

# MANIA AND THE RISK OF POWER

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During the onset of mania, or the early stage of any psychotic experience, dramatic changes occur in the body, in the perceptual systems and in the activities of mind. The following descriptions will be immediately recognizable to those who have previously endured them. The descriptions are meant to be instructive. One may be surprised by the shared patterns and universal elements of mania which had been thought to be so uniquely personal. It is possible that, by understanding the manic changes thoroughly, they can become less compelling and less threatening, and thereby more workable.

This might be called an “esoteric psychology.” In this sense esoteric means inner, secret or confidential. For one of the founders of this kind of psychology, John Perceval (1803-1876), it was to be a psychology which attempted to account for the interaction of what he called “natural, preternatural and supernatural phenomena.” He came to believe that the “feverish mind” of psychosis was particularly susceptible to a variety of influences, yet at the same time it could also recognize the nature of those influences. He anticipated the difficulty which so many readers have had in reading his memoirs, only partly due to his rigorous Victorian prose (Perceval, 1961):

I am afraid that these details will appear tedious and frivolous: but on a subject, on which medical men are evidently so ignorant, and, usually, so thoughtless—and nearly all others are desperate, because they deem it beyond their comprehension, I hope I may be excused in entering upon these minute particulars, though they are but lucubrations on the operations of a deranged understanding—still that was a deranged *understanding* (p. 274).

## THE METAPHYSICS OF PSYCHOSIS

Perceval's methodology was to record precise psychological observations made by psychotic mind about itself. Such a psychology tracks the moment-to-moment mental events in which perceptions become illusions and hallucinations; it investigates how every function of mind can be vulnerable and subject to invasion; how one can become increasingly insane in reacting to hallucination; and how one's mental functions are altered following psychosis. It is now well-known that William James came to believe that no psychology could ever be considered complete without such an examination (James, 1936).

Many people have undertaken studies of alternative states of mind; these have appeared, and continue to appear, in every age and culture. All of them draw upon profoundly personal experiences which alter their understanding of the world around them. Out of this, a metaphysical account frequently develops. During their lives they are, at best, thought to be eccentrics of one kind or another: Swedenborg, Blake, Strindberg, Nietzsche. Many others with Perceval's interests have attempted to experience and understand the fundamental powers which move the mind of madness. The contributions come from all quarters. For example, there is a well developed esoteric psychology in the healing traditions which works with hallucinogenic mushrooms. Currently, a large literature has developed from research concerning the relationship between the hallucinogenic state of mind and the mind of psychosis. The work of the French poet and artist Henri Michaux (1974) is remarkable in this respect and of great importance in understanding the relationship between psychosis and intoxication with natural hallucinogens.

But the greatest number of those who share Perceval's concerns are the people who have more or less recovered from

psychotic episodes, and remain haunted by a compulsion to find the essential meaning and importance of the extraordinary events through which they have lived, and may live through again. For them, this is not simply a scholastic concern, it is felt as an urgent opportunity for self-discovery.

## POWERS

Resulting metaphysical speculations from such attempts have varied greatly. Some have been elaborate and comprehensive systems which explain “cosmic laws,” as in the “new synthesis of religion and science,” proclaimed by Chief Justice Daniel Paul Schreber during his nine years of psychosis. It dealt with the “power” which had transformed his body in order to make it a healing instrument for the world (Schreber, 1955). The treatises of August Strindberg written during his three years of psychosis similarly describe his experiences. Strindberg’s purpose was to develop a system of alchemy which would meet a human hunger for self-transformation. The alchemy was to be a metaphor for the “power” through which man could transcend “original sin” (Strindberg, 1979). There is also a genre of psychotic metaphysics, like that of the poet Gerard de Nerval, which grapples with the essence of passion and an ultimate “power of love” (de Nerval, 1970). Basically speaking, all the powers are said to be either kindly or destructive to oneself.

However, many metaphysical formulations are only bits and pieces of esoteric speculations, not yet formulated into systems. Some are compelling and interesting to a point, but many are tiresomely egocentric. Yet the similarities are striking. Whether the metaphysics is expressed poorly or well, they are all about the same glimpses of power which have been experienced during a psychosis, of whatever variety. *Psychosis is about power: power that is said to be inaccessible to conventional conscious life.*

This kind of metaphysics reinterprets the experience of the stages of “losing one’s mind” as a “spiritual phenomenon,” as an encounter with many different varieties of “powers,” both inside and outside oneself. The scenario of each metaphysics attempts to explain the energy of psychotic power; how someone might awaken to an ultimate reality of power, or how one might be misled by powers, only to become confused and absorbed into a dream. *Thus, the metaphysics is a description of the workings of powers and how they may become wildly confused.*

During the earliest phase of most psychoses one feels a growing sense of physical vitality, mental agility, and personal freedom in relationships. One might even feel resonant with some form of “absolute truth.” Just about everyone refers to this feeling as a “new life.” It may last for only a short period of time—much to one’s dismay—but it is nevertheless remembered and longed for (Podvoll, 1980). One’s curiosity about the nature of the experience is itself a powerful force. The key point is that the desire to re-possess that degree of power becomes the seed for future episodes of psychosis, a psychological materialism which intensifies to a lust for power. Thus, there are many species of “power” that must be dealt with during the beginning, middle, and end of a psychosis.

