

# *Prometheus and Narcissus in the Shadows of the Human Potential Movement*

— Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

*Neither Prometheus nor Narcissus will lead us out of our present predicament.*

— Christopher Lasch

The ancient Greek myths of Prometheus and Narcissus appear to have been resurrected in Renaissance thought, and for this reason they share a common impulse with humanism, which defines the human individual by what is horizontal and relative rather than what is vertical and Absolute. These two myths provide an instrumental allegory of the New Age Movement and the Human Potential Movement as they bring to light the inner workings of the human psyche in a way that is congruent with the teachings of all times and places. We recall that it was Prometheus who revolted against the Heavens to steal fire from Zeus, and Narcissus who became self-possessed with his own egoity through his reflection in the forest pool. These two impulses—the first, a rebellion against all norms, including spiritual authority, and the second, an all-consuming self-absorption that imprisons the individual within their own self-image to the degree that it negates the very existence of the other—are expressions of the inversion of the human condition that have become everyday diagnosable criteria. As a result it has been declared that: “Modern [and postmodern] Western man understands himself according to

the paradigm of Prometheus, a creature of Earth who has rebelled against Heaven” (Nasr & Jahanbegloo 2010:xix). Coupled with the following observation, one can see their significant roles in shaping the contemporary milieu: “Self-absorption defines the moral climate of contemporary society . . . Narcissism has become one of the central themes of American culture” (Lasch 1978:25). Few would argue that rebelliousness and self-absorption are two defining characteristics of the New Age and the Human Potential Movement—if not the globalizing West as a whole.

The emergence of the Human Potential Movement is inseparable from the New Age Movement, as both emerged during the milieu of the 1960s counterculture. Some hold them to be synonymous with one other, yet this is not entirely the case as they do appear to have noticeable differences. The passage of time has been a testimony to their deep-rooted effect upon the collective psyche, one which is still palpable today. What is interesting is that both of these movements appear to be derivatives of one and the same cause which is connected to a more remote historical manifestation of the “humanism” of the Renaissance that arose out of the seventeenth-century European

Enlightenment. It is here where we see the occurrence of a fundamental rift in what defines the human individual. In the traditional world where the sacred pervaded all of life, the human individual was defined by what transcended it; in addition, it is what completed the human condition itself.

*A word that rose to honor at the time of the Renaissance, and that summarized in advance the whole program of modern [and post-modern] civilization is “humanism.” Men were indeed concerned to reduce everything to purely human proportions, to eliminate every principle of a higher order, and, one might say, symbolically to turn away from the heavens under pretext of conquering the earth; the Greeks, whose example they claimed to follow, had never gone as far in this direction . . . (Guénon 2004:17; see Durand 1976)*

The humanism of the Renaissance defines man by his accidental nature and not his essential nature, no longer viewing the human state *in divinis* or as the intersection of the human and the Divine. Under the influence of Renaissance humanism, the Human Potential Movement has continued in its theoretical footsteps by

erecting a human individual who determines his or her own fate: “the individual will is all-powerful and totally determines one’s fate” (Marin 1975:46). The arrival of the Renaissance marks the desacralization of not only the cosmos, but the human individual, and it is on this fractured foundation that the modern and postmodern world developed. A world void of the sacred is abnormal and is in the fullest sense a deviation from what existed in the traditional or premodern era, which underscores the many visible pathologies plaguing our time. It may surprise contemporaries to know that: “Humanism . . . is the dominant religion of our time” and yet “most of its devout followers do not seem to be aware that they are humanists” (Ehrenfeld 1981:3).

The birth of the New Age Movement that emerged during the counterculture 1960s can be linked to its precursor The Theosophical Society founded in New York City on November 17, 1875, by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), along with William Quan Judge (1851–1896), and others.

“The Theosophists have provided almost all the underpinnings of the ‘New Age’ movement” (Godwin 1994:379). In fact Madame Blavatsky herself is indebted to the Promethean inspiration:

Hence the allegory of Prometheus, who steals the Divine Fire so as to allow men to proceed consciously on the path of Spiritual Evolution, thus transforming the most perfect of animals on Earth into a potential God, and making him free to “take the kingdom of heaven by violence” (Blavatsky 1893:255).

