Roszak’s Pagan Gospel

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The ideal preparation for Theodore Roszak’s new book is to read again Wordsworth’s sonnet “The World Is Too Much With Us.” After lamenting the “getting and spending” that lays waste our spiritual powers, the poet declares he prefers to be a pagan “suckled in a creed outworn,” sustained in a universe still mythic and sacramal. Wordsworth, like Roszak in Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Postindustrial Society (Doubleday; 492 pp.; $10.00), complains about the spiritual depletion resulting from the scientization of culture and the disenchantment of the world. Since Wordsworth, says Roszak, the situation has simply gotten worse, so that Blake’s “May God us keep/From Single vision and Newton’s sleep” sounds more than ever like a desperate prayer.

The villain in Roszak’s story is this single vision of science that has so entrapped us it is hard to imagine other more valid and humanly fulfilling worldviews. The story is told in three parts. The first is a grimm and, as Roszak concedes, often cynical depiction of the trapped life; the second is an historical explanation of this condition, particularly of the "strange interplay of objectivity and alienation" in Western civilization; the third is a prophetic exposition of the romantic discovery of the salvational alternative, an alternative in which imagination and transcendent symbol prepare for apocatastasis, the Great Restoration. So the story has a happy ending; it is comedy; it even verges on divine comedy, since it is grounded on personal rebirth and the recovery of something like a beatific vision after the harrowings of hell and the longeurs of purgatory. Insofar as it is ordered to action—that is, seriously concerned with the establishment of a new perspective—it is, in Blake’s words, “an Endeavour to Restore what the Ancients call’d the Golden Age.” The element of happy ending is qualified only by Roszak’s remaining, however he may wish it otherwise, a sophisticated and knowledgeable modern man who can never forget for long "the cunning and persistence of the powers of darkness that exist not only on the social scene but in every one of us."

The first, or “cynical,” part of the story is the least satisfactory. Roszak spells out with sufficient power the horrors of the artificial technocratic environment and the mindscape of single vision over which the citadel of expertise presides. He writes more capably than most who have found themselves in the same inferno; indeed, he can be as chilling, and as dour, as Jacques Ellul. The trouble is that his subject has for so long been an exercising ground for the literary intellectual who displays the same reductionist temperament Roszak so rightly attacks in the scientist. To be sure, Roszak’s reductionist’s powers are directed against false gods and meretricious myths in the interest of reestablishing a true belief, whereas most who have gone over the territory before him have had to make do with the act of reduction itself, not believing much of anything. Nevertheless his predecessors have come close to freezing the subject into a collage of dead or dying metaphors, one of which is the key term, wasteland. Besides, if one is told too often that he inhabits an air-conditioned nightmare he may begin to accept the interpretation as an identifying constant and proceed, perhaps with a certain stoic pride, to take what comfort he can from the air-conditioning. I suspect that Roszak knows all this, and his knowing it may explain both his cynicism and his frequent extravagance of statement.

In any event, the second part is much better. In briefest outline, it is an account of the triumph of Judaism, Christianity and science over the magical
worldview of what Roszak calls the Old Gnosis. Here is the only significant difference between Roszak and Wordsworth. In the latter's sonnet, the pagan, whatever his advantages over the world-bound Christian, has still been suckled in an outworn creed. This creed is a manifestation of the Old Gnosis, which is something of an umbrella term for all pre- and non-Christian cults, religions and philosophies that express a sacramental awareness of life and a visionary rather than a theological style of knowledge: Eskimo shamanism, Celtic druidism, Buddhist Tantra, Zen, Taoism, hermeticism, medieval alchemy, etc. For Roszak the resurrection of this 'supposedly defunct tradition . . . is an urgent project of the times.' Christianity—especially Protestant Christianity—and science have opposed this Old Gnosis as idolatrous and superstitious, and the result is the aweless, anti-ecological, mechanistic, single-visioned technological trap. The springers of the trap are such traditional "hero" figures as Augustine, Aquinas, Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Newton, Darwin and Comte. There is impressive work in this section even for the reader who cannot share the author's faith in the Old Gnosis. Especially valuable, and bound to be especially irritating to the scientific community, is the treatment of Bacon, Descartes and Newton.

The third part, the story of the salvational reaction against the closed secular world of single vision, proposes a politics of eternity by way of uncaged Skylarks and rhapsodic intellect. The heroes are Blake (interestingly linked with Joyce by way of his dream texture), Wordsworth (particularly the Wordsworth of The Prelude) and Goethe (whose scientific activities are valued for being in the hermetic and alchemical rather than Newtonian vein). This Old Gnostic tradition is carried on by the contemporary "visionary commonwealth," the members of which, impelled by an inchoate need to save their souls, are discovering a variety of ways to withdraw from the technocratic trap. So what we have at the end is less a paradise regained than a Pisgah sight of a promised land and a somewhat qualified prophecy that a saving remnant will, in God's good time, lead us out of the wasteland.

