

TRANSCENDENTAL EXPERIENCE IN RELATION TO RELIGION AND PSYCHOSIS

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WE MUST REMEMBER that we are living in an age in which the ground is shifting and the foundations are shaking. I cannot answer for other times and places. Perhaps it has always been so. We know it is true today.

In these circumstances, we have all reason to be insecure. When the ultimate basis of our world is in question, we run to different holes in the ground; we scurry into roles, statuses, identities, interpersonal relations. We attempt to live in castles that can only be in the air, because there is no firm ground in the social cosmos on which to build. Priest and physician are both witness to this state of affairs. Each sometimes sees the same fragment of the whole situation differently; often our concern is with different presentations of the original catastrophe.

In this paper I wish to relate the transcendental experiences that *sometimes* break through in psychosis, to those experiences of the divine that are the Living Fount of all religion.

Elsewhere I have outlined the way in which some psychiatrists are beginning to dissolve their clinical-medical categories of understanding madness. I believe that if we can begin to understand sanity and madness in existential social terms, we, as priests and physicians, will be enabled to see more clearly the extent to which we confront common problems and share common dilemmas.

The main clinical terms for madness, where no organic lesion

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has so far been found, are schizophrenia, manic-depressive psychosis and involuntional depression. From a social point of view, they characterize different forms of behavior, regarded in our society as deviant. People behave in such ways because their experience of themselves is different. It is on the existential meaning of such unusual experience that I wish to focus.

Experience is mad when it steps beyond the horizons of our common, that is, our communal sense.

What regions of experience does this lead to? It entails a loss of the usual foundations of the 'sense' of the world that we share with one another. Old purposes no longer seem viable. Old meanings are senseless: the distinctions between imagination, dream, external perceptions often seem no longer to apply in the old way. External events may seem magically conjured up. Dreams may seem direct communications from others: imagination may seem to be objective reality.

But most radically of all, the very ontological foundations are shaken. The being of phenomena shifts, and the phenomenon of being may no longer present itself to us as before. The person is plunged into a void of non-being in which he founders. There are no supports, nothing to cling to, except perhaps some fragments from the wreck, a few memories, names, sounds, one or two objects, that retain a link with a world long lost. This void may not be empty. It may be peopled by visions and voices, ghosts, strange shapes and apparitions. No one who has not experienced how insubstantial the pageant of external reality can be, how it may fade, can fully realize the sublime and grotesque presences that can replace it, or exist alongside it.

When a person goes mad, a profound transposition of his position in relation to all domains of being occurs. His center of experience moves from ego to Self. Mundane time becomes merely anecdotal, only the Eternal matters. The madman is, however, confused. He muddles ego with self, inner with outer, natural and supernatural. Nevertheless, he often can be to us, even through his profound wretchedness and disintegration, the hierophant of the sacred. An exile from the scene of being as we know it, he is an alien, a stranger, signalling to us from the void in which he is foundering. This void may be peopled by presences that we do not even dream of. They used to be called demons and spirits, that were known and named. He has lost his sense of self, his feelings, his place in the world as we know it. He tells us he is dead. But we are distracted from our cozy security by this mad ghost that haunts us with his visions and voices that seem so senseless and of which we feel impelled to rid him, cleanse him, cure him.

Madness need not be all breakdown. It is also breakthrough. It is potentially liberation and renewal, as well as enslavement and existential death.

There are now a growing number of accounts by people who have been through the experience of madness.¹ I want to quote at some length from one of the earlier contemporary accounts, as recorded by Karl Jaspers in his *General Psychopathology*.²

I believe I caused the illness myself. In my attempt to penetrate the other world I met its natural guardians, the embodiment of my own weaknesses and faults. I first thought these demons were lowly inhabitants of the other world who could play me like a ball because I went into these regions unprepared and lost my way. Later I thought they were split-off parts of my own mind (passions) which existed near me in free space and thrived on my feelings. I believed everyone else had these too but did not perceive them, thanks to the protective and successful deceit of the feeling of personal existence. I thought the latter was an artifact of memory, thought-complexes, etc., a doll that was nice enough to look at from outside but nothing real inside it.