Within any stage of a psychotic experience there may be a strong temptation to elaborate a metaphysics. At times, it is even felt as an obligation. Sometimes it is only to make sense of what is happening and at other times a transparent self-justification. However, all the metaphysical speculations point to *entities or “powers” which exert their influences only when one is in a particular state of mind.* And that state of mind is astonishingly similar throughout the differing experiences of psychosis.

## THE MAD CAPER OF JOHN CUSTANCE

By the time John Custance was in his early fifties he had

already endured a number of psychotic episodes. Usually, he was hospitalized when his behavior reached a peak of excitability, grandiosity, and poor judgment. Each episode was a wretched cycle of hope, wild daydreaming, fear, and despair. "And yet," he writes,

. . . it was as a lunatic that I saw something, a vision as it were of the whole universe from a completely different angle, which was so overwhelming, that even in my sanest moments I cannot help attributing to it a measure of validity. For better or for worse it is part of my consciousness, an aspect of things with which I have to live, so that my only possible course is to relate it as best I can to the everyday world around me (Custance, 1954, p. 1).

He had been in psychiatric treatment centers and hospitals episodically for many years. He was grateful that sometimes they contained him when he was unable to exist without care. But ultimately he felt that no "treatment" could help him. And for good reason. He had tremendous allegiance to his experiences in the manic state of psychosis. He felt that what he learned and understood during that state of mind was irresistible. The depressive state which usually followed, he viewed as the necessary whiplash for his failure to successfully accomplish the tasks of mania. He thought to himself, like so many others, "Next time I will make it come out right!"

He concocted a plan. It was to be the archetypical manic-dream-come-true. When the next episode of mania arose he would leave his home in England and travel to another country, there to live out his mania to its fullest extent, uninterrupted by the apprehension of family or friends. He planned to use everything he had learned from previous manic episodes to control it and use its energy. He felt certain that next time he would be able to harness the joyfulness of mania and not lapse into wild destructiveness and eventual depression. After some badgering, his wife reluctantly agreed to the plan.

It was very important to Custance that the country in which this "adventure" took place be somewhat familiar yet also be

an environment of “wakeful danger.” When experiences of mania next began to appear in October, 1951, he chose Soviet-occupied East Berlin: “I was quite certain that I would be brought safely home though I might well have the experiences of a Communist prison or lunatic asylum before I got there” (Custance, 1954, p. 9).

## SURGE OF POWER

His “manic periods” came at roughly two-yearly intervals and one was “due” towards the end of the year. He found himself preparing for what he called his “adventure into the unconscious.” He was aging and the years of mania and depression had taken a heavy toll on his body and mind. He had been in the world of business with mixed results; mania had usually interrupted his plans. It was also a time in his life when he felt he had no other choice but to come to grips with his mania, which meant to see it through, to follow its call, and perhaps to put it to rest, after this one last time.

Two years earlier he had published an important study of the nature of mania and depression called *Wisdom, Madness and Folly* (Custance, 1952). Its purpose was to demonstrate that there is a wisdom in madness which had not yet been fully explored. Later he consulted with Carl Jung in Zurich who thought favorably of his work and agreed to write a preface to the German edition (Jung, 1954). Jung felt that Custance’s experience of mania was an excellent example of archetypal forces being released from the Unconscious when the “mental level is lowered.” It was obvious to Custance that mania had provided the most interesting and important ordeals of his life and he became convinced of his ability to bring some intelligence and discipline to it.

Here is how he knew the mania was beginning. Its first signs could be noted by an alteration of every sensory modal-

ity. His vision, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and body sensations, and his sense of awareness, all began to change. And it was undeniable to Custance that they all began to change for the better. The words which most characterize the changes are that the *senses came alive*. At times he says they were "illuminated." The mania proceeded to mount from its earliest, most subtle alterations, such as the change in the play between light and shadow, to its more peak experience of an intense excitability running through the spinal column: "The whole aspect of the world about me began to change, and I had the excited shivers in the spinal column and tingling of the nerves that always herald my manic phases" (Custance, 1954, p. 45).

From the point of view of external time, the mania could be said to have happened precipitously; it could be upon him in two or three days, or over a period of two weeks at the most. But from the point of view of a chronology or evolution of the perceptual changes: they were gradual, chain-linked, and irreversible. In Custance's experience, virtually nothing could prevent their advancing march and, if he had anything to do with it, nothing would interfere with the intense excitement and inspiration to live—and live fully—that mania brought with it. He was always apprehensive of the chaos it might cause, yet he lusted for it. He had his own reasons, as everyone who craves mania does.

