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The Stars Down to Earth

and other essays on the irrational in culture

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THESES AGAINST OCCULTISM

I. The tendency to occultism is a symptom of the regression in consciousness. This has lost the power to think the unconditional and to endure the conditional. Instead of defining both, in their unity and difference, by conceptual labor, it mixes them indiscriminately. The unconditional becomes fact, the conditional an immediate essence. Monotheism is decomposing into a second mythology. "I believe in astrology, because I do not believe in God," one participant in an American socio-psychological investigation answered. Judicious reason, that had elevated itself to the notion of one God, seems ensnared in his fall. Spirit is dissociated into spirits and thereby forfeits the power to recognize that they do not exist. The veiled tendency of society towards disaster lulls its victims in a false revelation, with a hallucinated phenomenon. In vain they hope in its fragmented blatancy to look their total doom in the eye and withstand it. Panic breaks once again, after millennia of enlightenment, over a humanity whose control of nature as control of men far exceeds in horror anything men ever had to fear from nature.¹

II. The second mythology is more untrue than the first. The first was the precipitate of the state of consciousness of successive epochs, each of which showed its consciousness to be some degrees more free of blind subservience to nature than had the previous. The former, deranged and bemused, throws away the hard-won knowledge of itself, in the midst of a society which, by the all-encompassing exchange-relationship, eliminates precisely the elemental power the occultists claim to command. The helmsman looking to the Dioscuri,² the attribution of animation to tree and spring, in all their deluded bafflement before the unexplained, were historically appropriate to the subject's experiences of the objects of his actions. As a rationally exploited reaction to rationalized society, however, in the booths and consulting rooms of seers of all gradations, reborn animism denies the alienation of which it is itself proof and product, and concocts surrogates for non-existent experience. The occultist draws the ultimate conclusion from the fetish-character of commodities: menacingly objectified labor assails him on all sides from demonically grimacing objects. What has been forgotten in a world congealed into products, the fact that it has been produced by men, is split off and misremembered as a being-in-itself added to that of the objects and equivalent to them. Because objects have frozen in the cold light of reason, lost their illusory animation, the social quality that now animates them is given an independent existence both natural and supernatural, a thing among things.

III. By its regression to magic under late capitalism, thought is assimilated to late capitalist forms. The asocial twilight phenomena in the margins of the system, the pathetic attempts to squint through the chinks in its walls, while revealing nothing of what is outside, illuminate all the more clearly the forces of decay within. The bent little fortune tellers, terrorizing their clients with crystal balls, are toy models of the great ones who hold the fate of mankind in their hands. Just as hostile and

conspiratorial as the obscurantists of psychic research is society itself. The hypnotic power exerted by things occult resembles totalitarian terror: in present-day processes the two are merged. The smiling of auguries is amplified to society's sardonic laughter at itself, gloating over the direct material exploitation of souls. The horoscope corresponds to the official directives to the nations, and number-mysticism is preparation for administrative statistics and cartel prices. Integration itself proves in the end to be an ideology for disintegration into power groups which exterminate each other. He who integrates is lost.

IV. Occultism is a reflex-action to the subjectification of all meaning, the complement of reification. If, to the living, objective reality seems deaf as never before, they try to elicit meaning from it by saying abracadabra. Meaning is attributed indiscriminately to the next worse thing: the rationality of the real,³ no longer quite convincing, is replaced by hopping tables and rays from heaps of earth. The offal of the phenomenal world becomes, to sick consciousness, the *mundus intelligibilis*. It might almost be speculative truth, just as Kafka's Odradek⁴ is almost an angel, and yet it is, in a positivity that excludes the medium of thought, only barbaric aberration alienated from itself, subjectivity mistaking itself for its object. The more consummate the inanity of what is fobbed off as 'spirit' – and in anything less spiritless the enlightened subject would at once recognize itself – the more the meaning detected there, which in fact is not there at all, becomes an unconscious compulsive projection of a subject decomposing historically if not clinically. It would like to make the world resemble its own decay: therefore it has dealings with requisites and evil wishes. "The third one reads out of my hand,/She wants to read my doom!" In occultism, the mind groans under its own spell like someone in a nightmare, whose torment grows with the feeling that he is dreaming yet cannot wake up.

