

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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A Place Where God has Stopped

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Dear Mr. Nolte,

This has been a crowded and gestatory month. Before I try to tell you what has been happening I must say that I'm not sure whether I shall be describing completed work, or work that has been opened up as a possibility as a result of the experiences we've had. Sometimes an action or an exercise will turn out to be like a signpost - not the place itself, but pointing to its location and assuring you of its existence. So I'll start with some fragments, sketches, glimpses, and then try to explain more coherently where they fit in and where they came from.

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A person enters sacred ground. When he enters sacred ground he is altered, set apart; he becomes special. This special quality is contagious. Anyone else who happens to be nearby may become special in just that way. But only on condition they are standing on the same ground. Thus the person

who is set apart possesses, or is possessed by, a kind of power. It is impersonal; it could belong to anyone. It makes him both frightening, and fascinating, to others. People want to get close to him, but they don't want to touch or be touched by him. Their secular, un-sacred ground is security. They scurry between their islands of security as if in danger of ... what? They don't know. But that danger is tempting and alluring.

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An oracle is to be consulted. How do you consult an oracle? Where do you find oracles? Someone offers to help. They say they will perform a delicate operation on your live brain, and since in oracles the gods speak, this operation will allow the words of the gods to be let in to your brain. Or let out. All this is make-believe, of course, because no one can perform such an operation. Nevertheless, you submit to the pretense and the person who is to perform the operation starts to describe what they are doing to open up your brain. As they speak they are very precise about the sensations you will have, and are actually having, at each moment. After a while, the boundary between the real sensations - hands on the head, a pressure here, another pressure there - and the pretended situation become blurred. As the moment approaches when the god will speak, you feel a peculiar sensation, which may or may not be part of the make-believe ...

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When a person says "I" who, or what, is saying it? Where do we think that the I we use so automatically is housed? Suppose we take this I and place it in a part of the body, such as the hand. Then imagine the hand is an autonomous being with its own center and its own ability to say "I". The hand says "I" and you or 'it' is observed only as the object of the hand's consciousness. What will the hand then do, left on its own? Where will it wish to go? And what can you do to stop it ...?

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A scene between two people begins. At first it seems to be a perfectly ordinary scene about everyday things. But at some point it dawns on us who are watching that the scene is no longer about what it appeared to be about at the beginning. Then a third person joins the scene and it changes yet again. Others join in, and yet others, and the events start to evolve and proliferate in a way that defies logic yet holds us. It seems to hold us because now it is clear that anything is possible, and if anything is possible then everything is possible, including those things we have feared, avoided, not said, refused to think, tried not to feel. We have been living by rules. But now the rules don't apply. Even what is play is subject to rules, but here they are changed from moment to

moment. In a way, that is more like life than the assumptions with which we started. It is the ordered recognizable picture that is unreal; the unpredictable and dangerous illogic is the truer representation of our waking experience. So we rush to get back to the fantasy that is reality, and ... slip on a banana peel.

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... These may all seem enigmatic and mystifying shadows on the wall. But they are a few of the reflections that were cast by some quite concrete problems and theatrical techniques. One of those problems was how to create any sense of the reality of sacred ground, or a person/or object imbued with some special but intangible power. Simply to perform a series of so-called 'ritual' gestures didn't produce any results. It never does, in my opinion. Spectator and performer alike are left outside the action; at best it is aesthetic. Only when we forgot to strive for anything so exalted as ritual did something approaching a real ritual emerge - real, that is, in the sense that those who took part were bound by strict laws which they accepted without question, and which enabled them to concentrate totally on the task in hand. The action that led to this took a variety of forms, but the simplest was a children's game, such as Tag. After a few minutes of playing this game, not as children but