Other noteworthy precursors to the New Age Movement are: Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), Allan Kardec (Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, 1804–1869), Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), and G. I. Gurdjieff (1877–1949).

One of the obstacles in discussing the advent of the so-called New Age is that the broader context of temporal cycles or the cycle of manifestation (*Manvantaras*) composed of Gold (*Krita-Yuga* or *Satya-Yuga*), Silver (*Treta-Yuga*), Bronze (*Dvapara-Yuga*), and Iron Ages (*Kali-Yuga*) is grossly overlooked, what is generally termed the New Age is in reality numerous remnants of previous cycles surfacing at the culmination of the current cycle. Although the entirety of the religious and spiritual heritage is for the first time available in this temporal cycle, this does not therefore suggest that we are in or embarking upon the New Age, the contrary is in fact the case, for we are in the throes of the *Kali-Yuga* or “dark age.”

It is likely that the seeds of the Human Potential Movement were germinated via the New Age Movement: “The Human Potential Movement and its popular offshoot, the New Age” (Drury 1989:2). While some might point out that it is more academic, it is nonetheless still linked to the New Age Movement. The Promethean

impulse within the Human Potential Movement is evident in the innovative ways that it attempts to gain access to the transcendent: “The release of our full human potential—to let the light of Prometheus shine everywhere” (Wilson 1997:117). The phrase *the Human Potential Movement* has been said to have originated from a lecture that Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) delivered under the name “human potentialities” in



CHAINED PROMETHEUS BY PETER PAUL RUBENS 1611–1612

1960, at the University of California San Francisco Medical Center; however, former American Psychological Association President Gardner Murphy (1895–1979) wrote a book under the same title in 1958. Nevertheless, it was George Leonard (1923–2010), senior editor for *Look* magazine, who was said to have coined the term *the human potential* in 1965 while conducting a brainstorming session with

Esalen Institute co-founder Michael Murphy (born 1930). Abraham H. Maslow (1908–1970), one of the founders of both humanistic and transpersonal psychology, gave the noteworthy lecture at Esalen in September 14, 1967, entitled “Farther Reaches of Human Nature.” Despite the fact that Huxley only met Michael Murphy and the other co-founder of Esalen, Richard Price (1930–1985), on one occasion when visiting Esalen shortly before his death in 1962 (the same year when Esalen was founded), he had a principal influence upon the formation of the Esalen Institute, along with his close friend Gerald Heard (1889–1971). Huxley’s widow Laura Huxley (1911–2007) became a lifelong friend of Esalen.

Another significant development that was emerging at this time was humanistic psychology, known as the “third force” of modern psychology, succeeding behaviorism (“first force”) and psychoanalysis (“second force”). Humanistic psychology and the Human Potential Movement are in many ways synonymous: “Humanistic psychology—called the Third Force (the other two major forces in psychology being psychoanalysis and behaviorism)—is also referred to as the human potential movement” (Wilber 1981:12). This relationship is apparent in the following: “From the germinal thoughts of humanistic psychology grew more developed perspectives, forming what is now called the human potential movement, a prime component of the New Age” (Groothuis 1986:79). That the development of the New Age Movement is intrinsically linked to and inseparable from the Human Potential Movement in a virtually singular process with the forma-

tion of humanistic psychology has been well-documented (Vitz 2002, Ferguson 1980, Roszak 1975, Drury 1989, Bodian 1989, Taylor 1999, Alexander 1992, Spangler, 1993, Groothuis 1986, Heelas 2003). In conjunction with the emergence of humanistic psychology is the development of transpersonal psychology, the “fourth force” of modern psychology. Transpersonal psychology, like its precursor humanistic psychology, is inseparable from the Human Potential Movement: “*Transpersonal Psychology* can be regarded as the theoretical wing of



