

THE CHARLATAN

and

THE MAGUS

Ramsey Dukes - 1985

"This essay, which was first published in *The Lamp of Thoth*, was written to be read at a meeting of "The Society", London, in Spring 1984. Hence its lecture style and the references to Ellic Howe, who was also a member of The Society, and had been investigating the history of the OTO in the same critical spirit used in his book about the Golden Dawn.

It remains one of my favourite essays, and its theme is still dear to my heart"

RECENTLY A FRIEND read me a draft chapter of a novel he was writing. It was a novel of a spiritual quest, and in this chapter there was a chance encounter of the hero and a group of bohemian extroverts at a cafe table. They joined up for a meal and some wine together, and this encounter was later destined to lead to the next clue in the hero's search.

I was asked for comment on the chapter, and one comment that I made has since haunted me. I asked if this encounter was a truly important signpost upon the hero's spiritual highway. It was. In that case my suggestion was that, at the end of their meal together, the group should find themselves slightly short of cash, to the effect that the hero then felt obliged to foot the remainder of the bill.

Why did this seem right? Why did literary aesthetics seem to require that an important step on the spiritual path be marked by an element of roguery? Not so much an out and out swindle that would have turned the hero away in disgust, but rather just that streak of caddishness. Enough that would allow the group to order more wine than they could afford, on the strength of an unconscious calculation of the hero's assets and his sense of generosity, or even his fear of unpleasantness.

Why is it right that an important spiritual turning point should be just sufficiently tainted, as to give the hero reason to pause before stepping forward? For might he not well have spent the evening fuming that he had been conned into paying the drinks, and decided to have no more to do with his new-found acquaintances? Might he not, as a result, have missed his chance?

aberration

If I sense that spiritual diamonds should always come with a bit of muck upon them, am I only reflecting a cynical lesson that my own inadequate life has forced upon me, or am I

in fact tuning in to a vital cosmic principle? For a start, was this idea of mine a purely personal aberration? My first evidence to the contrary is that the author agreed with my suggestion, and proceeded to write it into his next draft.

The subject of this essay is literally a tricky one. Normally I do not like to write about a subject until my views on it are in some sense complete and "buttoned up". In the case of the Charlatan and the Magus I am writing on a topic that has haunted me for many years, but which is far from being clarified. Indeed I will be asking more questions than giving real answers. You may even miss the point of what I am saying and wonder if I am simply pulling your legs.

Perhaps this is an inevitable consequence of my subject: perhaps it is right that I should assume the mantle of the Trickster in trying to write about the Trickster?

There is, however, one problem that I can anticipate: a problem best described by analogy. Look at the behaviour of this pendulum...

[At this point the speaker produced a pendulum, made from a thin rod with a bar magnet on the bottom end, and allowed it to oscillate in the magnetic field of a powerful magnet placed on the table top]

... Notice how its motion is deflected because of opposing magnetic poles.

The demonstration I really wanted to show you was rather less portable: it was of a billiard table with a slight dip in its surface. A ball rolling across that table and towards that dip would be deflected in a similar fashion to the pendulum. But in this case the motion could be more easily looked at in two different ways. From our point of view, as outside observers, the ball has been very obviously deflected from the straight and narrow under the influence of forces connected with the distortion of the table's surface. However we can instead put ourselves imaginatively in the ball's position, and argue that there has been no deflection. For the definition of a straight line on a billiard table is that it is the path a ball will roll along unless some outside force acts upon it. The ball knows only the two dimensions of the table's surface; it does not have our superior knowledge of the third dimension, and the fact that the surface is warped in that dimension. So, as far as the ball is concerned, it has simply rolled along a straight line.

This relativistic argument can be adapted to the demonstration of the pendulum. On the one hand we, as outside observers, can argue that we have seen a pendulum being deflected by a magnetic force. On the other hand we could imagine that the pendulum has simply continued upon what IT thinks is a straight line, because it does not realise that its local universe has been distorted by a strong magnetic field.

warped

The analogy that I wish to suggest is this: that just as the pendulum's field of movement

can be locally distorted by a powerfully charged magnet, so also can a human's field of reason be distorted by a powerfully charged concept. And in the vicinity of that concept reason can run along a path that appears warped to an outside observer, yet appears perfectly straight to the thinker.

Consider a theologian of a past age listening to a brilliant discourse upon the nature of angels. He is no idiot, he uses his full knowledge and powers of logic to analyse what is said, and he is very impressed. That is, until a chance remark exposes the speaker to be a Protestant heretic. Suddenly his whole discourse is so suspect as to be worthless. As outsiders to a world so heavily charged with concepts of godliness and heresy, we see that the listener has been deflected through a complete U-turn as soon as he approached the realisation that the speaker was a heretic.

As outsiders we see a U-turn. But what if we were part of that theologian's world? Would we be able to provide a logical explanation as to why the speaker's being a heretic means that he is incapable of saying anything worthwhile about angels? In other words would we be able to describe the forces that deflected the theologian's reason? Or would we take his reaction so much for granted, that we would refuse to recognise that his reason HAD done a U-turn?

