RICE UNIVERSITY

High Weirdness:
Visionary Experience in the Seventies Counterculture
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A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
Doctor of Philosophy

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HOUSTON, TEXAS
SEPTEMBER 2015
Abstract

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This project interweaves two critical investigations into the history of religions in America, one theoretical and one historical. The theoretical investigation concerns the question of religious experience, and particularly how scholars of religion understand this category once we recognize that to label any experience “religious” already prejudices the phenomenon in question. Developing the work of Ann Taves, I call for a more fine-grained account of how forms of extraordinary experience come to be constructed as religious (or mystical, occult, etc.) through the creative assemblage of existing scripts and templates. However, using the ontological theories of Bruno Latour and Felix Guattari, this project argues that the constructionist account of religious experience does not necessarily negate the phenomenological and pragmatic dimensions of such experiences. In this sense, the project brings an ontologically rich understanding of constructionism into productive dialogue with the current of American religious experience initiated by William James.

The scripts and templates associated with well-bounded religious traditions are relatively
easy to identify. However, within the countercultural period, a wide variety of discourses—religious, psychological, occult, fictional, aesthetic, technological—compete and commingle as ways of shaping and understanding the myriad of intense, sublime, and profoundly weird experiences that, through psychedelics and the pursuit of a wide variety of “altered states of consciousness,” characterize so much countercultural life. Though most studies of the counterculture focus on the sixties proper, I am interested in tracking the construction of extraordinary experience into the seventies, when disappointed revolutionaries turned in droves towards gurus, self-help regimens, and proto-New Age spirituality. While analyzing some of the sociological dimensions of this influential cultural shift, the project principally investigates three symptomatic but singular intellectuals: the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick, the underground author Robert Anton Wilson, and the future psychedelic raconteur Terence McKenna. Employing their own unique mix of esotericism, social science, irony and fiction, all three men wrestle with their own extreme bouts of “high weirdness” in ways that reflect critical mutations in American religious experience.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Some of the originating inspirations of this book have been with me since my Yale undergraduate years, which, speaking as a mid-career PhD candidate, now seem a very long time ago indeed. As such, a complete reckoning of the individuals who have helped this project toward the light of manifestation would not only be excessively lengthy, but riddled with gaps imposed by fallible memory and the nebulous and yet pervasive way that our individual efforts are supported and realized through our relationships with others.

First I would like to thank my thesis committee. Jeffrey Kripal has been a generous and inspiring advisor who has encouraged me unreservedly to find my own “weird” path through scholarship even as he laid out an exceptionally useful map of the field and particularly of the history of religions, whose lineage I now claim as my own. Cary Wolfe has also proved unremittingly encouraging of my work as both a thinker and a writer, and his work on systems theory and posthumanism has provided a deeply influential, if mostly implicit, inspiration for this project. William Parsons has not only proved a superb model for the classroom teaching of religion and mysticism, but has reliably beamed sunny Bay Area “vibes” in the direction of this San Francisco native, thereby easing my transition into the strange land of Texas and the stranger land of academe.
Within the wider community of Rice, I was helped and encouraged by a number of faculty members as well as fellow graduate students. Claire Fanger, John Stroup, Anne Klein, Phil Wood, and Richard Smith all helped this project along in important ways, in part by convening seminars and workshops that called forth excellence. Among my many friends and conversation partners in the Religion, English, and Philosophy departments, pride of place go to Dustin Atlas, Derek Woods, Benjamin Kozicki, Mike Griffiths, and Jacob Mills, all of whom challenged and inspired my thoughts and sharpened by critical acumen. I would particularly like to thank my colleague Matthew Dillon, who not only generously shared thoughts and references relevant to our many shared fields of interest, but whose exacting scholarship and discipline have proven invaluable in innumerable practical ways.

Academic colleagues beyond Texas also proved many words of insight and encouragement, especially Christian Greer, Marcus Boon, Michael Saler, Alexander van der Haven, Joshua Ramey, Heather Lukes, Molly McGarry, and Mikita Brottman. Equal waves of assistance came from beyond the walls of academe. The deep fuel for the project came through (sometimes desperate) conversations with Mark Pilkington, Jennifer Dumpert, Victoria Nelson, Fernando Castrillon, and my old friend Jeff Linson. Many others provided precisely the fragmented reference or concept I needed at the time, or game me the opportunity to work out my ideas in public. These include Jacques Vallee, Eddy Nix, David Pescovitz, Matt Cardin, Mike Jay, Earth and Fire Erowid, Matthew Souzis, Juris Ahn, Craig Baldwin, and Uel Aramchek. Special thanks to Finn McKenna for providing me a rare peek at the most important of his father’s unpublished writings.