as adults, there was no question where power lay, and danger; which was sacred ground, and which was secular; and the emotions released could be transformed into a dramatic situation with ease. In Tag anybody can be It. Anybody can^{be}/the hero, that is, in the mythological sense of the person with a power or attribute that sets him apart from the rest of humanity. So Orestes, for example, when he returns to Argos to avenge the death of his father Agamemnon, is a hero who has been in touch with a god, Apollo, and he carries a kind of taint with him. He would like to pass it on. But he has been singled out. He is afraid, he is dangerous, and he is trapped. Or again, in the Arthurian legends, there is one place at the Round Table, which is always left empty. That place is called the Siege Perilous, for whoever sits in it will die horribly unless he is the knight for whom it is reserved by destiny. That knight, as it turns out, is Sir Galahad, the perfect embodiment of the ideals of the fellowship of the Round Table, and the only knight to achieve what all the others dedicated their lives to pursuing - the Holy Grail. How to be that person? How to express what that hero stands for? How to experience, if only for a moment, that sense of impersonal, 'fated' power? The microcosm of the childrens' game seemed to allow people to feel, unselfconsciously, the isolation and sense of mission of that character. The feeling soon goes, though, unless it is

is sustained by something else - either a specific story or situation to which it can be transferred, or a device to keep it fresh, such as playing a scene from an already existing text simultaneously.

The 'oracle' motif appeared in a number of places where we found it necessary to deal with a reality presented by many stories - when, at a certain stage, the protagonist encounters someone, or some thing, which puts him in touch with a superior wisdom or intelligence. This superior wisdom may appear as a character, a disembodied spirit, a word or phrase in a dream. The overall image that seemed to express it best was that of the oracle. Again, all we could honestly use was everyday experience. There are no oracles, or at least none that we trust. So it is necessary to fall back on ourselves, our own powers, whatever we have within us. But we don't know what we have within us, what our powers are. The best image for this mystery is the mystery of the brain. So the search for some superior knowledge, which might help overcome a problem, leads inevitably to the only possible source that we both know exists and feel to be unexplored. The effort of imagining that an operation is being performed to open up the brain becomes a challenge to our powers of creation - suggesting to ourselves that we are 'open' in more ways than one. Then the question of whether the

knowledge comes from inside or from outside ceases to be important. It is all one. There is another issue here too. How much could a spectator be involved in the process that they were witnessing? Could the same suggestions that were being offered to the person whose brain was being 'opened' also work on a spectator at the same time? And would the words that came from the 'oracle' then apply as much to the spectator as to the person on stage? The answers to these questions lie in a very careful use of words, of grammar employed to shift the center of attention without the conscious mind noticing and objecting. I haven't solved this problem yet, but some work we've done suggests that it's possible.

All this, of course, is ex post facto. The analysis of what happened is nothing like the historical record of how it happened. Most of the work which gave rise to this was stimulated by an attempt to come to terms with one of the themes I discussed in my last newsletter - the question of death. In reading and using stories that dealt with this theme, we found ourselves being faced with similar problems over and over again. What appears to be emerging is a form of narrative that falls into definite stages, with a central character who takes us with him into the fear, the taboo

territory surrounding the idea of personal death. It is what happens when we enter into this territory that is the raw material of all mystery drama; when one kind of self dies, and another takes its place, achieving an inner transformation. Along with the self that dies, a set of assumptions, attitudes and beliefs disappear. One of the interesting results of the past month's work has been to see how some quite conventional theatre forms become essential tools for the creation of alternate ways of looking at reality. So far, I've only had hints of the precise means we would have to use, but I want to spend some time in the weeks ahead exploring this and should have more to tell you in my next letter.

Turning now to a more accessible kind of work, I'd like to tell you about some of the explorations I've done with a small group of actors on some characters out of the American past. I had been collecting material and stories for a month or two, mostly from anthologies of folk lore and historical references. The most interesting group of characters, I thought, were the heroes who sprang up in the 1830s, some based on real-life folk heroes, others quite fictional. But real or fictional, they all came to have a purely miraculous life. Take this, for example:

I weighed about two hundred pounds and fourteen ounces with my shoes off and my feet clean and stomach empty.

And my flesh were so solid they used to take my body for a roller to level gravel walks with, and my head were used for a grindstone. If they wanted to split a rock in two all they had to do was swing me up, hands and heels, to a block and tackle and then push me backwards and forwards and the way the cliffs come apart it were about equal to a high pressure earthquake.

