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ART IMAGES ASSOCIATED WITH STATES OF EXPANDED CONSCIOUSNESS: A STUDY OF THE INDIVIDUAL CASE

Peter Butcher*

Abstract—A description is given of a single case study of an individual who experienced a number of spontaneous, positive, expanded states of consciousness. The study is centred on a six-month period when the subject underwent a radical, disorienting change in his way of understanding the world. This change is interpreted as a shift in primary constructs. His state of consciousness and the eventual resolution of the crisis are analysed through:

- (1) A content analysis of his dream diary which showed that during this time there was a more than three-fold increase in the frequency of entries and that the majority of images fell into three broad categories: dreams with images of chaos; dreams with images of compensation; and dreams with images of reorganization;
- (2) A description of new developments and themes in his sculpture and a major change in his approach to making art.

The expanded states of consciousness, the crisis, the increase in dreaming, the dream and art symbols are analysed from a number of theoretical viewpoints, including reference to analytical psychology, dream research and anthropological data. However, special emphasis is placed on system and personal construct theories of consciousness as well as recent findings in brain physiology—particularly left and right hemisphere differences—as a means of interpreting the observations and of generalizing from the material.

I. INTRODUCTION

Although psychologists have made tremendous progress in understanding normality and abnormality, we continue to know very little about realms of experience which positively transcend normal ways of being. In particular I am thinking of 'spontaneous expanded states of consciousness'. Perhaps an understanding will come through careful longitudinal studies of individuals who experience such states. Observations of any individual case have obvious limitations but they can generate testable hypotheses.

Material from one individual is presented in this paper. A phenomenological description is provided in which there are references to parallel phenomena and some tentative explanations are made.

II. BIOGRAPHICAL DATA AND PERSONALITY ASSESSMENT

There was nothing particularly remarkable about the subject's early childhood. He was born in England in 1942, the second child in a stable, working-class family. His upbringing was normal. Apart from the usual illnesses of childhood, his health was good and there were no serious surgical operations. As a child he was energetic and curious, strong-willed and somewhat independent. Although introverted, he still formed close relationships with family and peers. The one major life-event was the death of his father when the subject was ten years old. During primary and secondary school years he proved an unremarkable and indifferent scholar. He left school at the age of fifteen and earned his living as a semi-skilled factory worker. In his twenties, however, he recommenced his formal education and completed an arts degree and a postgraduate course.

Psychological assessment made a few years ago demonstrated an above average intelligence and a non-neurotic, well-adjusted personality: scores on two personality tests (the *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory* and the *Eysenck Personality Inventory*) were within normal limits. His response to the

Allport-Vernon-Lindzey Study of Values showed that he had a developed interest in aesthetic values associated with qualities of form and harmony. This dominant aesthetic interest was followed closely by a very high social awareness and interest in religious dimensions of experience.

III. THE EXPANDED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The first experience which the subject could recall of a kind regarded here as an expanded state of consciousness was at the age of about seven or eight years. He was playing in a large garden in the country and stood still for a moment beside one of the many trees. He says that suddenly he no longer existed as an individual. He experienced himself as the sky, the grass, the clouds, the trees—everything there.

When he was about sixteen years old he had a similar experience. The ordinary world, he recalls, was suddenly transformed: he became aware of a radiating, complex pattern in existence, in which he and all else played an integral part. This time the experience lasted for several hours, during which he particularly recalls walking across a field, becoming aware that the plants around him appeared quite changed and that they had a vibrant livingness which seemed to expand beyond their form.

Another spontaneous change in consciousness occurred fifteen years later, in 1973. He was in the Museum of Modern Art in Paris and had just left the room containing the Brancusi collection. Something about the sculpture and surroundings had deeply affected him. Entering a nearby gallery, he became unusually aware of the light and space. Then, as he walked toward Jean Arp's sculpture 'Shepherd of the Clouds', the environment was as though transfigured: although he was still aware of walking, dimensions of space and time seemed no longer to exist. He also experienced a sensation of weightlessness, as though he was floating several inches above the ground.

People who have experienced expanded states of consciousness often encounter a period of inner chaos or disorientation. This has been described as a Death, the Dark Night, a Fall into Formlessness, Being Swallowed by a Monster, Entering Hell or the Void, and so on [1]. The subject's inward disorientation began shortly after the end of a love affair in 1975. This

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experience made him question some well-entrenched self-perceptions. By questioning judgements and assumptions which he held about the world, he found his own framework of categorizations becoming looser and broader until it hardly existed. What he then experienced was very much like an encounter with a dark 'Void' or a 'Fall into Formlessness', a world where there were no distinctions, no means of orientation, where all opposites, even good and evil, were not opposites at all but were part of one and the same thing.

To understand an experience of this sort we should appreciate that our central ingrained and well-tested beliefs—primary concepts or primary constructs—support a number of related, but less important, secondary concepts. The primary and secondary constructs serve as blinkers or frames through which we see and interpret reality. With any modification in understanding—a shift in construing or interpreting—certain constructs become redundant. If an extensive change should take place then it is likely that the whole system or structure of higher thought would fall apart [2]. This appears to be what happened in the case of our subject.

Describing the nature of this type of inner experience is always difficult. However, we do have two records of our subject's inner world during this time. The first comes from a dream diary which dates from 1973. Entries during the two-and-a-half years before the crisis were fairly infrequent, as little as two or three and no more than nineteen dreams for any six-month period. But during the six months between June and December 1975 he noted details of fifty-six dreams. Hartmann, for example, noted an increase in reported dreaming during times of change and stress, due, he believed, to a process of 'reconnection' [3]. This suggestion ties in with the view that the subject was trying to integrate a new way of seeing with old interpretations or constructs. Content analysis of the diary placed the majority of dreams into three categories: those with images of *chaos* (e.g. destruction, disorientation and fear), *compensation* (e.g. containment and harmony) and *reorganization* (e.g. entering a new state of being).

