In Search of the Miraculous

by THEODORE ROSZAK

Below the rational-scientific surface of our times, intellectual and common man alike experience a deep longing for the transcendental level of experience that would satisfy man's total being. The lack of a balance of intellect and vision in our lives leads to the pursuit of doubtful cults of the supra-rational.

Over the past several years, in the opportunities I have had to travel and speak, I have become acutely aware of a restless spiritual need in the audiences I meet. They wonder: Have I a vision, an epiphany, an uncanny tale to relate? A moment of illumination or unearthly dread, a close encounter with arcane powers...? It is a need, I hasten to add, which I have never tried or been able to gratify. This hunger for wonders powerfully engages my sympathetic concern, but utterly outruns my knowledge and skill.

I have, however seen it fasten upon others about me in ways that leave me sad or fearful, because the appetite can be so indiscriminately eager, so mindlessly willing to be fed on banalities and poor improvisations on the extraordinary. I realize that the eclipse of God in our time has never been the exclusive anguish of an intellectual and artistic few. As a nameless moral anxiety, a quiet desperation, it has been festering in the deep consciousness of people everywhere, and at last it has erupted into the totalitarian mass movements of the 20th century. Self-enslavement to easy absolutes and mad political messiahs: that is the poison tree that flourishes peculiarly in the Waste Land.

Mercifully, the metaphysical insecurity of our time does not always reach out toward such vicious manifestations. Currently, its foremost expression in the industrial societies is the rapid spread of evangelical and charismatic forms of Christianity, faiths that teach the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit. These highly personal, emotionally electrifying versions of Christianity are now the most burgeoning congregations of our day. In America they are fast developing an alternative educational establishment and their own mass media, which rival the outreach of the broadcasting networks.

Beyond such formal, religious affiliations, the hunger for wonders expresses itself in countless forms of pop psychiatry and lumpen occultism which thinly disguise the same impetuous quest for personal salvation. The most widely read newspapers in the United States—weekly gossip and scandal sheets like The National Enquirer—carry steady coverage of UFO cults and ESP, spiritualism, reincarnation, and faith cures. Esoteric forms of Oriental meditation have been opened to the public by university extensions and the YMCA; they have even been organized into successful franchise businesses that promise tranquility and enlightenment to anyone who can spare 20 minutes a day. At the other extreme from transcendent calm, there is the undiminished popular fascination with Gothic horror, which makes Satanism, demonic possession, supernatural thrills and chills one of the film industry's most reliable attractions. And there exists a busy trade in mystical comic books in our society: Dr. Strange,
The Eternals, The New Gods, The First Kingdom, a pulp-paper folklore of sorcery and psychic phenomena whose readership is by no means restricted to mindless adolescents.

One might conclude that at the popular cultural level such preternatural curiosities have always been incorrigibly and insatiably with us, from the mystery cults of the ancient world to the table-tilting spiritualism of the late 19th century. That would be true, and all the more to be pondered that they should survive and even flourish as a feature of modern industrial life. But more significant is the fact that the allure of psychic and spiritual prodigies has lately traveled up the cultural scale, and not only, as at the turn of the century, in the form of clandestine fraternities—like the Order of the Golden Dawn. We might say it has "come out of the closet" for academics and professionals who have been touched by the same metaphysical yearnings as the public at large, and who have simply stopped fighting them off as if they were some form of unmentionable sexual perversion. They make up the principal audience for the human-potential therapies, the main membership of the Association for Humanistic Psychology and the Association for Transpersonal Psychology, organizations that offer a professional shelter where psychiatry, Eastern religions, etherealized healing, and the exploration of altered states of consciousness may freely cohabit.

Far and away the largest number of students who have gravitated to Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, and to spiritual masters like Swami Muktananda, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, and the lama Chögyam Trungpa are maverick or dropped-out academics. Intellectuals constitute the largest public for such developments as Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' investigations of immortality, and the remarkably successful Course on Miracles (a new Christian mystical discipline revealed by way of "channeled messages" to a New York University clinical psychologist). There are also the many study centers—the Institute for Noetic Sciences, the Division of Parapsychology at the University of Virginia Medical School, the Kundalini Research Foundation—which draw academic talent into the realm of the extraordinary.