This book would not have been possible had not I been granted the extraordinary opportunity to provide editorial assistance to Pamela Jackson and Jonathan Lethem after they
madly took on the task of wrangling eight thousand largely hand-scrawled pages of Philip K. Dick’s Exegesis into a book, which was published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in 2011. Thanks to both of them for inviting me into the engine room of VALIS. The intertwined worlds of Philip K. Dick scholarship and fandom also gave me the opportunity to present earlier versions of this material, along with providing an ongoing conceptual and imaginal base of operations. Here I would like to thank David Gill, David Hyde, and Alexander Dunst for inviting me to participate in their respective PKD conferences, Fred Dolan for inviting me to share my PKD work at the SLSA, and to acknowledge as well as conversations and vital data-swaps with James Burton, Chris Mays, Richard Doyle, Patrick Clark, John Fairchild, Lawrence Rickels, and Ted Hand. Finally, I must thank two professors at Yale who watched over my initial foray into PKD criticism so many years ago, David Rodowick and Richard Halpern.
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INTRODUCTION: HIGH WEIRDNESS

This dissertation is about, and inspired by, high weirdness, a mode of culture and consciousness that, in my telling, reached a peculiar peak in the early 1970s, when the handful of highly intelligent writers and psychonauts that make up my subjects pushed hard on the boundaries of reality—and got pushed around in return. I raise the flag of high weirdness as both a standard (of the unstandard) and a warning of sorts, like the indication “here be dragons” that medieval map-makers scrawled on the margins of the known world. The margins that our avatars of high weirdness explored were, admittedly, more cognitive and cultural than geographical. But the phantasms they both fought and fell for in those margins were as monstrous and florid in a way as any fire-breathing worm: religious obsession, overwhelming synchronicity, paranormal psychedelia, cosmic conspiracy theory, pathological delusion, paranoid pulp fiction, and other dimensions of that cultural zone that the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick called “the trash stratum.”

Indeed, this project began as a study of Philip K. Dick and the series of extraordinary experiences he underwent in early 1974, when a delivery woman with a curious Christian necklace knocked on the door of his apartment in Orange County, California. Peculiar things had
been happening in Dick’s life and texts for decades, but the series of perceptual anomalies, synchronicities, oracular dreams, and close encounters that characterized the period he called “2/3/74” really take the cake. Equally amenable to the discourse of visionary gnosis, science-fiction fabulation, and psychopathology, 2/3/74 offers an exemplary locus of high weirdness in the history of American (and Californian) consciousness. Descending with the force of revelation, 2/3/74 nonetheless did not deliver a coherent message or prophecy, and Dick spent the rest of his eight years on this planet feverishly hashing through the meaning of his experiences in his fiction, his letters, his published essays, and the Exegesis—the immense and enigmatic private journal that eventually clocked in at over 8000, largely hand-written pages.

Though Dick’s late “religious turn” puzzled or repelled his earliest critics, some of whom feared he had gone mad, the novels he wrote in this period have now been richly recuperated by the growing numbers of science-fiction critics and literary theorists drawn to his work. As a historian of religions, I wanted to approach this period of Dick’s life from a different angle, one informed by the study of mystical experience, the hermeneutics of religious discourse, and the cultural history of American spirituality in the postwar period, with special emphasis on the psychedelic transformation of esotericism. I aimed to shed light on Dick’s gnostic, esoteric, and theological sources; contextualize Dick within California’s unique spiritual counterculture; shed light on the dynamics of altered states of consciousness and their construction as religiously meaningful events; and, perhaps most importantly, directly engage the eccentric religious, esoteric, and comparativist hermeneutics—and the reflection on such hermeneutics—that Dick himself practiced in his late work.