the Human Potential Movement” (Hanegraaff 1998:50). In a similar connection, we need to also make note of transpersonal psychology’s association with New Age thought: “Transpersonal worldview . . . qualifies as ‘New Age’” (Hanegraaff 1998:70, see Drury 2004). Psychoanalysis or the “second force” in modern psychology has also played a role in both the Human Potential Movement and the New Age Movement as has been indicated: “Freudian renegades [i.e. Alfred Adler (1870–1937), Carl Jung (1875–1961), Otto Rank (1884–1939), Karen Horney (1885–1952), Friedrich “Fritz” Perls (1893–1970), Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), Erich Fromm (1900–1980), and Erik Erikson (1902–1994), etc.] have made a significant impact on the development of the New Age, in

particular on that aspect known as the Human Potential Movement” (Heelas 2003:47, see Roszak 1978, Kripal 2007). Behaviorism or the “first force” in modern psychology was also on the scene as we recall that radical behaviorist B. F. Skinner (1904–1990) gave talks at the Esalen Institute in the late 1960s; one of them was entitled “The Scope of the Human Potential” (Skinner 1983). It is also noteworthy to illustrate the essential link that unites the Human Potential Movement with popular contemporary movements, such as Ken Wilber’s (born 1949) Integral Institute whose mission is to “awaken humanity to full self-awareness.” Its signature method Integral Life Practice (ILP) can be viewed as the maturation and extension of the Integral Transformative Practice (ITP) developed by Michael Murphy and George Leonard that emerged during the Human Potential Movement at the Esalen Institute (Wilber 2000, 2010).

One of the most remarkable declarations confirming the hegemony of the Promethean spirit within modern psychology is traced to the motto borrowed from Virgil’s *Aeneid* from one of its foremost initiators: “If I cannot bend the higher powers [the gods or the spiritual domain], I shall stir up Hell” (Freud 1913). The late Theodore Roszak (1933–2011), an authority on the counterculture, writes an informative statement that underscores the essential narcissism and we would add promethean outlook embedded within third and fourth “forces” of modern psychology:

The techniques and theories of Gestalt, Encounter, Transactional, Psychodrama, Transpersonal differ in many ways, but all the schools are united in asserting the essential

health and innocence of human nature. They are the therapies of a narcissistic culture, and unapologetically so. (Roszak 2001:275)

A central feature that underscores the New Age Movement, the Human Potential Movement, humanistic psychology, and transpersonal psychology, is its deep-seated and radical *syncretism* together with *New Age thought*, *psychologism*, *scientism*, and *evolutionism* (Bendeck Sotillos 2013). A key example of this can be found in the definition of transpersonal psychology provided by Anthony J. Sutich (1907–1976), a pioneer of both third and fourth “forces” of modern psychology:

The emerging Transpersonal Psychology (“fourth force”) is concerned specifically with the empirical, scientific study of, and responsible implementation of the findings relevant to, becoming, individual and species-wide meta-needs, ultimate values, unitive consciousness, peak experiences, B-values, ecstasy, mystical experience, awe, being, self-actualization, essence, bliss, wonder, ultimate meaning, transcendence of the self, spirit, oneness, cosmic awareness, individual and species-wide synergy, maximal interpersonal encounter, sacralization of everyday life . . . (Sutich 1969:16)

Strangely, the myths of Prometheus and Narcissus are themselves symbolic representations of these phenomena, for no longer are contemporaries willing to turn to the timeless truths of the wisdom traditions for guidance and transcendence; they now take transcendence and the salvation of their souls into their own hands, paving their own inroads on the consciousness circuit.

Yet, we must be ever so watchful of new or novel developments that make their appearance in today’s spiritual marketplace, as Prometheus and Narcissus are ingeniously masquerading under every guise imaginable: “The *Kali Yuga* is not only the time when there is no longer anything but problems without solutions, nor the time when the sacred ceases to exist. It is the time when everything that fundamentally opposes the spiritual passes itself off as spiritual” (Biès 2004:136–137). Due to the innumerable seductions of New Age spiritual counterfeits along with hybrid therapies that make their appearance in the *Kali-Yuga*, the following word of caution is necessary: “The shadow side of spirituality cannot be ignored” (Vaughan 1995:xv). From this perspective we can thus understand the implications of what has been termed “spiritual materialism” (Trungpa 2008) or “spiritual narcissism,” along with a peculiar but nonetheless striking observation of the contemporary spiritual milieu: “Many so-called ‘Spiritual seekers’ are just Narcissus in drag!” (Da 1995:216). All of them appear to be expressions of the myriad “ways in which selfishness and moral blindness now assert themselves in the larger culture as enlightenment and psychic health” (Marin 1975:45). Ironically, while the catalog of psychological disorders multiplies in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), soon to be in its fifth edition, modern psychology has been unable to diagnosis the roots of the present-day dissolution. The contemporary crisis is non other than a spiritual crisis, yet modern