I cannot vouch for the depth or quality of these efforts; what I do know is that more and more frequently I find myself at conferences and gatherings in the company of learned and professional people who are deliberately and unabashedly dabbling in a sort of higher gullibility, an assertive readiness to give all things astonishing, mind-boggling, and outrageous the chance to prove themselves true... or true enough. Among these academic colleagues, as among my undergraduate students, the most prominent laudatory expletives of the day are "Incredible!"; "Fantastic!"; and "Oh, wow!"

Let me mention only a few of the "incredible" breakthroughs and "fantastic" possibilities that have come my way lately: A prominent psychotherapist remarks to me over lunch that people sleep and die only because they have been mistakenly "programmed" to believe they have to... and goes on to suggest how this erroneous programming might be therapeutically undone. A neurophysiologist tells me of her research in liberating latent mental controls over pain, infection, and aging. A psychologist shows me photos of himself being operated on by Philippine psychic surgeons whom he has seen penetrate his body with their bare hands to remove cartilage and tissue. I attend a lecture where another psychologist tells of his promising experimentation with out-of-body phenomena. I come upon a physicist writing in Physics Today about "imaginary energy" and the supposedly proven possibilities of telepathic communication and precognition. I find myself in a discussion with a group of academics who are deeply involved in Edgar Cayce's trance explorations of past and future, which they accept as indisputably valid. A historian tells me of his belief that we can, by altering...
consciousness, plug into the power points of the earth’s etheric field and by so doing move matter and control evolution. An engineer I meet at a party explains how we might influence the earth’s geomantic centers and telluric currents by mental manipulations, which he believes to be the technology that built Stonehenge and the pyramids.

In the presence of such dazzling speculation, I find myself in two minds. These are hardly things I would believe at second or third hand; and insofar as they involve physical or historical events, I am inclined to hold that standard rules of verification should apply in distinguishing fact from fallacy. I tend to welcome the clarity that a decent respect for logic and evidence brings to such matters.

On the other hand, I can so clearly hear the restless spiritual longings behind the reports, the urgent need to free the fettered imagination from a reality principle that brings no grace or enchantment to one’s life, that I usually listen sympathetically, unresistingly... though seldom credulously. This is not the course I would follow, but perhaps these unauthorized speculations can also lead to a renaissance of wonder. In any case, I am dealing here with people who learned all the objections I might raise—and did—in their undergraduate years. This is clearly a post-skeptical intellectual exercise for them, requiring a critical response that is more than simple doubt and denial.

What impresses me about these strange metaphysical fevers is the way they blithely appropriate the authority of the hard sciences. In these circles, far from being rejected, science enjoys (or suffers) a smothering embrace. There is a certain license, borrowed from theoretical physics—especially by nonphysicists in the academic world—which leads even well-educated minds to believe that, since the fifth Solvay Conference a half century ago, all standards of verification and falsification have been indefinitely suspended in the scientific community. For, after all, if matter is energy and time is space, then all things are one, as the Upanishads taught. And if the observer jostles the infinitesimal observed, then the world is our will and idea, and one paradigm is as good as the next.

Accordingly, the revolution in modern physics is freely interpreted as having abolished the objective reality of nature and sanctioned all forms of paranormal and mystical experience. Einstein is understood to have established that "everything is relative"; Bell’s theorem and the uncertainty principle are invoked as a defense of unrestrained subjectivity; split-brain research is said to validate the status of metaphysical intuition; Kirlian photography is cited as evidence of auras and astral bodies; holograms are construed as proof of extrasensory perception, synchronicity, and transcendental realities. In recent days, I have had students spin me tales about "charmed quarks" rather as if these might be characters invented by Tolkien.

Robert Walgate, discussing books like Lyall Watson’s Supernature, John Gribbin’s Timewarps, Gary Zukav’s The Dancing Wu Li Masters, and the science fact and fiction magazine Omni, has made an interesting distinction. Such literature, he suggests, is not "popularized science but a truly popular science, transformed by the interests of the readers it serves.... Like science fiction, it is much better supplied with speculation and myth than the dry, exclusive world of science that feeds it."

