

PREVIEW

STUDIES IN COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS

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STUDIES IN COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS

THESIS

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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PREVIEW

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To the memory of my father,

Reverend Jonas Burnham, alumnus of Phillips Exeter Academy, and of Bowdoin College; A. B., M. A., Phi Beta Kappa; student of Andover Theological Seminary; and native of Arundel, which he left as a lad of twelve to serve for four years as a cabin boy on an American privateer during the War of 1812, this effort is inscribed.

If you have something to say, said my father, say it without thought of anything except the truth. If it is worth saying, those who read it will not complain. If it is not worth saying, then there will be few to read it, and fewer still to vex you with complaints.

Kenneth Roberts, in Arundel, p. 4

## PREFACE

For many years the accomplishments of the handicapped and the elderly have been of increasing interest to me. Two facts have increased that interest: The advance of life expectancy, and the growing number of the handicapped.

Two other facts have presented themselves for consideration: the deep reserves which the handicapped discover within themselves, and draw upon; and the failure of the elderly, as a class, in the midst of their period of greatest leisure, to make use of that leisure constructively.

Of the two groups, the handicapped and the elderly, the first is giving by far the better account of itself. Members of this group are finding something they can do, and in most cases, doing it better than might reasonably be expected.

But society is wasting a vast number of man-years by not utilizing the sunset hours of people with ripe experience. There is an enormous reservoir of know-how going to waste. Men in the prime of life are dying of heart disease, often from attempting too much, while those who have passed the meridian of that danger are sitting around, idle and bored.

As a result of my attempt to live an interesting life while I must live, I have enjoyed the satisfaction of having a number of people tell me that I have, by undesigned example, given them ambition and courage to make use of whatever equipment and time they still possess.

The spectacle of handicapped men selling pencils on a dirty side-walk, or of old people sitting around in hotel lobbies, not even reading, is wholly undesirable and unnecessary. Such pitiful time wasting should be discouraged; it is conducive only to self-pity and dependency. Activity in its many possible forms leads to a degree of happiness which should be not only a birth-right, but an age right.

In the effort - and I admit it was an effort - to put in practice these opinions, I have been in every way most understandingly encouraged and aided by both Dr. and Mrs. C. L. Sonnichsen, who have gone far out of their way to render me assistance in the accomplishment of a goal visioned long ago, and now in reach. My acknowledgements are gratefully made to them, and thanks are due to Dr. Haldeen Braddy and Professor Lehman Hutchins, who so patiently read my manuscript.

I must also express deep appreciation of the extraordinary efforts all three of my professors made to help me hear in the class-room; and of the judiciously bestowed words of encouragement of Dr. Haldeen Braddy which from time to time gave me a seriously needed lift.

A woman of nearly seventy returns to school rather shyly; the considerate attitude of the members of the student body at the Texas College of Mines was unexpectedly responsive, cordial and friendly. Invariably they approved of what I was doing, when many of my friends in town could see no point in ~~my~~ talking up what seemed to them a dead-end street. I wish to testify that I was never allowed to stand in a College bus.

Above the satisfaction of earning an advanced degree has been the joy of being brought up to date. The study of modern psychology, the introduction to psychiatry, the filling up of gaps in my knowledge of literature - all have combined to effect an initiation into the living present, and have afforded a priceless opportunity to do a great amount of outside reading.

Perhaps I waited too long. But I would urge men and women of fifty and upwards to go back to school. They cannot renew their youth, it is true; but they can richly endow their age.

Marie Sophrene Bonorden

30 April, 1948  
El Paso, Texas

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COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN LITERATURE:  
Door to a Larger Life

Cosmic Consciousness as a literary topic has found a place in our reading within the last fifty years. It has been introduced, rather than exhausted. The writers who have interested themselves in this subject have approached it in a scientific spirit, but have found in it literary material as well. Among these, three are outstanding.

The first wrote a large book called Cosmic Consciousness. This was Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, English born but Canadian reared. The second was our own William James, who included the subject in his classic Varieties of Religious Experience. The third was the Russian mathematician and philosopher P. D. Ouspensky, whose Tertium<sup>1</sup> Organum was translated by Nicholas Bessaraboff and Claude Bregdon. Both James and Ouspensky drew upon Bucke for their material. Within the twenty years covered by these three books the term "cosmic consciousness" entered our language and was recognized by Merriam-Webster's New International Dictionary. This definition is as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> "I have called this system of higher logic Tertium Organum because for us it is the third canon - third instrument - of thought after those of Aristotle and Bacon. The first was Organon, the second, Novum Organum. But the third existed earlier than the first." TERTIUM ORGANUM, 2nd ed. p. 262

1. cosmic; of or relating to the cosmos or something similarly vast and systematic; shared with or assimilated to the cosmos; as, cosmic consciousness....
2. Hence, harmonious; orderly, as opposed to chaotic.
3. Pertaining to the material universe as a whole, and not to the earth alone.

