanalysis of ecstasy is provided by Freud's comments on what he calls the "oceanic" feeling at the beginning of Civilisation and its Discontents. Here Freud takes the main characteristics of the 'mystical' state — the feeling of passing outside of

time, of going beyond the limits of the self and becoming one with the universe — and relates them to the earliest stages of infancy:

“..originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive — indeed, an allembicing — feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it.” *Civilisation and its Discontents*, p 5)

This is the stage which, elsewhere, Freud refers to as “primary narcissism”, a state in which the instinctual conflicts which plague the human adult have not yet appeared; a state, then, of intensely pleasurable instinctual fusion and of external unity with the world, most typically represented by the suckling of the infant at the mother’s breast.

In *Civilisation*. Freud expresses doubt as to whether this state lies at the very bottom of humanity’s religious aspirations, opining that the longing for a father figure is more primordial. But this view seems to contradict other statements which insist that this state of being provides a model of human happiness that remains a fundamental unconscious ideal in all of adult life and culture:

“..an actual happy love corresponds to the primal condition in which object-libido and ego-libido cannot be distinguished... the development of the ego consists in a departure from primal narcissism and results in a rigorous attempt to recover it” (Freud, ‘On Narcissism’, 1914).

The emergence of the ego is thus a ‘fall’ from this blissful state; it is predicated upon repression, which must be understood not as a one-off event but as a series of traumas which gradually give rise to the adult ego and the adult organisation of the instincts; to the more or less rigid separation between ego and world, and between ego and id. The intensity of the child’s original experience of his world (which initially coincides with the mother) has, as the other side of the coin, an unbearably intense experience of anxiety about separation from the love object — an anxiety which becomes a model for the human incapacity to accept death. Since the ego emerges in conditions outside its control and beyond its understanding, it can only survive these traumas by repressing all this tremendous instinctual exuberance, so that the price paid for being able to cope with anxiety and object-loss is a gradual diminution of the capacity for the ecstatic enjoyment of all the bodily senses. Society cooperates in this process because it must, in the interests of its own preservation faced with the struggle for survival, curb the instinctual drives of its members, force the child to conform to the norms of the social organisation.

The gradual nature of this process must be stressed here; paradoxically, because of the requirements of cultural and social development, the human infant enjoys a prolonged period of privileged irresponsibility in which its instinctual drives are allowed to blossom in relative freedom from the constraints of the reality-principle. Thus while in the adult, the erotic impulses have been more or less diminished to the genital region, the child is ‘polymorphously perverse’, in that all its bodily areas and functions can be a source of the most intense pleasure; while the adult’s world is dominated by work and an ever-present anxiety about the future, the characteristic mode of activity in childhood is play. And as Brown writes:

“Play is the essential character of activity governed by the pleasure-principle rather than the reality-principle. Play is ‘purposeless and yet in some sense meaningful’. It is the same thing if we say that play is the erotic mode of activity. Play is that activity which, in the delight of life, unites man with the objects of his love, as is indeed evident from the role of play in normal adult genital activity.” (*Life against Death*, p 39–40)

Linking this to the problem of time, Brown arrives logically at the following formulation:

“Activity not generated by want or defect is purposeless, and therefore play; hence Boehme conceived of God’s life as it is in itself as play. Eternity is the mode of play.” (*ibid*, p 91)

This corresponds precisely to what we have said about the relationship between work and the sacred festival in the primitive community; the attempt to regain the timeless, playful mode of being enjoyed by the ancestors is really an attempt to regain our own lost capacity for childhood play.

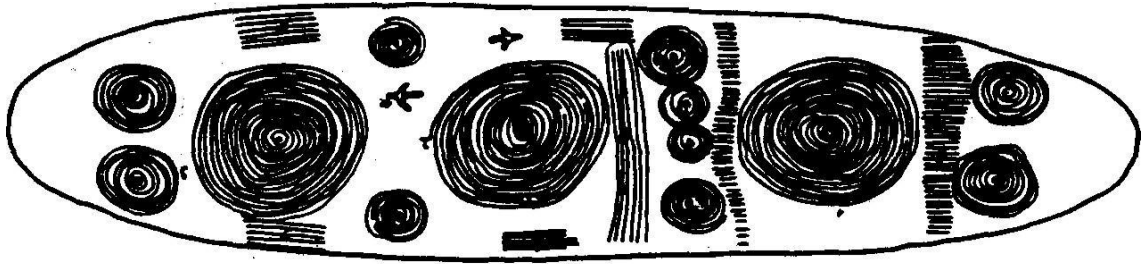
But whether we are talking about the egoless ‘nirvana’ of earliest infancy, or the myth-like intensity of later childhood, since this primal capacity for enjoyment is repressed rather than destroyed, it lives on as a profoundly motivating force in the unconscious, lying behind all the numerous means whereby adults search for a positive fulfilment of happiness. It is relived nightly in dreams, which Freud explicitly described as a return to the paradise of childhood: ‘*Paradise itself is no more than a group phantasy of the childhood of the individual...But we can regain this Paradise every night in our dreams*’ (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, London 1976, p 343). And it is recaptured in the state of being in love, particularly in those moments of erotic passion when the adult rediscovers the polymorphously perverse body of infancy, which no longer needs to ‘labour’ towards a purely genital climax but is caught up in the delight of the present moment. And Freud also recognised that the same capacity for delight could be achieved through poetry and humour:

“Long after a child has grown up and stopped playing, after he has for decades attempted to grasp the realities of life with all seriousness, he may one day come to a state of mind in which the contrast between play and reality is again abrogated. The adult can remember with what intense seriousness he carried on his childish play; then by comparing his would-be serious occupations with his childhood play, he manages to throw off the heavy burden of life and obtain the great pleasure of humour” (‘The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming’, 1908).

The poets, in fact, have long championed the position that, in many respects, the adult is a diminution of the child. There is a continuity in this tradition which spans from the Blake who sang that “*heaven lies about us in our infancy*”, to the Breton who proclaims that it is childhood “*that comes closest to one’s ‘real life’*”, and that “*the mind which plunges into surrealism relives with glowing excitement the best part of its childhood*” (Manifesto of Surrealism!). These poetic traditions, in their turn, can be connected to older mystical currents such as Taoism and Zen, which enjoin their followers to seek to recapture the spontaneous ‘not doing’ of childhood; or indeed to those

Christian mystics, like Francis of Assisi, who took seriously Jesus' saying that you cannot hope to enter the kingdom of heaven without first becoming like little children. But psychoanalytical theory gives these poetic and mystical intuitions a scientific foundation, chasing away mere sentimentality to arrive at the definition of man as *"that species of animal which has the historical project of recovering its own childhood."* (Life against Death. p55)

It thus provides us with a materialist explanation of the universal appeal of the myth of a lost paradise, since it demonstrates that the 'fall' is not an event restricted to the remote past of the human species, but is a drama inescapably lived through by each and every individual human being. And here again, there is a perfect accord between the most daring conclusions drawn by psychoanalysis and Marx's dialectical vision of a return at a higher level, of communism as *'a return become conscious, and accomplished within the entire wealth of previous development.'* (EPM, p 135 ) Or, as he puts it in the Grundrisse: *'A man cannot become a child again, or he becomes childish. But does he not find joy in the child's naivete, and must he himself not strive to reproduce its truth at a higher stage?'* (London 1973, p 111). For Marx, as for Freud, the way back was also the way forward.





## Part Two: Grandeur and Limits of the Shaman's Vision

### The Grandeur of the Shamans

The fundamental element in capitalism's relationship with primitive society is destruction and denigration: destruction, both through physical force and the disintegrating power of the commodity, of the material roots of the primitive community; and denigration of the subjective side of primitive man, of the consciousness that emerges from his social being. This twofold process continues today: the last outposts of primitive communism in the Amazon and elsewhere are being shattered by the gun, the axe, and the dollar, while the main trends in the way that the dominant ideology portrays primitive man's vision of the world are still basically mired in the imperialist arrogance of those who regarded the primitive world-view as a form of devil-worship.

It therefore follows that the first task in this field, for those who consciously stand against the rule of capital, is to come to the defence of primitive communism: first, to repudiate all the current ideological themes which deny that primitive communism ever existed, and secondly, to affirm that the very existence of primitive communism in the past is a practical refutation of all the ideological fables which present capitalism and class society as being rooted in the very fibres of man's being, as eternal facts existing since the dawn of time. In this regard, the words of Rosa Luxemburg about the findings of Henry Morgan remain as valid as ever:

"Morgan has provided new and powerful support to scientific socialism. Whereas Marx and Engels, through their economic analysis of capitalism, demonstrated the inevitable passage of society, in the near future, to a world communist economy, and thus gave a solid scientific foundation to socialist aspirations, Morgan has to a certain extent emphatically underlined the work of Marx and Engels by demonstrating that democratic communist society, albeit in its primitive forms, has encompassed all the long past of human history before the present civilisation. The noble tradition of the distant past thus extends its hand to the revolutionary aspirations of the future, the circle of knowledge is harmoniously completed, and in this perspective, the existing world of class rule and exploitation, which pretends to be the *nec plus ultra* of civilisation, the supreme goal of universal history, is simply a miniscule, passing stage in the great forward movement of humanity." (*Luxemburg, Introduction a Teconomie politique. Paris 1971, p 121, my translation*).

The point for us is not to enter onto the terrain of the empiricist critics of the notion of primitive communism, whose method consists in finding this or that contingent error in the works of Morgan, or Marx, or Engels, and concluding from this that their whole framework was false. Rather it is to point to the fundamental characteristics of primitive communist society: the

lack of an exploiting class living off a surplus produced by others, the orientation of production towards the satisfaction of need, the sharing of all the essential means of subsistence among the members of the community...and thus to show, along with Luxemburg and other marxists of the past, that this simple form of communism, through which humanity organised its social forces during by far the longest period in its history, confirms the possibility of the fully-developed communism of tomorrow.

By the same token: if shamanism is the characteristic expression of the subjective side of primitive communist society, our first task is to demonstrate the grandeur of the shamanic vision against all those bourgeois theories which reject it as a psychotic aberration, a diseased product of the superstitious unreason of primitive times.

It is only from this starting point that we can arrive at an adequate critique of those 'anti-capitalists' who, seeing no hope in the future, resort to a facile idealisation of primitive society; similarly, it is only by refuting the vulgar materialist denigrations of the shamanic experience that we can also make a clear response to those who recognise the visionary capacities of primitive man only to develop a new version of idealist philosophy, new apologies for religion and spiritual dualism.

It is impossible, in the limits of this essay, to examine all of the different aspects of the shamanic vision, or even to do justice to those aspects which we have selected for examination. There is no substitute for going back to the original sources, to the shaman's own accounts of their experiences as collected by intrepid travellers like Popov, Bogoras, Dioszegi, Rasmussen, etc; nor for consulting the main scholarly works on the subject: Eliade, Elkin, Arberman, etc. Our aim here is simply to focus on the interpretation of the shamanic experience in the light of the theoretical framework outlined in Part One; it is to be hoped that the approach contained in this essay will stimulate others to walk along the same path, because, contrary to the canons of individualistic competition which predominate in the academic world today, it is only a collective endeavour that can systematically explore new avenues of thought..

## **The Techniques of Shamanic Initiation: Dreaming While Awake, Awake While Dreaming**

From the standpoint of reductionist psychology, all 'mystical' states of consciousness can be dismissed as regressions to pre-rational, infantile states in the individual's history. The mystic who feels that his ego has been transcended and that he has become 'one with the universe' in a blissful and timeless moment is from this point of view merely reliving an extremely primitive level of consciousness prior to the emergence of rational thought. By extension, such experiences are seen as being indistinguishable from psychotic states, which are similarly characterised by a regression to the infantile mode of being. The sombre conclusion to be drawn from this is that some of the most revered individuals in history — Buddha, Lao Tzu, Jesus, Eckhart, Boehme, Spinoza, Blake, and all the rest — are really to be regarded as psychotics, and the cultures which so revered them can hardly escape the same charge. In this vision of the past, the whole history of humanity prior to the 'dawn of science' is swallowed up by a dark shadow of ignorance, superstition and out-and-out insanity.

Dialectics, however, provides us with a different approach. It can demonstrate that the techniques of meditation and ecstasy which humanity has cultivated so laboriously for so many

millenia are not simply expressions of an urge to collapse back to pre-human or infantile levels of consciousness, but are also the product of an immemorial quest to make “*a return become conscious, and accomplished within the entire wealth of previous development*” (Marx, EPM. loc. cit). The master of meditation is precisely one who is able consciously to reactivate ‘lost’ layers of consciousness, to bring to the surface previously buried strata of the unconscious, and thus to effect a synthesis between the ‘animal powers’ of the id and the human qualities of rationality and purposeful action.