Popular science in this vein is not much to my taste. I sometimes enjoy its freewheeling and fanciful brainstorming, but I back off rapidly as it approaches a scientized mysticism. By my lights at least, this is a fruitless confusion of categories. Still, it is hardly within my province to
censor these rhapsodic variations on scientific or quasi-scientific themes. The positivists among us, however, seem to have a tricky new problem on their hands: scientific superstitions, the loose use of scientific ideas to appease an essentially religious appetite.

What I offer here is only a brief sketch of a post-Christian, postindustrial society in search of the miraculous. I believe this search can be documented at great length and at many social levels—from teenage acid rock to the painstaking labors of scholars and philosophers to salvage the teachings of the world’s endangered spiritual traditions. But even this impressionistic survey points to a significant conclusion. If we can agree that Western society’s most distinctive cultural project over the last three centuries has been to win the world over to an exclusively science-based reality principle, then we have good reason to believe that, for better or worse, the campaign has stalled and may even be losing ground in the urban-industrial heartland. In the deep allegiance of people, in the secret crises of decision and commitment, the scientific world view simply has not taken, though it continues to dominate our economic and political life.

Our culture remains as divided as ever—top from bottom—in its metaphysical convictions. Now, as at the dawn of the Age of Reason, the commanding intellectual heights are held by a secular humanist establishment devoted to the skeptical, the empirical, the scientifically demonstrable. That point of view may admit a sizable range of subtle variations; but taken as a whole, as a matter of stubborn ethical principle, it refuses rational status to religious experience, it withholds moral sanction from the transcendent needs.

But meanwhile, in the plains a thousand miles below that austere high ground, there sprawls a vast popular culture that is still deeply entangled with piety, mystery, miracle, the search for personal salvation—as much today as were the pious many when the Cartesian chasm between mind and matter was first opened by the scientific revolution. If anything about this cultural dichotomy has changed, it would be, as I have suggested, that the membership of the humanist elite has lately been suffering a significant and open defection as academics, intellectuals, and artists take off in pursuit of various visionary and therapeutic adventures. It would be my conclusion that the great cultural synthesis of the Enlightenment—Reason, Science, Progress—is in a much less secure position today than it was in the heyday of crusading positivism, the time of Darwin and Comte, Freud and Marx. (On the other hand, as I have indicated, the democratic values of that synthesis are very much with us now as a brash demand for access to the mysteries and wonders.) It may be that the only substantial popular support the ideals of the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution still enjoy stems from their lingering promise of material abundance—and how heavily will we be able to lean on that expectation in the years ahead?

There are two major interpretations of this schizoid state of affairs open to us. The first—I call it the secular humanist orthodoxy—would be to regard the hunger for wonders as a continuing symptom of incurable human frailty, an incapacity to grow up and grow rational that is as much with us today as in the Stone Age. Sadly, one would conclude that the masses are not yet mature enough to give up their infantile fantasies, which are—as Freud once designated religion—illusions that have no future. As for the intellectuals who surrender to that illusion, their choice would have to be regarded as a lamentable failure of nerve. They betray the defense of reason, the cause of progress.
It is important to recognize that this interpretation of religious need as neurosis or moral weakness is deeply rooted in humanitarian values. Any criticism it may merit must begin by acknowledging its essential ethical nobility, or it will fail to do justice to a central truth of contemporary history: namely, that the rejection of religion in modern society is an act of conscience and has functioned as a liberating force in a world long darkened by superstition and ecclesiastical oppression. There should be no question that the service done by secular humanism in this regard is to be respected and preserved.

Then there is the second interpretation of our society's undiminished transcendent longings. It accepts that need as a constant of the human condition, inseparably entwined with our creative and moral powers: a guiding vision of the good that may often be blurred, but which is as real as the perception of light when it first pierced the primordial blindness of our evolutionary ancestors. In this interpretation, it is not transcendent aspiration that needs critical attention, but the repressive role of secular humanism in modern culture, which may be seen as a tragic overreaction to the obscurantism and corruption of the European ecclesiastical establishment: a justified anticlericalism that has hardened into a fanatical, antireligious crusade.