Bucke, James, and Ouspensky have been responsible for the inclusion of the phrase "cosmic consciousness" in the vocabularies of many to whom the state was unfamiliar; and have given a definition and a name to a type of experience many have known, but few could place. William James quotes Dr. Bucke's description, which clarifies the difference between cosmic consciousness and other mystic states experienced usually by religious persons. Bucke says:

The prime characteristic of cosmic consciousness is a consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe. Along with the consciousness of the cosmos there occurs an intellectual enlightenment which alone would place the individual on a new plane of existence - would make him almost a member of a new species. To this is added a state of moral exaltation, an indescribable feeling of elevation, elation and joyousness, and a quickening of the moral sense, which is fully as striking, and more important than is the enhanced intellectual power. With these come what may be called a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life, not a conviction that he shall have this, but the consciousness that he has it already. 2

It would appear that this is a state devoutly to be wished. It may be supernormal, but the description is not that of an abnormal state. Here are no stigmata, no bleeding

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2 Cosmic Consciousness: a Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind, p. 2. Cf. James in Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 398.

hearts, no fears of having committed the unpardonable sin. There is nothing suggestive of the sufferings of what William James has called the sick soul. There is nothing of the self-torture of better-than-ordinary men, afflicted by melancholy; nothing to suggest John Bunyan writing his spiritual autobiography, Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners (1666), while imprisoned in Bedford jail--not, as many erroneously think, for debt, but for his persistence in dissenting preaching.

Grace Abounding is one of the most remarkable confessional documents on record, the stranger because, as we see it now, Bunyan had little to confess. Yet the whole book is steeped in Bunyan's conviction of sin, sin palpable and horrible, smiting his conscience by day and filling his nights with horrible anguish. At last his 'horror of great darkness' was lifted, and there came to him a sense of God's goodness and peace. In this book the tormented Puritan conscience finds release in words that sting, and that reveal with almost pathological accuracy the intense conviction of the early Dissenter. 3

Rather here is a suggestion of the healthy-mindedness of Baruch Spinoza, greatest modern exponent of pantheism, and for this excommunicated by the Jewish congregation of Amsterdam as a heretic (1656). Spinoza was long considered a hobgoblin because he would have nothing to do with the doctrine of repentance, but now he has come into his own; since most of us have preferred to charge our errors off to

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3 Types of English Fiction, edited by Craig and Dodds, "Introduction," p. 11.

experience and so brood over our sins no more.<sup>4</sup>

Bucke not merely told us what cosmic consciousness is; he also told us what it is not:

In its more striking instances it is not simply an expansion or extension of the self-conscious mind with which we are all familiar, but the superaddition of a function as distinct from any possessed by the average man as self-consciousness is distinct from any function possessed by one of the higher animals.<sup>5</sup>

This is not a description of an ecstasy, such as was the common mystic experience of the Carmelite Saint Theresa. Here is nothing of the sacrifice which causes most natural men to shrink from the saintly life. It rather conveys the idea of the normal-plus individual one would be glad to know and perhaps emulate.

Where did Bucke get these ideas, which have so enlarged the horizons of reading and thinking men that library copies of any of the three books already mentioned as endorsing them are almost never "in"? And who is reading Bucke, so much that since his death forty years ago eleven more editions of Cosmic Consciousness have been demanded? Perhaps they are the followers of Whitman, whom Bucke believed to be the greatest example of the cosmically conscious man he had found. I do not know.

But I know where the ideas came from. Bucke obtained

<sup>4</sup> Heart of Emerson's Journals, p. 320: "In my youth Spinoza was a hobgoblin. Now he is a saint."

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by James, Varieties, p. 398.

them through a personal experience, in other words, at first hand; and he was thereby induced to survey the field of human experience in search of parallels, which he fortunately found. Let us review the life of Dr. Bucke, since we unquestionably owe to him the discovery of this enlarged area of human consciousness. The earliest edition of his work does not contain his biography, although James says it was preceded by a small pamphlet containing the story of Dr. Bucke's illumination. However, the twelfth edition provides biographical information in the introduction by Mr. George Moreby Acklom. It describes the sort of character which makes us proud of being people!

