

Inebriate of Air: Gas, Magic and Omnipotence of Thought in the Nineteenth Century

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Omnipotence of Thoughts

Freud identifies magical thinking with what he calls ‘omnipotence of thoughts’. He believes that this attitude is a return to what he calls the ‘animistic’ phase, which is characterized, as he puts it in ‘The Uncanny’ (1919),

by the idea that the world was peopled with the spirits of human beings; by the subject's narcissistic overvaluation of his own mental processes; by the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts and the technique of magic based on that belief; by the attribution to various outside persons and things of carefully graded magical powers, or ‘*mana*’; as well as by all the other creations with the help of which man, in the unrestricted narcissism of that stage of development, strove to fend off the manifest prohibitions of reality. (Freud 1988, 362-3)

The phrase ‘omnipotence of thoughts’ is not Freud’s own coinage, but that of the patient he called the ‘Rat Man’. As he explains in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), the Rat Man believed in his capacity to affect reality through his thoughts:

He had coined the phrase as an explanation of all the strange and uncanny events by which he, like others afflicted with the same illness, seemed to be pursued. If he thought of someone, he would be sure to meet that very person immediately afterwards, as though by magic. If he suddenly asked after the health of an acquaintance whom he had not seen for a long time, he would hear that he had just died, so that it would look as though a telepathic message had arrived from him. If, without any really serious intention, he swore at some stranger, he might be sure that the man would die soon afterwards, so that he would feel responsible for his death. (Freud 1985, 143-4)

As the belief that thoughts have the power to affect the world, indeed, as the mistaking of one’s thoughts *for* the world, magical thinking might not seem at first sight to cover the case of superstitious, ritual or magical behaviours, in which actions rather than thoughts seem to be to the fore.

After all, a magical action – walking under a ladder, breaking a mirror - may well be thought to have consequences that are entirely separate from the thoughts that one might have about them. We may suggest, however, that, in reality, such actions are a species of thought-in-action, in that they belong to and confirm a magical theory of the world that represents a triumph over it, a subordination of the world to thought, only here made autonomous of thinking itself.

Freud may inherit something of Frazer's admiration for, and even partial identification with the magical stage of human development. It is plain that, although Frazer regarded the magical stage of human thought as more primitive than the religious, he respected the rationality of magical thinking, cracked rationality though it might be; for at least magical thinking posited a world of invariant physical laws applying indifferently to all forms of life, physical and spiritual, as opposed to a world governed by the randomness, rancour or toddler-like tantrums of supernatural beings. Magic, like science, depends upon the power of thought both to apply and subordinate itself to law.

One problem for Freud and for psychoanalysis is that he so often and so intensely practises his own version of the omnipotence of thoughts – indeed psychoanalysis itself is a prime candidate for the diagnosis of omnipotent-thought syndrome. Psychoanalysis is the talking cure, but Freud himself points to the importance of magical belief in the powers of language as an instance of omnipotence of thoughts. Psychoanalysis itself crosses the divide between thinking and material doing, and seems subject to the most florid form of magical thinking, for example in its belief in the power of unconscious thought to bring about symptoms in the body, a principle which Freud hoped might turn out to be a psychoanalytic confirmation of Lamarckianism, or the power of circumstances to bring about heritable changes in an organism. In a letter to Karl Abraham of 11 November 1917, Freud wrote 'The idea is to put Lamarck entirely on our own ground and to show that the necessity that according to him creates and transforms organs is nothing but the power of unconscious ideas over one's own body, of which we see remnants in hysteria, in short, the omnipotence of thoughts'. Of course, Freud is here attributing the omnipotence of thoughts to the hysteric, but, insofar as he accords it the very capacity that the hysteric seems to want to act out, he makes actual, or acts as if he thought he could, the as-if of the hysteric's magical theatre.

Thinking About Thinking

Freud suggests that in the animistic period (religion without gods), man has untroubled confidence in himself and his powers. This idea recurs throughout psychoanalytic writing and psychoanalytically-inflected

ethnographic writing on magical practices and procedures. René Spitz sees the move from the magical to the religious stage as involving the idea of transcendence, with its associated requirement of a split between the subject and object. By contrast, he affirms, 'magical thinking knows nothing of transcendence. In the beginning, primitive man does not sense any difference at all between subject and object. Later, to be sure, he objectifies the external world, but he himself is on the same footing with it. Even in the most highly developed magical cults, the basic principle remains the possibility of *coercing* the godhead' (Spitz 1972, 2).