psychology does not comprehend that the human psyche cannot be treated by the human psyche, it is the Spirit that situates the human psyche, and likewise it is solely the



Spirit that can resolve the crisis of the modern and postmodern world.

In presenting the above critique we must also offer our gratitude to the pioneers of humanistic and transpersonal psychology who attempted to establish a psychology that is true to both the human and the spiritual dimension given the profound wreckage of behaviorism and psychoanalysis. “[John B. Watson and] Freud supplied to us the sick half of [modern] psychology and we must now fill it out with the healthy half” (Maslow 1968:5). The crux of humanistic and transpersonal psychology is that what is human is inseparable from the transpersonal and equally what is transpersonal is inseparable from what is human. It is important to note that while behaviorism has divorced itself from both the Spirit and the soul, exemplifying an underlying *scientism*, psychoanalysis has discarded Spirit and salvaged in its place the human psyche, exemplifying an underscoring *psychologism*; humanistic psychology has endeavored to reclaim what is human after its disfigurement, while transpersonal psychology likewise acknowledged

the key role of the human being, it emphasized the primacy of Spirit. It is the pioneers of humanistic and transpersonal psychology who confronted the explicit reductionism and dehumanization of the first two “forces” of modern psychology—behaviorism and psychoanalysis—yet as long as transpersonal and humanistic psychology accepts the principal errors of behaviorism and psychoanalysis, which they are a logical derivative of and not to mention

immanence rather than transcendence, which obscures both integral spirituality and integral psychology. The plenary traditions of the perennial philosophy unanimously assert: “There can be no immanence without prior transcendence” (Perry 2012:50). The complementary nature of transcendence and immanence is unanimously recognized. For example, in the West, immanence has been expressed by “The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21) and in the East by *Tat tvam asi* or “That art thou”

(Upanishads); and likewise transcendence in the West has been underscored by “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 16:36) and in the East by “Brahman alone is real; the world is an illusory appearance” (Shankarāchārya).

The use of the popular phrase “I’m Spiritual, but not religious” speaks to a common contemporary misunderstanding that does not realize that spirituality is the inner corollary of religion and does not exist independent of religion. This

of the Divine and makes an absolute out of the human condition. Frederic Spiegelberg (1897–1994), who had a significant impact upon the 1960s counterculture, keenly underscores the many faces of Prometheus and Narcissus found throughout these movements, which leads to the cul-de-sac of: “the religion of no religion” (1948). It is not enough to acknowledge the mystical dimension underlying all of the world’s religions—what is required is to live their truth. Even atheism, its polar extreme, is still no less promethean and narcissistic in its position as it too becomes a religion, even if inverted, as it still comprises great faith in asserting that the world and all of life occurred by chance or accident.

The myths of Prometheus and Narcissus are evermore significant today as the Human Potential Movement along with the New Age Movement have made their way into popular culture, and their ideas have additionally been introduced into major American businesses and corporations. “The human potential movement . . . has thoroughly permeated our language and values; indeed, it would be safe to say that very few Americans have not been touched by its influence, at least to some degree” (Bodian 1989:44). It is imperative to recognize the fact that the Human Potential Movement in conjunction with the New Age Movement contributed to the watering down of, if not an outright attack on, traditional religion and spirituality, by substituting it with counterfeit spirituality and experimental forms of therapy that usurped its centrality, which has had unquantifiable effects on the human collectivity. In no other era, with the exception of the contemporary one, has psychological health and well-being been



NARCISSUS BY MICHELANGELO CARAVAGGIO 1594–1596

continuator of, they are enabling theoretical positions that fundamentally contradict and undermine their theory and practice.