Do you see the problem?

bloomers

Well, consider a more contemporary example. The famous scientist who decides to investigate the paranormal and so arranges a laboratory seance with Minny Blenkinsop the Flower medium who is at present the big name amongst spiritualists because of her amazing ability to materialise flowers from the spirit world. The scientist, after several interesting experiments, catches Minny smuggling a bunch of violets into the laboratory in her bloomers. He abandons the experiments forthwith.

I wonder if, in some future age, we might not judge the scientist's dismissal of the fraudulent medium to be just as arbitrary as the theologian's dismissal of the heretic? Could our attitudes change to that extent? Or is mankind doomed to lose its apparent ability to make endless fun of its ancestors?

In SSOTBME I argued that Good versus Evil was the dominant concept of the Age of Pisces, because the spirit of that age was the religious spirit. And I predicted that the dominant concept of the Age of Aquarius would be Truth versus Illusion. Now I would like to revise my opinion. Good versus Evil is always the most heavily charged concept in men's minds: the difference is that in the Piscean age "Good" = "God" and "Evil" = "the Devil", while in the new age "Good" = "Truth" and "Evil" = "Illusion".

So, when in this essay I attempt to turn our attention to the very nature of illusion and our response to it, I am attempting something that makes great demands upon my audience.

And I will need to return again and again to this analogy. If, instead of averting our gaze in disgust, we turn to face the Charlatan, then we are doing the psychological equivalent of a physical investigation in the vicinity of a Black Hole.

Who are the great occult figures of this century? Blavatsky, Steiner, Besant, Crowley, Gurdjieff, Rajneesh... Those present might add names like Mathers and Westcott to the list; the layman might add Uri Geller and some of the recent gurus from the East. But is there a single name that is untainted by the smell of charlatanry?

Whether it is actual fraud - as in Blavatsky's faked spiritual phenomena, the holy dust of a recent guru, or the forged cipher manuscripts of the Golden Dawn - or whether it is sheer roguery - as in the life of Crowley or Gurdjieff - or whether it is a most unspiritual aptitude for making easy money - as in most gurus from the East: whatever form it takes I defy anyone to find a stainless saint among occult leaders. Even the impeccable Krishnamurti was created out of scandal. And Lemuel Johnstone didn't even have the decency to exist.

This is the problem that has haunted me for so long. So let us examine it straightaway in the light of my analogy. How did you react to my observation about the occult leaders? There are two standardised reactions.

The first is to think; "Well of course they were all charlatans. That is all occultism is, just a great big con game". This is the sceptic's response.

The second is to think; "Oh, hell, not another debunking essay". This is the reaction of the defensive believer.

Crowley

A third reaction, the reaction of the committed believer, is to think, for example; "He's quite right about all those other cranks, but surely he has heard that those stories about Madame Blavatsky were merely trumped-up charges...". He then regurgitates a mass of evidence that other historians seem to have overlooked. Alternatively he might argue that; "He is right about all those second-rate masters, but doesn't he realise that Crowley was simply wise enough to understand people and to know what compromises are necessary when dealing with the masses...". There then follows a most ingenious argument that does not quite fit all the facts.

All three responses are liable to totally colour your whole attitude to this subject. Each reaction amounts to a deflection from the straight path. All three are so natural that I cannot yet ask you to resist them, all I ask is that you pause a moment to think which response is nearest to your own. To be conscious of your inclination is the first step towards independence.

What sort of independence might we hope to gain?

In Anita Mason's novel about Simon Magus there is a lovely portrayal of the rational mentality struggling to adapt to a world that was slipping into magical thinking. I have argued elsewhere (SSOTBME and an article in Aquarian Arrow 17) that we are at present witnessing a transformation from an era of basically rational to an era of basically magical thinking. The last time that this happened was around the birth of Christ - the difference being that last time it all happened in the name of religion, while this time it is happening in the name of science.

absurd

In *The Illusionist* we are at one point lead through the mental contortions that lead to one character becoming able to say, "I believe because it is absurd". This is done too convincingly to be summarised here.

The point is this: how many of us would be able to do the equivalent? When you discover that your favourite guru has got feet of clay, the natural reaction is either to deny the evidence, or to desert your guru in anger or contempt. How many of us could say, "I follow him BECAUSE he is a charlatan?"

But how ridiculous! I have overstated my case, gone too far too soon. I have taken you too close to that black hole, and now perhaps you are wondering if this essay is a spoof! Some careful repair work needs to be done.

Consider the psychical researcher, one of Freud's circle described in J. Webb's *The Occult Establishment*, who abandons experiments with a promising medium when he catches her cheating. This attitude is so normal as to demand no justification. But will it always be so? Since pondering this problem I have begun to find such behaviour increasingly peculiar.