But what happens when thought's omnipotence turns on itself? In more recent times, magical thinking has become reflexive, involving, not only the power of thought over the world, but also the coercive power of thought over itself, along with (the thought of) the power of others' thoughts over one's own. Freud does not neglect this question entirely. Indeed, he derives the feeling of the uncanny from an uncomfortable return of the idea of the omnipotence of thoughts, as though the idea of omnipotence represented some threat to the more modest, constrained attitudes of 'the scientific view of the universe', which 'no longer affords any room for human omnipotence' and in which 'men have acknowledged their smallness and submitted resignedly to death and to the other necessities of nature' (Freud 1985, 146). The uncanny is thus the result of a kind of interference of different modes or epochs of thought.

Perhaps the most striking thing about magical thinking is that, for the most part, it does not, as Freud and Frazer might have wished, constitute omnipotence of thoughts. Magical thinking is typically expressed in habits, rituals, obsessions, in which, far from being free to exercise its dominion over the world, thinking is subjected to austere and inexorable regulation. Magical thinking may be powerful, but it is by no means free. Magical thinking seems, in fact, to be based less on free omnipotence of thoughts, than on a complex and ambivalent bringing together of power, passivity and persecution. Some psychoanalytic case-histories have stressed the alienating effect on patients who suspected themselves of being able to control reality by their thoughts, and regarded themselves as the helpless victims of that power. – for example Theodor Reik in 'On the Effect of Unconscious Death Wishes' (1913) (Reik 1978).

Magical thinking is usually mechanical, reminding us forcibly of the shared etymological roots of magic and machinery. This is nowhere more the case than when thinking itself is caught up in the magical economy of power. In 1919, Victor Tausk described the operations of what he called the Influencing Machine (1991). In the kinds of cases of which Tausk's theory makes sense, the sufferer believes their thoughts are being manipulated,

often at a considerable distance, by a complex apparatus. Perhaps for the first time, at the end of the eighteenth century, delusions of thought control began to take a systematic character. There may have been no specific machine imagined as part of the delusion, but their very systematicity suggested the importance of the idea of machinery. The first systematic delusions involving actual machinery for thought control are those of James Tilly Matthews, as recorded by John Haslam, in his *Illustrations of Madness* (1810). Since then, the influencing machine has had a glorious, almost unbroken career in the delusions of psychotics. Tausk believed that that influencing machine was ultimately to be identified with the genitals of the delusive subject, but there seems no reason not to take the influencing machine candidly on its own account, as an image of thought itself, abducted from its thinker, and acting at an imaginary distance from, yet on, itself. There is reason to suspect that, during the eighteenth century, thinking indeed came more and more to think of itself in terms of machinery – the subject as Rochester’s ‘reasoning engine’.

Accepting Freud’s definition of magic as omnipotence of thoughts, but concentrating on the magic of thoughts rather than the thought of magic, I want to consider the ways in which thought strives and is constrained to exercise its coercions on itself during the later nineteenth century.

A Matter of Thought

Despite enduring philosophical rumours to the contrary, it is not very easy for human beings to entertain an immediate apprehension to their own thinking. ‘The more I think, the less I am’, as Michel Serres has percipiently observed (Serres 1999, 12). Thinking of thinking is a magical operation, in that it requires a subject to constitute itself as an object, while not surrendering its subjective privileges. For thinking to make of itself an object, it seems to need a material substrate, defined as ‘that which underlies, or serves as the basis or foundation of, an immaterial thing, condition, or activity’. There is one particular substrate for the immaterial action of thought which has had prestige across many cultures and languages, namely the air and, from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, its many gaseous correlates. Like thought, the air has power without presence. It is invisible, but has visible effects. Oddly then, in serving as the substrate for thought, the air succeeds precisely to the degree that it does not in fact function as a substance, but rather a quasi-substance, a substance that, like thought itself, is next to nothing, not quite there. Air is a thought-form. It is a substrate for that which has no evident substrate. Air is always more or less than air: more because it is always in some measure the idea as well as the simple stuff of air, less because it is never fully present in or as itself, and so only ever air apparent. In this non-adequacy to itself, it resembles the thought it figures, and is thus at once adequate and fittingly

inadequate for that figuring. For this reason the powers of air are not just imagined or imaginary; they are materialisations of the power of imagination itself.