In my case the personal self had grown porous because of my dimmed consciousness. Through it I wanted to bring myself closer to the higher sources of life. I should have prepared myself for this over a long period by invoking in me a higher, impersonal self, since "nectar" is not for mortal lips. It acted destructively on the animal-human self, split it up into its parts. These gradually disintegrated, the doll was really broken and the body damaged. I had forced untimely access to the "source of life," the curse of the "gods" descended on me. I recognized too late that murky elements had taken a hand. I got to know them after they had already too much power. There was no way back. I now had the world of spirits I had wanted to see. The demons came up from the abyss, as guardian Cerberus, denying admission to the unauthorized. I decided to take up the life-and-death struggle. This meant for me in the end a decision to die, since I had to put aside everything that maintained the enemy, but this was also everything that maintained life. I wanted to enter death without going mad and stood before the Sphinx: either thou into the abyss or I!

Then came illumination. I fasted and so penetrated into the true nature of my seducers. They were pimps and deceivers of my dear personal self which seemed as much a thing of naught as they.

¹See, for example, the anthology, *The Inner World of Mental Illness: A Series of First-Person Accounts of What It Was Like*. Ed. Bert Kaplan. N. Y.: Harper and Row, 1964.

²Manchester University Press, 1962, pp. 417-18. (Also from Univ. of Chicago and Univ. of Toronto Presses.)

A larger and more comprehensive self emerged and I could abandon the previous personality with its entire entourage. I saw this earlier personality could never enter transcendental realms. I felt as a result a terrible pain, like an annihilating blow, but I was rescued, the demons shrivelled, vanished and perished. A new life began for me and from now on I felt different from other people. A self that consisted of conventional lies, shams, self-deceptions, memory-images, a self just like that of other people, grew in me again but behind and above it stood a greater and more comprehensive self which impressed me with something of what is eternal, unchanging, immortal and inviolable and which ever since that time has been my protector and refuge. I believe it would be good for many if they were acquainted with such a higher self and that there are people who have attained this goal in fact by kinder means.

Jaspers comments:

"Such self-interpretations are obviously made under the influence of delusion-like tendencies and deep psychic forces. They originate from profound experiences and the wealth of such schizophrenic experience calls on the observer as well as on the reflective patient not to take all this merely as a chaotic jumble of contents. Mind and spirit are present in the morbid psychic life as well as in the healthy. But interpretations of this sort must be divested of any causal importance. All they can do is to throw light on content and bring it into some sort of context."

I would rather say that this patient has described with a lucidity I could not improve upon, a Quest, with its pitfalls and dangers, which he eventually appears to have transcended. Even Jaspers still speaks of this experience as morbid, and discounts the patient's own construction. Both the experience and construction seem to me valid in their own terms.

I should make it clear that I am speaking of certain *transcendental experiences* that seem to me to be the original well-spring of all religions. Some psychotic people have transcendental experiences. Often (to the best of their recollection) they have never had such experiences before, and frequently they will never have them again. I am not saying, however, that psychotic experience necessarily contains this element more manifestly than sane experience.

The person who is transported into such domains is likely to act curiously. In other places, I have described in some detail the circumstances that seem to occasion this transportation, at least in certain instances, and the gross mystification that the language and thinking of the medical clinic perpetrates when it is brought to bear on the phenomena of madness, both as a social fact and as an existential experience.

The schizophrenic may indeed be mad. He is mad. He is not ill.

I have been told by people who have been through the mad experience how what was then revealed to them was veritable manna from Heaven. The person's whole life may be changed, but it is difficult not to doubt the validity of such vision. Also, not everyone comes back to us again.

Are these experiences simply the effulgence of a pathological process, or of a particular alienation? I do not think they are.

When all has been said against the different schools of psychoanalysis and depth psychology, one of their great merits is that they recognize explicitly the crucial relevance of each person's experience to his or her outward behavior, especially the so-called "unconscious."

There is a view, still current, that there is some correlation between being sane and being unconscious, or at least not too conscious of the "unconscious," and that some forms of psychosis are the behavioral disruption caused by being overwhelmed by the "unconscious."