Consider instead the upright citizen, president of the local Round Table, Chairman of the local school's Board of Governor's, and so on. He has three children, a mock Tudor house and a happy marriage. Then he finds that his wife is cheating on him. What does he do? If his shame is so great that he at once arranges for a divorce, or even leaves for another job in another part of the country, we would say that he has over-reacted. By the standards of today he is trying to live out an absurdly unrealistic ideal of perfection. And yet a century ago such action would seem too normal to need any justification. Why was it accepted? I think that even today we would find such a rigid code very powerful in the outer world: such behaviour would impress society by its sheer audacity, and such a man would have a good chance of reaching the sort of social heights described. But what we would also recognise is that such behaviour is vastly less productive in the more "inner" world of human relationships. The man would end up as a very lonely success story, because he refused to face the world as it really is. As my good friend The Hon. Hugo C. St. J. l'Estrange said on the occasion of his first divorce, at a time when the society columns were dragging his name through the mire; "When will mankind grow out of its flirtation

with Christian ethics, and face the fact that the Great Cosmic Principle is not to do what is right and honourable, but to do what is wrong but with STYLE."

So what of the scientific researcher who approaches the universe with such cleanliness and honour that the first hint of trickery is often the end of the matter? As in the last example, this attitude has resulted in considerable successes; does this mean that we should therefore admit that it is proven? Or is this very success an obstacle to further progress? Might we not grow out of this scrupulous approach and find, as in the last example, that although the puritan approach may have great power in the outer world, such behaviour is much less productive in the more "inner" world of spiritual development. Is the rationalist approach to the occult also destined to lead to a lonely loss of contact with the world as it is?

"But that is an unfair comparison" says the researcher, "for the medium's reliability is CENTRAL to what I am investigating, whereas that wife's reliability is a side issue." Try telling that to the man who once stood beside his wife and shared vows at the altar!

limitation

Yes, I really mean it. I really am suggesting that perhaps there is a fundamental limitation in the rational approach. Not just a slight practical limitation, but a fundamental one.

Too often we approach the occult in the same scrupulous spirit. Because we believe in an absolute truth, we set our sights on it and are in danger of missing the reality.

I am sure that, in terms of sheer numbers, the majority of mankind probably subscribes to some religion that insists that the world is an illusion; even our own scientists are increasingly making it seem like an illusion. And yet, when we want to find out about the world, so many of us still choose to seek the answers among those who search for absolute truth. Might you not find out more about the nature of an illusion by following those who deal with illusions? Might not the spiritual path lead through the world of mountebanks and charlatans, rather than away from it?

Consider the tarot pack. The 22 trumps are often spoken of as symbolising the path of spiritual progress. So does the series start with a High Priest, or the authority of an Emperor? No, it begins with a Fool dressed in rags, and the next card is of a Juggler or common street magician (at least until recent packs improved his image a bit).

Another example. Imagine that for some reason, (perhaps because you are on the run from the secret service) you find yourself forced to start a new life as an unknown stranger in a some big city's slums, or even worse in some South American or Far East shanty town. You have nothing but the clothes you stand up in, however you do have an offer of help. Two offers to be precise. The first offer comes from the very learned Professor Wiesenstein of Edinburgh University. He offers to put his entire sociological and psychological researches at your disposal, including his brilliant papers on

"Emerging Social Structures in the South American Shanty Town", on "The Psychology of Aggression in the Urban Underworld" and so on. The other offer comes from Rico The Razor, a small-time pimp and petty crook, who says "Stick wiv me, mate, 'n I'll show yer around".

Somehow you know that both offers are equally sincere, but that you may only accept one of them. What I am suggesting is that Rico's offer should be given serious consideration.

So often the artist, who thinks deeply about the world, finds himself drawn to the fairground and the circus for his inspiration. Might not we too take our eyes away from the dream of the Magus, and take another look at the Charlatan? The moment that this bold decision is taken, you hit difficulties. Don't panic! As any seeker knows, if the way is hard it is probably the right way. You see, as long as you were seeking a Magus, you found only a world full of Charlatans. But now that you set out to find a real, wholehearted occult charlatan, you discover that they are all so bloody high-minded.

Again, is it my own craziness, or am I right in feeling that this very fact is a vital clue that we are on the right path? If the transition from charlatan to magus can be so swift, does it not confirm that we are living out our inner states, that the world is illusion and we are getting closer to the Master of Illusions? Whoops, again I've gone ahead too fast!

So where do we seek the charlatan? In my search I decided to take a tip from the second trump of the Tarot pack, and become an associate of the Magic Circle.

First I went to the public library to read some recent books on conjuring. One observation struck me at once: the number of conjurors who felt that their art was going through a lean phase at present. Some blamed this on television.

hypnotic

Only in one book was the problem discussed at greater length: "Entertaining With ESP" by Doc Shiels. Doc suggested that the reason that conjuring no longer draws the crowds is that the public now knows too well that it is all just trickery. Nobody is naive enough to believe in magic anymore. One hundred years ago, although few people really thought you could create a rabbit in a hat, there was at least a belief in the mysterious wisdom of the east, that could create amazing hypnotic illusions. And there was also the chance of some unknown inventor creating a scientific miracle in his back room (without The Military swooping in to claim it). In other words there was just the slightest streak of public openness to the miraculous. And this made conjuring great. To support his theory he pointed out that there was one area of conjuring that was still as healthy as ever: namely mentalism, or the art of faking extra-sensory perception. He suggested that the strength of mentalism lay in the fact that this was one area of magic where the public still had that streak of belief: perhaps telepathy IS possible? In this respect it was suggested that conjurors had been their own worst enemies: by trying so hard to dissociate

themselves from the fake spiritualists, they had lost their roots in the public imagination. They had become too scrupulous.