It is this capacity to explore the realms of the unconscious which explains why the shamans, the yogis, the ‘mystics’ were in former times held in such high regard: it was recognised that the synthesis thus achieved gave them access to unusual power and insight. Likewise, it is this capacity to control and direct the process of psychic regression that distinguishes the shaman from the psychotic. This is particularly clear when we examine the numerous ordeals and terrors the apprentice shaman has to pass through in the course of his initiation.

Those called to the shamanic profession, particularly among the Siberian tribes, often pass through a deep mental crisis that is hard indeed to distinguish from a descent into insanity: candidate shamans become withdrawn and dreamy and babble all kinds of nonsense; they may wander off for days, living like wild beasts in the forests; they become sick; they experience frightening hallucinations which frequently involve fantasies of being dismembered, torn to pieces by demonic spirits, and so on. But as Eliade points out in his introduction to Shamanism, in reply to the thesis that shamanism is ‘nothing but’ a form of arctic hysteria, what distinguishes the shaman from the hysteric is that the former is able to emerge from this crisis not only cured of his own sickness but also blessed with the gift of curing others. He may, in his dream-like trance journeys, be ripped to pieces by demons, decapitated, boiled in a cauldron...but this destruction of his former self is only the precondition for the emergence of a new self, a transfigured body equipped with the higher powers of the shaman. These descents into the infernal regions, moreover, have their parallel in the more developed forms of mysticism, such as the ‘Dark night of the Soul’ in the writings of the Christian mystic St John of the Cross, or the ‘Great Doubt’ described by the Zen master Hakuin, for whom a truly lucid consciousness could only emerge after one has passed beyond the never-ending antimonies of rational, discursive thought.

Then again, shamanic training usually involves the cultivation of heightened powers of concentration, which enable the shaman to maintain a calm and clear state of mind even when he is confronted with the most awe-inspiring visions. This quality is stressed very succinctly in the advice of an Australian medicine man to his pupil:

“When you lie down to see the prescribed visions, and you do see them, do not be frightened, because they will be horrible. They are hard to describe, though they are in my mind and my *miwi* (i.e. psychic force), and though I could project the experience into you after you had been well trained.

”However, some of them are evil spirits, some like snakes, some are like horses with men’s heads... You see your camp burning and the blood waters rising, and thunder, lightening and rain, the earth rocking, the hills moving, the waters whirling...do not be frightened. If you get up, you will not see these scenes, but when you lie down again, you will see them, unless you get too frightened. If you do, you will break the web (or thread) on which these scenes are hung. You may see dead persons walking towards you, and you will hear their bones rattle. If you see and hear these things

without fear, you will never be afraid of anything. These dead people will not show themselves to you again, because your *miwi* is now strong. You are now powerful because you have seen the dead people” (Elkin, *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*, pp 70–71).

The shaman’s attitude here bears a striking resemblance to the advice given in the Tibetan Book of the Dead, where the newly dead (or initiated) man is enjoined not to fear the ‘wrathful deities’ he encounters on the bardo-plane, since they are ultimately mere mental constructs. These kinds of experience cannot be dismissed as a simple surrender to the dark powers of the unconscious; they express a definite effort to harness these powers in a conscious manner.

From the psychoanalytical point of view, shorn of its reductionist distortions, all the shamanic techniques for attaining visionary and ecstatic states — fasting, isolation, exposure to extremes of heat and cold, drumming, chanting, dancing, motionless meditation, ingestion of mind-altering plants, etc — are all so many assaults on the walls of repression which separate the waking ego from the dreaming id, so many attempts to unlock the floodgates of the unconscious. As the Eskimo shaman Igjugaijuk put it:

“True wisdom is only to be found far away from people, out in the great solitude, and it is not found in play but only through suffering. Solitude and suffering open the human mind, and therefore a shaman must seek his wisdom there.” (Rasmussen, *Intellectual Culture of the Hudson Bay Eskimo*. Copenhagen 1930, pp 52–55).

There is no denying that few modern ‘defenders’ of psychoanalysis would share this interpretation; but when we turn to the writings of Freud himself, we do not find the flat, reductionist attitude exhibited by so many of his epigones.

In *Civilisation and its Discontents*, for example, he was quite willing to accept Romain Rolland’s view that

”through the practices of Yoga, by withdrawing from the world, by fixing the attention on bodily functions and by peculiar methods of breathing, one can in fact evoke new sensations and coenaesthesias in oneself, which he regards as regressions to primordial states of mind which have long ago been overlaid. He sees in them a physiological basis, as it were, of much of the wisdom of mysticism. It would not be hard to find connections here with a number of obscure modifications of mental life, such as trances and ecstasies” (CAD, London 1973, pp 9-10).

Unfortunately, Freud himself was unable to take these investigations further: having admitted that yogic-type techniques could be a genuine road to the unconscious, he then pulled back from the logical consequences of this with a frightened yelp:

“I am moved to exclaim in the words of Schiller’s diver: ‘let him rejoice who breathes up here in the roseate light’” (*ibid*, p 10).

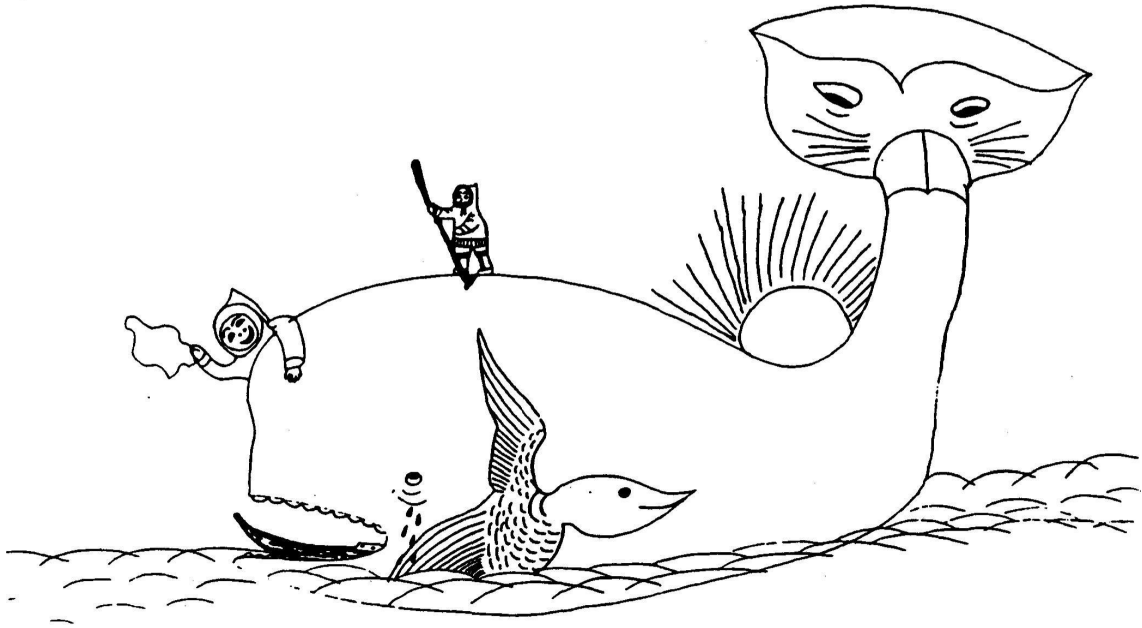
And so, gulping for the air of rational thought, Freud was unable to take his insights any further. We therefore have no real psychoanalysis of the ‘mystical’ techniques.

On the face of it, such a reaction, coming from one who dedicated his whole life to exploring the dark depths of the unconscious, seems perfectly extraordinary; but in fact it makes perfect sense as soon as we invoke Freud's own theory of repression.

We have seen that the shaman is one who attempts to dive into the depths of the id. But he is of no use to the community that sends him there if he cannot swim, if he simply drowns in those depths, as the 'mad' are drowned. In order to fee a shaman, he must be able to swim in the waters of the unconscious; to use another analogy, to carry the torch of consciousness into the cavern of dreams, as in those yogic techniques where one enters a higher state of consciousness by becoming aware that one is dreaming (the 'astral projector' Oliver Fox describes a similar method for entering the 'out-of-body' state). Or again, as in Andre Breton's definition of the central goal of surrealism: "*the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which today are so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a **surreality**, if one may so speak*" ('Manifesto of Surrealism', MOS, p 14). This 'surreal', that is to say, super-real, synthesis of waking and dreaming is also the goal of the shaman.

So, if the goal of psychoanalysis is to make the unconscious conscious, the techniques of the shaman go one further: rather than interpreting the patient's dreams, they enter directly into them. And the ability to do this requires something more than undergoing a process of analysis and training in psychoanalytical theory. It requires the courage to abandon the ego, and thus to experience death: for as we have seen, it is only through the death of his old self that the shaman acquires the capacity to enter the world of the spirits. But this death, this obliteration of its separate and unique existence, is precisely what the ego spends its life warring against; it is for this very reason that it has erected the walls of repression. According to Freud, "*it was anxiety which produces repression and not, as I formerly believed, repression which produces anxiety*"; at the same time, "*the ego is the sole seat of anxiety*"; and, finally, what the ego fears in anxiety "*is in the nature of an overthrow or an extinction*" (quoted from 'Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety', London 1936; New Introductory Lectures. London 1973, pi 17; and The Ego and the Id. London 1927, p85).

Thus, the ego resorts to repression to protect itself from this overthrow; from 'its' point of view, the descent into the 'mystical' regions, where the familiar world of separate objects and binary logic breaks down, must appear indistinguishable from death pure and simple, and so it fights to die last against being dragged into such zones of experience. Even in primitive times, the shamans had to endure the most rigorous trials and sufferings in order to overcome the ego's resistance; but we have also seen that, historically speaking, the more man has developed a 'hard' atom-like ego, the more he has tried to run away from die old traditions of 'killing' the ego, of using the 'mystical' ego-death as a path to self-knowledge (even if this has meant that a morbid flight into death has become more and more pronounced, above all in the dying days of bourgeois society). Freud's hesitations about inquiring any further into the yogic techniques thus reflect the historical evolution of repression. But whereas the reductionist certainties of Freud's epigones are utterly sterile and take us no further towards any understanding of the phenomena of "trances and ecstasies", Freud's equivocations are meaningful equivocations, and, properly followed up, can lead to new insights about the human mind.



Henry Napatuk

## Regaining the Friendship of the Animals

In his description of a shamanic sceance among the Siberian tribes (in the chapter 'Nostalgia for Paradise in the Primitive Traditions' in MDML Eliade observes that the first stage of the shaman's ecstasy, prior to the flight of his soul to the other world, is the calling up or incorporation of his spirit helpers, which usually take on an animal form. Similarly, in his training, the apprentice shaman often has to learn a 'secret language' which, again, is generally presented as the language of the animals, in particular the cries of birds. During the sceance, in winch the shaman dons a costume replete with animal and bird symbolism, the utterance of these cries, of this secret language, signifies that the shaman's spirit helpers have arrived on the scene, that they are speaking directly through the shaman.

We have already noted that identification with semi-animal ancestral beings constitutes one of the most universal aspects of the mythico-ritual enactments in primitive cultures: in Australia, for example, it is not just the shamans, but all the participants in the sacred festivals who experience this identification with the animal ancestors of the dreamtime. For those who look at primitive society with the jaundiced eye of bourgeois rationalism, these enactments must surely provide the strongest proof that if the 'return to mythical time;' means anything at all, it means regression to a lower, animal level, to mere animality.

There are certainly grounds for arguing that the experience of being 'possessed' by animal or other spirits can represent a lowering rather than an expansion of conscious awareness. Maya Deren, for example, writing about her initiation into Haitian voodoo rites, describes the 'transitional' state between normal consciousness and possession as one of merging and flowing with the rhythmical drumming and chanting that accompany the voodoo rites; but the actual 'possession by the loa', which the voodoo practitioners she was with accepted as a genuine one, seems to

involve a complete mental black-out (Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. London 1953, pp233f). Eliade himself, reflecting on the Dionysian cults of ancient Greece, comes close to equating the return to mythical time with an experience of biological regression:

“Whence this attraction, this mystery: to eat raw flesh, the flesh of the pursued animal, trapped and torn apart with the nails. Isn't it probably a regression to a very archaic stage, perhaps even prehuman? The wild stage? This unfathomable fall into the world of animals of prey can constitute a spiritual and physical shock that is extremely creative. A feeling of *freedom*: you feel that you are no longer a man, no longer subject to laws, to prohibitions. There is even more: you *relive* a primordial stage, you rediscover a world that was thought to be lost, you are immersed in the time of purely zoological existence, a time thought to have been abolished. The Dionysiac ecstasies: to rediscover the time from before the world, when time was only presence without beginning or end (that is how I picture, more or less, the experience of time among animals).” (*No Souvenirs*. London 1978, p93)

We do not deny at all that there is such a thing as a ‘downward’ transcendence, a mere losing of oneself in unconsciousness, and that such states may have played a very considerable role in primitive rituals, as they do in latter day revivalist meetings, spiritual and political leader-cults, etc. But Eliade also warned against approaching this problem in a simplistic manner. For the primitives, animals do not represent a ‘lower’ form of life: they have access to the secrets of life and nature, so that to speak their language, to win their friendship, to enter their condition, means sharing their secrets and enjoying their plenitude of life. In fact, it symbolises a return to the paradisaic state which man enjoyed before he became estranged from the animals and the rest of nature (MDM. p 61).