Trances of the Blast

From the end of the eighteenth century, advances in pneumatic chemistry made the old affinities between air and thought both more various and more accostingly actual. The late eighteenth century saw a sudden breakthrough in the understanding of the chemistry of gases, with the discoveries of Black, Cavendish, Lavoisier and Priestley, and the isolation of oxygen, carbon dioxide and other gases. Following the establishment of the Pneumatic Institute in Bristol, by Thomas Beddoes and Humphrey Davy, oxygen, the principle of life, was invested with huge therapeutic powers, with air-baths and other therapies being vigorously marketed. At the end of the eighteenth century, chemical methods began to be developed for impregnating water with bubbles. Carbonated water, with bubbles of carbon dioxide or 'carbonic acid' as it was known until the early twentieth century, was originally marketed as medicinal. When one C. Searle patented an effervescent drink infused with nitrous oxide in 1839, he marketed it as 'Oxygenous Aerated Water'. He stressed that it was the oxygen carried in the compound that vitalised;

it exhilarates, by producing a positively increased quantity of the natural animating spirit of the system. The oxygen, or source of vital spirit, existing in this gas in the greater proportion of eight to three over its existence in the atmosphere, and being thus richer in oxygen, furnishing to those who take it a more abundant supply of animal spirits. And hence the vivid idea, the unusual disposition to muscular activity, and joyousness of feeling experienced, as noticed by Sir H. Davy and others who have tried it; as well as the cheerfulness and high spirits which succeed its use throughout the day. (Searle 1839, 7-8)

The water was warranted to be effective in cases of languor, debility, depression, constipation, typhus, cholera, palsy, asthma, scrofula, leprosy, scurvy, as well as 'torpor of the brain from moral dejection' and 'female obstructions' (Searle 1839, 9).

The whole century was becoming, as Emily Dickinson declared herself to be 'inebriate of air' (Dickinson 1984, 99). This belief in the vitalising powers of air broadened into the Victorian cult of ventilation and fresh air. The nineteenth century saw a struggle between an older fear of exposure to the air, and campaigns to promote more vigorous and healthy forms of that

exposure. On both sides of the dichotomy, we may detect a magical aggrandisement of the powers of air, as the bringer either of health or of infirmity. Air-thinking exhibited a characteristic compounding of omnipotence and anxiety, which is nowhere more marked than in the superstitious Victorian fear of draughts and specifically the belief that exposure to small currents of air will cause illness, a mild and magical delusion that remains almost universal. Many felt that the very swaddling whereby urban dwellers of the nineteenth century sought to avoid exposure to cold air actually made them hyper-sensitive to its effects: Samuel Sexton wrote in *Harper's* in 1879 that

living in overheated apartments during the cold season (the temperature greatly exceeding the healthy limit of 65° to 70° Fahrenheit) develops a sensitiveness of the system, and therefore predisposes to attacks of catarrh. An excess of clothing is no less obnoxious than the foregoing, furs being especially dangerous in our changeable climate, as they are liable to be worn around the chest and neck in moderate weather, overheating the body, and thus increasing the liability to colds. (Sexton 1879-80, 615)

Some saw the fear of draughts as in itself pathological: Annie Paysan Call wrote in 1894 that ‘The fresh-air-instinct is abnormally developed with some of us, but only with some. The popular fear of draughts is one cause of its loss. The fear of a draught will cause a contraction, the contraction will interfere with the circulation, and a cold is the natural result’ (Call 1894, 20-1). The ideal was vigorous and unimpeded circulation: the obstructions that produced stoppage of airflow and the irregularities that produced unnatural intensifications of airflow were equivalent dangers. These ideals emerge clearly in the discussions inaugurated in 1878 by a pamphlet by John Marshall arguing the advantages of circular hospital wards (Marshall 1878), which would prevent the formation of draughts, since ‘“having no blank ends like an oblong ward [it] .. would receive light, air and wind from every direction”’, and ‘“sharp draughts across the ward, down draughts on the walls opposite and relatively near to open windows ... would not exist”’ (quoted, Taylor 1988, 427).

Perhaps the strongest and longest-lasting of the magical dispositions towards the air bequeathed to us by the nineteenth century is the intense fetishism of the breath. George Catlin provoked and fanned concern about the enfeebling effects of breathing through the mouth rather than through the nose, in his *Breath of Life* (1861), reissued as *Shut Your Mouth and Save Your Life* (1873). For others, breathing became a master-metaphor for the health and corruption of the body politic:

The social lungs are so compressed - the breath of fresh knowledge is taken in with such small and feeble inspirations, and the state of the blood of the body-politic and social, is so paralytic and foul, such a poisonous sphere is given forth at every letting-out of the breath from the asthmatic, or else hectic lungs of the public pulpit, platform and press, that the social circle is impregnated with poisonous effluvia; till the whole body-politics is on the verge of a consumption of the lungs (Robinson 1869, 23)