For example, both August Strindberg and Friedrich Nietzsche courted mania for the similar purpose of liberating a supernormal intelligence. Strindberg and Nietzsche had actually studied each other's works and Custance had studied them both. Nietzsche believed his mania was the herald of his transformation into the fully perfected being which his philosophy and psychology had predicted. Strindberg felt that his mania would point the way to the completely natural, pure and instinctive man. Custance was more interested in world politics. The goal of his mania was "to put the world in order." He

came to believe that his manic state was the living metaphor of the post-war division of Europe, between East and West; and that by solving a fundamental antithesis of opposites within himself, he might also do so for the community of nations. "An unsuccessful member of a depressed class in an age of social disintegration, in a vast delusion of grandeur, I saw my own family, through my own house, saving the world" (Custance, 1954, p. 28).

### INTENSIFICATION OF THE SENSES

As soon as Custance touched down at the airport in West Berlin he felt the world around him "changing," a sign, he said, that his mission would be successful. He would continually reiterate this feeling as if to gear himself up to new degrees of mania. But at the same time he took no chances: "I made every possible attempt to intensify this state, notably by means of alcohol." In the week to come he would total no more than five hours of sleep. He settled himself (perched, would be a better word) in the same hotel he had lived in as a young banker twenty years earlier. It was from there that he would make daring forays into the heavily policed Eastern sector and allow himself to be led by his manic "guidance."

He was getting "high" and inspired in the work that he had set for himself but the mania was simply not reaching the intensity he had hoped for. It is important to note, that as much as mania appears to come upon one imperceptibly it cannot truly develop without the application of some further effort in that direction. Those with much experience in mania gradually discover a repertoire of tricks and methods to intensify it, or "let oneself go," so to speak. Custance already had much experience with mania and was becoming a virtuoso in the methodology of becoming a maniac. The practices that he evolved are virtually a handbook to insanity.



He applied himself to his time-tested techniques of intensifying the mania. They are commonplace: writing with abandon (writing and paying no attention to the words being written), drinking alcohol, fasting, fleeting infatuations with street women, sleeping only minimally, and above all, staying “on the move.” Putting himself in a state of constant activity was most important. On a junket in a dangerous place to carry out a secret psychological-political mission and in an increasingly excited state, he was becoming the James Bond of mania: “I solemnly declare that I have been sent by the Powers to put this lunatic world in order” (Custance, 1954, p. 81).

In the hotel he began to write. From here on Custance wrote daily notes and commentaries for his journal.

The world is transforming itself around me as I write; it is coming alive; and all the Powers of actuality, the spirits of the past, the gods and goddesses, yes and the devils too, tell me to let them have their way (1954, p. 69).

I am experimenting with the Powers. I want to know whether they will look after me, as my inner voices tell me they will . . . The Powers will tell me in their own way, through chance acquaintances, symbols, pieces of information here and there (1954, p. 70).

But it is only when he steals his way into the Soviet zone that his excited state reaches the degree of sharpness that he longed for. There he begins to wander in the streets, approaching prostitutes with the idea of sexually uniting East and West. Every perception becomes an auspicious omen and a symbolic confirmation of what he should or should not do next. “It is a principle of this experiment to act on suggestion, like a lunatic suffering from paranoia” (1954, p. 85). He is talking to statues in the city squares, following every hint of chance, which now became “guidance.” His ability to magnetize and manipulate a conversation was always a sure sign to him that his mania was working. After fast-talking his way out of an encounter with the police he exclaims, “I got away with it!” And then,

It has happened. I am mad at last. The Powers have taken over, I am their body and soul. I do not belong to myself any longer; I am simply a tool, and all I have to do is to keep myself oiled and open, clean and receptive . . . (1954, p. 88).

“First and foremost,” says Custance, “comes a general sense of intense well-being.” This pleasurable and sometimes “ecstatic feeling-tone” remains as a sort of permanent background for all his experiences during the manic period. This background colored all the changes taking place in the special senses.

### *Seeing*

The changes of visual sense perception were the first:

This began . . . with the usual curious change in sense-perception of the outer world. I can only describe it by saying that “the lights go up,” as if a kind of switch were turned on in my psycho-physical system. Everything seems different, somehow brighter and clearer. This is, of course, the phenomenon technically known as “photism;” it is quite easily recognizable and bitter experience has now taught me that, as soon as it occurs, I should take immediate steps to go to the hospital, since within a few days I shall be out of control. This time, however, I had no intention of going near the doctors . . . (1954, p. 185).

There were a variety of changes taking place in visual experience, such as an increased sense of clarity, star-like and rainbow phenomena surrounding bright lights, halo effects and so on. But most important for understanding and appreciating the psychological mechanics of mania, and psychosis in general, was *a heightened ability to see illusions*. It could be called “visual imagination;” that is, the capacity to form complete images out of basic visual events (e.g., colors, angles), and then through a number of steps, to embody and enliven those images, to the point that they communicate back to the perceiver.