We should also note that Eliade makes a distinction between the incorporation of animal spirits and possession by them (ibid). The shaman's ‘possession’ is a controlled possession: he only attains his status by developing the capacity to master his spirits, to call them up at will and have them do his bidding. That this state of controlled possession is a conscious state is also suggested by the extraordinary feats of agility and balance which the shaman frequently accomplishes in this stage of the *scence*:

“Although shamans of the Reindeer Tungus of Manchuria perform their ecstatic dance in a yurt crowded with onlookers, in a very limited space, and wearing costumes that carry more than thirty pounds of iron in the form of disks and other objects, they never touch anyone in the audience. And the Kazak Kirgiz *baqca*, when in trance, ‘though he flings himself in all directions, with his eyes shut, nevertheless finds all the objects that he needs’”<sup>(1)</sup> (*Shamanism*, p 29–30.)

It seems evident that this paradoxical state in which one is ‘taken over’ by something ‘other’, while still acting in a conscious manner, is, as the term itself implies, fundamentally indistinguishable from those moments of artistic inspiration where spontaneity and painfully acquired skill are fused into a higher synthesis:

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<sup>(1)</sup> Castagne, ‘Magie et exorcisme chez les Kazak-Kirghizes et autres peuples turcs orientaux’, *Revue des études islamiques*, Paris 1930).

“We all know well enough what inspiration is... We can easily recognise it by that total possession of our mind which, at rare intervals, prevents our being, for every problem posed, the plaything of one rational solution rather than some other equally rational solution, by that sort of short circuit it creates between a given idea and a respondent idea.. Just as in the physical world, a short circuit occurs when the two ‘poles’ of a machine are joined by a conductor of little or no resistance. In poetry and in painting, Surrealism has done everything it can and more to increase these short circuits. It believes, and it will never believe in anything more wholeheartedly, in reproducing artificially this ideal moment when man, in the grips of a particular emotion, is suddenly seized by this something ‘stronger than himself which projects him, in self-defence, into immortality.” (Breton, ‘Second Manifesto of Surrealism’, *MOS* pp 161–2)

And indeed, it has become evident that the shaman is the prototype of the poet; when he enters the inspired state, ordinary speech gives way to song, but it is a song that comes from the very depths of his being. As a Gitksan Indian shaman, Isaac Tens put it:

“While I remained in this state, I began to sing. A chant was coming out of me without my being able to do anything to stop it. Many things appeared to me presently: huge birds and animals...these were visible only to me, not to others in my house. Such visions happen when a man is about to become a shaman; they occur of their own accord. The songs force themselves out complete without any attempt to compose them.” (Marius Barbeau, *Medicine Men of the Pacific Coast*. Ottawa 1958, cited in Joan Halifax, *Shamanic Voices*. London 1980, p 33)

It is not only the way these songs of power emerge that corresponds to the authentically poetical spirit; any examination of these songs reveals that their content is very far from being an incoherent series of grunts and cries; more often they are made up of verses and words of a profoundly human and poetical character.

At the same time, the significance of inspiration is not limited to the restrictive categories of what modern bourgeois culture defines as ‘art’. Breton’s definition already takes us beyond these categories and connects up with a whole number of ‘mystical’ traditions. Zen Buddhism in particular has emphasised the need to attain a state of ‘no mind’ in which one has leapt beyond the dilemmas of discursive thought and reached a kind of controlled spontaneity in which there is no room for hesitation about what course of action to take. This notion is expressed with admirable directness by Ummon:

“Wien walking just walk  
When sitting just sit  
Above all, don’t wobble”

Closely related to this is the approach taken in the eastern martial arts, in which the mastery of endlessly repeated postures opens the door to a tremendous outflow of energy in which the



protagonist acts without a moment's doubt and is capable of an extraordinary mobilisation of power (it should be remembered too that many of these postures reproduce animal movements).

But one of the most lucid descriptions of the inspired state is contained in a passage written by Trotsky in his autobiography. This passage has the advantage both of showing that the inspired state can manifest itself at the level of mass social action, and of providing a rigorous theoretical framework for analysing such states. In describing the halcyon days of the revolution, just after October 1917, Trotsky writes:

“Marxism considers itself the conscious expression of the unconscious historical process. But the ‘unconscious’ process, in the historico-philosophical sense of the term — not the psychological — coincides with its conscious expression only at its highest point, when the masses, by sheer elemental pressure, break through the social routine and give victorious expression to the deeper needs of historical development. And at such moments the highest theoretical consciousness of the epoch merges with the immediate action of those oppressed masses who are furthest away from theory. The creative union of the conscious with the unconscious is what one usually calls ‘inspiration’. Revolution is the inspired frenzy of history.

Every real writer blows creative moments, when something stronger than himself is guiding his hand; every real orator experiences moments when someone stronger than the self of his everyday existence speaks through him. This is ‘inspiration’. It derives from the highest creative effort of all one's forces. The unconscious rises from its deep wells and bends the conscious mind to its will, merging with it in some greater synthesis.

The utmost spiritual vigour likewise infuses at times all personal activity connected with the movement of the masses. This was true for the leaders in the October days. The hidden strength of the organism, its most deeply rooted instincts, its power of scent inherited from animal forebears — all these rose and broke through the psychic routine to join forces with the higher historico-philosophical abstractions in the service of the revolution. Both these processes, affecting the individual and the mass, were based on the union of the conscious with the unconscious: the union of instinct — the mainspring of the will — with the higher theories of thought.

Outwardly it did not look very imposing: men went about tired, hungry, and unwashed, with inflamed eyes and unshaven beards. And afterwards none of them could recall much about those most critical days and hours.”

(My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography. London 1975, p 348–9)

On the basis of this framework, we feel no hesitation in concluding that, in its highest form, the shaman's capacity to ‘recapture’ the language of the animals, to allow the unconscious to speak through him, does not represent a simple regression to a sub-human level; rather it is the expression of this “greater synthesis” which combines the untrammelled power of the animals — who are not subject to repression, who in Rilke's phrase have no “unlived lines” to their bodies, and can thus function to the maximum of their potential — with the creative intelligence unique to the human species. Seen in this light, we can better appreciate the significance of the old practice of casting the gods as halfhuman and half-animal, or of the countless myths which speak

of the days what animals were men and men were animals. These traditions testify to man's deep-seated desire to reach a state wherein his advantages over the animals are no longer disadvantages, and where he can enjoy all the fruits of the union of instinct and conscious thought.

A monk asked Master  
Joshu, DOES A DOG  
HAVE BUDDHA-NATURE:

Joshu answered,  
MU!



## The Lost Art of Flying

Thus far, we have attempted to establish the shaman's credentials as a poet; indeed, as the original poet, whose inspired songs of power deserve an honoured place in the history of mankind's artistic creativity.

But for primitive man, 'art' is not a separate sphere, something to be contemplated passively by a multitude excluded from its innermost secrets: it is part of the collective life and labour of the whole tribe. And no more is it separate in its functions: it is indissolubly bound up with magic and the primitive's never-aiding quest to alter into contact with the hidden realm of the archetypal powers. And the shaman is nothing if he is not a master of magical power, a point of contact between the world of everyday reality and the mysterious dimensions that lie beyond it.

It's perfectly true that some of the shaman's 'powers' — such as the skill and stamina required in some of the classic shamanic dances — are simply expressions of highly developed physical and artistic capacities. The same can be said of more directly 'magical' skills such as ventriloquism, sleight of hand, etc ... all of which are the stock-in-trade of today's stage magicians, even if the context and meaning of these skills has changed completely. And even the 'mastery of fire' and insensitivity to pain manifested by many shamans can to some degree at least be explained with reference to known anatomical properties of the human body.

But as the Eskimo shaman Igjugaijuk put it, these skills are far from being essential to shamanism:

“On my travels I have sometimes been present among the saltwater dwellers, for instance among the coast people at Utkuhigjalik...these angatkut (shamans) never seemed trustworthy to me. It always appeared to me that these saltwater angatkut attached more weight to tricks that would astonish the audience, when they jumped about the floor and lisped till sorts of absurdities and lies in their so-called spirit language; to me all this seemed only amusing and as something that would impress the ignorant. A real shaman does not jump about the floor and do tricks, nor does he seek by the aid of darkness, by putting out the lamps, to make the minds of his neighbours uneasy. For myself, I do not think I know much, but I do not think that wisdom or knowledge about things that are hidden can be sought in that manner.” (Rasmussen, *Iglulik Eskimo*. p54f)

For a man or a woman to become a true shaman, there has to be a qualitative breakthrough to the realm of “hidden things”, an acquisition of powers beyond the reach of the outward senses. The Iglulik shaman Aua gave a moving and vivid description of this breakthrough:

“Then I sought solitude, and here I soon became very melancholy. I would sometimes fail to weeping, and feel unhappy without knowing why. Then, for no reason, all would suddenly be changed, and I felt a great, inexplicable joy, a joy so powerful that I could not restrain it, but had to break into song, a mighty song, with only room for the one word: joy, joy! and I had to use the full strength of my voice. And then in the midst of such a jolt of mysterious and overwhelming delight I became a shaman, not knowing myself how it came about. But I was a shaman. I could see and hear in a totally different way. I had gained my qaumaneq, the shaman-light of brain and body, and this in such a manner that it was not only I who could see through the darkness of life, but the same light also shone out from me, imperceptible to human beings, but visible to all the spirits of earth, sky and sea, and these now came to me and became my helping spirits.

*My first helping spirit was my namesake a little aua fa diminutive woman who lives by the sea shore, ACJ. when it came to me, it was as if the passage and the roof of the house were lifted up, and I felt such a power of vision, that I could see right through the house, in through the earth and up into the sky...”* (Rasmussen, *Iglulik Eskimo*, pp1 18–119).

This passage has been cited in a number of works on shamanism, but it is strikingly similar to a less well-known account by a North American Ojibway shaman, describing his first encounter with the spirits. He says that when he began shamanising in his hut, the walls and roof began to shake. “*7 did not move the hut. It was shaken by the power of the spirits. Nor did I speak with a double tongue like ventriloquise). And I only said to you what the spirits said. Moreover, the spirits themselves spoke. I heard their voices. The top of the hut was filled with voices, it was lit up by a clear shining light, and heaven was opened up before my eyes and extensive (earthly) lands. I could see far about me and thought I could recognise the most remote things.*” (J Kohl, *Kitchi-Gama oder Eizahlungen*

von Obem See. Bremen 1859, Vol H, p 76, quoted in Arbman, *Ecstasy or the Religious Trance, in the Experience of the Ecstasies and from the Psychological Point of View*. Uppsala, 1963–70, Vol I, p 303). In both cases, the shaman's 'graduation', his encounter with the world of the spirits, involves the acquisition of supernormal powers: clairvoyance, x-ray vision, the 'mystical light' which enables him to see things that are concealed from the ordinary consciousness.

But the most characteristic of all the shaman's powers is the ability to 'fly': to project his consciousness 'outside' of his body, to engage in spirit-flights either across the familiar earthly landscape or to die otherworldly realms of heaven and hell. This is the true 'ecstasis', the being 'beside oneself; it is this above all which gives the shaman access to the realms of myth, to the archetypal secrets of the world.

It is impossible, in the limits of this text, to convey very much of the flavour of these journeys into the beyond. Here in particular there is no substitute for consulting the ethnological sources themselves, although there are in fact comparatively few direct accounts of these 'trips' by the shamans in their own words. One of the most complete is that given by the Oglala Sioux shaman Black Elk in the book *Black Elk Speaks*, which he narrated to John Neihardt in 1931. This book, which is also a tragic account of the last great days of the American Indian culture, centres round the 'Great Vision' vouchsafed to Black Elk when he was only nine, but which moulded the rest of his life. We will not even attempt to present this experience, which involved a flight to the realm of the archetypal powers of the world, a revelation of his people's destiny, and a 'mystical' climax at the very centre of the universe. Instead we will restrict ourselves to the more compact account he gives of a 'soul-flight' that occurred when he was participating in the millenarian Ghost Dance movement which swept through the Indian tribes at the end of the last century.