Mesmerism, spiritualism and esoteric religion generated their own forms of respiratory discipline and promise of pneumatic bliss in parallel with these developments. Following Emmanuel Swedenborg, who described his techniques of psychic breathing, Victorian mediums and subjects of mesmeric trance claimed to be able to replace their vulgarly physiological breathing with a breathing of the spirit. At the same time, the physical operations of the breath were much in evidence in séances, with the libidinous rasping and panting of the medium entering the trance, and the various ways in which breath might seem to be visibly condensed into exotic mists and plasmas. The sudden ripples of cold air betokening an otherworldly visitant (the spiritual apotheosis of the dreaded Draught), the film that flutters in the grate, the flickerings and abrupt extinctions of candle-flames by ghostly breezes, the tremulous muslin, the gusts of perfume, the whisper-music wafted on the air, the auras and aromas, the flaps and freaks and general, floating afflatus of it all, enact the kind of magical pneumatology which is parodied and bleakly diminished in Eliot's 'Gerontion': Madame de Tornquist, in the dark room/Shifting the candles; Fräulein von Kulp /Who turned in the hall, one hand on the door. /Vacant shuttles /Weave the wind. I have no ghosts,/An old man in a draughty house/Under a windy knob.' The growing popularity of Eastern religions and mystical traditions among theosophists and others towards the end of the nineteenth century spread the news of the Hindu science of the five breaths, *prana*, *apana*, *samana*, *udana* and *vyana*, to the typists of Tottenham and the pale clerks of Crouch End (Ewing 1901). The atmospheric science which grew up during the nineteenth century was paralleled and parodied in the complex astral topographies to be found in the writings of Madame Blavatsky and others. The motto for all this practice and doctrine might have been adapted from Leontes: 'If this be magic, let it be an art/Lawful as breathing.'

Anaesthetic Revelation

Magical thinking about the air was also expressed in attitudes towards the gases of which chemical knowledge increased, from almost a standing start, over the course of the nineteenth century. Thought and matter, vision and

the body, intertwined in a literal fashion in the cults that grew up around two gases in particular. One was ether, which named the universal, inconceivably attenuated medium which ran through the cosmos and transmitted light, heat, magnetism and the other forces. But the cosmic ether of the physicists had a bodily complement, in the idea of animal magnetism and, more literally, the idea, advanced by Benjamin Ward Richardson (1874) of a putative nervous fluid that run through the body and was responsible for its life, force and well-being. The fact that ether was also the name of a volatile chemical, diethyl ether, first described in 1540, which was used as an anaesthetic from 1846, when it was marketed as 'letheon', and, less officially, as an intoxicant, seemed to give this most magical, or imaginary of substances a material embodiment, which could be felt, smelled, and tasted (Connor 2004).

The mid-century indulgence in ether-ingestion recapitulated the craze for the inhalation of nitrous oxide that was a feature of the turn of the nineteenth century. Nitrous oxide was first seriously investigated by the young Humphrey Davy in collaboration with Thomas Beddoes, who had also experimented with the medical uses of ether in 1794. As well as subjecting the gas to detailed chemical investigation. Davy also inhaled it regularly and in epic quantities to see its effects on himself. Beddoes and Davy had made the acquaintance of Coleridge and Southey, who were among their more enthusiastic experimental subjects.

Laughing gas parties began to be common in the 1820s, along with public demonstrations in theatres and playhouses (Smith 1982, 34-40). In the cases both of nitrous oxide and of ether, the substances which altered the tone of the mind became alternative images of mind itself, anticipating the way in which the air in general would acquire, not just a kind of life, but a kind of intelligence, a thinking air. James Wilkinson saw in the breath the very union of body and mind, averring that

[T]here is a breast in all of us where the mind and the body meet and conjoin in a compact which endures throughout life: a breast of affection between the mind of the body and the body of the mind... your thoughts and breaths are not only correspondent, but instantaneously coincident: if you think deeply you breathe deeply; if you hold thought you hold breath. (Wilkinson 1893, 77, 78)

As the century drew out, magical power passed from the air itself - traditionally the haunt of demons and carrier of malign influences - to what the air transmitted, in the secret ministry of magnetics, radio waves, X-rays, radioactivity and other kinds of unseen influence and undulation. The air

seemed to become a *res cogitans*, agitated and angelically alive with transmitted thoughts and feelings, signs and messages.