Here is one of his descriptions:

. . . ability to see visions in the form of illusions, that is to say distortion of visual images. This power is proportionate to the acuteness of the mania. . . . In periods of acute mania they can appear almost like a continuous cinema performance, particularly if there are any complicated and variable light patterns with which my optical mechanism can play the necessary tricks. These visions generally appear on the walls of my room, if these are shiny enough to reflect light. They are infinitely varied, and bear a close relation to the processes of thought passing in my mind at the time . . . there have been visions of Heaven—and Hell—of gods and goddesses and devils, and so on (1954, p. 57).

Custance repeatedly speculated about the neurology of these occurrences. In the course of time, he developed quite a sophisticated view which was based on his experimentation while in excited manic states. It could be called a “metaneurology” because it combined observations of mind and body and nervous system interactions, minutely examined during the special conditions of psychosis. For example, he observed that the illusions began by a relaxation of the focusing mechanism. During a manic period he could readily manage to read without spectacles and when in more acute mania, they were totally unnecessary and of no help at all. He presumed that in mania, “some sort of relaxation of tension takes place (in muscles of the eye), which enables the muscles to function more freely and thus more effectively” (1954, p. 57). The reverse happened as the mania diminished. This kind of metaneurology became increasingly more profound during his career in mania.

### *Hearing*

A clarity of hearing was manifested by his ability to take in many sound impressions at the same time and an increased sensitivity to different sound sensations. Because of this he felt more fully alive to the outside world, receiving it through

sound resonance or reverberation. Probably, similar to seeing, the changes in hearing involved a relaxation of the muscles of the inner ear.

Custance heard many different kinds of voices addressing him. But they were not complete hallucinations; the voices, in which he was in continual communication, were still incompletely formed in whispers, turns of phrases, puns, and innuendos. However, from these double meanings he took his cues for actions.

### *Smelling and Tasting*

He noted an enhanced capacity to finely discriminate between different smells and tastes. Mania was the only state of mind that Custance discovered in which he truly appreciated the varieties and subtleties of scents. And his sense of taste was opened to him as a gift: “. . . even common grass tastes excellent, while real delicacies like strawberries or raspberries give ecstatic sensations appropriate to a veritable food of the gods” (1954, p. 32).

### *Bodily Feeling*

Early in mania, he would experience a greater sensitivity in his sense of touch which he linked to an ability to draw figures with great likeness. In general, he reports an, “. . . extraordinary muscular looseness or suppleness” (1954, p. 56). As the mania progressed, he felt “particularly fit”; his reactions to the environment were rapid and well-defined.

He seemed to acquire a powerful bass voice, rich with resonances, “as though passages in my chest which were normally clogged were opened up, and my chest actually seems to set up abnormal vibrations” (1954, p. 32). This was the prototype

for Custance of some sort of manic “opening up,” which he attempted to account for with the following metaneurology. It was an expansion of his relaxation theories.

He felt certain that some sort of relaxation of normal nervous tension was involved. The channels in the body (whatever they may be) which convey and distribute the sensation of energy movement were unobstructed. In the early stages of mania this event is felt as merely good and healthy; as mania escalates, the sensation is ecstatic, rushing and overwhelming. It would peak in the “creepy or shivery feeling in the spinal column” (1954, p. 52).

August Strindberg expressed this sensation in another way:

Then I feel, at first only faintly, something like an inrush of electric fluid. I look at my compass, but it shows no sign of wavering. It is not electricity, then. But the tension increases; my heart beats violently; I offer resistance, but as if by a flash of lightning my body is charged with a fluid which chokes me and depletes my blood (Strindberg, 1979, p. 92).

This last sensation points to a similar metaneurologic occurring between body and mind; that is, an opening up of the channels which connect body and mind. Here is the best description that Custance (1954) could offer:

. . . linking-up of tracts of associations in the psycho-physical mechanism . . . . I have noticed again and again that when thinking or writing in a state of mania, every time unusual connections between departments of thought or tracts or associations occur to me, I get this sensation in direct proportion to the importance and extent of the departments or tracts thus connected . . . clicked or fallen into place in my head. . . . This feeling is neither purely physical nor purely psychological, but a sort of combination between the two (p. 54).

And finally, the relationship between body and mind, in terms of the connections between bodily sensations and the actual contents or scenarios of thought, became clearer to him: “. . . physical sensations make themselves felt well in advance of the corresponding thoughts, and sometimes even without

the thoughts becoming conscious at all” (1954, p. 16).

## INTENSIFIED MIND

Perhaps there is some confusion as to just what is meant by “mind.” However, if one does nothing but simply turns one’s attention to the stream of mental activity, it is obvious that at times it moves quickly and forcefully and at other times, quietly and sparingly. In mania, the velocity of the mind-streaming is notorious. Custance (1954) came to believe that “the two contrasting states of mind can be almost infinitely intensified” (p. 29).

Custance expresses the quality of “mind speed” in a variety of ways. He describes a tremendous proliferation of ideas, cascading one upon the other: “. . . my pen can scarcely keep up with the rapid flow of ideas.” He pinpoints the “extreme rapidity of association of ideas.” For example: “the sights of seagulls sets up immediately and virtually simultaneously in my mind . . . trains of thoughts,” far from the original sense perception, and all of which turn upon, and link by, such things as the sound similarity of words, or overlapping images, or adornment by memories. “I can look at nothing without receiving some idea from it leading to an impulse to action” (p. 36) and finally, “a flight of ideas . . . took as it were possession of me.”