The human will to transcendence, especially at the popular level, has been without counselor guidance. Untutored, it runs off into many dead ends and tours. It easily mistakes the sensational or the spiritual, the merely obscure for the authentically mysterious. Dominated by the technological ethos of single vision, it strives to outdo the technicians at their own game by identifying psychic stunts (ESP, levitation, spirit readings, etc.) with enlightenment. It may reach out toward emotionally charged, bornagain religions that generally weaken toward smugness, intolerance, and reactionary politics. It may blunder into occult follies and sheer gullibility, discrediting itself at every step. At last, it falls into the vicious circle: as spiritual need becomes more desperate for gratification, it rebels against intellectual and moral discernment, losing all clear distinction between the demonic and the transcendent.

Accordingly, the secular humanistic establishment is confirmed in its hostility and proceeds to scorn and scold, debunk and denigrate more fiercely. But, indeed, this is like scolding starving people for eating out of garbage cans, while providing them with no more wholesome food. Of course, they will finally refuse to listen and become more rebellious. Under severe critical pressure, the transcendent energies may be bent, twisted, distorted; but William Blake's dictum finally holds true: "Man must & will have Some Religion," even if it has to be "the Religion of Satan."

The wisdom of Blake's diagnosis lies in its honest attempt to integrate the splintered faculties of the psyche. He recognized that the "mental fight" within the self cannot be brought to peace by choosing sides between the antagonists. To choose sides is not to win but to repress—and only for the time being. Our course is not to strengthen half the dichotomy against the other half, because the dichotomy is the problem. It must be healed, made whole.

In the most general terms, what we face in the tragic stand-off between single vision and spiritual need is the place of experience in the life of the mind. "Experience" is not an easy word to use here; I take it up for lack of any better term, recognizing that it sprawls troublesomely toward ubiquity. What isn't an experience, after all? We experience words and ideas as meanings that stir the mind to thought. We experience another's report of experience. Let me, arbitrarily then, limit experience here to that which is not a report, but
knowledge before it is reflected in words or ideas: immediate contact, direct impact, knowledge at its most personal level as it is lived.

In the growing popular hunger for wonders, what we confront is an effort to experience the transcendent energies of the mind as directly as possible, to find one's way back through other people's reports to the source and bedrock of conviction. Charismatic faith, mystical religion, Oriental meditation, humanistic and transpersonal psychotherapy, altered states of consciousness... there are obviously many differences between these varied routes. Yet I would argue that they point in a common direction—toward a passionate desire to break through the barriers of single vision into the personal knowledge of the extraordinary.

All this must be seen against the background of an important historical fact: that ours is a society that has been peculiarly starved for experience as I speak of it here. It is the uncanny characteristic of Western society that so much of our high culture—religion, philosophy, science—has been based on what contemporary therapists would call "head trips": that is, on reports, deductions, book learning, argument, verbal manipulations, intellectual authority. The religious life of the Christian world has always had a fanatical investment in belief and doctrine: in creeds, dogmas, articles of faith, theological disputation, catechism lessons... the Word that too often becomes mere words. In contrast to pagan and primitive societies, with their participatory rituals, and to the Oriental cultures, which possess a rich repertory of contemplative techniques, getting saved in the Christian churches has always been understood to be a matter of learning correct beliefs as handed down by authorities in the interpretation of scripture.

Philosophy has shared this same literal bias. True, Descartes, at the outset of the modern period, developed his influential method by way of attentive introspection. Even so, his approach is a set of logical deductions intended for publication. Philosophy has not gone on from there to create systematic disciplines that seek to lead the student through a similar process. Instead, one works logically and critically from Descartes' argument, or from that of other philosophers, writing books out of other books. As philosophy flows into its modern mainstream, it invests its attention more and more exclusively in language: in the minute analysis of reports, concepts, definitions, arguments. For example, in a recent work the English positivist Michael Dummett, seeking "the proper object of philosophy," concludes...

...first, that the goal of philosophy is the analysis of the structure of thought; secondly, that the study of thought is to be sharply distinguished from the study of the psychological process of thinking; and, finally, that the only proper method for analyzing thought consists in the analysis of language.