I still intend to get to a lot of that. But in the course of navigating 2/3/74 and the matrix of rabbit holes that is the Exegesis, I realized that there was a fundamental problem in my project.
At the end of the day, it was still a story of one individual, albeit a remarkable individual who managed to be at once incredibly singular and disturbingly multiple. But it is tough to make one guy, largely working on his own, into the emblem of a significant mutation in American religious experience and identity. Poking around the network of Dick’s associates, commentators, and fellow travelers, I discovered a cluster of sometimes eerily similar experiences and more-or-less autobiographical texts among a number of countercultural figures, many of whom, it must be said, also either resided in or spent serious time in California in the early 1970s. These include Dick’s correspondence pal Robert Anton Wilson, who spent most of 1974 in a “reality tunnel” in which the esoteric conspiracy theories he had cranked out in his pulp fiction masterpiece *Illuminatus!* (co-written with Robert Shea) intruded into his life in the guise of apparent communications from discarnate aliens linked to the star system Sirius. No less weird was the experience of Terence McKenna, a brilliant former Berkeley student and psychedelic intellectual who returned from the Amazon in 1971 with a tale about the mother of all trips: a mushroom journey, taken with his brother Dennis, whose gnostic, paranormal, and science-fictional overlays McKenna would later compare explicitly (if somewhat audaciously) to 2/3/74. Two years later, the comet Kahoutek triggered the “starseed transmissions” that catalyzed a major intellectual and cognitive shift in the mind of the then-imprisoned Timothy Leary, which in turn heavily influenced Robert Anton Wilson.

All the memoirs and accounts by these men blend elements of religious mysticism and esoteric gnosis with cybernetic media, alien communications, and an embrace of altered states at once pragmatic and marked by popular underground culture. They are also all wonderful texts, tales that were published or framed as non-fictions, but non-fictions haunted by, at the very least, ontological phantasms that suggest the genres of weird fantasy and science fiction. As such, they
present the wonderful opportunity for a relatively close comparative study that moves beyond the confines of a single nervous system. The fact that all of these stories unfold, at least in part, in coastal California in the early to mid-1970s suggests that, at the very least, there are specific Zeitgeist engines operating behind the scenes, and that some serious cultural archaeology is called for, work that we will lay out early in this volume.

At the same time, though some of our avatars of high weirdness had personal connections or were aware of one another’s work, they also found themselves in different generations, social locations, and intellectual/artistic milieus. Terence McKenna (born 1946) was the only one who belonged to the sixties youth culture, though Robert Anton Wilson (b. 1932) played a great job of catch-up, immersing himself in the LSD scene, the occult revival, and a hedonic libertarian anarchism. And though all are figures were marked by the postwar presence of LSD and other psychedelics, Philip K. Dick (b. 1928) only tripped a few times. Finally, though many of these figures express a Promethean, heretical and even skeptical attitude towards religious experience, Dick includes traditionally Christian tropes and sensibilities within his countercultural constructions.

My decision to call all of this “high weirdness” draws from my long-ago encounter with Rev. Ivan Stang’s 1988 catalog *High Weirdness By Mail: A Directory of the Fringe: Mad Prophets, Crackpots, Kooks & True Visionaries*, a book worth briefly tarrying with here. Stang divided his directory of “crank literature” into categories like “Weird Science,” “New Age Saps,” and “Cosmic Hippie Drug-Brother Stuff,” which in turn collected capsule reviews and contact information for a variety of niche organizations like Christian Technocracy, Saucer Technology, the Warlords of Satan, and the Good Sex for Mutants Dating League. Stang’s volume was part of a micro-trend of fringe catalogs that marked the eighties underground—one
also thinks of the Loompanics Catalog, Amok Books’ *Dispatch* series, Mike Gunderloy’s metazine *Factsheet Five, CoEvolution Quarterly*, and Ted Schultz’s *Fringes of Reason: A Whole Earth Catalog*. These and other compendia represent a time, long before the World Wide Web, when the counterculture had splintered into a proliferation of subcultures accessible largely through alternate media, and particularly zines. These circuits of marginal mediation were by no means restricted to post-sixties currents, but included a rainbow array of American alternatives to a mainstream or mass media culture. Many of these subcultures, including holistic health movements, Ufology, paranormal science, feverish rightwing Christianity, antinomian parody religions, neopaganism, and an ascendent New Age, could be placed in the category of alternative religion.