This is generally what is meant by “mental speed.” The sense of “possession” is the final consequence of such wild mind speed: “in manic states of sufficient intensity animistic conceptions impel themselves forcibly upon me; I cannot avoid seeing spirits in everything” (1954, p. 34). Custance has little more to say about this sense of possession, but others have considerably expanded upon its psycho-physical mechanics (Thelmar, 1933).

“Thinking” itself is experienced as far more powerful than

ever expected. In mania, its power appears to be unveiled: "I seem to see a vast chain of associations, often extending into departments of thought not normally connected at all. Thoughts and impressions, in fact, do not appear in isolation as they so often do in ordinary life; they seem linked up with a whole (Custance, 1954, p. 53). One's manic thought acceleration appears to break through the boundaries of space and time. So, it is not surprising that with speculations like this Custance would take up the almost ubiquitous manic fascination with Einstein's special theory of relativity.

### *Wild Daydreaming*

Patterns of thought were completed much more easily than usual and seemed to have a life of their own, independent of his volition. Thinking interpenetrated the "innumerable watertight compartments of life and experience" (1954, p. 55). The speed and forcefulness of thinking was experienced as a physical metaphor: a continuous pulsating motor behind the eyeballs. Custance became intoxicated with the power of his mind. At times he would just sit down, ". . . enjoying the marvel of the new world which had appeared to me and daydreaming in the wildest manner of the future" (1954, p. 47).

Thought intoxication—a kind of drunkenness with mind forms—was the end result of mind speed when it attained a certain critical velocity. The analogy might be that of "critical flicker fusion" demonstrations within the visual system. When short bursts of light are presented to the eye, individual flashes can be discriminated up to a certain point. When the intervals between the flashes are progressively shortened there occurs a point where the flashes cannot be independently discriminated, but merge into a "flicker fusion." It is the same with cinema projection; when a certain speed of film movement is reached, the independent picture frames create the illusion of a solid

and continuous perceptual world. Similarly, when thinking reaches its critical velocity a confusional state occurs, characterized by projections becoming animated.

### *Trance Dreaming*

In his psychological speculations, Custance was surprisingly in agreement with the yet to be published work of William James. James (1982) saw the origin of all the varieties of "thought disorders" in the ordinarily observable processes of mind:

Everybody knows the state between sleeping and waking, in which half-realized and half-seen thoughts and images follow one another in endless succession without any conscious volition of the individual . . . abnormal mental conditions consist largely in an intensification of this state of reverie.

When attention is paid to the borderland of mental activity, between sleeping and waking, or between confusion and alert wakefulness, one begins to find the germination point of dreams.

There is a close association between dreaming and the manic state. Custance called it an interpenetration: "I wake up and my mind carries on the same train of thought which has been begun in a dream. I go to sleep and go on dreaming about the subjects I have been thinking about" (1954, p. 58). There are a number of gradations of mental states between sleeping, dreaming and waking which might be called transitional states. But Custance observed that in mania such states of consciousness are less separate and freely intermingle.

As many people have suspected, mania is marked by the activation of dream states of consciousness within the apparent state of wakeful activity. Such dream states become mixed with ongoing sensations. But instead of taking place within vague and wandering reverie, in mania, thoughts and images come under the sway of sensory intensification and are vivid,



compelling and “often so overpowering that they cause marked physical sensations” (1954, p. 16). This *mixed* state of mind allows underlying urges or instincts the freedom to express themselves.

. . . the horses of passion and instinct have run away. The immense enjoyment that they have in doing so governs one’s whole being. All brakes or clogs on the whole functioning of the psycho-physical mechanism are removed; the channels of instinct are freed; the libido can flow where it will (1954, p. 59).

The resulting state of mind is experienced as “magical” and beyond conventional patterns and constraints. Its possibilities appear to be limitless.

## SYNCHRONICITY AND UNION

Why, we might ask, did Custance become so enthralled with the phenomenon of “synchronicity” when he was already so familiar with the disastrous results it had on his life? Simply because, once having embarked upon a state of mania, he was not interested in restraining it. Besides, the usual manic amnesia for the results of previous episodes was in effect. There was simply no time to reflect. Events were rushing, Custance felt, to ever-increasing expansions of consciousness and understanding. He recognized his mind as being extremely powerful and he did not feel it to be the proper decorum of mania to forcefully direct it. It was more important for him that mind be directed only by the natural and elemental powers in whose company one dwells while in the state of mania.

A synchronous event for Custance was one in which the content of his thoughts instantly manifested in reality. The scenario which he pictured in his mind came to pass. An upsurge of wind, the sound of thunder, words spoken to him, all might occur at the very same time he thought of them. A syn-

chronous event could be anything he thought about which then had an echo in reality. He believed that the meaning of such events was much more important than any psychological discussion of coincidence or precognition. Synchronous events were confirmations that he was getting somewhere and they led him to moments of great confidence.