What both Freud and Jung called "the unconscious" is simply what we, in our historically conditioned estrangement, are unconscious of. It is not necessarily or essentially unconscious.

I am not merely spinning senseless paradoxes when I say that we, the sane ones, are out of our minds. The mind is what the ego is unconscious of. *We* are unconscious of our minds. Our minds are not unconscious. Our minds are conscious of us. Ask yourself who and what it is that dreams our dreams. Our unconscious minds? The Dreamer who dreams our dreams knows far more of us than we know of it. It is only from a remarkable position of alienation that the source of life, the Fountain of Life, is experienced as the It. The mind of which we are unaware, is aware of us. It is we who are out of our minds. We need not be unaware of the inner world.

We do not realize its existence most of the time.

But many people enter it — unfortunately without guides, confusing outer with inner realities, and inner with outer — and generally lose their capacity to function competently in ordinary relations.

This need not be so. The process of entering into *the other* world from this world, and returning to *this* world from the other world, is as "natural" as death and childbirth or being born. But in our present world, that is both so terrified and so unconscious of the other world, it is not surprising that, when "reality," the fabric of this world, bursts, and a person enters the other world, he is completely lost and terrified, and meets only incomprehension in others.

In certain cases, a man blind from birth may have an operation performed which gives him his sight. The result: frequently misery, confusion, disorientation. The light that illumines the madman is an unearthly light, but I do not believe it is a projection, an emanation from his mundane ego. He is irradiated by a light that is more than he. It may burn him out.

This "other" world is not essentially a battlefield wherein psychological forces, derived or diverted, displaced or sublimated from their original object-cathexes, are engaged in an illusionary fight — although such forces may obscure these realities, just as they may obscure so-called external realities. When Ivan, in the *Brothers Karamazov*, says, "If God does not exist, everything is permissible," he is *not* saying: "If my superego, in projected form, can be abolished, I can do anything with a good conscience." He *is* saying: "If there is *only* my conscience, then there is no ultimate validity for my will."

The proper task of the physician (psychotherapist, analyst) should be, in select instances, to educt the person from this world and induct him to the other. To guide him in it: and to lead him back again.

One enters the other world by breaking a shell: or through a door: through a partition: the curtains part or rise: a veil is lifted. It is not the same as a dream. It is "real" in a different way from dream, imagination, perception or fantasy. Seven veils: seven seals, seven heavens.

The "ego" is the instrument for living in *this* world. If "the ego" is broken up, or destroyed (by the insurmountable contradictions of certain life situations, by toxins, chemical changes, etc.), then the person may be exposed to this other world.

The world that one enters, one's capacity to experience it, seems to be partly conditional on the state of one's "ego."

Our time has been distinguished, more than by anything else, by a mastery, a control, of the external world, and by an almost total forgetfulness of the internal world. If one estimates human evolution from the point of view of knowledge of the external world, then we are in many respects progressing.

If our estimate is from the point of view of the internal world, and of oneness of internal and external, then the judgment must be very different.

Phenomenologically the terms "internal" and "external" have little validity. But in this whole realm one is reduced to mere verbal expedients — words are simply the finger pointing to the moon. One of the difficulties of talking in the present day of these matters is that the very existence of inner realities is now called into question.

By "inner" I mean all those realities that have usually no "external," "objective" presence — the realities of imagination, dreams, fantasies, trances, the realities of contemplative and meditative states: realities that modern man, for the most part, has not the slightest direct awareness of.

Nowhere in the Bible, for example, is there any argument about the *existence* of gods, demons, angels. People did not first "believe in" God: they experienced His Presence, as was true of other spiritual agencies. The question was not whether God existed, but whether this particular God was the greatest God of all, or the only god; and what was the relation of the various spiritual agencies to each other. Today, there is a public debate, not as to the trustworthiness of God, the particular place in the spiritual hierarchy of different spirits, etc., but whether God or such spirits *even exist*, or ever have existed.

Sanity today appears to rest very largely on a capacity to adapt to the external world — the interpersonal world, and the realm of human collectivities.

As this external human world is almost completely and totally estranged from the inner, any personal direct awareness of the inner world already entails grave risks.