Richard Maurice Bucke was fortunate in his ancestors, who were on both sides of sturdy English stock. Emerson says:

Every man finds room in his face for all his ancestors. 6

The portrait of the author used in Cosmic Consciousness as a frontispiece, modestly unnamed and unsigned, indicates none but worthy forebears, according to this dictum. Bucke's father was a graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge, and a clergyman. His mother was a granddaughter of Sir Robert Walpole. Richard was their seventh child, born in 1837, the year before his parents emigrated to Canada. There they settled on "Creek Farm" in what is now a suburb of London, Ontario. Although the father thus became a farmer, he already knew seven languages,

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6 Heart of Emerson's Essays, p. 247

and brought to his farm a library of thousands of books.

Young Richard was taught that fundamental tongue, Latin, which some pedagogues still maintain should precede English; otherwise he was turned loose among the books. It was no misfortune that, for the rest, he had to know and to do all the ceaseless round of chores on the farm in the era before farm machinery, and with no Jonas for his Rollo.<sup>7</sup> His mother lived only till he was seven. His father soon remarried, but the stepmother died when Richard was seventeen. The lad then decided the time had come for him to leave the farm for a larger view.

He crossed the Canadian border into the States, and for three years he accepted, like Whitman and Sandburg, the occupations which offered, the jobs which came to hand. He was a gardener in Columbus, Ohio; a railroad hand in Cincinnati; a deck hand on a Mississippi river steamboat. Finally real adventure beckoned. He hired out as driver in a twenty-six-wagon train which aimed to cross the Plains to the western edge of the Mormon Territory, now part of Nevada.

There were then no permanent white settlements for the last twelve hundred miles of the trek, and there was grave risk of Indian attack. The journey to Salt Lake took five months. There young Bucks drew his accumulated pay and with

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<sup>7</sup> In the series of children's books by Jacob Abbott, father of Dr. Lyman Abbott, called The Rollo Books, Jonas is the invaluable hired man and mentor of young Rollo.

a few others crossed the Rockies by the South Pass, straight-way encountering resentful bands of Indians who attacked on sight.

The handful of whites fought their way from camp to camp till they were reduced to their last cartridge, and travelled their last hundred and fifty miles on a diet of flour stirred into hot water, finally collapsing in a mountain trading camp.

After a short rest, the little party crossed the Great American Desert to the Carson River, eventually reaching Gold Canyon. Here Richard stayed a year, learning to become a gold miner. He met and made friends with the Gresh brothers and their partner, Brown, who discovered the Comstock Lode. But Brown and one of the Gresh brothers died. The surviving brother, with Bucke, set out over the mountains in an attempt to reach the coast. It was winter. Allan Gresh died by the way, and Bucke, both feet frozen, was at the last possible moment of survival rescued by a mining party.

The tragic result, which I think eventually caused his death, was the amputation of one foot and part of the other, and an entire winter in bed. At one-and-twenty Bucke was so badly maimed that for his remaining forty-four years he was never free from pain but a few hours at a time. So much for adventure.

Richard now received his mother's small estate and put himself through McGill Medical School, showing both judgment

and grim courage. He graduated well up on the list and took the prize for the best thesis. Then he went to Europe for post-graduate work, spending 1862-63 in London with Sir Benjamin Ward Richardson, and visiting France and Germany. In 1864 he returned to Canada, which was by now definitely home to him, and married, settling down in Sarnia, Ontario, to the practice of medicine.

In Bucke were united two natures: those of the scientist and of the poet; he knew whole volumes of poetry by heart. In 1876, showing the high esteem in which he was held, Dr. Bucke was appointed superintendent of the newly erected Provincial Asylum for the Insane at Hamilton, Ontario. He retained this position to the end of his life. In this capacity he attained great distinction, introducing many methods which, considered radical at the time, have since become routine procedure.

In 1882 he became Professor of Mental and Nervous Diseases at Western University (London, Ontario), and in 1888 was elected President of the Psychological Section of the British Medical Association. In 1890 he became President of the American Medico-Psychological Association.

These honors appear to indicate the growing regard in which Dr. Bucke was held as an alienist and physician; as an administrator; and as a man of character who used his handicaps as stepping-stones to personal achievement and public service of a greatly needed sort. However, greater experiences were in store for him.



In 1867 a friend quoted some verses of Walt Whitman to him, and he became thereby one of the thousands of persons all over the globe whose lives have been enriched by direct or indirect contact with this great personality. Mr. Acklom, Bucke's biographer, states that the effect of these verses upon Dr. Bucke

was extraordinary, instantaneous and permanent. They opened a new door into his mind. 8

It was indeed a case of the word spoken in season. Perhaps this influence was the philosopher's oil that did in truth lubricate the door which, swinging open as his biographer says, led to the greatest and most transforming moment in Bucke's intense life. This occurred in 1872, while he was on a visit to England. The story follows, as recorded in the Canadian Royal Society Proceedings.