Sure enough, I found that most conjurors are pathetically scrupulous. I even witnessed mentalists who began their act not with a lecture on the mysterious powers of the human mind, but with a sort of disclaimer to the effect that they claimed no superior powers, and that the act we were about to see would be performed merely by ingenious trickery. The effect was about as appetising as an European Community regulation ingredients list on a sauce bottle. What the man was saying was that his act would not present any challenge to the spectators, except that of trying to guess how it was done. We were to be presented with a series of puzzles.

scrupulous

The trouble is this: we all enjoy a book of puzzles, but etiquette demands that the answers should appear in the back of the book. Here was a set of puzzles devoid of such relief - for conjurors are not only scrupulous about occult disclaimers, they are also scrupulous about keeping their secrets.

This was to me a sound reason why the public image of the conjuror seems to be more that of an irritant, than of a significant artist. Perhaps you are so used to the image of the conjuror as the man in the loud jacket who does clever things against tasteless background of feeble jokes, that you cannot see why I should expect conjuring to be significant? But if you think about it, isn't conjuring a most amazing concept? The art of creating apparent impossibility, the purest manipulation of illusion; were it not such a red herring I would be tempted to divert into an argument that this playing with illusion was in fact the original source of ALL art.

I also found the greatest intensity of anti-occult scepticism amongst conjurors. Uri Geller was despised with an anger that reeked of jealousy: "How could the public rush to see such a pathetic magic demonstration, when your average conjuring professional can barely scrape a living?" To me the answer seemed obvious.

Uri Geller did not become famous for providing an amusing evening's diversion; he became famous for having opened a crack in the public's sense of reality. For a year there was a new topic of conversation in the public bar, people began to look at the world and wonder about it. In terms of quantity, if not quality, he was probably the greatest stimulus to popular philosophising since Einstein. Yet these conjurors were blind to his real achievement, seeing only details of poor technique. When this close inspection provided no explanation of Geller's success, they resorted to the old explanatory scapegoat: public gullibility.

So much for the Magic Circle as a hotbed of charlatans: instead of finding Geller's disciples I found his detractors. But in the library there was a most interesting type of book: anonymous books with titles like "The Confessions of a Medium". These books are

rather crudely written accounts of how to be a fake psychic. They describe ways of picking up clues from a person's appearance, mannerisms and clothing, and how to use those clues to colour a few generalised statements that are designed to sound-out the client's problems. Step by step the client is milked for information, while the medium is apparently uttering great wisdom; then these facts are finally revealed to the astonished client - who goes away to tell the world about the medium's amazing psychic gift.

Why were these books kept in the library and why indeed are such books ready sellers in the scrupulously honest world of conjuring? I have only heard them recommended as "giving useful hints on the presentation of a mental act" - but anyone who starts such an act by disclaiming all occult powers has certainly not learned his techniques from these sources!

My guess is that these books are wonderfully reassuring to the opponents of the occult, and that is why they are popular. Read them, and you will never again be impressed by a clairvoyant; when astonished friends tell stories of great psychics they have met, you will respond with a knowing smile. These books, written by the very people who made a living out of faking clairvoyance, are the ultimate defence against a belief in the paranormal.... Except for one curious anomaly.

Before I unveil that anomaly, and while you are all trembling on the edges of your seats, may I remind you of my pendulum analogy?

effrontery

What do you think so far? Has my revolutionary thesis shattered your world? Are you fuming at my effrontery? You are much more likely to be thinking along these lines: "Of course he is basically right, unless you are prepared to face up to the worst, you will never really get to the roots of the human condition. Nobody should expect any guru to be utterly perfect. And I suppose that parascientists might lose worthwhile evidence if they make absolutely no allowance for human weakness.

If that is what you think my essay is getting at, then too late! You have passed the danger zone and already been deflected. Try harder next time and meanwhile here are some more clues as to what to look for.

Nothing in that version of my thesis was at all revolutionary: it made this essay no more than a plea for tolerance. Am I suggesting that parascientists, instead of dismissing their subjects at the first sign of fraud, should learn to swallow their pride, breath a heavy sigh, give a little lecture on honesty and the principle of objective scientific truth... then allow the experiments to continue under slightly stricter controls? Would that be revolutionary? No: I suspect that parascientists have already adopted some such approach. Is it progress? No, not REAL progress.

Imagine that you are the errant wife of that respectable citizen I described. But, instead of

being faced with instant divorce and banishment, you find that your so-perfect husband is prepared to brace himself against his public disgrace, and is willing to give you a little lecture and a second chance to prove yourself. Is this progress? Perhaps you might at first feel relieved and penitent, but wouldn't you come to see this patronising generosity as just another face of his frustrating and sterile perfection? He has given way, but only to confirm that his saintliness is so saintly that it can even move with the times. Apparent progress serves as a blind to obscure the real problem.

paradox

And I would say the same of a parascientist who "understands" human instincts and takes care not to over-react to lapses into deception. By extending scrupulousness, a feeling of progress is achieved. Paradoxically, that feeling of progress is the most unscrupulous cheat of all. We can only begin to face that paradox at a distance, when we remember that more evil has been committed in the name of Christ than ever was in the name of Satan. Paradox is another manifestation of the black hole that deflects thought.