Two kinds of magical thinking attached to the inhalation of nitrous oxide. First there was the belief that it extended one's powers of sympathy and understanding. For the bibber of the gas, thought was magically extended to all quarters of the universe, and users typically reported experiences of expanded, even cosmic awareness. The second effect was a powerful identification of one's thoughts with the gaseous agent of the altered state of consciousness, sometimes accompanied by a grandiose conviction that the cosmos itself had been volatilised into pure thought. During one of his N₂O benders, Humphrey Davy had proclaimed "*Nothing exists but thoughts! - the universe is composed of impressions, ideas, pleasures and pains!*" (Davy 1800, 487-9). William Drummond's poem *The Pleasures of Benevolence* (1835) lauded man's angelic powers, as they were both spread and tempered by benevolence, claiming that he

thro' ether soars
 Sublime, on surer wing than that which bore
 The youth of Crete, and melted in the sun:
 With meteors travels, and with lightnings plays.
 From gaseous worlds he draws seraphic breath...
 Or heavenward soaring on the wings of thought,
 By science plumed, beyond the comet's range,
 Sweeps through infinitude (Drummond 1835, 27-8)

It was not until later in the century that the anaesthetic powers of nitrous oxide were recognised and its use became common in dentistry and surgery. But visionary adherents of the gas remained. William Ramsay lectured on his experiments with the gas to the Society for Psychical Research, confirming Humphrey Davy's experiences in his report of 'an overwhelming mental impression that he alone was a self-centred existence on which passing events made little or no impression. He became fully convinced of the truth of Bishop Berkeley's theory that all external objects are merely impressions on the mind, and have in themselves no real existence' (Ramsay 1893, 94).

But the most serious and sustained claim on behalf of nitrous oxide had come twenty years earlier. In 1874, a prolific letter writer and opinionist on politics, metaphysics and spiritualism named Benjamin Paul Blood published a pamphlet entitled *The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy*, which was the outcome of 14 years of reflection and experiment on laughing gas which he had first experienced in 1860 in the dentist's chair. His pamphlet came to the attention of William James, who reviewed it attentively in the *Atlantic Monthly* and then decided to explore for himself the philosophical

utility of the gas. His account of his experiences appeared as a long, unlikely appendix to an essay entitled ‘On Some Hegelisms’ he published in the journal *Mind* in 1882. Having soberly set out in the preceding essay his reasons for doubting the prospect of universal synthesis of opposites held out by Hegelian philosophy, James reported that the first effect of the gas was ‘to make peal through me with unutterable power the conviction that Hegelism was true after all’ (James 1882, 206). The gas dissolved into unity all the dichotomies and contradictions on which James was wont to insist in his un-inebriated condition. ‘The centre and periphery of things seem to come together. The ego and its objects, the *meum* and the *tuum*, are one’ (James 1882, 206). James was utterly overtaken by the conviction

that every opposition, among whatsoever things, vanishes in a higher unity in which it is based; that all contradictions, so-called, are of a common kind; that unbroken continuity is of the essence of being; and that we are literally in the midst of an *infinite*, to perceive the existence of which is the utmost we can attain. (James 1882, 206)

James was disappointed to find that his infinite apprehensions yielded little in the way of interesting philosophical material. Instead, his scribblings turned around the kind of magical word-play that would come to be thought characteristic of the schizophrenic, in which the decomposing of words did duty for a properly philosophical dissolution of distinctions, or, in James’s terms, ‘the mind went through the mere *form* of recognising sameness in identity by contrasting the same word with itself, differently emphasised, or shorn of its initial letter’ (James 1882, 207). James treats us to some of the relics of his rapture: ‘What’s mistake but a kind of take?...Within the *extensity* that ‘extreme’ contains is contained the ‘*extreme*’ of *intensity*...Reconciliation – *econciliation!*... By George, nothing but othing!... That sounds like nonsense, but it is pure *onsense!*’ (James 1882, 207). The only quarter-plausible formulation found amid this fairy gold is: ‘There are no differences but differences of degree between different degrees of difference and no difference’ (James 1882, 207), which James is forced to acknowledge ‘has the true hegelian ring, being in fact a regular *sich als sich auf sich selbst beziehende Negativität!*’ (James 1882, 207).

The suggestion that Hegelianism will seem imperiously rational to the spaced-out gas-head seems like a gratuitous and grotesquely inconsequential swipe, especially given the skewering Hegel had endured in the essay that precedes this appendix. But there is in fact a strong continuity between the essay and its inebriate appendix, albeit one that is retroactively disclosed by the latter. Against the universal syntheses demanded and proclaimed by Hegel, James urged in the preceding essay his vision of a world of which ‘the parts seem, as has been said, to be shot out of a pistol at us...Arbitrary,

foreign, jolting, discontinuous – are the adjectives by which we are tempted to describe it’ (James 1882, 187). Nevertheless, there are some forms of synthesis available, though these have only the weak form of a ground or screen which allows these jostlingly heterogeneous phenomena to subsist. James distinguishes three such screens, namely, space, time and consciousness; but he devotes most of his time to the first. James’s scheme requires the weakly synthesising envelope of space in order that the discontinuous objects of the world may lie together, but apart, in what he calls ‘absolute nextness’ (James 1882, 187) or ‘partaking’ (James 1882, 191).