V. The power of occultism, as of Fascism, to which it is

connected by thought patterns of the ilk of anti-Semitism, is not only pathetic. Rather, it lies in the fact that in the lesser panaceas, as in superimposed pictures, consciousness famished for truth imagines it is grasping a dimly present knowledge diligently denied to it by official progress in all its forms. It is the knowledge that society, by virtually excluding the possibility of spontaneous change, is gravitating towards total catastrophe. The real absurdity is reproduced in the astrological hocus-pocus, which adduces the impenetrable connections of alienated elements – nothing more alien than the stars – as knowledge about the subject. The menace deciphered in the constellations resembles the historical threat that propagates itself precisely through unconsciousness, absence of subjects. That all are prospective victims of a whole made up solely of themselves, they can make bearable only by transferring that whole to something similar but external. In the woeful idiocy they practice, their empty horror, they are able to vent their impracticable woe, their crass fear of death, and yet continue to repress it, as they must if they wish to go on living. The break in the line of life that indicates a lurking cancer is a fraud only in the place where it purports to be found, the individual's hand; where they refrain from diagnosis, in the collective, it would be correct. Occultists rightly feel drawn towards childishly monstrous scientific fantasies. The confusion they sow between their emanations and the isotopes of uranium is ultimate clarity. The mystical rays are modest anticipations of technical ones. Superstition is knowledge, because it sees together the ciphers of destruction scattered on the social surface; it is folly because in all its death-wish it still clings to illusions: expecting from the transfigured shape of society misplaced in the skies an answer that only a study of real society can give.

VI. Occultism is the metaphysic of dunces. The mediocrity of the mediums is no more accidental than the apocryphal triviality of the revelations. Since the early days of spiritualism, the

beyond has conveyed nothing more significant than the dead grandmother's greetings and the prophecy of an immanent journey. The excuse that the world of spirits can convey no more to poor human reason than the latter can take in, is equally absurd, an auxiliary hypothesis of the paranoiac system; the *lumen naturale* has, after all, taken us somewhat further than the journey to grandmother, and if the spirits do not wish to acknowledge this, they are ill-mannered hobgoblins with whom it is better to break off all dealings. The platitudinously natural content of the supernatural message betrays its untruth. In pursuing yonder what they have lost, they encounter only the nothing they have. In order not to lose touch with the everyday dreariness in which, as irremediable realists, they are at home, they adapt the meaning they revel in to the meaninglessness they flee. The worthless magic is nothing other than the worthless existence it lights up. This is what makes the prosaic so cosy. Facts which differ from what is the case only by not being facts are trumped up as a fourth dimension. Their non-being alone is their *qualitas occulta*. They supply simpletons with a world outlook. With their blunt, drastic answers to every question, the astrologists and spiritualists do not so much solve problems as remove them by crude premisses from all possibility of solution. Their sublime realm, conceived as analogous to space, no more needs to be thought than chairs and flower-vases. It thus reinforces conformism. Nothing better pleases what is there than that being there should, as such, be meaning.

VII. The great religions have either, like Judaism after the ban on graven images, veiled the redemption of the dead in silence, or preached the resurrection of the flesh. They take the inseparability of the spiritual and physical seriously. For them there was no intention, nothing 'spiritual,' that was not somehow founded in bodily perception and sought bodily fulfillment. To the occultists, who consider the idea of resurrection beneath them, and actually do not want to be saved, this is too coarse.

Their metaphysics, which even Huxley can no longer distinguish from Metaphysics, rests on the axiom: "The soul can soar to the heights, heigh-ho,/the body stays put on the sofa below." The heartier the spirituality, the more mechanistic: not even Descartes drew the line so cleanly. Division of labour and reification are taken to the extreme: body and soul severed in a kind of perennial vivisection. The soul is to shake the dust off its feet and in brighter regions forthwith resume its fervent activity at the exact point where it was interrupted. In this declaration of independence, however, the soul becomes a cheap imitation of that from which it had achieved a false emancipation. In place of the interaction that even the most rigid philosophy admitted, the astral body is installed, ignominious concession of hypos-tasized spirit to its opponent. Only in the metaphor of the body can the concept of pure spirit be grasped at all, and is at the same time cancelled. In their reification the spirits are already negated.

VIII. They inveigh against materialism. But they want to weigh the astral body. The objects of their interests are supposed at once to transcend the possibility of experience, and be experienced. Their procedure is to be strictly scientific: the greater the humbug, the more meticulously the experiment is prepared. The self importance of scientific checks is taken *ad absurdum* where there is nothing to check. The same rationalistic and empiricist apparatus that threw the spirits out is being used to reimpose them on those who no longer trust their own reason. As if any elemental spirit would not turn tail for the traps that domination of nature sets for such fleeting beings. But even this the occultists turn to advantage. Because the spirits do not like controls, in the midst of all the safety precautions a tiny door must be left open, through which they can make their unimpeded entrance. For occultists are practical folk. Not driven by vain curiosity, they are looking for tips. From the stars to forward transactions is but a nimble step. Usually the information amounts to no more than that some poor acquaintance has had his dearest hopes dashed.