The second record of our subject's inner world is to do with art images and is of prime interest to us here. In May 1975 he had just started carving a circle of twelve figures representing a myth of creation and oneness. Within the circle the initial figure, the *Anima Mundi*, changes into an Earth Mother. The Earth Mother then gives birth to a child. As the circle develops, the child becomes androgynous and gradually divides into a male and female. Finally, the male and female rejoin in order to complete, and re-begin, the circle (Fig. 1).

With the crisis the theme of the work changed radically. The circle remained the same but now it contained a darker vision of the process of transformation. The feelings of chaos, which seemed to be devouring him, were first externalized in one carving—a primitive, open-mouthed idol. The arms of the idol were like snakes, their mouths interlocked, fighting or eating each other. Attached to the idol were four more open-mouthed creatures. This sculpture was followed by two variations. Before completing these, however, he saw that the circle included not only these idols but a scattered family of man. He immediately began making a series of male and female figures which depicted stages in a passage from birth to death. This represented the initiatory journey of a half-child, half-woman called *The Changeling* (Fig. 2).

Externalizing the destructive forces as well as sublimating the inner chaos in these new sculptural themes was helpful but not enough. He felt the need for a symbol of orientation, a sort of anchor point. For this, a piece of sculpture—a figure which combined the image of an egg with that of an eye—was placed at the centre of the circle.

Interestingly, symbols of a centre had already emerged in his dreams and now appeared several times over a short period. Each time this symbol occurred it took on a deeper, richer

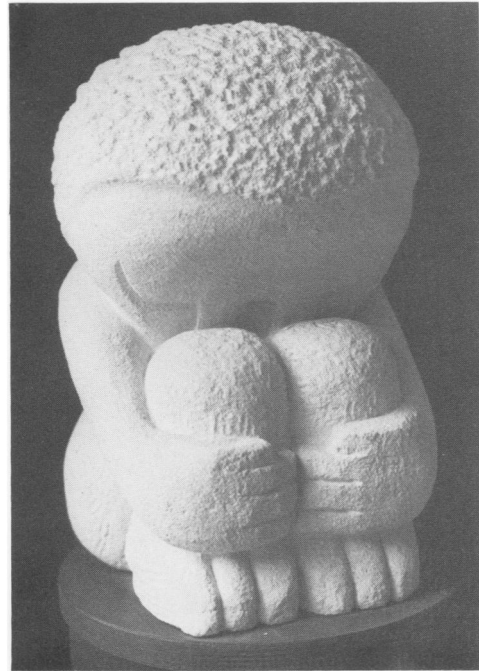


Fig. 1. 'The Anima Mundi, Tath-Benig', stone, 32 × 18 × 20 cm, 1975.



Fig. 2. 'The Changeling', wood, 22 × 5 × 4 cm, 1975.

meaning. Eventually, in August, the subject half woke from sleep to find himself lying with arms and legs out-stretched like Leonardo's drawing of the Cosmic Man. This happened twice more. He records in his dream diary that he was conscious of thinking "I must stay near the centre", or "The centre is so

near”, and that he felt that “the centre” was his stomach. In myth, the centre symbolizes the place of creative and renewing powers [4] and Jung [5, 6] has argued that this symbol occurs in dreams when a new centre of the personality (the Self) is being formed. No doubt, Jung would have interpreted our subject’s dream image as an example of this process, the outstretched arms and legs symbolizing a new harmony within the personality.

I would emphasize that the image took on a slightly different meaning for the subject. The dream occurred at a time when he was becoming increasingly fascinated by the inner subjective world, and may have been in danger of losing touch with objective reality. His interpretation of the dream was that it referred to the body as a symbol of balance, and it is interesting to remind ourselves how often we describe the insane as ‘unbalanced’ or ‘off their rocker’ or say that their mind has ‘toppled’. Thus the subject’s experience and artwork parallel the ideas of a journey and a new centre of balance; images which are found in myth and in Jungian psychology, and may be interpreted as finding a new balance of personal constructs about the world.

Toward the end of this six-month period, our subject’s sculpture underwent a radical change. By November 1975 he was experimenting with ways of extending his work—directly creating images which were primarily expressed in performance. During a performance in early 1976, he had an experience similar to that which he had undergone in the Museum of Modern Art three years earlier. The most striking thing about the experience was the way it altered his sense of time. Subsequently his artwork incorporated experiments with the experience of time (Fig. 3). He succeeded in isolating certain factors which created feelings of timelessness. These were associated with slow, unhurried, rhythmical movement, a degree of repetition and focusing perception in the here and now. Removing any of these elements or introducing speech destroyed the altered state of consciousness or timelessness. This is an interesting observation. Note that the changes in awareness occurred at times when he was involved in non-verbal, visuo-spatial activities. When related to brain function, these activities would primarily tend to involve the cerebellum (which controls balance) and the right hemisphere of the brain. Time estimation is a linear, analytic process which is the business of the left hemisphere, while holistic, present-centred understanding is carried out by the right hemisphere of the brain [7]. Perhaps the right hemisphere produces a form of



Fig. 3. ‘The First Spring Rite of Trear’, mixed media, Little Sigford, Devon, 11.4.77.

consciousness which experiences the world in a timeless way? Perhaps certain altered states of consciousness have something to do with a shift from a predominantly left hemisphere form of thinking to a more right hemisphere form of awareness?

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