It was out of such confidence that Custance composed his metaphysical system. He called it his "Theory of Actuality." The basic inspiration for the theory arose in a vision:

It was the only pure hallucination I have ever experienced; though I have had many visions, they have always taken the form of what are technically known as "illusions." I woke up about five o'clock to find a strange, rather unearthly light in the room. As my natural drowsiness wore off, the excited feelings of the day before returned and grew more intense. The light grew brighter; I began, I remember, to inhale deep gulps of air, which eased the tension in some way. Then suddenly the vision burst upon me.

How shall I describe it? It was perfectly simple. The great male and female organs of love hung there in mid-air; they seemed infinitely far away from me and infinitely near at the same time. I can see them now, pulsing rhythmically in a circular clockwise motion, each revolution taking approximately the time of a human pulse or heartbeat, as though the vision was associated in some way with the circulation of the blood. I was not sexually excited; from the first the experience seemed to me to be holy. What I saw was the Power of Love—the name came to me at once—the Power that I knew somehow to have made all universes, past, present and to come, to be utterly infinite, an infinity of infinities, to have conquered the Power of Hate, its opposite, and thus created the sun, the stars, the moon, the planets, the earth, light, life, joy and peace, never-ending (Custance, 1952, p. 46).

He considered this a revelation from the depths of his unconscious of how the world works and of the very essence of his mind. He was in love with the universe. Eventually, a complex philosophical statement arose out of this. It was the product of what Custance called "manic consciousness." The Berlin experiment was designed to further it and to put it to a test.

But things were falling into disarray: "After all, I was car-

rying out a rather dangerous experiment in Berlin of letting myself go into mania with a view to seeing if I could control it. I found I could, but only with some difficulty and strain." He said he felt like a man who had exhausted himself in riotous living, and on top of that he was beginning to have encounters with the police. He had spent all his money, primarily by squandering it in ostentatious displays: "I seemed to know that I must spend generously without calculating and that the money would be provided." The British military police intervened and gave him safe passage to Paris.

In Paris he experienced the pinnacle of his mania and also its subtle turning point. He felt cheerful and victorious, moving freely, as he put it, between the positive and negative forces of the universe. Now he was communing with figures "beyond the barrier of mortality." Because he felt he had bridged the opposites, other worlds had opened up to him.

. . . my state of elation is itself a bridging of or making contact between the opposites—the watertight compartment of individuality, the hard shells that surround our egos, tend to disappear. I am not I, but many; those I meet are not merely themselves but many others too (1954, p. 113).

Arrogance and aggression were soon to arise and signaled the deterioration of Custance's longed-for freedom from his limiting individual personality. It is a typical and painful paradox of mania that while seeking to go beyond ego one lapses into bullying egocentricity. An embarrassing event highlighted his self-preoccupation. While in a state of elation he managed to have an interview with the aged and revered Catholic theologian Gabriel Marcel. Custance had looked forward to the meeting but found himself announcing to Marcel that he (Custance) was mad and glorying in it and "instead of discussing his work and learning something I talked egotistically about my own. It was absurd." Marcel cautioned and counselled him about a "tendency to use my lunacy as an evasion of responsibility, as a license to remain a kind of Peter

Pan.”

Custance felt somewhat humiliated in contrast to his usual manic liberty from a sense of shame, sin or guilt. But he was not about to let anything get him down. The world still had great enjoyment for him: “The sense of being in mystical communion with all things is at the very root of the manic state in which I am at the present.” He sums up his manic practice: “Here in Paris, as earlier in Berlin, it is perfectly clear to me that the manic state involves a kind of wild plunge into the depths, a letting-go of all restrictions on the great forces of instinct and the Unconscious.” Since the time he had studied the works of Carl Jung, years before, the Unconscious had become deified by Custance.

He continued to feel himself rising to “unimagined heights”: “I imagined that I was starting a movement to end all movements, the movement without an “ism,” something natural and spontaneous which will spread like wildfire of its own inner power.” What had begun as a political motivation to join the English and Soviet cultures, expanded during his mania to a larger one of “setting the whole world right,” and finally ended up as a religious mission. In all he had spent a whirlwind five days in Paris and it had “passed like the dream it was.”

## THE AFTERMATH

Immediately on his return home Custance recognized that he was under surveillance by his family but nevertheless he was elated, “owing to a certain feeling of pride at my apparent success in having at last taken the manic bull by the horns and tamed him.” But he noticed a tendency to become infuriated when anyone countered him with rational arguments. Then another “synchronous” event occurred: he received an invitation to visit Carl Jung in Zurich and, according to Custance,

just at the time that Jung was working out his own theory of synchronicity. His family was naturally apprehensive and had grave doubts about setting him loose on the Continent once more, but they "finally agreed that, mad though I might be, the opportunity could not be allowed to slip."