IX. The cardinal sin of occultism is the contamination of mind and existence, the latter becoming itself an attribute of mind. Mind arose out of existence, as an organ for keeping alive. In reflecting existence, however, it becomes at the same time something else. The existent negates itself as thought upon itself. Such negation is mind's element. To attribute to it positive existence, even of a higher order, would be to deliver it up to what it opposes. Late bourgeois ideology has again made it what it was for pre-animism, a being-in-itself modeled on the social division of labour, on the split between manual and intellectual labor, on the planned domination over the former. In the concept of mind-in-itself, consciousness has ontologically justified and perpetuated privilege by making it independent of the social principle by which it is constituted. Such ideology explodes in occultism: it is Idealism come full circle. Just by virtue of the rigid antithesis of being and mind, the latter becomes a department of being. If Idealism demanded solely on behalf of the whole, the Idea, that being be mind and that the latter exist, occultism draws the absurd conclusion that existence is determinate being:

Existence, after it has become, is always being with a non-being, so that this non-being is taken up in simple unity with the being. Non-being taken up in being, the fact that the concrete whole is in the form of being, of immediacy, constitutes determinateness as such.⁵

The occultists take literally the non-being as in 'simple unity with being', and their kind of concreteness is a surreptitious short-cut from the whole to the determinate which can defend itself by claiming that the whole, having once been determined, is no longer the whole. They call to metaphysics: *Hic Rhodus hic salta*:⁶ if the philosophic investment of spirit with existence is determinable, then finally, they sense, any scattered piece of

existence must be justifiable as a particular spirit. The doctrine of the existence of the spirit, the ultimate exaltation of bourgeois consciousness, consequently bore teleologically within it the belief in spirits, its ultimate degradation. The shift to existence, always 'positive' and justifying the world, implies at the same time the thesis of the positivity of mind, pinning it down, transposing the absolute into appearance. Whether the whole objective world as 'product,' is to be spirit, or a particular thing a particular spirit, ceases to matter, and the world-spirit becomes the supreme Spirit, the guardian angel of the established, despiritualized order. On this the occultists live: their mysticism is the *enfant terrible* of the mystical moment in Hegel. They take speculation to the point of fraudulent bankruptcy. In passing off determinate being as mind, they put objectified mind to the test of existence, which must prove negative. No spirit exists.⁷

NOTES

The editor's notes, or editorial additions to Adorno's notes, are enclosed in square brackets.

- 1 [This passage re-states the basic thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The enlightenment project to install human control over nature as a way of warding-off the fear of nature has the ultimate effect of engendering an even greater fear of the products of human technology.]
- 2 [The mythological twins Castor and Pollux, associated with the constellation Gemini and with the double form of St Elmo's fire, regarded by sailors as a lucky omen.]
- 3 [An allusion to Hegel's metaphysics. As Adorno goes on to write, "Occultism is the metaphysic of dunces." The thrust of the rather dense paragraph IX below, which turns on a quotation from Hegel's *Logic*, is that occultism is both a crass vulgarization of "high" bourgeois metaphysics and at the same time a clue to the kernel of positivistic fatuity that lurks at the heart of metaphysics and makes its degeneration inevitable.]
- 4 [The Odradek features in Kafka's *Die Sorge des Hausvaters* (translated as "The Cares of a Family Man" in F. Kafka, *The Penal Colony: Stories*

and *Short Pieces*. New York: Schocken Books, 1961). Looking like a “star shaped spool for thread” the immortal Odradek, while of “no fixed abode,” appears and disappears around the house.]

- 5 G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik, Werke* 5, p. 116 (*Hegel's Science of Logic* [trans. A.V. Miller]. London [George Allen & Unwin], 1969, p. 110).
- 6 [“Here is Rhodes, jump here,” the ripost in a fable of Aesop’s to the man who claims to be able to jump over Rhodes. It is Hegel’s quotation of the saying which gives it its point for Adorno here. Hegel writes immediately afterwards

It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary age as it is to fancy that an individual can leap over his own age, jump over Rhodes. If his theory goes beyond the world as it is and builds an ideal one as it ought to be, that world exists indeed, but only in his opinions, an unsubstantial element where anything you please may, in fancy, be built.

(*Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (trans. T.M. Knox). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952, p. 11).

So, occultism calls the bluff of (Hegelian) metaphysics by taking literally, or positivistically, its prohibition on the speculative transcendence of “what is.” However, this literalism recapitulates the error as occultism builds anything it pleases in the para-material ‘spirit-world.’]

- 7 [“*Kein Geist is da*” (T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978, p. 329). Perhaps “no spirit is there,” or “there is no spirit.” Jephcott’s translation has the virtue of underlining a major point of this paragraph: that it is a crude and consequential positivistic error to endow *Geist* with the kind of “existence” enjoyed by material objects. A further difficulty is the notorious ambiguity of the German *Geist*, which is both “mind” and “spirit.” This double meaning helps Adorno to move between the “spirits” of occultism and the “mind” of Hegelian metaphysics. At one point he uses the word “spirit” – *Obersten Spirit*, “supreme Spirit.”]