Hegelianism revolts against this ‘partial community of partially independent powers’ (James 1882, 191), or, its more politically-accented version, ‘a republic of semi-detached consciousnesses’ (James 1882, 204). In Hegel’s system, according to James, every identity must conceal and imply a contradiction, while every contradiction in turn entails some higher, absolute unity: it is the principle of ‘the contradictoriness of identity and the identity of contradictories’ (James 1882, 195). James plays with ideas of adhesives and solvents to express his sense of Hegel’s rejection of ‘the sharing and partaking business he so much loathes’ (James 1882, 194). Contradiction is ‘a glue universal’ – but then ‘Why seek for a glue to hold things together when their very falling apart is the only glue you need?’ (James 1882, 193). This glue is a ‘universal solvent’ (James 1882, 194), yet not that either, given that there are in fact no substantial differences to dissolve. ‘To “dissolve” things in identity was the dream of earlier, cruder schools. Hegel will show that their very difference is their identity, and that in the act of detachment the detachment is undone and they fall into each other’s arms’ (James 1882, 194).

James compares Hegel’s system to the Irish bull of the Kilkenny cats. The story is that a number of German soldiers stationed in Ireland amused themselves by tying together the tails of two cats and hanging them over a washing line to fight. Seeing the commanding officer approach, a trooper quickly cut the cats from their conjoined tails, and they ran off. When asked the meaning of the bleeding tails, he replied that the two cats had been fighting and had eaten each other all but their tails. (Lewis Carroll seems certainly to have had the Kilkenny cats in mind in his Cheshire cat, though it is its smile rather than its tail which is the residuum). The Hegelian system, however, goes further than this:

the Kilkenny cats of existence as it appears in the pages of Hegel are all-devouring and leave no residuum. Such is the unexampled fury of their onslaught that they get clean out of themselves and into each other, nay more, pass right through each other, and then “return into

themselves” ready for another round, as insatiate, but as inconclusive as the one that went before (James 1882, 203)

Just for a moment, Hegel’s mid-air dialectical somersaults suggest something of James’s own characterisation of the unbreachable continuity of space earlier in his essay – ‘No force can in any way break, wound, or tear it. It has no joints between which you can pass your amputating knife, for it penetrates the knife and is not split’ (James 1882, 187). But in fact, though he admits that the ‘moonlit atmosphere’ of Hegelian insubstantiality is contagious, such that ‘the very arguments we use against him give forth strange and hollow sounds that make them seem almost as fantastic as the errors to which they are addressed’ (James 1882, 205), James does not condemn the magical thinking or omnipotence of thought represented by the ‘silly hegelian All-or-Nothing insatiateness’ (James 1882, 204) as windily inane, as he might easily have done. On the contrary, his metaphorology sets the looseness of a world in which different things can cohabit, because they have an allowance of room - air, breathing space - against a Hegelian system which scrunches difference into a solid block of identity. This represents the triumph of thought, a true omnipotence of thought over its object, of which not a crumb would remain undigested by the ravenous operations of the dialectic.

Bounds that we can’t overpass! Data! Facts that say “Hands off, till we are given”! Possibilities we can’t control! A banquet of which we merely share! heavens, this is intolerable; such a world is no world for a philosopher to have to do with. He must have all or nothing. If the world can’t be rational in my sense, in the sense of unconditional surrender, I refuse to grant that it is rational at all. It is pure incoherence, a chaos, a nulliverse, to whose haphazard sway I will not truckle. But no, this is not the world. The world is philosophy’s own; a Single Block, of which, if she once get her teeth on any part, the whole shall inevitably become her prey and feed her all-devouring theoretic maw. (James 1882, 192)

Although, compared with the modest transactions of Anglo-Saxon empiricism, Hegelianism ‘represents expansion and freedom’ (James 1882, 186), the solidity of Hegelian totality is, for James, autistic, asphyxiating: ‘In the universe of Hegel – the Absolute Block whose parts have no loose play, the pure plethora of necessary being with the oxygen of possibility all suffocated out of its lungs – there can be neither good nor bad, but one dead level of mere fate’ (James 1882, 204). Ironically, this densely undifferentiated solidity proves also to be the terminus of James’s euphoric whiffs of nitrous oxide. For, continued beyond a certain point, the universal communication afforded by the nitrous oxide turns into a kind of

meaningless ‘*indifferentism*’ (James 1882, 208). Suddenly, the oceanic vision shrinks to an ‘intense bewilderment, with nothing particular left to be bewildered at, save the bewilderment itself. This seems to be the true *causa sui*, or “spirit become its own object” ’ (James 1882, 208). The Romantic experience of nitrous oxide had made it the means to a magisterial melting of matter into pure thought. James takes from the same ‘insolence’ (James 1880, 192) of omnipotent thought a magic that ultimately cancels and blockades itself. (Appropriate, then, that the recreational use of nitrous oxide should turn out to carry a risk of death through anoxia, and to be a major greenhouse gas in the atmosphere.)