The meeting with Jung went much better than the one with Gabriel Marcel. In spite of the apparent differences there was much comradery in discussions of paranormal phenomena and he "left Professor Jung and Zurich feeling that something marvelous had happened. Never in my life had I had an interview that impressed me so much."

But as soon as Custance returned to his family he began trying to "work minor miracles" involving what he felt to be his gift in understanding synchronicity. They were of doubtful outcome, however, and so he decided "to adopt my old lunatic technique of relaxing, listening to inner voices, and accepting wholly extraneous and irrelevant indications from the outer world, such as the flight of birds, or going towards other objects which attracted my attention for completely illogical reasons."

As hard as he tried to hang onto his sense of elation and power he found it slipping away. For the next several months he struggled against depression: "What nonsense the whole thing was, just a grandiose delusion of a lunatic. . . . After every bout of manic elation there comes in my experience an unpleasant awakening to hard facts, a morning after the night before. The bills have to be paid; the chickens sent out on flights of inflated imagination come home to roost" (1954, p. 148). In this stage of disillusionment he felt completely abandoned by the powers of mania and had no enthusiasm for life itself.

There followed about six months of depression during which Custance was able to remain at home. But then another manic episode occurred two years after the onset of the Berlin experiment. Once again, "the lights went up" and he became

involved with the same old political and magical preoccupations and self-absorptive techniques as before. Once again he tried to ride the wild energy of mania and control its outcome. As he said to his exhausted wife, "Even you must admit that I got away with it in Berlin and Paris, and what I have done once I can do again." But he did not get away with it this time. He reveled in a tremendous display of energy which soon became extravagant and imperious behavior. Again, he squandered large amounts of dwindling family money on political schemes, but it was when he tried to force an interview with the Prime Minister that he was arrested, put under observation, certified and hospitalized. After about three months in the hospital he said, "Gradually I came down to earth."

"Rare indeed are the madmen equal to madness." So concluded Henri Michaux (1963), one of the most sensitive explorers of psychotic states of mind. Custance would certainly have agreed. At one time he thought *he* was such a rarity but in the end he felt this as a presumption, an egoistic tendency at very root of mania running wild. He said,

No feature of elated insane states is more disturbing to look back on than their appalling ego-centricity. Whatever "actuality," whatever truth and even wisdom may lie in the abnormal apprehensions of the Unconscious which crowd upon the lunatic, the idea that he is something wonderful, that he occupies a privileged position in the centre of things, must surely be regarded as wholly false and delusionary. And yet no idea is more insistent; delusions of grandeur are the commonest of all (1954, p. 187).

## MANIC CONSCIOUSNESS

The experience of mania is clearly an impressive physical and mental drama and its bodily and perceptual effects can be quite easily measured and calculated. The metaphysical

insights are rooted in tangible experiences and these are impressive and difficult to resist. One elderly woman I know, who had experienced about twenty manic episodes, would, at the approach of manic changes, throw away her otherwise badly needed glasses and announce her "return to life."

But anyone who has experienced mania knows that these changes are transitory and that they never yield an eternal state of health and happiness, which was the promise of mania. Yet so powerful is the force of desire to transform oneself that many people seize the opportunity of manic consciousness and risk their lives and their families (Podvoll, 1983). Custance continually attested to the enthrallments of mania, sounding much like Thomas De Quincy, singing the praises of the blissful state of opium intoxication: "In its favourable aspect it is a strange and lovely land beyond individuality, and incidentally also beyond good and evil, since the opposites are reconciled and the peace that passes all understanding reigns supreme" (1954, p. 4). This situation has all the potentialities for an addiction—to ecstasy, personal power, and the presumption one takes from that.

The manic adventures of John Custance points to a greed—both psychological and spiritual—for the pleasure and magic of manic consciousness, which gathers in strength through repeated episodes of mania. The steps taken to induce manic states, the "practices," which are meant to disorder habitual consciousness and modes of thinking, add fuel to the fire and are often accomplished with a sense of workman-like pride (Podvoll, 1979).

The resulting manic consciousness is the seed state of mind and the initial "surge of power" out of which can blossom a great variety of psychotic elations and excitements. For example, signs of manic consciousness manifesting as outright mania, or other psychotic variations, have been noted following head trauma, hallucinogenic ingestion, calcium replacement, vitamin B12 deficiency, the use of some medications

and the withdrawal of others, and even during simulated deep-diving experiments. The list of conditions which contribute to the upsurge of manic consciousness is extremely diverse and is continually growing. But most importantly, almost all psychotic occurrences of whatever species, can be seen to be infused—at their origin or during their recycling—by manic consciousness.

Manic consciousness is almost always reported to have a dream-like quality. Some people who have experienced it call it the “dream time,” the “dream world” or the “dream machine.” The sense of time, space, cause and effect; the availability of memory images; the way outward perceptions are woven into the ongoing scenario; the shifting of experience between subject and object; the play with words and puns; the electrical sense of power and magic; and, above all, the sense of conviction in the reality of what is in front of one’s eyes—are all marks of both manic and dream consciousness (Beers, 1981). It could be said that manic consciousness borrows or perhaps commandeers the mechanics of dreaming.