I do not question the value of such a project. I only observe that it is, like the theological approach to religion, a "head trip." Its virtue may be the utmost critical clarity, but, as the literature of linguistic and logical analysis grows, we are left to wonder: Is there anybody out there still experiencing anything besides somebody else's book commenting on somebody else's book? Where do we turn to find the experience—preverbal, nonverbal, subverbal, transverbal—on which the books and reports must finally be based? If we follow Dummett's program, such "psychological processes" are driven out of philosophy. Where? Presumably, into psychiatry, psychotherapy, meditation—which is exactly where we find so many people in our day turning to have their untapped capacity for experience authorized and explored.
If Existentialist philosophy has found its way to a larger public in our day than the various linguistic and analytical schools, it is doubtless because the Existentialists ground their thought in vivid, even anguished, experience: moral crisis, dread, the fear of death, even the nausea of hopeless despair. There is the high drama here of "real life," the urgent vitality that allows philosophy to flow into art and so reach a wide audience.

But there are strict limits to what Existentialism can contribute to our society's need for the transcendent. Excepting the Christian Existentialists, the range of experience that dominates the movement is restricted almost dogmatically to the dark and dreadful end of the psychological spectrum. The terrors of alienation we find there are posited as the defining qualities of the human condition. This is, in fact, the bleak underside of single vision, employed rather like a scriptural text for endless, painstaking exegesis. Paradoxically, we are offered a minute examination of such experience as is left over for us after the experience of transcendence has been exiled from our lives. We are left to explore a psychological Inferno, with no Purgatory or Paradise in sight beyond.

It may seem strange to include science among the nonexperiential "head trips" of our culture. Isn't science grounded in physical experimentation and empirical method? Yes, it is. But as science has matured across the centuries, its experiments and methods have become ever more subtle and technical, ever more mediated by ingenious instruments whose readings must be filtered through intricate theories and mathematical formulations. As scientific techniques of observation grow steadily more remote from the naked senses, they require the intervention of more intricate apparatus between knower and known. Whoever may be doing the "experiencing" in modern science, it is not the untutored public. Here, indeed, is a body of knowledge, supposedly our only valid knowledge of the universe, which is "not for everybody" except by way of secondhand accounts. We are a long way off from the day of the gentleman scientist, figures like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Young, who might keep up with the professional literature and even make significant contributions to basic research in their spare time.

There is a special irony to this development in the history of science: As the field has moved toward professionalization, it has become more and more involved with subliminal realities, entities, or theoretical structures that, while understood to be in some sense "physical" (surely the word has been strained to its limit), are yet "occult" in much the same sense in which Newton understood the force of gravitation to be occult: known only by the mathematical expression of its visible effects. Particle physics is obviously such a science of the subliminal; microbiology is only a shade less so in its dependence on techniques like X-ray crystallography. Astronomy, in its use of radio-wave, X-ray, and gamma-ray observation, in its reliance on advanced physical theory, becomes ever more preoccupied with bodies, vibrations, processes beyond the range of direct visibility. These are no longer fields of study that can be explored by those lacking special training and elaborate apparatus; often even ordinary language will not cope with their subtleties.

For that matter, much the same tendency toward the subliminal can be seen in psychology and the newer human sciences like semiotics, or structural linguistics and anthropology, or highly statistical forms of sociology. These too tend to relocate their realities in exotic theoretical realms that defy common sense and the evidence of ordinary experience. In search of the foundations of human conduct, they burrow into unconscious instincts, into hidden structures of language and the brain. Currently, the sociobiologists are busy tracing human
motivations to the subliminal influence of as yet undiscovered (and perhaps undiscoverable) behavioral genes.

In all these cases, the surface of life is understood to be underlaid by deep structures that cannot be fathomed by untrained minds and that are envisaged as being of a wholly different order from surface phenomena. I grant that all these entities and forces are still dealt with by scientists as objective and physical; but from the viewpoint of the unschooled public, nature—including human nature—seems to recede into a phantom province that is nothing like the everyday world of appearances. The visible and tangible stuff around us becomes a Mayalike shadow-show; nothing that happens there is the "real" nature of things. Only trained minds can penetrate this veil of illusions to grasp the occult realities beyond.