At the core both the Human Potential Movement and the New Age Movement, including humanistic and transpersonal psychology for the most part, emphasize

mistaken perspective also endorses a “pick and choose” model, which is a hallmark of New Age thought; it is ignored that it is not we who choose our religion, but the Divine who elects it for us. It is from this error that it is assumed that religion is a man-made phenomenon, which denies the existence

regarded as an end unto itself. In the traditional or premodern world, the benefits of psychological health and well-being have always been understood as less important or of secondary status, for what was essential was living in accordance with one's religious tradition. Without the spiritual domain—there is *no* integration of the human psyche in the deepest and truest sense—it is the Divine alone that brings balance to the human microcosm encompassing Spirit, soul, and body.

While both humanistic and transpersonal psychology in many ways championed the reductionistic outlook of behaviorism and psychoanalysis—“*The human potential is infinitely greater than we have been led to believe*” (Leonard 1968:215)—establishing a more complete image of what it means to be human, the misdeeds of the New Age Movement and the Human Potential Movement simultaneously distorted the human image. This is largely due to the fact that: “The humanistic therapy movement, as well as the therapeutic schools of transpersonal psychology, does not embody an adequate understanding of authentic spirituality” (Feuerstein 1991:193). While there are certain benefits to be gained from modern psychology and its various therapies, they do not come without serious perils, as many contemporaries no longer comprehend the significance of religion and its role in human integration.

It is all too easy for the human individual to conclude their terrestrial journey at the psychological level; in fact the confusion of the psychic with the spiritual is one of the most widespread errors, underscoring these movements. The attempt to forge an identity purely

on a subjective and relative level is none other than a promethean and narcissistic impulse. It is true that contemporary therapies may provide one with a sense of greater ego-strength and human connection, and given that dehumanization has been normalized we cannot blame people for desiring to attain psychological balance in the midst of the chaos that has been unleashed. Yet, a “healthy ego” only concerns the horizontal dimension of psycho-physical development excluding the most vital, the vertical dimension or the spiritual domain. “Humanistic [along with transpersonal] psychology is in effect an attempt at a secular path to salvation” (Ellis & Abrams 2009:310). The paradox of desiring a “healthy ego” is that at its core it is none other than the longing to return back to Spirit. The shadows of Prometheus and Narcissus will still prevail if humanistic and transpersonal psychology does not reclaim the integral spirituality and psychology of the perennial philosophy that it initially developed out of, for the spiritual domain can solely fulfill the human state, and provide the indispensable discernment between the Real and the illusory:

*The power to tell the greater from the lesser reality, the sacred paradigm from its copies and secular counterfeits . . . without it the consciousness circuit will surely become a lethal swamp of paranormal entertainments, facile therapeutic tricks, authoritarian guru trips, demonic subversions.* (Roszak 1975:13)

Should the shadowlands of Prometheus and Narcissus not be adequately diagnosed and treated, conceivably the whole of modern psychology premised on a distort-

ed image of the human individual and a profane science may possibly lead itself to the same unfortunate prognosis of one of its early offshoots of Renaissance humanism and where it culminates: “The self-destructive elements of modern humanism . . . will eventually destroy it from within” (Ehrenfeld 1981:xi). While the Human Potential Movement is not entirely synonymous with the New Age Movement, they still share many significant and overarching similarities. Given that some will likely challenge the points made here, arguing that spirituality is better than *no* spirituality, even if misled, this fails to comprehend the real damage that has been done and continues to be done in the name of the Human Potential Movement and likewise the New Age Movement. The core issue is that these harmful effects are not generally understood nor are their broader and long-term consequences. Far from being dead, both of these developments are on the contrary endlessly resuscitated, proliferating, and appear ever more nuanced and sophisticated in their presentation. What makes us integrally human is what beckons us to return to the Divine, and it is this transcendent and immanent source that brings enduring equilibrium and harmony to both the human psyche and the physical body, which is as true today as it was yesterday and always.

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