That is Davy Crockett, talking about his infancy, as written up in one of the old Farmer's Almanacs of the 1830s. But it could just as well have been Mike Fink (the Mississippi Screamer and King of the Boatmen) or Paul Bunyan, the lumberjack hero who at the age of three weeks rolled over in his sleep and knocked down four square miles of standing timber, or Pecos Bill who was barely a toddler when his parent left him alone in their cabin one day. From the field where they were working, in a wild part of Texas, his Mother said to his Father, "I just seen a panther go in the cabin where little Pecos is lyin'". His father doesn't stop ploughing, "Too late to help the poor beast now," he says, and when they return at the end of the day Pecos Bill is chewing the last of the panther's bones.

These heroes inhabit a world much wilder and less rooted in everyday commonsense than the later heroes of the west - the sheriffs and badmen, Bill the Kid and Jesse James and Sam Bass. The earlier heroes are capable of actions of cosmic proportions, such as Davy Crockett's feat, the day the sun would

not rise. "I soon discovered what were the matter. The earth had actually friz fast in her axis and couldn't turn around. The sun had got jammed between two cakes of ice under the wheels and there he had been, shining and working to get loose till he friz fast in his cold sweat."

Crockett releases the sun and saves the world by a typical act of gigantic power. "I took a fresh twenty pound bear off of my back that I'd picked up on the road, and beat the animal agin the ice till the hot oil began to walk out on him on all sides." Then he squeezed the oil over the earth's axis, gave the machinery a kick, and the earth started turning. Crockett walked home, "introducing the people to fresh daylight with a piece of sunrise in my pocket."

Except for the pallid Walt Disney and childrens' comic book versions that started to circulate again in the fifties, these enormous figures have vanished into the hinterland of our consciousness. Nevertheless, they may still be alive, and part of the trouble is that they are not acknowledged. They may also be in conflict with other values and other heroes. Some time after we had started work on this I was interested to see an article on the Op-Ed page of the New York Times in which their names appeared. The author, a historian, is talking about the conflicts between the success ethic and the older, more indigenous (?) ethos contained in the images of "indiv-

idualists who have responded to their own inner gyroscopes". *
Though I don't think the to-be-or-not-to-be-a-success conflict is a particularly acute one at the moment, I do think there is a battle going on, a battle of god-men or giants, with figures like Crockett and Bunyan and Fink still kicking and struggling to be heard. But another part of us opposes them: they are not suitable for polite company. And so they work underground, out of sight, and perhaps more powerfully for it.

As we went into the scanty literature on the authentic Crockett legends we found an interesting thing - the voice and the personality that boomed so big on the page was in fact a lost child. Pecos Bill, one of the most outrageous of these heroes, is in fact lost, somewhere in Texas, and left to grow up with the coyotes. The other voice that is heard, between the lines as it were, is the crying of an infant in the wilderness, and it becomes clear that the bragadoccio and the extravagance are the whistling in the dark of men who found themselves lost in space, a terrestrial space to which they had no connection. In this vast emptiness they had to become big; not just bigger than other men, but bigger than the earth itself, and able to tame anything and everything in it. Forests, rivers, wild animals by the thousands, and even the lightning itself

* Michael Kammen, N.Y. Times, March 16th 1974

are treated as so many kitchen utensils. It is not a creative or happy relationship, though you would never guess it from the stories themselves which have a generally happy-go-lucky quality. But we are living today with the disastrous results of that consciousness, and the figures who embody it seem still to have life in them. How are they to be transformed?

I'm still following up the implications of this question. One thing that is required is to confront this consciousness with an alternative. The following quotation from a Dakota Indian wise man:

Everything as it moves, now and then, here and there, makes stops. The bird as it flies stops in one place to make its nest, and in another to rest in its flight. A man when he goes forth stops when he wills. So the god has stopped. The sun, which is so bright and beautiful, is one place where god has stopped. The moon, the stars, the winds he has been with. The trees, the animals, are all where he has stopped, and the Indian thinks of these places and sends his prayers there to reach the place where the god has stopped and win help and a blessing.

Somewhere, between a vision of the sun as something you can break up like a cookie and put in your pocket and as a place where god has stopped, a meeting point must be found.

Sincerely,

Kenneth

Kenneth Cavander

Received in New York on April 8, 1974