I needed to remind you of that danger before continuing, as the next part of this essay is most important.

What was the anomaly in *The Confessions of a Medium*? This book confirms the sceptic's claim that most psychics are unscrupulous con-artists; it gives an actual account of the tricks used, and was written by someone who made a living out of their use. Read these accounts and you will never again be impressed by a clairvoyant. Reading these books must be as reassuring to the anti-Geller brigade as witchcraft confessions were to the Inquisition. So much so, that few people seem to notice the anomaly, which is that, the writers of these books so often themselves believed in clairvoyance! I find that weird.

You see we are not dealing with simple-minded souls who are so dazzled by their own spiritual beliefs that they cannot recognise what they are doing; the writers of these books are involved in a more or less cynical exercise in manipulating public gullibility in order to make money. They know all about the subtle, even subliminal, ways of reading another person, and yet they still manage to believe in genuine psychic experience. One writer, having lead the reader through all the techniques, and having described how to practice them until proficiency is gained, says that the process becomes almost unconscious with practice: you look at your clients and immediately just KNOW things about them. Yet at times you will find information springing to mind that could not possibly be deduced from outward signs - you experience flashes of genuine psychic ability.

mentalism

The last chapter in the Doc Shiels book I mentioned, was a chapter on genuine ESP. It

was devoted to simple drawing-room experiments in telepathy, the dowsing pendulum, psychokinesis and so on, but done as straight experiments without any chicanery to fake the results. I was intrigued by the writer's justification for including these in a book of fake psychic effects: he said that the aftermath of a conjuror's mentalism act was a good time for genuine ESP experiments, because he had found in his own experience that it produced good results. A demonstration of fake magic powers seemed to make the spectators more receptive to genuine psychic influences - for Doc Shiels believed in genuine psychism.

It was this last observation that struck me more than any other in this quest, for I would not have anticipated it. Putting myself in a parapsychologist's shoes, I would have said that a demonstration of blatantly fake psychism would have sharpened people's scepticism, and made them LESS open to psychic influence. From an occultist's point of view, surely the conscious intent to deceive is not the best setting for the invocation of one's subtler senses? And yet Doc Shiels says it is; and those fake mediums seem to suggest that the long term practice of fake clairvoyance can lead to the genuine thing.

How would you feel if a friend asked you to give a talk on some semi-occult topic, like astrology or dowsing, to a small group of laymen, and you were then approached by someone who introduced himself as a professional astrologer? This person took you aside and made the following proposition. He would come to your talk as an apparent stranger who was rather hostile to the subject. He would challenge you to prove that astrology was not bunk and he would produce his horoscope and demand an interpretation. You were then to take the chart, study it thoughtfully, and then denounce your heckler as a fraud. Holding up the chart you would rattle off a brief character sketch (supplied secretly by our friend) then point out that the character was clearly not that of the man in the audience, who was obviously a Gemini and almost certainly born on a certain day two years earlier when Saturn was in And at that prearranged moment the man in the audience would blurt out "but that is absolutely incredible! Not only have you accurately guessed my birth-date, but you have also seen through my test, and perfectly described my wife's character, for it was really her chart!"

tempter

How would you react to this proposition? I think that, practical joking aside, most people would be horrified by it. If they were on the sceptical side they would feel that there is too much trickery in this field anyway, and the last thing they want is to pollute a serious discussion of the subject with such a fraud. If on the believing side they would be most unwilling to taint their art in this way. "But it would make your audience so RECEPTIVE" says your tempter, "that could only be constructive in the long run." Get thee behind me Satan!

In fact I find this idea amazingly revolutionary. The whole fabric of the sceptic's technique - do a control test on the famous psychic, catch them cheating once or twice, then publish an expose - falls to bits if we say that Uri Geller HAS to perform a few

tricks in order to bring through the influence. For now you have to prove not just that he sometimes cheats, but that he never does anything but cheat!

Let us take the story of Geller's trickery nearly to its limits: let us imagine that just once, as a lonely young man, Uri Geller stared at a spoon and it genuinely curled up before his very eyes. It was only when he found that other people were so amazed and incredulous of his claim that he realised what potential it had for a public sensation. Unfortunately, he never managed to do it again. However he was so determined, that he went ahead and devised ways of faking the effect, and has been doing it ever since.

This version of the story might seem like an almost total vindication of the sceptical position, but of course it is not. As was suggested in SSOTBME, a rational world-view is so brittle that it needs only a single miracle to shatter it. A scientist would almost rather accept that Geller can ALWAYS bend metal, than accept that he did it just once. For science is only happy amidst the repeatable: the fleeting singularity is its worst nightmare.

So here is my biggest bombshell: by actually faking magic, we might discover magic. Not just that we should be less scared of the charlatan, less inclined to flee his presence; but that we should actually take lessons from him.

Are you reeling under the impact? Are you falling back in your seats, gasping and goggle-eyed?