"Then we began dancing, and most of the people wailed and cried as they danced, holding hands in a circle; but some of them laughed with happiness. Now and then some one would fall down like dead, and others would go staggering around and panting before they would fall. While they were lying there like dead they were having visions, and we kept on dancing and singing, and many were crying for the old way of living and that the old religion might be with them again.

After a while I began to feel very queer. First, my legs seemed to be full of ants. I was dancing with my eyes closed, as the others did. Suddenly it seemed that I was swinging off the ground and not touching it any longer, the queer feeling came up from my legs and was in my heart now. It seemed I would glide forward like a swing, and then glide back again in longer and longer swoops. There was no fear with this, just a growing happiness.

I must have fallen down, but I felt as though I had fallen off a swing when it was going forward, and I was floating head first through the air. My arms were stretched out, and all I saw at first was a single eagle feather right in front of me. Then the feather was a spotted eagle dancing on ahead of me with his wings fluttering, and he was making the shrill whistle that is his. My body did not move at all, but I looked ahead and floated fast toward where I looked.

There was a ridge right in front of me, and I thought I was going to run into it, but I went right over it. On the other side of the ridge I could see a beautiful land where many, many people were camping in a great circle. I could see that they were happy

and had plenty. Everywhere there were drying racks full of meat. The air was clear and beautiful with a living light that was everywhere...

I floated over the teepees and began to come down feet first at the centre of the hoop where I could see a beautiful tree all green and full of flowers. When I touched the ground, two men were coming toward me, and they wore holy shirts made and pained in a certain way. They came to me and said: 'It is not yet time to see your father, who is happy. You have work to do. We will give you something that you shall carry back to your people, and with it they shall come to see their loved ones'.

I knew it was the way their holy shirts were made that they warned me to take back. They told me to return at once, and then I was out in the air again, floating fast as before. When I came right over the dancing place, the people were still dancing, but it seemed that they were not making any sound...

Then I fell back into my body, and as I did this I heard voices all around and above me, and I was sitting on the ground..." (*Black Elk Speaks*. University of Nebraska, 1972, p204-6)

Later on, Black Elk has a second ecstasy during the Ghost Dance; this time, he traverses a region of tormented souls as well as returning to the paradisaical country and the holy tree, where he encounters a being who seems to be a manifestation of the Great Spirit himself.

Thus the shaman, by achieving the ecstatic state, enters directly into the geography of the sacred myths; he is admitted into a new dimension of existence, another world which, for Black Elk and no doubt for all his fellow shamans, is in many ways more real, more intense, more alive than the everyday world: as Black Elk put it, when a ceremony modelled on his Great Vision gave him a brief glimpse of that realm: "*I looked about me and could see that what we then were doing was like a shadow cast upon the earth from yonder vision in the heavens, so bright it was and clear. I knew the real was yonder and the darkened dream of it was here.*" (ibid, p 142)

This same sense of entering, while still awake, into a world of archetypal reality, is also conveyed by an account which Eliade chose to reproduce at length in his *Shamanism*, precisely because of the astonishing richness of its mythopoetic imagery. We reproduce it here in Eliade's own summary:

"A A Popov gives the following account concerning a shaman of the Avam Samoyed. Sick with smallpox, the future shaman remained unconscious for three days and so nearly dead that on the third day he was almost buried. His initiation took place during this time. He remembered having been carried into the middle of a sea. There he heard his Sickness (that is, smallpox) speak, saying to him: 'From the Lords of the Water you will receive the gift of shamanizing. Your name as a shaman will be *Huottarie* (Diver)'. Then the Sickness troubled the water of the sea. The candidate came out and climbed a mountain. There he met a naked woman and began to suckle at her breast. The woman, who was probably the Lady of the Water, said to him: 'You are my child; that is why I let you suckle at my breast. You will meet many hardships and be greatly wearied'. The husband of the Lady of the Water, the Lord of the Underworld, then gave him two guides, an ermine and a mouse, to lead him to the underworld. When they came to a high place, the guides showed him seven

tents with tom roofs. He entered the first and there found the inhabitants of the underworld and the men of the Great Sickness (syphilis). These men tore out his heart and threw it into a pot. In other tents he met the Lord of Madness and the lords of all the nervous disorders, as well as the evil shamans. Thus he learned the various diseases that torment mankind (that is, he learned to know and cure them).

Still preceded by his guides, the candidate then came to the Land of the Shamanesses, who strengthened his throat and his voice. He was then carried to the shores of the Nine Seas. In the middle of one of them was an island, and in the middle of the island a young birch tree rose to the sky. It was the Tree of the Lord of the Earth. Beside it grew nine herbs, the ancestors of all the plants on earth. The tree was surrounded by seas, and in each of these swam a species of bird with its young. There were several kinds of ducks, a swan, and a sparrow-hawk. The candidate visited all these seas; some of them were salt, others so hot he could not go near the shore. After visiting the seas, the candidate raised his head and, in the top of the tree, saw men of various nations: Tavgi Samoyed, Russians, Dolgan Yakut and Tungus. He heard voices: 'It has been decided that you shall have a drum (that is, the body of a drum) from the branches of this tree'. He began to fry with the birds of the seas. As he left the shore, the Lord of the Tree called to him: 'My branch has just fallen; take it and make a drum of it that will serve you all your life'. The branch had three forks, and the Lord of the Tree bade him make three drums from it, to be kept by three women, each drum being for a special ceremony — the first for shamanizing women in childbirth, the second for curing the sick, the third for finding men lost in the snow.

The Lord of the Tree also gave branches to all the men who were in the top of the tree. But, appearing from the tree up to the chest in human form, he added: 'One branch only I give not to the shamans, for I keep it for the rest of mankind. They can make dwellings from it and so use it for their needs. I am the Tree that gives life to all men'. Gasping the branch, the candidate was ready to resume his flight when again he heard a human voice, this time revealing to him the medicinal virtues of the seven plants and giving him certain instructions concerning the art of shamanizing. But, the voice added, he must marry three women (which in fact, he later did by marrying three orphan girls whom he had cured of smallpox).

After that he came to an endless sea and there he found trees and seven stones. The stones spoke to him one after the other. The first had teeth like bears' teeth and a basket-shaped cavity, and it revealed to him that it was the earth's holding-stone; it pressed on the fields with its weight, so that they should not be carried away by the wind. The second served to melt iron. He remained with these stones for seven days and so learned how they could be of use to men.

Then his two guides, the ermine and the mouse, led him to a high, rounded mountain. He saw an opening before him and entered a bright cave, covered with mirrors, in the middle of which there was something like a fire. He saw two women, naked but covered with hair, like reindeer. Then he saw that there was no fire burning but that the light came from above, through an opening. One of the women told him that she was pregnant and would give birth to two reindeer; one would be the sacrificial

animal of the Dolgan and the Evenki, the other that of the Tavgi. She also gave him a hair, which was to be useful to him when he shamanized for reindeer. The other woman also gave birth to two reindeer, symbols of the animals that would aid man in all his works and also supply his food. The cave had two openings, toward the north and toward the south; through each of them the young women sent a reindeer to serve the forest people (Dolgan and Evenki). The second woman, too, gave him a hair. When he shamanizes, he mentally turns towards the cave.

Then the candidate came to a desert and saw a distant mountain. After three days' travel he reached it, entered an opening, and came upon a naked man working a bellows. On the fire was a cauldron 'as big as half the earth'. The naked man saw him and caught him with a huge pair of tongs. The novice had time to think 'I am dead!' The man cut off his head, chopped his body into bits, and put everything in the cauldron. Then he boiled his body for three years. There were also three anvils, and the naked man forged the candidate's head on the third, which was the one on which the best shamans were forged. Then he threw the head into one of the three pots that stood there, the one in which the water was the coldest. He now revealed to the candidate that, when he was called to cure someone, if the water in the ritual pot was very hot, it would be useless to shamanize, for the man was already lost; if the water was warm, he was sick but would recover; cold water denoted a healthy man.

The blacksmith then fished the candidate's bones out of a river, in which they were floating, put them together, and covered them with flesh again. He counted them and told him that he had three too many; he was therefore to procure three shaman's costumes. He forged his head and taught him how to read the letters that are inside it. He changed his eyes; and that is why, when he shamanizes, he does not see with his bodily eyes but with these mystical eyes. He pierced his ears, making him able to understand the language of plants. Then the candidate found himself on the summit of a mountain, and finally he woke in the yurt, among his family. Now he can sing and shamanize indefinitely, without ever growing tired." (Shamanism. pp38-42, citing Popov, Tavgtstsv. Materialy *do* etnografi avamskikh i vedeyevskikh tavgtstsev. Moscow and Leningrad, 1936, pp84f)

It would take a whole treatise in itself to uncover and analyse the profound symbolism contained in this account, although many of the themes — the Tree of life, the centre of the world, dismemberment and I rememberment', etc — have already been encountered in this essay. But what leaps out at the reader from this account is a powerful sense of a 'visit' to other dimensions of time and space: in the shaman's journey, not only do 'years' pass during the course of a three-day trance, bringing to mind the supernatural lapses of time associated with Celtic and other stories of visits to fairyland, but it is also clear that the shaman has in a sense become contemporary with the original mythical time when the first great gifts are given to the human race. Likewise, the shaman has entered a spatial geography that is specifically other than that of the earth; or rather, it is a kind of archetypal geography, a celestial model of the world we know.

The problem posed by experiences of this kind is that they do not fit into the categories of consciousness generally accepted by contemporary psychology. It would be a mistake to explain

them as no more than very intense dreams. To begin with the shamans themselves sometimes clearly state that these flights are not the same as the ordinary dreaming state, since the latter entirely lack the condition of self-awareness which exists in the visionary state (cf Black Elk Speaks, p 116; Arbman, Ecstasy, vol I, pp592f), and as Arbman argues, the very capacity of the shamans to recall their visions in such extraordinary detail itself militates against assimilating them with ordinary dreams (op cit, p595-7). There again, a number of the shamanic ecstasies, for example Black Elk's spirit-flight over the Atlantic ocean from an unhappy exile in Paris to his own village in the USA, don't involve any disappearance of the 'normal' external world, which is a basic characteristic of dreams; here again Arbman considers this to be an argument against reducing the ecstatic experience to the simple dream state (ibid).

It is certainly the case that all these shamanic visions are heavily overlaid with a symbolic content which implies that the 'alternative reality' they enter into is deeply moulded by dream-like phenomena, that whatever objective reality they may perceive in their visionary flights, it is perceived through a veil of dream and myth; we will return to the 'philosophical' significance of this later. But what finally speaks against the argument that the shamanic ecstasy is, in Black Elk's words "just a queer dream after all" (p 116) is the body of evidence deriving from the surprisingly large number of people, who, most often without warning, and in a context which is as 'modern' and as 'secular' as you could wish, have gone through so-called 'out-of-body-experiences' which reproduce, often in astounding detail, the classical phenomena of the shamanic ecstasy. Holger Kalweit (*Dreamtime mid Inner Space*) has drawn attention to a number of these parallels; he specifically cites the experience of Black Elk which we have ourselves used, because it gives a detailed, first hand description of the physiological and subjective aspects of the out-of-body state, containing many direct analogies with more 'modern' accounts (p37). My own B. Litt thesis (*The Small Grey Bird, a study of forms and patterns in shamanism and ecstatic experience*. Oxford 1976) goes into these parallels in considerable detail. Here we will only briefly mention the main ones: 'modern' out-of-body experiences, like those of the old-time shamans, are most often connected to extremes of suffering and crisis — most frequently they are described by people who have been on the very edge of death. They frequently involve sudden explosions of the 'mystic light' and the acquisition of supernormal mental capacities: clairvoyance, x-ray vision, telepathy; they can include visits to paradisaal and infernal regions, and 'mystical' revelations about the archetypal order of the cosmos. As with the shamans, those who have experienced such states are usually emphatic that they cannot be dismissed as mere dreams, because during them their self-awareness remains as lucid as ever, indeed is often felt to be more lucid than usual. Some exceptional individuals, who seem to have been able to enter the 'ecsomatic' state at will, have even attempted to categorise the different levels of reality encountered in these states; Whiteman, for example, points out that very often the 'obe' will be strongly tinged with dream material or may simply relapse into an ordinary dream, but this in itself involves a careful distinction between ordinary dreaming and the ecstatic state, which he held to be perfectly objective (Whiteman *The Mystical Life*. London 1961, ppl31-2).