Roszak does not take this visionary commonwealth entirely on its own evaluation, which is one of several reasons why his book is so superior to The Greening of America. Nevertheless, these last chapters are as optimistic as are the opening chapters pessimistic. It is not enough for him to believe, for instance, that well-developed rural and village life must and will "become a live option, a necessary kind of variety." He is committed to a vision in which urban problems are solved by massive deurbanization in a society where science and technology serve a revitalized, magical worldview. This is supposed to happen in a countercultural ethos in which an authoritarian top-down radicalism "simply would not hold together from midnight to dawn. There is not the willingness to depersonalize, or the patience with external discipline."

No one who has been reading Roszak these past few years would expect him to favor top-down radicalism. But here he seems to build his hopes on personality types in which it is hard to believe he has much confidence; they share too many characteristics of the swinging, greedily consuming society he abhors. His writings suggest to me an author who, as Lionel Trilling said of Marcuse, likes people who have character in a rather old-fashioned sense, people capable of a disciplined, self-denying commitment to what they consider a good cause. Such people have found that the recognition of authority is not necessarily depersonalizing and may in fact be a means to personalization. If they voluntarily choose economy of means and simplicity of life, they can be counted on to honor that choice and themselves by hanging in when the going is tough, not simply until their fancies are caught by yet another life style.

The dilemma for many proponents of the counterculture is that such people possess virtues that connote the upright middle-class enemy or the apparatchik. So we are back with Kenneth Keniston's two revolutions: one oriented to salvation by way of political activism, the other by way of self-actualization. The practical consequences for the visionary commonwealth when the two are confused, or when it is assumed that one necessarily includes the other, are spelled out brilliantly by Sonya Rudikoff in her essay "O Pioneers!" (Commentary, July, 1972).

Of course there is the expectation that insofar as the visionary commonwealth expresses a genuine religious rebirth there will be no conflict between personal and communal needs. But the Old Gnosis is a very romantic affair; better, it is primitive religion looked at through a romantic conviction that creed, doctrine and dogma (structure) are the fetters of the spirit. But is there not good evidence in the history of romanticism that this aspiration to "pure" religion (its esthetic analogue is "pure" poetry) invites religion-in-a-vacuum and a romantic variation of deism? Were any of the historical forms of Roszak's Old Gnosis this kind of religion? Eliade (whose work Roszak much admires) suggests that every religion tends to be religion-in-particular, to be structured by creed and ritual this way rather than that, to be more or less capable of liberating the human spirit for transcendent experience in terms of a specific organization of its energies toward the ultimately real—and to be doomed in time to strangle itself if it closes itself in too tightly or makes an idol of its own structuring. Roszak is very good on Christianity's efforts to strangle itself by identifying its competition as idolatrous (he seems unaware of the many Catholic and Protestant theologians who have in recent
years been making the same argument); perhaps this is why he is led to posit a religion that is by its very nature beyond idolatry. But the question is whether a religion that is immune to idolatry can be a religion at all. It sounds much like that state beyond religion called Paradise.

Roszak presents the Old Gnosis as a magical worldview and therefore open to the transcendent, as against the closed world of scientific single vision and alienating objective knowing. This makes the Old Gnosis an excellent model in the argument and Roszak uses it effectively. But the very usefulness of the model can keep the reader (and the arguer) from seeing the extent to which the Old Gnosis is capable of closing itself within a circle inside which, because the atmosphere is magically charged, the spiritual and intellectual environment is unbearably stifling. There is in Roszak the passion for Oneness, for the visionary whole, for the conflict-resolving androgyne; his is that radical discomfort with the world of historical process that Arthur Lovejoy once described as monistic pathos—and who in these fractured times is not susceptible to it? It is not easy for man, says Eric Voegelin in *New Science of Politics*, “to regain the reality of the world in which paradise is lost” and to live there under the presence of God. In the meantime the Papa Doc Duvaliers and Charles Mansons caricature our yearnings for a magical worldview, no less than the B.F. Skimmers caricature our Enlightenment dream of a benevolent rational community. What Roszak rather disdainfully calls “the collective historical process” offends them all. Therefore his passion for the transcendent and for the sacramental experience makes me uneasy, although life is meaningless without the transcendent and sacramental. But in Roszak’s context the vision itself is reductive; the circle has been drawn too tight.

It is Roszak’s commitment to the magical and ecological worldview of the Old Gnosis that leads him to downplay those Faustian elements in the hermetic and alchemical traditions that link it with the Faustian spirit in modern science. There is a useful alternative reading of these traditions in Martin Green’s recently published *Cities of Light and Sons of the Morning*, especially in chapter eight in which Gnostic Faustianism is treated at length. Green is obviously fascinated with this subject (who wouldn’t be?) but his orientation is Christian, so that he is more inclined than Roszak to be struck by the moral and intellectual muddle that accompanied the mystery. Roszak is aware of the muddle, but he seems to be saying that, while it may be better to have white than black magicians, any magicians are to be preferred over a Calvinistically disenchantcd world. In addition he thinks it possible that a Simon Magus (“most infamous of black magicians”) is really “the free magician who resisted the Church’s effort to monopolize the occult powers.”

These, then, are basic reservations. The book is nonetheless orderly, learned, eloquent and absorbing. It is repetitious and at times pitched too high, as might be expected from an author who seems himself to have experienced an apocatastasis. It badly needs an index.