If you are not, might I suggest that it would be worth making a little more effort? Embrace wonderment! One conjuror I met who did actually believe in the psychic, shared something with me that is rare among conjurors: he confessed that when he saw a really brilliant conjuring trick, he preferred not to find out how it is done, but would rather just delight in the magic. Somehow that told me something positive about the nature of magical experience. It isn't easy to explain what or why.

Allow yourselves to be amazed, or you will miss a lot. Some people may be so unconsciously defensive, however, that it is once again too late. They will once more bypass the black hole and be unwittingly deflected without feeling a thing. In case this is true in your case, let me try to explain how it happened, to give you a better chance of escaping from this mechanism on the next time round.

powers

You might not have PREDICTED that openly fake psychic effects could be a good preparation for genuine psychic effects, nor that a study of how to cheat people could lead to genuine powers: you might even have been surprised by the revelation. But it only takes a little thought, and you soon realise that it isn't so surprising after all. It is very easy to rationalise. For example: you could argue that the fake medium becomes so used to his act that he does it unconsciously, even off-duty he is picking up clues about people;

and occasionally these unconscious fragments can well up and surprise even himself. The victim of his own techniques, he thinks he is becoming genuinely psychic.

In this way, any surprise in this essay can be easily banished. But what are we doing in the process? Faced with the unfamiliar, how are we to respond to it? Either it fits the framework of our thinking - in which case it is no longer unfamiliar - or it does not. If it does not, then we either leave it - this is the miracle that cannot fit our world, with nothing to hang on it slips between the structure and falls into oblivion and is forgotten - or else we try to make a fit. Something has to change: unless we are at a crisis point it is unlikely that our structure will change, so usually it is a question of dismantling then adapting, rebuilding, recreating the unfamiliar until it fits our framework. Now we are comfortable with it... but the miracle has gone.

Rationalisation is always possible, just as anything can be banished with a good enough Sword. The question is this: how often do you consciously choose to banish, and how often is it an automatic reaction, and therefore a deception?

We have found the footprints of the trickster, and we have found them very close to home.

The point I am trying to express always slips out of my reach. I too am deflected by that warping of reality. The real point of highest charge, the black hole of maximum distortion, is where the Good-Bad axis crosses our world. If the Christ-Satan axis is detached from this Good-Bad axis, it becomes a simple choice between two types of deity, one of the spirit and one of the earth. All the excruciating paradoxes that Hugo l'Estrange and Dr Sigismund Galganspiel wrestle with in their discourses, are born of the attempt to say "Evil be thou my Good". If we could now detach the Truth-Illusion axis from the Good-Bad axis I suspect that it would begin to look like the simple choice between Hygiene and Fertility. Until those two words are in turn rationalised, you may catch a glimpse of the vital, active relationship that I am trying to convey: Hygiene versus Fertility. When removed from the Good-Bad axis, the word "versus" sounds more like a game than a life and death battle between emotionally charged opponents.

Two practical points are emerging from this quest. Firstly a negative one: do not be too easily put off by fraud, or you will risk losing what you seek. Secondly a positive one, experiment with deception itself. Be a charlatan!

I will flesh out this unusual second approach with two examples.

One branch of mentalism - definitely at the seamy end - is called in conjuring circles "contact mind reading". An example of this is to ask a person from the audience to hide an object while you are out of the room. When you return you hold the person's hand lightly and ask him to concentrate on the hidden object. You then become aware of very small, unconscious muscular forces in the person's hand and these will direct you toward the hidden object. It takes courage to stick your neck out by attempting such a sensitive task in front of a group of people, but all authorities agree that once you have taken the

plunge you will quickly become proficient at it. You become so proficient that it ceases to be a conscious process: hold his hand and you really feel you are being lead by direct thought power! But some authorities claim that you no longer need to hold his hand, one hand on his shoulder is sufficient, or even a short length of chain, with him holding one end and you the other.

This is beginning to sound like real mind reading. Sure enough, the next phase is marked by those writers who describe feats of telepathy or even precognition when there is no longer any physical contact between performer and assistant. [See Nelson's 'Hellstromism' p 21]. By practising false mind-reading, the conjuror develops the real thing.

cheating

I feel like saying "hands up all those who had a go at dowsing, but gave it up because you found it was so easy to consciously effect the pendulum's motion"! Perhaps you should, instead of giving up, have explored this very ability: practised "cheating" until you became very good at it; doing it with eyes averted, doing it blindfold, doing it with a pendulum on the end of a stick or hanging inside a bottle so as to be less easy to control. The end point might have been... the real thing.

As in the case of the contact mind reader, we can rationalise one useful mechanism at work. Faking is more fun than scrupulous experimentation. If your psychic practices are restricted to 15 minutes intense meditation a day, there is less incentive to keep it up than there is for the charlatan who can enjoy his developing skills, be encouraged by the spectators' amazement and requests to "do it again". But, after what was said earlier, I must not encourage such rationalisation.

The second example is less exciting, but it is my own, so I can say more about the actual experience of it.