The literature on out-of-the-body experience is immense in itself; here we will give only one example of a 'modern' account. It is quite a well known one, and deservedly so, because it is written with great care and attention to detail, while at the same time containing themes which are unmistakably central to the classical shamanic ecstasy. It is the case related by Sir Auckland Geddes before the Royal Medical Society of Edinburgh, in February 1937. The experience may have been that of a friend, or it may have been that of Lord Geddes himself.



“On Saturday, 9 November, a few minutes after midnight, I began to feel very ill, and by two o’clock was definitely suffering from acute gastro-enteritis, which kept me vomiting and purging until about eight o’clock. By ten o’clock I had developed all the symptoms of very acute poisoning, intense gastro-intestinal pain, diarrhoea, pulse and respiration becoming quite impossible to count. I wanted to ring for assistance, but found I could not, and so placidly gave up the attempt.

I realized I was very ill and quickly reviewed my whole financial position; thereafter at no time did my consciousness appear to me to be in any way dimmed, but I suddenly realised that my consciousness was separating from another consciousness, which was also ‘me’. For the purpose of description we could call these the A and B consciousness, and throughout what follows the ego attached itself to the A consciousness. The B personality I recognised as belonging to my body.

As my physical condition grew worse and the heart was fibrillating rather than beating, I realized that the B consciousness belonging to the body was beginning to show signs of becoming composite, that is, built up of *consciousness* from the head, the heart, the viscera, etc. These components became more individual, and the B consciousness began to disintegrate, while the A consciousness which was now me, seemed to be altogether *outside of my body, which I could see*.

Gradually I realized that I could see not only my body and the bed in which it was, but everything in the whole house and garden, and then I realized that I was seeing not only *things* at home, but in London and Scotland, in fact wherever my attention was directed... And the explanation which I received (from what source I do not know, but which I found myself calling to myself *my mentor*) was that I was free in a time dimension of space, wherein *now* was equivalent to *here* in the ordinary three-dimensional space of everyday life.

I next realized that my vision included not only things in the ordinary three-dimensional world, but also things in these four or more dimensional places that I was in.

From now on the description is and must be entirely metaphorical, because there are no words which really describe what I saw, or rather, appreciated. Although I had no body I had what appeared to be perfect two-eyed vision, and what I saw can only be described in this way, that I was conscious of a psychic stream flowing with life through time, and this gave me the impression of being visible, and it seemed to me to have a particularly intense iridescence.

I understood from *my mentor* that all our brains are just end-organs projecting as it were from the three-dimensional universe into the psychic stream, and flowing with it into the fourth and fifth dimension. Around each brain, as I saw it, there seemed to be ...a condensation of the psychic stream, which formed in each case as though it were a cloud, only it was not a cloud.

While I was appreciating this, *the mentor*, who was conveying information to me explained that the fourth dimension was in everything existing in the three-dimensional space, and at the same time everything in the three-dimensional space existed in the fourth dimension, and also in the fifth dimension, and I, at the time,

quite clearly understood what was meant; and quite understood how *now* in the fourth-dimensional universe was just the same as *here* in the three-dimensional universe. That is to say, a four-dimensional being was *everywhere* in the *now*. Just as one is *everywhere* in the *here* in a three-dimensional view of things.

I then realized that I myself was a condensation, as it were, in the psychic stream, a sort of cloud that was not a cloud, and the visual impression I had of myself was blue. Gradually I began to recognise people and I saw the psychic condensation attached to many ... and saw quite a number that had very little ... In addition to those just mentioned, I saw T very clearly and she also gave a visual impression of blueness. 'A' gave blue and dark red; 'B' pink; 'D' rather definitely grey-brown 'E' pearly, etc.. Each of these condensations varied from all others in bulk, sharpness of outline, and apparent solidity.

Just as I was beginning to grasp all these, I saw 'A' enter my bedroom. I realized she got a terrible shock and I saw her hurry to the telephone. I saw my doctor leave his patients and come very quickly and heard him say and saw him think, 'He is nearly gone'. I heard him quite clearly speaking to me on the bed, but I was not in touch with the body and could not answer him.

I was really cross when he took a syringe and rapidly injected my body with something which I afterward learned was camphor. As my heart began to beat more strongly, I was drawn back, and I was intensely annoyed, because I was so interested and was just beginning to understand where I was and what I was seeing. I came back into my body, really angry at being pulled back, and once back, all the clarity of vision of anything and everything disappeared, and I was just possessed of a glimmer of consciousness which was suffused with pain.

This ... experience has shown no tendency to fade like a dream would fade ... nor grow or to rationalize itself as a dream would do. I think that the whole thing simply means that but for medical treatment of peculiarly prompt and vigorous kind, I was dead to the three-dimensional world ... Since my return with the injections there has been no repetition...of the experience or the clear understanding that I seemed to have while I was free from the body" (cited by Muldoon and Carrington, *The Phenomena of Astral Projection*. London 1969, pp 72-74).

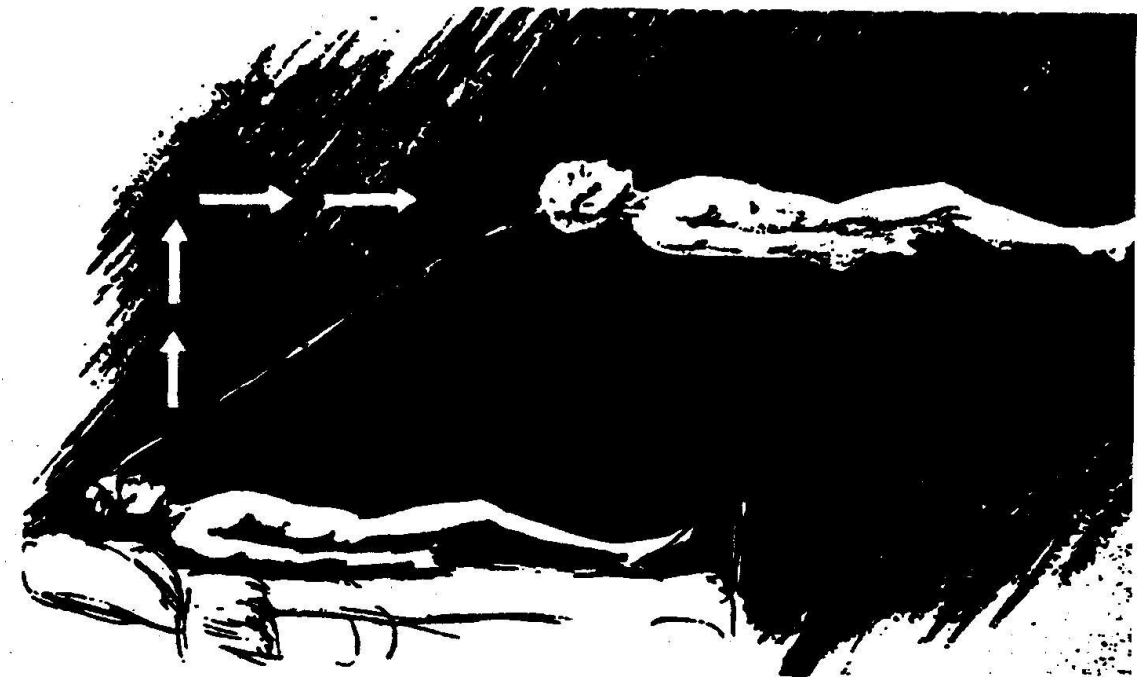
A shaman might have talked about 'spirit guides' rather than a 'mentor', or about the 'world of the dead' rather than the 'fourth dimension'. But there can be little doubt that the essential content of the experience is the same. Shamanism has undoubtedly gone into decline as a coherent social practice in modern bourgeois society; but, buried deep under all the 'advances' of rationalism and the dead weight of official religion, the old capacity for the shamanic vision remains, ready to reassert itself in certain boundary situations, at the uncomfortable extremes of human existence. For us, the problem no longer lies in establishing the basic unity between the shamanic soul-flight and the latter-day accounts of 'astral projection'. Nor does it lie in recognising that these states, because they do not involve any diminution of 'rational' self-awareness, are to be analysed not as a particular kind of dream but as an authentic state of consciousness in their own right. For us, the problem isn't in proving that this is a real phenomenon, but in integrating this phenomenon into a coherent theoretical outlook which is opposed not only to the vulgar

materialism that simply dismisses or ignores things that don't fit into its limited schema, but also to those ideologists who are only too pleased to seize on experiences of this kind to provide ammunition for new forms of idealism, new dualisms of matter and spirit — as is the case, for example, with Holger Kalweit, who simply uses the shamanic ecstasy to reassert the age-old belief in a discarnate soul (see *Dreamtime and Inner Space*, chapter three). In short, the problem for us is to root these fantastic and extraordinary experiences in the solid ground of material reality. And here, once again, we turn to Freud for the beginning of an answer.



## From the Collective Unconscious to the Conscious Collective

Late in life, Freud began to suspect the enormous importance of so-called 'occult' phenomena, and to lose his original dread that investigating them would open the flood-gates of spiritualism and mysticism and so drown the scientific spirit. Although he did not refer to 'out-of-the-body' experiences, he did devote a whole chapter of his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* to the theme of 'Dreams and Occultism,' concentrating particularly on the question of telepathy; and as we shall see, the theoretical framework that he put forward to try to encompass the phe-



nomenon of telepathy will also help us considerably in our efforts to arrive at an understanding of the 'out-of-body-experience'.

In this chapter, Freud notes that there were just too many examples of telepathic phenomena in the dreams of his patients for them to be dismissed as mere coincidence. Instead he tries to draw some general conclusions from these occurrences. First, he notes that "*the state of sleep seems particularly suited for receiving telepathic messages*" (p 66) — an observation that accords with the traditions of shamanism; shamans seeking knowledge of things distant in time or space generally find it necessary to leave behind their 'everyday' consciousness, and enter a state of dream, waking dream or ecstasy (this is surely one of the reasons why telepathy is so hard to 'track down' in the tedious laboratory experiments favoured by the 'respectable' researchers into parapsychology — like the out-of-body experience, it is so often associated with moments of crisis, with boundary situations that grip two or more people in a peculiarly intense way).

Secondly, Freud advances the view that telepathic communication is probably more developed among children and primitive peoples than among the typical 'modern' adult:

"One is led to the suspicion that this is the original, archaic method of communication between individuals and that in the course of phylogenetic evolution it has been replaced by the better method of giving information with the help of signals which are picked up by the sense organs. But the older method might have persisted in the background and still be able to put itself into effect under certain conditions..." (p86).

We will examine the significance of this conclusion later on. Passing to the last general conclusion, it is that far from proving the arguments of idealism, the phenomenon of 'thought transference' implies that thoughts are real entities having a tangible effect in the material world; and that "*psychoanalysis, by inserting the unconscious between what is physical and what was*

previously called 'psychical', has paved the way for the assumption of such processes as telepathy" (p85-6). The unconscious is here presented as the medium through which 'thought' can pass from one individual to another.

Here we have another example of Freud's own words speaking against the vulgarisations that so often accompany his view of the unconscious; in this case, the prejudice that whereas Freud, being a good mechanical materialist, saw the unconscious as something purely individual, a cupboard full of personal skeletons and no more, Jung broke from Freud in order to defend the 'idealist' notion that the unconscious is, at root, a collective unconscious, the common property of all mankind. In fact, elsewhere, Freud explicitly affirms that the "*the content of the unconscious is collective anyhow*" (Moses and Monotheism. London 1939, p 129); but in any case his whole notion of the id (as the reservoir of instinctual drives universal in nature) and of the archaic heritage (all the elements of the psyche that are passed down through man's phylogenetic inheritance) mean nothing at all unless the depths of the unconscious are fundamentally the same for all human beings. Here Jung's definition of the collective unconscious as an "*omnipresent, unchanging, and everywhere identical quality or substratum of the psyche*" (Aion. London 1959, p 7), and thus the common soil for all the universal or archetypal symbols of mankind, does not at all conflict with the Freud who wrote that "*dreams bring to light material which cannot have originated either from the dreamer's adult life or from his forgotten (Midhood. We are obliged to regard it as part of the archaic heritage which a child brings with him into the world, before any experience of his own, influenced by the experience of his ancestors. We find the counterpart of this phylogenetic material in the earliest human legends and in surviving customs ...*" (An Outline of Psychoanalysis. New York, 1969, pp23-4).

Indeed, Freud's concept of the collective unconscious was if anything more 'Lamarckian', more 'idealist', than Jung's: whereas for Jung what was inherited was a tendency or predisposition towards the formation of certain symbolic patterns, for Freud, this collective layer of the psyche was to a large extent made up of actual memory traces of the traumatic experiences of past generations. We will not enter further into this problem here; in any case, the real differences between Jung and Freud lie elsewhere, above all in Jung's failure to understand the crucial significance of the concept of repression. But what we do want to say is that while Jung did indeed embark on a path that took him back to the comforting arms of idealism and religion, there was nothing inherently idealist in the concept of a collective unconscious; and that in fact this concept was absolutely central to Freud's essentially materialist view of man.