From Custance’s observations the beginning of mania was like having a fuse blow out in a fuse box. The lights will darken in some places but the ones left on seem brilliantly illuminating. “When the light of sense goes out, but with a flash that has revealed the invisible world,” are words of the poet William Wordsworth which Custance said most precisely expressed his experience.

Custance felt strongly that a continuing thread of “wisdom” lasted beyond his mania and in spite of all his doubts during depression. “As the result of my experiences the whole universe has changed about me, and it will never be quite the same again” (1954, p. 2). There is an obvious brilliance within manic consciousness and there is a general agreement among those who have experienced it, that religious truths are realized, *the* religious truths, the ones of the desert fathers and the great mystics. For Custance, those truths involved a con-



viction in the gentleness, purity, and sacredness of this world and of his participation in it. That is what lead Perceval to say, after his fact-finding tours of English asylums, "There may be faithful witnesses locked up." Custance believed that his recovery depended on these memories, even though he could no longer experience them. Others have said the same (Boisen, 1936; Beers, 1981).

## EGO AND RECOVERY

From the point of view of recovery, there is a crucial problem with manic consciousness: a lack of awareness of other people's feelings and states of mind, as if one were incapable of any interpersonal exchange. Even though for brief periods one may feel an almost supernormal sensitivity to other people's emotional states, largely one's attention is fixated on one's own illuminated displays and insights and so the ability to learn from or identify with someone else is obstructed. As it has been frequently expressed by people who recover from mania, "I was incapable of seeing myself from the outside." Because of this disorder of awareness many misinterpretations and painful mistakes are made. No better example of this can be found than the way in which one in mania can alienate friends and other people (upon whose help they may be depending) by insensitive and imperious actions.

On recovering from mania one begins to recognize and is shocked by the enormity of the misinterpretations made during manic consciousness, not only of other people's advice but also of the instructions given one by hallucinated voices. Often one hears only the opposite of what was intended. My clinical colleagues and I have jokingly referred to such a person as being in the grip of "right brain logic."

Custance and many others in mania have been appalled by this tendency, but only after the fact. Custance felt that this

tendency was forcefully exposed during manic consciousness and it suggested to him how energy operates—in the mind, the body and the universe. Instead of treating it as an interference, he incorporated it as one of his mind manipulations, in his mania-inducing practices. He called it the “wholehearted acceptance of the rejected opposite.” John Perceval on the other hand, felt this tendency to react to the “hidden opposite” in all things to be a natural human perversity, even though he indulged it himself during mania, which eventually sabotages manic consciousness.

Everyone who has endured mania agrees that, whatever else mania is, it is also living dangerously. One is sporting with powers, energies, intensified mind, amplified senses, unleashed egoistic impulses, and one becomes vulnerable to seen and unseen influences of all kinds. What begins for anyone as a glimpse of vastness, unity, interdependence, transcendence, “god consciousness,” or whatever other name one uses for it, ends in the confusion of self-aggrandizement. Manic consciousness becomes degraded because it never heard of or pays no heed to ancient knowledge and counsel: “You cannot own the power and the magic of this world. It is always available, but it does not belong to anyone” (Trungpa, 1984). In essence manic energy is new territory and does not belong to ego. But as manic consciousness usurped the mechanism of dreaming, so manic consciousness, impersonal by nature, comes to be appropriated by the process of ego.

The almost simultaneous seduction by and incorporation of fascinating stimuli by ego becomes the critical locus and battleground of mania. Clarity turns to confusion as one gets stuck in, or left behind by, an intriguing cascade of sensations and thoughts which have been triggered by the manic energy. Finally, one finds oneself abandoned and exhausted in the wake of its rush, and is left with none of the freshness and brilliance that had been so enticing.

The one in mania tries to claim as his own an energy too

impersonal and too powerful, not for him to appreciate, but for him to manipulate, in the illusory hope of possessing it. The subtle grasping tendency of ego is the vital point of mania. At this point one's clarity or confusion will depend on how much one has trained oneself *not to get stuck* in the thought processes which, with manic speed, are ever-proliferating and expounding upon the attributes of one's self.

The last that is heard of John Custance is that he was living at home with his family, hard at work trying to restore the family farm, raising animals, and delighting in the birth of his first grandchild. In his manic episodes, a sense of simplicity, earthy appreciation, and mundane magic had always been noted. Islands of clarity had been his most authentic and cherished moments of mania. His last published words in a chapter called "Down to Earth," speak of his more balanced state of mind, still finding pleasure in the intensity of ordinary reality:

There has been a thunderstorm, but it is a lovely evening now, with the ley in front of the window shining in the sun with that peculiar yellowish green that so often makes the glory of a sunset. On the ley a cock and hen pheasant symbolize that unity of "positive" and "negative" in a completed whole which still so infuriatingly eludes me. But instead of complaining I should be thankful that I have caught a glimpse of it all (1954, p. 207).

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