As a schoolboy I discovered Hodson's lovely book on The Kingdom of the Gods. Enjoying the luscious pictures of tree spirits and landscape gods, I wanted to share the fun, but never managed to see them. Through the sixties I sometimes experimented with various techniques for increasing sensitivity and developing auric vision, but with no notable success. I suppose I was always more or less consciously haunted by the danger of self deception: at what point do you begin to kid yourself, become uncritical? I was fleeing from the charlatan.

Around 1981 I rediscovered the book and, being in a desperate frame of mind, tried again. But, as with someone who has attained Zen, a tree remained obstinately a tree, however I squinted at it. Then one day I stood by my favourite hawthorn and thought as follows: "What a pity I cannot see trees' auras. If I could, I wonder what sort of aura this one would have? Hmm. I feel it ought to be a fairly vivid red, from crimson to scarlet, but shot through with a network of gold strands. Yes, that would suit it. Then what about that

tree over there? Oh no, definitely yellowy green in wispy hanging folds."

What was I doing? I was seeing auras, but not REALLY seeing them, only imagining them in the sort of way you might imagine how a bare room of a new house might look when it is furnished, how it would look after being decorated. How odd to think that this sort of pseudo-seeing was just the sort of deception that I had so long steered clear of, in my early attempts to REALLY see REAL auras. And yet an interior designer's whole income depends upon these 'unreal' imagined images. Just as the writers of those fake psychic books were people whose livelihood depended upon what they were doing: desperados more akin to Rico the Razor than to Professor Wiesenstein.

My new-found game flourished: every tree has a different aura, yet similar species have similar styles. I have resisted the temptation to try to test this discovery, to try to prove that I am not just responding to visual clues as to the type of tree, because it is a growing and delightful diversion. I no more want to dissect it than I want to dissect a pet kitten. I want to enjoy it. If another person describes the aura differently, it would not bother me, because I find this type of perception is more akin to the perception of character than of outer form. In the sense that two people might begin by describing a third person's personality in totally differing terms; yet when they collaborate they arrive at some sort of common description.

trickster

If you can catch the spirit of this approach, you will catch another glimpse of that charlatan. The approach is blatantly unscrupulous and amoral, the very stuff of deception, yet it is also paradoxically down to earth and elementary: you just do it, you don't stop to theorise about WHAT you are doing. Just like the trickster whose every action is suspect, but who so clearly knows his way around, and makes a living where others simply panic.

I cannot claim that the gift has any practical use, but it was very refreshing to note how quickly it developed once I had got over the initial hurdle of accepting it on its own terms.

This essay is developing a wave formation: a series of forward steps, between which I rush back to defend the rear. Here goes again. I will describe another of the forces that deflect one's mind in the vicinity of a black hole.

You may have labelled me as an anti-rationalist. Labelling is another technique for handling the unfamiliar. It does not depend upon dismantling and rebuilding the unfamiliar, in the way of rationalisation, nor does it just allow it to slip away, like ignoring. It is more akin to casting a net to catch the unfamiliar, then leaving it hanging in the net on some corner of your structure. Unlike rationalisation, this does not destroy the original object; unlike ignoring it does not let it go free. It hangs suspended in its net and is no part of your structure, and it is left, because it is no longer a threat.

So to label this essay as anti-rationalist, is to once more be deflected from the central mystery. I must cut myself out of this net.

Far from being anti-rationalist, I sometimes feel that I am the one person left on earth who knows the real value of reason, of science, of the academic approach. It is a wonderful Sword of Banishment, yet so many seem to confuse it with a Cup of Plenty!

The essential value of reason, or the scientific approach, is that it stops things happening. This is an utterly vital function in a world where most people would agree that too much is happening too fast. The remedy lies right under our noses, yet we create the problem by asking science to do the one thing it has never been able to do, that is to make things happen. As a result a million charlatans have stepped into science's shoes and we never give them their due.

As was argued in Thundersqueak, it is ludicrous to describe the aeroplane as a wonder of science. The Wright brothers were not scientists, they were bicycle makers. On the day of their historic first flight they invited the American Scientific establishment to attend, and the Establishment quite rightly refused to waste time with cranks who were attempting the blatantly impossible. As a consequence, the plane flew. If only scientists had left Uri Geller alone.

As someone who has worked in the aircraft industry, I can assure you that a plane flies despite science, not because of it. Yet I am not belittling science, merely seeing its true contribution. To be utterly precise, it is magic that makes the plane fly, and what science does is to STOP IT FROM CRASHING. Indeed the nearest approach made by strict scientific rigour into the "real" world, is via the safety industry.

As reason is the great destroyer - in order to pull you clear of that dreaded Good-Bad whirlpool I will rephrase that remark - as reason is the excellent and much needed destroyer, we should direct it with the care it deserves.

safaris

What a pity that man's hunting instincts are driving impressive and exciting creatures like tigers into oblivion. If only the big-game hunters could redirect their urges into hair-raising safaris across the London skyline, in pursuit of starlings and pigeons. Then we would not only be able to keep our tigers; we could also suffer less bird shit.

And what a pity that the scientist insists on chasing the paranormal to its doom, and the historian cannot redirect the urge to shatter myths. They do it too well. Our very own Ellic Howe has delighted us with his skill in stalking the OTO, to the point where there was only one place of safety left for it - namely non-existence.