The relevance of this to the question of the 'occult' becomes apparent when we turn from the question of a common 'biological' inheritance to a second dimension of the collective unconscious that is invoked by Freud to explain the phenomenon of telepathy: the unconscious as a shared psychic field, as the link between individual minds. Now for Jung, it was perfectly evident that the unconscious, at a certain level, transcended the 'normal' limits of space and time, and was thus the medium through which an 'occult' phenomenon like telepathy took place. But we have also seen that Freud came to an identical position. That is why Norman O Brown is in perfect continuity with Freud's thought when he affirms, in Love's Body, that:

"The unconscious, then is not a closet full of skeletons in the private house of the individual mind; it is not even, finally, a cave full of dreams and ghosts in which, like Plato's prisoners, most of us spend most of our lives —

The unconscious is rather that immortal sea which brought us hither, intimations of which are given in moments of 'oceanic feeling'; one sea of energy or instinct; embracing all mankind, without distinction of race, language, or culture, and embracing all the generations of Adam, past present and future, in one phylogenetic inheritance, in one mystical or symbolical body". (pp 88–9)

In other words, the unconscious is nothing less than the movement of the entire cosmos. But here the term 'unconscious' begins to lose its precision. What we are talking about, in effect, is what Ernst Bloch called the Not Yet Conscious; the movement towards the self-awareness of nature; in Marx's terms, "*nature developing into man*" (EPM, p 143). And here we can begin to appreciate the profound subtlety of the Aborigine concept of the Dreaming. We have seen that Jung identified the Dreaming with the collective unconscious; but if in fact the collective unconscious is nature itself, then it would make more sense to turn the equation the other way round, and say that the collective unconscious is another word for the Dreaming. For the world, nature, is neither unconscious nor yet conscious of itself; and the connecting point between, on the one hand, true unconsciousness, the dreamless sleep of inorganic matter or life at its most primitive stage, and on the other hand the self-aware, waking state, is precisely the dream. This problematic was a central theme of Hindu philosophy, notably in the Mandukya Upanisad, but it was also given a more scientific rendition in the psychoanalytical anthropology of Geza Roheim, who concluded that the dream is a transitional state between sleep and waking; it is, as Freud argues in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the sleeping ego's defence against waking up, but at the same time it has another, more 'progressive' side, as a transition towards waking up. Considered in its cosmic dimension the dream, or the Dreaming, is an accurate description of a cosmic process which is subjectively split up into an immeasurable number of individual consciousnesses but which at a deeper level is groping towards an awareness of itself as a unified totality. To put it more simply, the whole universe is dreaming, is the Dreaming; it is one vast collective dream. Not in the old idealist and solipsist sense, but in the dynamic and materialist sense of a movement from the unconscious to the conscious, from being to conscious being. Is this not also the occulted significance of the haunting lines that Marx wrote to Ruge in 1843: "...*the world has long dreamed of something of which it needs only to become conscious for it to possess it in reality*"? (quoted from Marx, *Early Writings*. London 1975, p209).

To return to our main theme. Considered in the light of the above, the dream presents this paradox: it is both the withdrawal of the individual ego into a private, self-enclosed universe, and at the same time, the first step of the ego towards a reality where psychic life is no longer an individual, but a shared, a collective experience. It is the door that leads to the collective psyche of "nature developing into man". Thus, the shaman or the mystic who is able to 'enter the dream awake' inevitably encounters 'powers' such as telepathy, because he has penetrated to a level of being which is beyond the individual ego; he has become directly aware of this collective psychic reality. This makes it easier to understand why, when asked to explain phenomena such as telepathy, the Aborigines of Australia simply refer to the Dreaming; the Dreaming is precisely that level of reality where the individual ego merges into something greater than itself, some vast 'psychic stream' which far from being detached from the real movement of nature, expresses the tendency for that movement to make the qualitative leap towards a collective self-awareness.

It is also significant that Freud considered telepathy to be the original, archaic method of communication, since this enables us to pose the question historically, and concurs with what

we have already said about the historical decline of ecstasy. In primitive times, repression is less advanced and the wall between the conscious and the unconscious is less thick; by the same token, when man still lived in a tightly-knit primordial community, when man's 'species life', his 'gemeinwesen' had not been dissolved into the war of each against all that characterises civil (ie, bourgeois) society, the connection between minds was far more intimate than in later, more 'civilised' times. What is more, since the productive forces were but little developed, there was no doubt a genuine reliance on such 'occult' forms of communication, especially to deal with situations of extreme crisis (which of course is when the shamans would be called in). Magic, in short, had a real practical use value for primitive man, since although it is by no means as reliable as other methods of communication, it was often the only thing that was available. This is how an Australian Aborigine shaman, Guboo Ted Thomas, puts it: *"We have no phones to ring people up, no wireless. We do it with our minds. We send messages from mountain to mountain, from mountain to mountain, thousands of miles away. That's how we keep in touch with our people."*

Richard Grossinger, the author of the article from which this is taken, comments that for Guboo, *"the Dreaming is not just a passive myth-account of the creation of dungs and the journeys of the ancestors (as early anthropologists reported); it is a living telepathic experience, a meditation with a long training and focusing a tremendous power...The Dreaming is, in fact, the same as telepathy. It is precisely through moving into an experience of the Dream Time that telepathic communication becomes possible, for one is then outside space and time"*. And he adds that *"I found it a shocking claim, with monumental implications. Paranormal episodes have been reported and even well documented for decades, but Guboo was saying that this was an ordinary everyday ability of the Aborigine and was used as mundanely as a telephone"*. ('Aboriginal Elder Speaks in Ojai', in *Planetary Mysteries*, edited by Richard Grossinger, Berkely, 1986)

And no doubt all this will be considered no less shocking, indeed it will be denounced as heresy and a 'concession to mysticism', by any number of hard-headed 'materialists', but it wouldn't hurt these 'Comrades Feet-on-the-Ground' to reflect on what it is that really separates materialism from idealism. In fact, vulgar materialism and idealism both share a common characteristic when it comes to the question of consciousness: consciousness is seen by both as a thing rather than as a process. For the former, consciousness is a 'thing' that resides uniquely in the brain, ergo communication 'between' brains is impossible; for the latter, telepathy and similar phenomena are possible because consciousness is another kind of thing, a detachable spirit-thing that can leave the body and float about. But both these views conflict with the dialectically materialist view which sees that *"consciousness is, from the very beginning, a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all"* (Marx, *German Ideology*, p 51); it is in fact a collective reality, a material force. Not something locked up in the brain of each individual, but a qualitative transformation of reality, a process shared and produced by the practical activity of millions of human beings. Seen from this point of view, and connected to Freud's very material conception of a collective unconscious, telepathy becomes a mere commonplace, just as it was for primitive man.

Turning now to the question of the 'out-of-the-body experience', it becomes clearer that when consciousness appears to 'leave' the body, it is actually only grasping that it was never limited to the body of the individual but is the product of a far wider movement, that it already functions in more than the three (or four) dimensions of our 'normal' waking state. This is surely what Lord Geddes was trying to describe in the account reproduced above.

This also explains why, very often, the 'obe' itself is merely a transition to the fully-fledged 'mystical' experience, in which the ego gives up the fiction of being an absolute unit and realises that it is part of the whole cosmos. Thus, Black Elk's Great Vision reaches its culmination on a mountain which symbolises the very centre of the world, and it is here that "*I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being*" (Black Elk Speaks, p 36).

Two accounts from a more 'modern' context also contain this transition from the visionary flight to the 'mystical' climax at the 'centre' of the universe. Edward Maitland writes that following a period of meditation,

"I found myself traversing a succession of spheres or belts... the impression being that of mounting a vast ladder stretching from the circumference towards the centre of a system, which was at once my own system, the solar system, and the universal system, the three systems being at once diverse and identical...I succeeded in polarising the whole of the convergent rays of my consciousness into the desired focus. And at the same instant, as if through the sudden ignition of the rays thus fused into a unity, I found myself confronted with a glory of unspeakable whiteness and brightness, arid of a lustre so intense as well nigh to beat me back".

But Maitland, like the trained initiate in the Tibetan Book of the Dead who has learned not to flee in terror from the Clear Light of the Void, forces himself onwards, and finally attains a kind of coincidentia oppositorum, "*the unmanifest made manifest, the unindividuate individuate, God as the Lord... Feminine as well as Masculine, Mother as well as Father...*" (Edward Maitland, Anna Kingsford. her Life. Letters. Diary and Work. London 1896, pp 129f).

The experience that prompted Warner Allen to write The Timeless Moment has an almost identical symbolic structure to Maitland's. During a few seconds of a Beethoven Sonata he felt himself drawn through the centre of a shining circle, as though through a tunnel of light which led him to the "Heart of the Self", a state of light, knowledge and unity, beyond time, where "*the peace that passes all understanding and the pulsating energy are one in the centre...where all opposites are reconciled.*" (London 1946, p33)

We have already noted that, for Brown, the 'oceanic feeling' is a revelation of the true nature and scope of the unconscious; in other words, the 'mystical' feeling of becoming one with the entire universe is, in its purest form, a sudden shift away from the standpoint of the atomised individual to the point of view of the entire cosmic movement — a 'timeless moment' in which the universe is experienced in the act of waking up and becoming aware of itself. This is why Buddhist tradition, for example, defines the Buddha as the "awakened one": he has woken from die cosmic dream, gone beyond die dreaming state of a universe which has not yet realised its unity, and shifted permanently onto a level of consciousness where this unity is a living reality; and for this reason he has transcended the inevitable (and necessary) restlessness and dissatisfaction that drives the individual parts of the cosmic movement. This is why die Buddhist notion of Nirvana, the 'blowing out of the passions', should not be seen in a negative light; if the restlessness of the individual parts is a fundamental characteristic of the whole evolutionary process, then Nirvana could be construed as the birth of a new kind of species which has transcended this process and, no doubt (since all is change and movement), embarked upon a new one.



Such views of the 'awakened state' are inimical both to the idealist view which regards the mystical experience as an etherial contact between the soul and an external deity, and to the reductionist view which can only see Nirvana as a regression to pure unconsciousness and even death. The 'enlightened' state which frees the ego from the illusion of its absolutely distinct and separate nature is, on the contrary, a glimpse of the possible future of the whole human species, indeed, of all sentient beings. And at the same time, it is a recognition of a real connection, a real underlying unity that already exists, but which is buried in what we call the unconscious.

And since it is a recognition of something that already exists, or which exists at some level beyond the rigid limitations of clock time, it is no surprise how often these states have the quality of the restoration of a Tost revelation\*. Just as dreams of flight so often provide the dreamer with a strange sense of familiarity, as though he is simply remembering a lost art, those who have had the 'out-of-body' experience not infrequently describe the state as a return *"to my true home which I had always known,"* (R. Johnson, *The Watcher on the Hills*. London 1959, pp82-3), or comment that *"it was as if part of me had always known it would be like that"* (Crookall, *The Study and Practice of Astral Projection*. London 1961, p 181). The same applies to the 'mystical' state proper. As Warner Allen puts it, the secret of life is *"too simple — I always knew it — it is remembering an old forgotten secret — like coming home"* (op cit, p31).

For idealism, such statements prove the existence of a realm of Ideas eternally pre-existing the grubby material world; for vulgar materialism, they are no more than descriptions of flashes of infantile self-absorption. But in our view, this theme of a Tost paradise' is the key to a profound truth. It is an immortal symbol pointing to man's true nature as an integral part of cosmic life, a relationship experienced unconsciously in early childhood, but which, grasped by the conscious, self-aware adult, enables the latter to make a qualitative leap onto a new level of being. It is thus not only a remembrance of things past, but a remembrance of that future Sabbath of Eternity which the human species will attain if and when it is able to throw off the muck of the ages and at last take charge of its own destiny.



*'A small grey bird humpty  
awoke out of the mountain'*

AC

## Limits of the Shaman's Vision: Body and Soul Must Unite, the World Must Change

Having affirmed the grandeur of the shaman's vision, and of the 'mystical' traditions that are the offshoots of the shaman's tree, we must return to the myth of the decadence of the shamans in order to understand the limitation of these traditions.