It is right to acknowledge that James may perhaps be accused of putting on his own kind of philosophical squeeze, in refusing to acknowledge the crucial principle of time in Hegelian thought. It is this which enables him to claim that identities are always already riven by contradictions which are already bound together in identity. It may be that the breathing space that James craves is provided for Hegel not by space at all, but by the becoming of things in time, the principle which ventilates or opens out the closed system of the always-already.

Benjamin Paul Blood’s pamphlet, which had introduced James to the links between metaphysics and nitrous oxide in 1874, had prompted similar thoughts. In his 1874 review of the pamphlet, James had identified Blood as among those who ‘have helped to bring the metaphysical craving into disrepute, as being a morbid overgrowth of intellectual activity’ (James 1874, 628). The ‘anaesthetic revelation’ of Blood’s title is a revelation that does not unify, but opens up a gap between the mystical experience provided by the gas and the demands of ordinary communication. So, against most pharmaceutical mysticisms, Blood ‘ratiocinatively explains the gist of all philosophy to be its own insufficiency to comprehend or in any way state the All’ (James 1874, 628).

Blood’s pamphlet may be described as an exercise in mystical immanentism. He begins from the problem of how what he calls ‘the duplexity of being and thought’ (Blood 1874, 25) is to be resolved: ‘If we know *what* we are, still we know *as* we are, – for what is known and what knows are then the same, - and then also being and knowledge are the same, - and what we are is simply knowledge – yet knowledge *of*, or *off* what we are’ (Blood 1874, 6) – a play on words that has an N₂O whiff about it. Although Hegel represents the high point of the attempt to bring being and knowledge into communication with one another, it nevertheless relies upon the ‘vulgar sleight’ (Blood 1874, 24) involved in the suggestion that the subject can coincide fully with itself as object of its own self-knowing. For it to be fully adequate to being, Hegelian thought would have to be absolute and all-

encompassing, even though this would seem to contradict the principle of unfinishedness that is of the essence of being. What distinguishes Hegel is ‘the determination that the logic of life shall be as life exceeding, and yet perfect as exceeding, or as including excess’ (Blood 1874, 19). But, for thought not only to be a complete thought of life but also fully to participate in the life of which it is the thought, it would have to have the quality of incompleteness (or be limited by its indefiniteness), and therefore to fall short as thought: ‘Life is sensibly exceeding and unfinished; its logic must be exceeding and unfinished also; but so it should not be to Hegel, for logic unfinished is but diastophic, or science of the fleeting, and is ever too late for the vitality of the notion’ (Blood 1874, 21)

Arguing that the ‘sultry Hegelian noon’ (Blood 1874, 29) of dialectics has taken philosophical reason as far as it can go in meeting the paradoxical demand to bring together being and knowing, Blood finally announces his ‘anaesthetic revelation’:

By the Anaesthetic Revelation I mean a certain survived condition, (or uncondition,) in which is the satisfaction of philosophy by an appreciation of the genius of being, which appreciation cannot be brought out of that condition into the normal sanity of sense – cannot be formally remembered, but remains informal, forgotten until we return to it ... Of this condition, although it may have been attained otherwise, I know only by anaesthetic agents...there is an invariable and reliable condition (or uncondition) ensuing about the instant of recall from anaesthetic stupor to sensible observation, or “coming to,” in which the genius of being is revealed. (Blood 1874, 33-4).

The principal characteristic of the anaesthetised state of consciousness is its dissolution of all distinctions and differentiations of value, in a way that is utterly foreign to the ‘formal or contrasting thought’ of ordinary consciousness, or ‘sanity’, as Blood calls it (Blood 1874, 34). The transition from the anaesthetised to the rational state ‘leaves in the patient an astonishment that the awful mystery of Life is at last but a homely and a common thing, and that aside from mere formality the majestic and the absurd are of equal dignity’ (Blood 1874, 34). This might cast a different light on the apparent triviality of the insights recorded under the effects of nitrous oxide. In his later book *Pluriverse*, an extension of the insights and principles of the 1874 pamphlet on which he worked for more than thirty years and was only published after his death, Blood records the effects on Oliver Wendell Holmes:

