

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC - 6

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Mahatmas and other secret
obsessions.

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Dear Mr. Nolte

You are probably aware of a phenomenon called by experimental psychologists 'Accelerated Mental Process' or "time distortion". An everyday example of this is the feeling that our sense of the passage of time does not accord with the clock time that has elapsed. This experience is amplified under certain special conditions, like the states of mind created by psychotropic drugs. But chemicals aren't really necessary to create the effect. Any fascinating or entertaining or gripping event 'distorts' time. The theater is always playing with AMP, in the sense that we live through years or generations of characters' lives within the space of two or two and a half hours. (In spite of Aristotle, even the Greeks didn't always try to represent time as a unity on stage). It is said that a dying man, in the seconds before life departs his body, sees the whole of his past flash before him.

This is by way of preface to some ideas which I would like to air

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to
in this letter, and/which I would be interested to hear your
readers' responses.

But first, in case you are wondering what happened to some of
the work that was about to start when I was writing my last
newsletter, let me tell you about Practical Evocation. This is
definitely not something I would recommend to the uninitiated.
As I told you, I collected a small group of people for the purpose
of trying, over a short term, an Evocation based on instructions
I had resurrected out of some 19th century sources, but in fact
going back to much older practices. We met two or three times
for the purpose of deciding some practical questions, and also
to settle on a direction for the work. But for reasons which I
haven't completely analysed yet, these initial meetings turned out
to be so unsettling that fully half the group found it impossible
to go on. All this without having begun real work on the project.
The reasons people gave were on the whole confused and garbled;
I couldn't believe they were the real reasons. So I am left with
some very powerful techniques for raising spirits, and some
practical experience in lowering them. To anyone thinking of
doing a practical evocation my advice is Don't. (Later I hope to
have a few more specific thoughts on what happened, but not for
a month or two at least.)

Meanwhile the work in the other / I mentioned progressed quickly, and some structures began to crystallize. It is the outlines of these that I would like to discuss in this letter, rather than give you a daily report on the events in our rehearsal hall.

To get back to the man who sees his life flash before him in the moment of death. Is our civilization like that man? We are told that we are passing out of one astrological aeon into another; that a new era has begun with the development of the Bomb; that Christianity is dead. Meanwhile, thanks to modern technology and communications, we can have instant retrieval of all our known history. The past is more accessible to us than ever before - our own past, that is; we are still not so interested in other peoples' pasts. Many people prefer to read history and biography over fiction. Waves of nostalgia wash over the entertainment industry.

In order for there to be change, something has to die. Death is as natural as being born. It is the precondition of any transformation. But in our culture death, especially personal death, is masked and veiled behind a layer of euphemisms, evasions, and fear-born pretenses. It's all summed up in a phrase once used to me by a salesman trying to sell me life insurance. He couldn't

bring himself to say, "If you should die" so he said, looking me straight between the eyes, "If death should occur to you."

So death, at best, becomes something impersonal, something you ship off to an institution to take place out of sight. Out of sight, out of mind. (I'm speaking here of personal death, death that happens to persons: the deaths of the 'enemy' on TV screens or of the characters in movies are not 'occurring' to people.)

It hasn't always been so, of course. In other societies there have been elaborate preparations, sometimes going through all the stages of a person's life, for death. All ceremonies of initiation, all rituals designed to bring about change inwardly, have dealt in the metaphor of death, sometimes in the most immediate and frightening images. But we have almost completely lost touch with the feelings aroused by confronting the fact of death, so these images, and these ceremonies, would be lost on us. Even more obscure, except in an intellectual sense, would be any concepts involving a symbolic death.

There is a revealing detail in the myth of Prometheus. Along with fire Prometheus brings to man foreknowledge of his own death.

It's not immediately clear why this should count as such a great blessing alongside the more obvious advantages of technology and culture. Is it just the hole in the donut, the negative aspect

that is bound to be there along with the positive? Or is it something else - a gift like all the other gifts, if only we know how to make use of it? Consciousness of mortality is as specifically human as the ability to write and to use fire. Is it as useful?