Primitive man, in contrast to the dominant outlooks in many of the 'civilised' cultures, was no gnostic, no ascetic repudiating of the material world. Primitive man's world-view affirmed and embraced the living universe of which he felt himself to be a part, and from which he had no desire to escape. And it was on the basis of this intuitive 'materialism' that he expressed his reservations about an ecstatic experience that was purely spiritual, that only engaged the spirit and not the whole body. But this reservation could only be expressed in a poetic, mythical form; primitive man inevitably lacked the analytical tools to grasp the limitations of his own cultural productions. But from our vantage point, we can see that the myth of the decadence of the shamans, the depreciation of ecstasy, is a reflection of an inherent restriction in primitive man's consciousness of the world, and, at the same time, a confirmation of the necessary and progressive character of the tortuous historical process that leads from the primitive's poetical world-outlook to the spiritually impoverished attitudes of bourgeois modernity. A confirmation, in short, of the historical necessity of alienation. As Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*

"... this complete working-out of the human content appears as a complete emptying-out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing of all limited, one-sided aims as sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end. This is why the childish world of antiquity appears on one side as loftier ..." (p488). But "it will be shown ... that the *most extreme form of alienation* wherein labour appears in the relation of capital and wage labour... is a necessary point of transition — and therefore already contains in *itself*, in a still only inverted form, turned on its head, the dissolution of all *limited presuppositions of production*, and moreover creates and produces the unconditional presuppositions of production, and therewith the full material conditions for the total, universal development of the productive powers of the individual" (p515, *London, 1973*).

In other words, man had to be 'emptied out' by the historical process before he could become full, complete: the communism of archaic times was a primitive communism because it did not permit the "total, universal development of the productive powers of the individual": as we have seen, the "tribe was the boundary for man", the individual was dominated by the collectivity, which in turn was dominated by the struggle for survival.

Thus the unity of the primitive community was in this sense an oppressive, totalitarian unity; but at the same time, it was only a partial unity in terms of the species. 'Die tribal organisation was posited upon the division of mankind into a host of separate units, unconscious of, or even hostile to, each other. The unity of the tribe was predicated upon the disunity of the species, and the latter could not have been overcome without the dissolution of tribal boundaries and the emergence of class society.

Understanding these 'social' limitations of primitive communism also enables us to understand the limits of its highest 'spiritual' creation, the dreamtime. The dream, Freud has taught

us, expresses a deep inner urge towards a fully human life, a life corresponding to the repressed wishes of the species, but it is at the same time a 'substitute gratification', a substitute for real life. It necessarily involves a turning away, a closing off from the real world and the discovery of an inner world. This is true for the 'ordinary' dream and the 'waking dream' of the shaman; even if the latter connects to the dreams of others, enters into the mysterious collective unconscious, the Dreaming, it remains a secret, hidden world separated from the ordinary life of labour and practical consciousness. The limits of the purely spiritual ecstasy are to be found here: unable to transform the world around him, primitive man could only find his wealth within, in dreams, in the sacred myths. When Marx wrote, in the Theses on Feuerbach, that "*social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which mislead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice*" (quoted from Mara and Engels on Religion. New York, 1971, p71), he could have been writing about all the pre-capitalist societies, but the critique applies most precisely to the unchanging archaic and eastern societies, which devoted themselves so thoroughly to mystical practices because of their incapacity to develop the means to change the social and natural conditions in which they found themselves. Primitive man, at some deep level, felt this limitation, and was therefore dissatisfied with reaching paradise in the spirit alone. The bodily attainment of paradise is the equivalent of building heaven on earth, but when the earth cannot be changed, heaven can only be an inner realm, guarded by angels with flaming swords.

Moreover, since this paradise can only be reached in dream, it can only be seen in a veiled form; Freud also teaches us that while dreams are a product of the relaxation of repression, they do not constitute a real transcendence of repression. In dreams the 'censor' still operates and thus hides the truth behind layers of symbols. The dream is a glimpse of a more intense, more fulfilled life, but it is a distorted glimpse; mythical symbols, in other words, both point to reality and conceal it. But primitive man was too immersed in the mythical outlook to be able to separate one function from the other. In that sense he was mystified by the myths, caught up in the dream. It is significant, for example, that the shamanistic ecstasy, with some rare exceptions, does not go beyond the visionary level: the shaman is projected into a world of archetypal revelation, but these revelations are masked by any number of anthropomorphic and theriomorphic symbols. It is only in the more developed cultures that the 'mystical' vision begins to see through these symbols — including the 'God' symbol — and realise their limitations. The highest forms of the mystical tradition — Meister Eckart, Zen Buddhism and some others — are essentially atheistical, having gone beyond all anthropomorphic projections onto the universe. But even these mysticisms remain mystical in the negative sense; all the Buddha's wisdom could not alter the fact that, in his day, and to this day, the conditions of life imposed on the vast majority of mankind simply made it impossible for them to 'work out their salvation with diligence'. For the individual to realise his Buddha-nature — which is just another way of describing the "total, universal development of the productive powers of the individual" — he must live in a social environment which is devoted to that development and not to the needs of a privileged minority; in other words, in a classless, communist society.

In his famous passage on religion in the Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right. Marx writes:

"Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain not so that man will wear the chain without any fantasy of consolation but so that he will shake off the

chain and cull the living flower. The criticism of religion disillusioned man to make him think and act and shape his reality like a man who has been disillusioned and has come to reason, so that he will revolve around himself and therefore around his true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself' (*Marx and Engels on Religion*, p 42).

Historically speaking, this passage can also be taken as a description of the disenchantment of the world brought about by the triumph of capitalist alienation and the destruction of all poetical, mythical, in sum, primitive conceptions of reality. The disillusionment of man is a painful but necessary bridge to man's real centre, his real sun, his true enlightenment, which will have no need of masks or gods or other mediations.

And once again, the revolutionary tendency in psychoanalysis concurs: as Norman O Brown puts it, "*Archaic man must not be idealised by attributing to him the power to abolish time and 'live in a continual present' (Eliade's phrase, AC); no religion of expiation, but only the abolition of guilt, can abolish time. Archaic man experiences guilt, and therefore time; that is why he makes such elaborate efforts, once a year, to deny it*" (LAD. p243). This endless repetition of the archetypal models, 'satisfies' primitive man to the extent that his ego is not yet sufficiently separate from the rest of the tribe to afflict him with the burden of irredeemable guilt. He can find a temporary relief from guilt in the collective expiations carried out in the periodic festivals, and thus begin his life anew. The historical religions already expressed the fact that the burden of guilt was becoming more and more intolerable, because they increasingly rejected the possibility of annulling guilt in the lifetime of the individual, and placed salvation at the very end of the historical process. This process has reached its culmination with 'modern' man, man in bourgeois society, who has been simultaneously saddled with a far greater weight of guilt and unhappiness, cut off as he is from any organic community, and denied the religious consolations which once made the burden of guilt tolerable. But if the ego of modern man is strong enough to bear the unbearable, it is also strong enough to face the fundamental question of repression, guilt and death, and thus to overcome them and begin a new life for the human race." ... *the path to that ultimate reunification of ego and body is not a dissolution but a strengthening of the human ego. The human ego would have to become strong enough to die; and strong enough to set aside guilt. Archaic consciousness was strong enough to recognise a debt of guilt; Christian consciousness is strong enough to recognise that the debt is so great only God can redeem it; modern secular Faustian man is strong enough to live with irredeemable damnation; full psychoanalytical consciousness would be strong enough to cancel the debt by deriving it from infantile fantasy*" (ibid, p255).

From both points of view, marxist and psychoanalytical, the historical process, with its ever-increasing burden of alienation and repression, unhappiness and guilt, is a necessary 'travail', an unavoidable stage in the true birth of mankind. Against all those nostalgic voices who see only 'misery in misery' in today's civilisation, who dream of a return to the simplicities of the remote past, the emergence and development of class society, and of its final avatar, capitalism, is a necessary precondition for that communism of the future that will no longer be based on the subordination of the individual to the community, but that will be, in the words of the Communist Manifesto. "*an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all*"; a communism which is no longer based on the atomisation of the species into tiny units unaware of each others' existence, but on the true *gemeinwesen* of mankind, the true unification of the human species.

## The Secrets of Communism

And what is this 'communism'? Communism, Marx wrote, was the solution to the riddle of history; but we live in an epoch when the true meaning of communism has itself become a riddle, a secret. And yet today, despite all the efforts of the exploiting class, despite all the difficulties encountered by the exploited class in becoming aware of its position in society, these secrets are slowly being uncovered.

For decades, we have been informed that communism existed in the regimes of the east, in Russia, China, Albania and the rest; that communism means an omnipresent state apparatus, ferocious levels of exploitation, repression of the slightest breath of dissent. Or else, more sophisticated voices, those of the 'left', came up with a more subtle version of the same lie: these regimes are not yet communist of course; they are 'socialist' countries or 'workers' states' with bureaucratic deformations, engaged in a 'transition' towards genuine communism.

This lie, in its various forms, has been the greatest enemy of marxism, of communism and the socialist revolution this century. It has helped to bury the revolutionary traditions of the working class under an immense dung-heap of mystifications, it has turned millions and millions of proletarians away from the very idea of challenging capitalism and of changing society. 'If that's communism, let's stick with capitalism': no wonder the bourgeoisie all over the world has insisted so relentlessly, so unerringly that the Stalinist regimes really are communist. And today, as these regimes slide into bankruptcy and chaos under the pressure of the world economic crisis, as the Russian imperialist bloc falls to pieces before our eyes, the old lie is given a new gloss by all the propaganda which shrieks at us that 'communism has failed', that 'democratic capitalism' is the only possible form of social organisation now and forever, amen.

But we are no longer living in the dark depths of the counter-revolution which descended on the proletariat like a punishment for having dared to disturb the capitalist order in the revolutionary years after 1917. In the last two decades, the workers' struggle, once dismissed as an anachronism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has once again raised its uncouth head in every country in the world, in the west as well as the east. And with it there has emerged a new generation of revolutionaries who are rediscovering the real meaning of the communist programme, the authentic lessons of working class history. And in this process of rediscovery, the 'secret' of the so-called 'communism' of the eastern countries is being revealed more and more openly: these regimes are (though increasingly they must be referred to in the past tense) capitalist regimes where the basic division in society is still between a class of wage slaves and a small and privileged minority who command their labour power in the interests of accumulating capital. The Stalinist bourgeoisie, which is no less a bourgeoisie for having become fused with the state apparatus, was a product of the failure of the international revolution in the years 1917–23; isolated and alone, the Russia of the workers' soviets and of internationalist Bolshevism could only succumb to an agonising process of internal degeneration and counter-revolution. Against all the distortions peddled by right and left, there is no continuity whatever between the October revolution of 1917 and the monstrous labour-camp regimes of Stalinism.

And as the true nature of the 'communist' regimes becomes less and less of a secret, so the real meaning of communism and the means to achieve it are also becoming less cloudy: communism can only be the result of a world wide proletarian revolution which forcibly overthrows the united states of capitalism; which, on the basis of the international power of the workers' councils, sets about rooting out the essential characteristics of the capitalist economy: wage labour, commodity

production, the division of the globe into nation-states, and the separation of the town from the countryside; and which has as its target the formation of a global association of the producers, a planetary human community where production is geared entirely towards the satisfaction of human needs and desires. This moneyless, stateless, classless society is the one and only version of communism envisaged by Marx and his successors; any other story is just a lie of the counter-revolution.

But what, you may ask at this point, has this got to do with shamanism? To answer this, we have to turn to what is perhaps the best kept of all the secrets of communism: the content of human life in a communist society which is no longer marred by the struggle against the vestiges of the old order, but which has begun to flower on its own bases; in what Marx called the higher stage of communism (and even the stage beyond communism itself, which Marx briefly alludes to in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts). For Marx, contrary to a widely held belief, did not stop at defining communism in purely negative terms, as the abolition of capitalism and the negation of the negation. Particularly in his early work, in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, it is possible to discover a whole treasure-trove of material concerning the positive content of communism. But even in the mature Marx of the *Grundrisse*, we discover this same concern. For Marx it was evident that a truly human society could only be one in which man's most distinctive characteristic as a species — the capacity for conscious productive activity — had ceased to be the curse that it is in class society, and above all under capitalism. That is why Marx attempts to outline the main features of the free creative activity that will replace alienated labour in a communist society:

“This process is then both discipline, as regards the *human* being in the process of becoming; and at the same time, practice, experimental science, materially creative and objectifying science, as regards the human being who has become, in whose head exists the accumulated knowledge of society. For both, in so far as labour requires practical hands and free bodily movement, as in agriculture, at the same time exercise” (*Grundrisse*, p 712).