And here is the irony of the matter. Psychologically speaking, the relationship this creates between scientist and public cannot be widely different from that between priesthood and believers in more traditional societies... It might even be seen as a secularized transformation of the age-old religious distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric. And in modern science, as in religion, much that crosses the line between the priestly and public realms becomes garbled in the mind of the laity. Hence the "scientific superstitions" I alluded to earlier—essentially attempts, like all religious superstitions, to wring some hint of the extraordinary from reports and verbal formulations imperfectly understood. If I interpret the contemporary hunger for wonders correctly, it is at once a profoundly religious and a profoundly democratic movement. Its rejection of single vision is a rejection of the peculiar literalism of Western culture, and of the elitism that has dominated almost every culture of the past. It is a demand for mass access to sacramental experiences that have traditionally been the province of a select spiritual minority, and that have been "retailed" to the populace by way of prescribed rites under priestly guidance.

I will not presume to judge every culture of the past that dealt with the mysteries in this way; perhaps not all were plagued with corrupted mystagoguery and caste privilege. But surely most were, within the civilized period, where, again and again, we find priest and king, church and state interlocked as an exploitative power elite grounded in obfuscation and brutal dominion. They betrayed and discredited the natural authority that may properly belong to spiritual instruction. So today we are faced with an unprecedented demand for popular access to the temple, a demand that could arise only in a society deeply imbedded with democratic values. That, in turn, could happen only in a society that had passed through a secular humanist phase in which all hierarchical structures had been called into question.

Perhaps that is an impossible demand. If that is so, then we may see our society settle for a dismal and degrading compromise. The familiar pattern of priestly authority will regenerate itself, only now it would most likely organize itself around the sort of ersatz religion that Nazism and Bolshevism have represented, with priestly authority vested in the state, the party, the leader; and the mass rituals of the totalitarian cult would be vicious celebrations of collective power. So our industrial culture in its time of troubles might lurch from one "Religion of Satan" to another. We have had enough signs to warn us that such forms of self-enslavement remain an everpresent temptation for desperate people. But there is a happier possibility: that we will indeed find ways to democratize the esoteric that are morally becoming and life-enhancing. And here philosophy might find a guiding ideal in its own history: the image of Socrates in the marketplace, among the populace, practicing his vocation as an act of citizenship.
We know that Socrates went among the ordinary people—tradesmen, merchants, athletes, politicians—and brought into their lives a critical clarity that only a persistent gadfly could achieve. It is this element of intellectual rigor that distinguishes Socrates from prophet, messiah, mystagogue. There is the willingness to put the uncomfortable question—to oneself and others—which separates philosophy from faith. But why was the populace willing to come to Socrates? Why were these ordinary citizens willing to face his hard critical edge? I suggest it was because this gadfly was also something of a guru: both at once at the expense of neither. Socrates placed personal experience at the center of philosophy; he used deep introspection as his primary tool of inquiry. There was that quality of personal attention, even loving concern, about his work that we might today associate with psychotherapy or spiritual counseling.

More than this, Socrates himself embodied the promise of transcendence at the end of the dialogue. For him, criticism and analysis were not ends in themselves: there was something beyond the head trip, a realm of redeeming silence where the mysteries held sway. Socrates had been there and returned many times. So he was often found by his students standing entranced, caught up in his private vision. He had escaped from the cave of shadows; he had seen the Good. Something of the old Orphic mysteries clung to this philosopher and saved his critical powers from skeptical sterility. I suspect it was because he offered this affirmative spiritual dimension that Socrates found affectionate and attentive company in the agora—though, of course, finally martyrdom as well.

Just as he had borrowed his fragile balance of intellect and vision from Pythagoras, so Socrates bequeathed it to his pupil Plato. But neither Pythagoras nor Plato was daring enough (or mad enough) to follow Socrates into the streets in search of wisdom. Instead, the one sequestered philosophy in a secret fraternity; the other retreated to the academy. As these two options come down to us today, they have fallen disastrously out of touch with one another. The academy has come to specialize in a sheerly critical function; the spiritual fraternity—any that survives—has concentrated upon techniques and disciplines of illumination that are no longer on speaking terms with critical intellect.

Can these two be brought together once again in their proper Socratic unity as an ideal of rhapsodic intellect: the critical mind open to transcendent energy? More challenging still, can that balance of intellect and vision once more be taken into the public realm, to meet the spiritual need that has arisen there? Or will philosophy shrink back from the importunate vulgarity, the citizenly burden of the task? This much is certain: We will not find what we refuse to seek; we will not do what we refuse to dare.

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