Constant preoccupation with the fact of death would be morbid; but equally morbid may be the pretense that there is no such thing as death, except the death that 'occurs' to others, and arouses no feelings, just leaves you numb.

Some of the feelings aroused by the contemplation of one's own death are too private to be shared. They are the equivalent of the secret in the mysteries. But the images that arouse those feelings need not be private at all. They could be used to awaken people to the Promethean challenge posed by death - that is, the fact that you will - must - die.

In the course of the past month, partly through improvisation and partly through short pieces of text that oblige us to face this problem, we have been exploring the resonances of some of these ideas. I'll describe these texts and the content of the scenes more fully in another letter. For the time being, though, it's interesting to see how consciously evoking the awareness of

personal death leads, not into nihilism, but into an assertion of the necessity for the right kind of life. So this train of thought leads to the question - what use can we make of the consciousness of mortality? Or, as the Russian philosopher and mystic Gurdjieff put it, more bluntly, "Do you want to die like dogs?"

I'll pick up this whole question again in my next newsletter. Meanwhile, I'd like to talk about another complex of ideas which has interested me for some time and which is now beginning to take shape as the foundation of another kind of dramatic narrative.

There are stories that persist in every age and culture about a character, usually someone identifiable and historical, who claims to have received a message from a "Master" or "Masters" during a time when he was absent from society, and is now returning to society to transmit that message on behalf of his teachers. These "Masters", sometimes known as "Rishis", or "The Great White Brotherhood", or "Mahatmas", are often, as far as the west is concerned, located in the east, or 'over there'. Their messenger, though, usually belongs to the west, or to some intermediate culture, and acts as translator and medium. This figure who, for want of a better word, I'll call the Magus, is different from those persons who claim direct inspiration

from God, or who speak with spirits, like shamans. He may have shamanistic powers, but his is not the way of direct possession; his is the way of the initiate.

In the ancient world Zoroaster and Pythagoras seem to belong to this type. So does Simon Magus. In the eighteenth century, during the Age of Reason, one or two more appeared - most notably the famous Count St. Germain. The magus has a fairly consistent biography. Having returned from his travels, which take up a considerable and never fully explained portion of his life, he returns to the part of the world from which he began and proceeds to explain his message or system. He carries on the teaching as his Master or Masters transmitted it to him in the form of lectures, writings, meetings, or the formation of a small community of initiates.

The Magus arouses great resentment. He is challenged to contests of magical powers by rival magicians. He is accused of chicanery, manipulation, fraud, and profiteering. He is often put on trial, and executed or imprisoned. At the same time pious and loyal people construct whole creeds from his words though he himself remains aloof from dogma. He is always an enigma; the consensus seems to be that there is 'something about him', but a taint attaches to him; yet he is powerful, magnetic, a source of energy.

He seems to be a model and a warning combined.

In the late 19th century more of these people appeared on the scene - Madame Blavatsky, for instance. And in the past few years there has been a fresh crop of these characters, in fact and in fiction. My belief is that, especially in their contemporary incarnations, these magi are living out a perennial myth that is reactivated at certain periods in history in response to a pressing collective need. The fact that many of them, like Paracelsus or Madame Blavatsky herself, claimed to have, or actually did have, paranormal healing powers, seems to me significant. Healers are always around, but they usually make no claims about being able to formulate their power as part of a system.

Then there are these mysterious Mahatmas, these all-wise, far-seeing individuals, who are credited with a benevolent and watchful interest in our planetary evolution. They are not gods, but highly developed individuals who have chosen to remain on earth as overseers of our destiny, prepared to make contact whenever the right seeker approaches them. True or not, real or fictional, this complex of characters and biographies strikes me as likely to replace some of our older myths and heroes. I wonder if this is one of those hidden obsessions that are slowly coming to light as the century, and the millenium, draws to its close.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kenneth Cavander". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Kenneth Cavander