But since society, without knowing it, is *starving* for the inner, the demands on people to evoke its presence in a "safe" way, in a way that need not be taken seriously, etc., is tremendous — while the ambivalence is equally intense. Small wonder that the list of artists in, say, the last 150 years, who have become shipwrecked on these reefs is so long — Hölderlin, John Clare, Rimbaud, Van Gogh, Nietzsche, Antonin Artaud, Strindberg, Munch, Bartok, Schumann, Büchner, Ezra Pound . . .

Those who survived have had exceptional qualities — a capacity for secrecy, slyness, cunning — a thoroughly realistic appraisal of the risks they run, not only from the spiritual realms that they frequent, but from the hatred of their fellows for any one engaged in this pursuit.

Let us *cure* them. The poet who mistakes a real woman for his Muse and acts accordingly . . . The young man who sets off in a yacht in search of God . . .

The outer divorced from any illumination from the inner is in a state of darkness. We are in an age of darkness. The state of outer darkness is a state of sin — i.e., alienation or estrangement from the Inner Light. Certain actions lead to greater estrangement; certain others help one not to be so far removed. The former are bad; the latter are good.

The ways of losing one's way are legion. Madness is certainly

not the least unambiguous. The counter-madness of Kraepelinian psychiatry is the exact counterpart of "official" psychosis. Literally, and absolutely seriously, it is as *mad*, if by madness we mean any radical estrangement from the subjective or objective truth. Remember Kierkegaard's objective madness.

As we experience the world, so we act. We conduct ourselves in the light of our view of what is the case and what is not the case. That is, each person is a more or less naive ontologist. Each person has views of what is, and what is not.

There is no doubt, it seems to me, that there have been profound changes in the experience of man in the last thousand years. In some ways this is more evident than changes in the patterns of his behavior. There is everything to suggest that man experienced God. Faith was never a matter of believing He existed, but of trusting in the Presence that was experienced and known to exist as a self-validating datum. It seems likely that far more people in our time neither experience the Presence of God, nor the Presence of His absence, but the absence of His Presence.

We require a history of phenomena — not simply more phenomena of history.

As it is, the secular psychotherapist is often in the role of the blind leading the half-blind.

The fountain has not played itself out, the Flame still shines, the River still flows, the Spring still bubbles forth, the Light has not faded. But between *us* and *It*, there is a veil which is more like fifty feet of solid concrete. *Deus absconditus*. Or we have absconded.

Already everything in our time is directed to categorizing and segregating this reality from objective facts. This is precisely the concrete wall. Intellectually, emotionally, interpersonally, organizationally, intuitively, theoretically, we have to blast our way through the solid wall, even if at the risk of chaos, madness and death. For from *this* side of the wall, this is the risk. There are no assurances, no guarantees.

Many people are prepared to have faith in the sense of scientifically indefensible belief in an untested hypothesis. Few have trust enough to test it. Many people make-believe what they experience. Few are made to believe by their experience. Paul of Tarsus was picked up by the scruff of the neck, thrown to the ground and blinded for three days. This direct experience was self-validating.

We live in a secular world. To adapt to this world the child abdicates its ecstasy. (*L'enfant abdique son extase.* — Mallarmé.) Having lost our experience of the Spirit, we are expected to have

faith. But this faith comes to be a belief in a reality which is not evident. There is a prophecy in Amos that there will be a time when there will be a famine in the land, "not a famine for bread, nor a thirst for water, but of *hearing* the words of the Lord." That time has now come to pass. It is the present age.

From the alienated starting point of our pseudo-sanity, everything is equivocal. Our sanity is not "true" sanity. Their madness is not "true" madness. The madness of our patients is an artifact of the destruction wreaked on them by us, and by them on themselves. Let no one suppose that we meet any more "true" madness than that we are truly sane. The madness that we encounter in "patients" is a gross travesty, a mockery, a grotesque caricature of what the natural healing of that estranged integration we call sanity might be. True sanity entails in one way or another the dissolution of the normal ego, that false self competently adjusted to our alienated social reality: the emergence of the "inner" archetypal mediators of divine power, and through this death a rebirth, and the eventual re-establishment of a new kind of ego-functioning, the ego now being the servant of the Divine, no longer its betrayer.

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