He and two friends had spent the evening reading Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Browning, and especially Whitman. They parted at midnight, and he had a long drive in a hansom. His mind, deeply under the influence of the ideas, images and emotions called up by the reading and talk of the evening, was calm and peaceful. He was in a state of calm, almost passive enjoyment. All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around, as it were, by a flame-colored cloud. For an instant he thought of fire--some sudden conflagration in the great city. The next (instant) he knew that the light was within himself.

Directly after there came upon him a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness, accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination

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8 Introduction written by George Moreby Acklom to the Twelfth Edition of Cosmic Consciousness.

quite impossible to describe. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Brahmie Splendor which ever since lightened his life. Upon his heart fell one drop of the Brahmie Bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an after-taste of Heaven. 9

Bucke was then thirty-five. The effect was to give him the knowledge and insight which he later described in Part III (pp. 61-82) of Cosmic Consciousness. Previous to its publication Dr. Bucke had written in 1879 a book which he called Man's Moral Nature, published by G. P. Putnam's Sons. In 1877 he had read a paper on this subject before a meeting of the Association of American Institutions for the Insane, now the American Medico-Psychological Association. The following year in another paper before the same organization he carried the subject still further.

In Man's Moral Nature Dr. Bucke put forth the idea of a possible relation between the sympathetic nervous system and the moral nature of man, surely a valid and desirable topic for the consideration of the Association. Bucke dedicated this book to Walt Whitman.

In 1877 he had met Whitman for the first time. Chapter 13 in Cosmic Consciousness records something of the tremendous effect this contact made upon Dr. Bucke. In Part II of the foregoing chapter Bucke says:

Walt Whitman is the best, most perfect example

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9 See Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada. Series II. Vol. 12, pp. 159-196.

the world has so far had of the Cosmic Sense, first because he is the man in whom the new faculty has been, probably, most perfectly developed, and especially because he is, par excellence, the man who in modern times has written distinctly and at large from the point of view of Cosmic Consciousness, and who has also referred to its facts and phenomena more plainly and fully than any other writer, either ancient or modern.

He tells us plainly, though not as fully as could be wished, of the moment when he attained illumination, and again towards the end of his life of its passing away. Not that it is to be supposed that he had the Cosmic Sense continuously, for years, but that it came less and less frequently as age advanced, probably lasted less and less long at a time, and decreased in vividness and intensity. 10

Dr. Bucke became Whitman's physician, friend, and eventually one of his literary editors and executors. The poet believed that Dr. Bucke had saved and extended his life. Speaking of another great physician, Sir William Osler, Whitman had said:

Osler, too, has his points, big points, but, after all, the real man is Doctor Bucke. He is top of the heap. 11

By 1894 the matter of illumination and of cosmic consciousness had so possessed Bucke's mind that in May he read a paper entitled "Cosmic Consciousness" before the American Medico-Psychological Association at their annual meeting in Philadelphia. In August he further developed the idea in his presidential address before the British Medical

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10 Cosmic Consciousness, Bucke, Chapter 13, Part II, pp. 225-226. 6th Ed., 1923, E. P. Dutton & Co.

11 Ibid., Acklon's Introduction (not paged), 12th edition, 1946.

Association in Montreal. By now Bucke realized this type of consciousness to be a mental evolution of mankind, which would eventually elevate humanity to a higher plane. Four years later came the initial publication by Messrs. Innes & Sons of Philadelphia of Cosmic Consciousness in a limited edition of only five hundred copies.

While Dr. Bucke outlived Walt Whitman, he did not live to see the growth of interest in his book, a growth which has been steady for the past forty-eight years, nearly half a century. In fact, the edition upon which I have based this thesis is the twelfth, published in 1946.

On February 19, 1902, Dr. Bucke and his wife had been spending the evening at the house of a friend. Coming home, he noted that the stars were exceptionally brilliant, and he went out on the verandah to have another look at them before retiring. He slipped on the icy flooring, struck his head against a pillar and was picked up dead. So instant was his passing, so was his last sight on earth that of his beloved stars.  
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Richard Bucke earned a rarely broad experience in life as emigrant, pioneer, explorer, miner, college man, professional man, specialist and administrator. He established and maintained a happy home. He lived a balanced and stable life, won and held

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12 From Acklom's biography, previously quoted.