But Marx does not stop here, at this fusion of practical bodily exercise and scientific/theoretical insight. From the standpoint of the ruling ideology, otherwise blown as common sense, the very notion of a society free of exploitation, war and the police is just an idle fantasy; to go farther and posit a world where work has become a pleasure is, from this point of view, even more foolish. But Marx himself demonstrates the truly radical nature of his thinking by taking one more step, painting a picture of the qualitative transformation that humanity would undergo in a true society. For Marx, communism in its ultimate stage meant nothing less than an alteration of man's very mode of being in the world.

In the EPM, for example, Marx insists that communism means the “*genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man*” (p135). The resolution of the conflict between man and nature: no longer an unconscious unity, as with the animals, nor a dreamlike, myth-based unity, as in the archaic societies, but a conscious unity: “*Thus society is the unity of being of man with nature — the true resurrection of nature — the naturalism of man and the humanism of nature both brought to fulfilment*” (p137). These lines have a particularly acute significance in a world that has been so horribly poisoned by the blind machinery of capitalist accumulation, but this “resurrection of nature” means more than just cleaning up the mess bequeathed by capital: it implies a new mode of being in the world, a practical and sensuous realisation that nature

is man's body. But this realisation, this new mode of being — isn't it something we have glimpsed already, in sudden flashes of Satori, like the one described by the Zen master Sokei-an Sasaki:

“One day I wiped out all the notions from my mind. I discarded all the words with which I thought and stayed in quietude. I felt a little queer — as if I were being carried into something, or as if I were touching some power unknown to me ... and Ztt! I entered. I lost the boundary of my physical body. I had my skin, of course, but I felt I was standing in the centre of the cosmos. I spoke, but my words had lost their meaning. I saw people coming towards me, but all were the same man. All were myself. I had never known this world. I had believed that I was created, but now I must change my opinion: I was never created; I was the cosmos; no individual Mr Sasaki existed”. (‘The Transcendental World’, *Zen Notes*. Vol I no 5, New York 1954, cited in Watts, *The Way of Zen*. London 1970, p 141)

“I was the cosmos”, “All were myself”: is this old Japanese succumbing to incurable megalomania, or could he be enjoying a privileged glimpse of what Marx meant by the resolution of the conflict between man and nature, and between man and man? Not the merging of selves into a dark unconsciousness, not some loathsome process of depersonalisation, but the realisation of a higher unity, the real solidarity of mankind, a vision of mankind as united in one body, which is at the same time the body of the cosmos itself?

“I wiped out all the notions from my mind”. Irrationalism! The denigration of thought and reason! What has this to do with Marx? But then we come to another well-kept secret: the free activity of mankind in the communist future will take him onto a plane that is beyond merely thinking about life, to one in which “*man is affirmed in the objective world not only in the act of thinking, but with all his senses*” (EPM. pl40). This is what Marx called “*the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities*” (ibid, p 139), a world in which “*all objects become for (man) the objectification of himself, become M objects: that is man himself becomes the object*” (ibid, pi40). How are we to understand such phrases today? We have already suggested that this key phrase, “the emancipation of the senses”, can be interpreted psychoanalytically as the reattainment, by the mature human being, of that condition of sensual enjoyment known to all of us in childhood. But it can also be understood in a more poetical or musical sense by comparing Marx's vision to the prophetic utterances of William Blake, which by a happy coincidence allow us to return to the symbolic themes that were presented at the beginning of this essay:

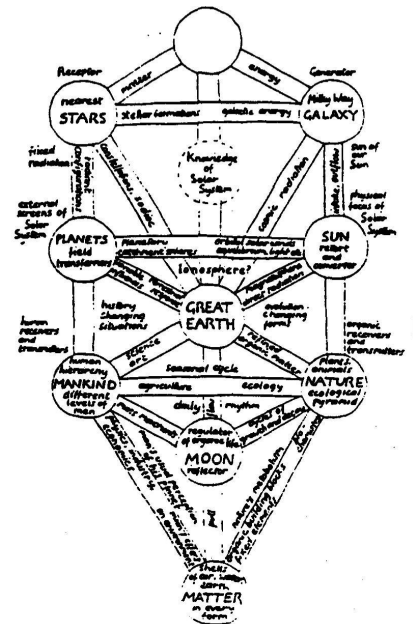
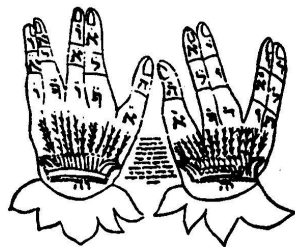
“The ancient tradition that the world will be consumed in fire at the end of six thousand years is true, as I have heard it from Hell. For the cherub with his flaming sword is hereby commanded to leave his guard at the tree of life; and when he does, the whole creation will be consumed and appear infinite and holy, whereas now it appears finite and corrupt.

This will come to pass by an improvement of sensual enjoyment.

But first the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged; this I shall do by priming in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid.

For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern." ('The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', from *William Blake. A Selection of Poems and Letters*. London 1970, p 101).

Alan Cohen, February 1990





## Post-Script Reflections in 2010

This text was written 20 years ago, and delivered as a paper to an academic gathering held in Helsinki in May 1990: the International Association for the History of Religion regional conference on northern and circumpolar religions. It was then published as a booklet by Unpopular Books in London, a print run that has long been exhausted. Inevitably, there are numerous elements in it that I would have approached differently if I were writing on the same themes today. The text was written almost as a manifesto or set of theses, and many points that might be better formulated as questions or areas for further study have the appearance of definite statements. On the other hand, bold affirmations can also have the beneficial effect of stimulating a confrontation of ideas that can lead eventually to a more developed synthesis.

In the years since the text was written, I have certainly become more aware of some of the pitfalls involved in raising a discussion about 'mysticism' and altered states of consciousness, whether in academic circles or among those who see themselves as part of the revolutionary movement. Unless one takes very good care in stating exactly where one stands, it is very easy to open oneself to the charge that you have fallen into idealism, religious apologetics, new ageism or the romanticising of primitive society. And while these charges are often themselves reflection of an attachment to mechanical forms of materialism or a vulgar empiricism, I would not dismiss the danger that the very process of investigating the realms of the mystical can lead to concessions to irrationalism and the 'occult', which are increasingly ubiquitous products of the period of social decomposition we are living through.

The text leans heavily on the theories of Freud, and at the time of writing it I was not really aware of the level of animosity which his ideas can provoke, not only among schools of psychology and philosophy which reflect the prevailing academic orthodoxies, but even among authentic revolutionaries. I remain as convinced as ever that the fundamental questions posed by Freud are an essential component of any serious discussion about human nature and its future flowering, but I am also more aware that convincing many others of this is a task that has only just begun.

I also hope that my own knowledge and thinking has not stood still since 1990. In the last couple of decades there has been an increased insistence among a number of anthropologists and archaeologists on the fundamental importance of shamanic experience and traditions in understanding the very origins of human culture, for example through the studies of palaeolithic cave paintings and rock drawings by David Lewis-Williams and others. Any future studies of shamanism on my part would certainly have to take account of the debates sparked off by these studies. At the same time, I have become more aware that there have been some serious efforts among a minority of anthropologists to examine the problem of primitive communism, and I have begun to familiarise myself with some this work. Alain Testart's *Le communisme primitif*, published in 1985, has the merit of raising the problem of what we mean by primitive communism as a mode of production, as an ensemble of social relations, focusing particularly on traditional Australian aborigine society. The school of anthropology around Chris Knight has, in my opinion, gone

much further than Testart in considering the *positive* attributes of primitive communist society, developing the idea that this social formation emerged as the result of a 'human revolution' in which the female of the species played a leading role.

Knight's theory of human origins, like Engels', stresses the immense step forward represented by the transition from ape to man: where Engels (and Marx) focused on the particular role of productive labour in the generation of a specifically human consciousness, capable of planning forward and transforming the natural environment, Knight looks into the social context in which this specifically human form of labour might have emerged, in particular, the combination of the females aimed at persuading the males to forgo the immediate product of the hunt and bring it back to the collective.

The text that follows, however, is addressed above all to the 'other side' of the emergence of humanity: what Freud was referring to when he wrote that the conflict between the sexual drive and the necessity for self-preservation "*may perhaps only occur in human beings, and on that account neurosis may, generally speaking, constitute their prerogative over the animals*" (*Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, London 1973, p 463); or the problem that Marx poses when he confronts us with the phenomenon of man's alienation, particularly when he wrote that "*estranged labour tears from (man) his species life, his real objectivity as a member of the species and transforms his advantage over the animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken away from him*" (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*). There are of course those who argue that in all his writings about alienation, Marx is talking about something specific to capitalist society, but for me the problem of alienation is far more deeply rooted and has to be approached against the background of the whole of human history, as I hope to argue in future contributions. But I am as certain as ever that the study of shamanism and its various historical descendents (yoga, Zen and other 'mystical' traditions) can offer us priceless insights into human nature conceived as a dialectical totality, in which an advance into human self-awareness can also be a fall into self-alienation.

In trying to draw the parallel between the ecstatic states achieved by the shamans and the inspiration of poets and other artists, the text cites a passage from Trotsky's autobiography, where he writes about the experience of living through a revolution:

"Marxism considers itself to be the conscious expression of an unconscious historical process. But the 'unconscious' process, the historico-philosophical sense of the term – not in the psychological – coincides with its conscious expression only at its highest point, when the masses, by sheer elemental pressure, break through the social routine and give victorious expression to the deepest needs of historical development. And at such moments the highest theoretical consciousness of the epoch merges with the immediate action of those oppressed masses who are farthest away from theory. The creative union of the conscious with the unconscious is what we usually call 'inspiration'. Revolution is the inspired frenzy of history.

Every real writer knows creative moments, when something stronger than himself is guiding his hand. Every real orator experiences moments when someone stronger than the self of his everyday existence speaks through him. This is 'inspiration'. It derives from the highest creative effort of all one's forces. The unconscious rises from its deep well and bends the conscious mind to its will, merging it with itself in some greater synthesis.

The utmost spiritual vigour likewise infuses at all times personal activity connected with the movement of the masses. This was true for the leaders in the October days. The hidden strength of the organism, its most deeply rooted instincts, its power of scent inherited from animal forebears – all these rose and broke through the psychic routine to join forces with the higher historico-philosophical abstractions in the service of the revolution. Both these processes, affecting the individual and the mass, were based on the union of the conscious with the unconscious: the union of instinct – the mainspring of the will – with the higher theories of thought” (*My Life*, 1929, chapter 29, p 348–9).

It is my contention that, in primitive communist society, human beings were, even if in a mystified and semi-conscious manner, aware of this disjuncture (in fact, this inner conflict) between the waking ego and the realm of the instincts; aware that becoming human had impaired the sense-awareness enjoyed by their animal ancestors. And I argue that the people of this epoch deliberately cultivated states of inspiration precisely because they felt the need to heal this disjuncture and regain the powers “inherited from animal forebears”. The shaman, the “man of high degree” (to use the phrase coined by the Australian anthropologist AP Elkin), was given a particular mandate to pursue this quest; and at its furthest boundaries, the experiences encountered along that road provide us with profound insights into what mankind’s relationship with the cosmos might be in a fully communist society.

In his comments on Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, the Italian communist Amadeo Bordiga was particularly insistent that a fully developed human consciousness was only possible “once we have left behind the millennia-old deception of the lone individual facing the natural world, stupidly called ‘external’ by the philosophers. External to what? External to the ‘I’, this supreme deficiency,’ but we can no longer say external to the human species, because the species man is internal to nature, part of the physical world.” And he goes on to say that “in this powerful text, object and subject becomes, like man and nature, one and the same thing. We can even say that everything becomes object: man as a subject ‘against nature’ disappears, along with the illusion of a separate ego.” (‘Tables immuables de la theorie communiste de parti’, in *Bordiga et le passion du communisme*. edited by J Camatte, 1972). Bordiga’s description of the species-consciousness attainable through the communist transformation cannot fail to bring to mind the description of the ecstatic union with the world searched for in the various traditions of meditation which have their root in shamanism.

In the writings of Knight and others who take the problem of primitive communism seriously, collective rituals and mythical re-enactments are examined principally as moments in which social cohesion is reinforced and celebrated – a cohesion which is still genuinely human because it is not designed to mask any underlying class exploitation. But a consideration of the ‘inner’ states of consciousness which were undoubtedly a central goal of these rituals is not at odds with an examination of their social function. On the contrary, both are aspects of the same quest for unity – unity between human beings, and between human beings and nature within and without. The communism of the future will not be weighed down by the mythological projections which tended to dominate man in primitive society, nor by the struggle for immediate survival, which could impose a harsh discipline of the community over the individual. But it will surely seek to relearn and assimilate, on a yet higher level, all that our ancient ancestors did achieve in the real conquest of the mind.

Alan Cohen, London, Autumn 2010

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