He prepared the ether, and having placed beside his bed a small table, with pencil and paper to record his impressions on awakening, he lay down and applied the drug. Sure enough, he presently found himself just sufficiently conscious to seize the pencil, and with a sentiment of vast thought wrote something down. It proved to be these words: ‘A strong scent of turpentine pervades the WHOLE.’ (Blood 1921, 231)

The philosophical revelation yielded by nitrous oxide is therefore the profoundly unmagical one that there is no secret, or hidden truth, that life, in its undetermined ongoingness, is sufficient to itself: ‘There is no higher, no deeper, no other, than the life in which we are founded’ (Blood 1874, 35). This remark seems to be echoed in James’s argument, in ‘On Some Hegelisms’, for the irreducibility of experience to knowledge, the ‘real ambiguities which forbid there being any equivalent for the happening of it all but the happening itself’ (James 1882, 190). Though it has all the apparatus and atmosphere of the mystical, Blood’s vision is in fact thoroughly secular: ‘The secret of Being, in short, is not in the dark immensity beyond knowledge, but at home, this side, beneath the feet, and overlooked by knowledge’, James wrote in his review (James 1874, 629). Blood finds in the automaticity of the breath an image for this apodictic ongoingness of life. Revelation comes not from the overcoming of the breath, that great, crazy theme of much mystical and occult writing, but from our partaking in its apartness from us:

Every breath that we voluntarily draw is, in the cosmic sense, an irrelevant interference with divine providence. We have no need to *do* it; with or without our volition it will be done; and the determination *not* to do it – which would be in [sic] the least violent method of suicide – is one that nature most essentially abhors. We have no account of any man succeeding in such an attempt, although many have thus experimented. (Blood 1921, 241-2)

It is this acceptance of the world, and the perhaps unclosable gap between world and thought, along with the reproof that this implies to Hegel’s efforts toward apnoic omnipotence, with being inhaled utterly into thought, that seem to have appealed to William James.

James remained in correspondence with Blood for the rest of his life, his appreciation growing steadily of his philosophical and poetic writings. In the meantime, Blood seems to have drawn steadily closer to James’s pluralism. Blood’s pamphlet is referred to again in the ‘Mysticism’ chapter of James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). Here, he regrets the fact that most mystical states or systems should be so monotonously monist, with Hegel once again as its ultimate incarnation: ‘What reader of Hegel can doubt that

that sense of a perfected Being with all its otherness soaked up into itself, which dominates his whole philosophy, must have come from the prominence in his consciousness of mystical moods like this, in most persons kept subliminal?’ (James 1985, 308 n.8). But by now, James has come to feel that the kind of awareness of which Blood had borne witness, though it might not be able to be rendered in philosophical terms, nevertheless needs not to be discounted by philosophers:

our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different... No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other states of consciousness quite disregarded. (James 1985, 307-8)

In an essay on Blood which he wrote in 1910, shortly before his own death, James celebrated the fact that in Blood’s work we find exemplified that optimistic anomaly, a pluralist mysticism.

His mysticism, which may, if one likes, be understood as monistic in the earlier utterance, develops in the later ones a sort of “left-wing” voice of defiance, and breaks into what to my ear has a radically pluralistic sound. I confess that the existence of this novel brand of mysticism has made my cowering mood depart. I feel now as if my own pluralism were not without the kind of support which mystical corroboration may confer. (James 1910, 374-5)

I have argued that the air is an indispensable, if also mutable, mediator in the relations between thought and world, and between thought and itself. James’s engagement with anaesthetic revelation allows us to set two forms of magical thinking against one another. One is the factitiously omnipotent air of mystical monism, in which all that is solid melts into the air of thought. We might imagine a material parallel for this philosophical theme, in the colonisation of the air by communications, and the beginnings of the dematerialisation of the world by information, as our air becomes a thinking air, and ever more the fantasised arena of our thought. The other sees in the air the principles of pluralism and discontinuity, and is characterised by a thought content never to be able to catch, or consume its own tail. Through his dalliances with Blood’s anaesthetic revelation, William James confronts one particular form the omnipotence of thought took in his time. Against the airy magic of a thought that dreamed of dissolving everything into itself, James proposed a philosophy that allowed elbow room, or breathing space for plurality, the pragmatism that ‘means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality in truth’

(James 1907, 50). We may read James's pragmatism as a salutary alternative to the Hegelianism that would be aligned to some of the most imperious forms of omnipotence of thought of the last century. Magical thinking, and the magical thinking in particular of the air, is ultimately an enactment of our perturbed, imperilled relations to our own thought, and the ever-present, and still crescent temptation to take our thought for the world.

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