Such skills must not be wasted, for there is real work for the sword in this world. Several billion pounds are being spent on a cruise missile deterrent, might not some of that

money go towards an undercover operation with the collaboration of the secret service? I suggest taking the psychologists out of the parascience field and dropping them behind the Iron Curtain in order to discover the value of Cruise. How deterred by it does your typical Russian military officer feel? Knowing how emotional Russians can be, I want figures of how many soldiers burst into tears, how many resigned from the army, how many committed suicide when Cruise was announced. There is much to do, for I also want some accurate quantitative index of deterrence: I want to know the exact deterrent-value of every million pounds spent. I want to know which is the greater deterrent to world war three: a multi-billion pound satellite warfare program, or a late, wet and rather cold spring in Moscow.

And Ellic, your talents are being wasted on an endangered species. The world is crying out for skills like yours, and a far greater challenge awaits you. Instead of chasing the OTO into oblivion, how about directing your attention towards the communist conspiracy within the Labour Party, or the National Front conspiracy behind the Tories? Or why not go for the Big One, and prove once and for all that the CIA is a myth? And please, can I have my OTO back? It was fun.

I would like to be seen as reason's champion, not its detractor. Am I yet free of that net?

I did warn that, in order to write about the Trickster, it might be necessary to assume his mantle: now the time has come to pack up my box of tricks. That would usually signify that a hasty retreat was in the offing: for when people return to reality at the end of his illusions, an angry reaction is liable to set in. But in this case it is the nature of illusion itself that is being studied, so I'll stick around.

The trick that has been played on you is the old trick of presenting a world in black and white: the white light of Truth, of Good, of Hygiene, against the blackness of Illusion, of Bad, and of Fertility. The subject was far too tricky to be tackled without such a trick. But now we awake from the dream, this essay's wave-form accelerates to a frenzied rippling of light and dark, and all outlines are lost until they re-form in the world's true colours. What might almost have seemed clear at times, now passes through chaos.

hope

This is because the rational approach is not scrupulous after all! And yet the very confusion of the situation is somehow a beacon of hope to the traveller, for it recalls the many-layered hypocrisies of highly religious or politically motivated people. In other words, the fact that the rational approach is going to turn out to be riddled with deceit, will 'ring true'. There is something familiar about the path, and that is reassuring. So where is the rational approach unscrupulous?

James Webb writes on the tricky subject of Hitler's involvement with the occult - an area where there are so many rumours that the historian needs to be extremely careful. Was Greiner telling the truth in his interview with Daim? I quote "In his account of their

interview, Daim altered some details to test Greiner, and sent the memorandum for the engineer to sign: Greiner corrected the details Daim had changed". So a trick serves as a test of truth! When I think of the many complex ways an individual might respond to finding himself misquoted, I am amazed at the flimsiness of this test of historical truth.

Yet as soon as the academic approach leaves the ivory laboratory and faces the real world, it almost seems as though deception is its only tool. Non-laboratory psychological experiments nearly always seem to involve people doing something whose apparent purpose is a blind for the real test - e.g. the complex questionnaire to fill in, when it is only the subject's speed of writing that is being tested. Last week a television film showed a road test at the vehicle research laboratory: the lorry was quivering away on a hydraulic test rig, and the engineer explained that it was experiencing a recording of a stretch of British A-road. He took a different disk from storage, fed it to the microprocessor, and now the lorry was bouncing like mad - for this was a recording of a stretch of desert highway in the Middle East. Lorries being tested in their dreams, not on real roads! Our future, in world war three, depends entirely upon weapons that no-one has been able to test under war conditions! The very idea of objectivity is a trick; the researcher imagines he is in a sort of condom that gives infinite sensitivity to what he is studying, yet perfect protection against contaminating the subject.

So that is where our pursuit of the charlatan ends: Illusion has an alias, he calls himself Truth. Mercury-Hermes, the divine trickster, is the god of thieves and rogues, but also the god of businessmen and scientists. His first trick was the best: he taught us language. Many yards of language now stretch out before me, and I wonder why I did it. But I was looking for a remedy, Mercury is also the god of healers.

To return to my first question: how do you respond when your spiritual quest leads to fraud and illusion? When your hopeful pilgrimage to His Inestimable Holiness Swami Sri Chapati, whose adverts in Prediction spoke of the secrets of the universe, leads you to an east-end cockney whose ashram occupies a seedy flat above an Indian take-away? Do you react in anger and disgust, or do you make the best of a bad job and go back laughing to your friends, to expose the old rogue in much humorous descriptive detail?

shrine

I sometimes wonder whether, in my childhood when I felt the first calling to the mysteries of the occult, I might have built a little shrine deep in my soul, lit with many candles. Later sophistication buried that shrine and it was forgotten. But I rather suspect that, each time my dreams turn to dust, another candle is snuffed out in that sanctum; and that my anger or laughter is but a mask to hide the disappointment.

The remedy I sought was this: to hope for a new approach, that in future each time a Great Occult Master turns out to have bad breath and wandering hands, I might find not one less, but one more candle burning in my shrine. Amen.