The tone of these compendia varied widely: Amok presented a rictus grin of nihilism, while Gunderloy maintained a scrupulous impartiality. Stang’s attitude towards the groups and individuals he wrote about hovered somewhere between Dada celebration and juvenile snark. “Appreciate unexpected glimpses of the strange ‘realities’ behind religions other than your own?” he asked in the introduction. “Entranced by the thought process of the mentally ill?”1 In other words, Stang’s notion of high weirdness was not something most of the groups he cataloged were aiming for or interested in. Instead, high weirdness signified, but only in part, a deliriously ironic distance cultivated by Stang and his readers, a parasitic effect of perverse enjoyment that could be generated, Stang showed, from a mail-order trawl through the mediated margins of American culture, haunted by conspiracy, delusion, and “the freak show of faith.” Stang was perfectly upfront about the role that mockery played in his curation of American fringe religion, though the smirk was only one element in a deliberately heterogenous mask of

attitudes that included rationalist skepticism, irrationalist pranking, and a kind of celebratory bemusement that can only be called wonder. Indeed, part of the fun lay in keeping open the possibility, at least in some cases, that “true visionaries” lurked among the kooks.

But the truly visionary warp of Stang’s project lay in the fact that neither himself nor his readers could keep their distance from the phenomenon at hand. Part of the problem was categorical. Alongside many naively or unintentionally weird groups, Stang’s catalog also included many comic artists, zinesters, satirists, and musicians who, like himself, were self-consciously mining, recombining, and rebroadcasting a subcultural aesthetic that Stang himself was helping to fashion. Such intentional high weirdness also characterizes the organization for which Stang still serves as Reverend to this day: the Church of the SubGenius. Most simply characterized as a parody religion, the Church, first developed by Stang and Philo Drummond at the end of the 1970s in a variety of zines, is most centrally associated with its prophet: J.R. “Bob” Dobbs, a 1950s salesman whose grinning Ward Cleaver-like visage is invariably pictured with pipe.

This goofy but strangely unnerving image needs no giveaway announcements—Ceci n’est pas un prophète. Beyond the iconography of suburban America in the 1950s, the Church also drew its matter from a wide variety of conspiracy theories, UFO narratives, pulp fictions, and apocalyptic religious forms, with Scientology, fundamentalist Christianity—then flexing its political muscles as the Moral Majority—and the ascendant New Age coming in for focused and roughly equal drubbing for their copious “bulldada.” As we will see in a later chapter, the Church of the Subgenius drew a great deal of inspiration, lore, and tone from Discordianism, an earlier, more individualistic, and less pop culture-saturated parody religion whose ironic mysteries, slapstick anarchist politics and terrible puns were transmitted into the seventies

But for all the bad puns and learned satire, Stang and other leading SubGenii would also insist that their religion was real. However you interpret this second-order irony—as a paradoxical mode of sincerity, or a bid for tax breaks—it affirms and announces the disruptive power of religious fictions, a faith—or better said, a procedure—that some sociologists of religion now identify with “postmodern religion” or even “hyper-real religion.” This slippery sense of self-reference is key: in the section of his *High Weirdness* catalog called “More Weird Religion,” Stang listed his own Church under the heading “The One Sane Anchor In This Raging Sea Of False Belief.” He did, however, also include other similar anchors, such as Robert Anton Wilson, the Discordian co-founder Kerry Thornley, and fellow travelers like Antero Alli and Hakim Bey. With these shout-outs, Stang let the mask slip: high weirdness was not simply an ironic category for eccentric and naive chunks of American cultural detritus, but a self-reflexive engagement with those religious materials, even a religious tradition or esoteric current of its own. In this tradition, whose spectral currency flows throughout this project, the object of high weirdness is folded back into the subject, a Möbius strip of cultural and cognitive positioning that helps establish the enigmatic topography of the term.

Since Stang’s book, high weirdness has also become a subcultural term of art for a mode of extraordinary experience, one most often associated with paranormal activity, occult phenomena, synchronicities, and psychedelic voyages. In this sense of the term, which is closer to the one I am developing in this project, high weirdness occurs when the peculiar logics

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associated with various marginal cultural narratives—particularly those concerning conspiracy theories, extraterrestrials, esotericism, and fantastic pulp fictions—intrude forcefully, uncannily, and sometimes absurdly into the texture of lived experience. Such a formulation, of course, begs many questions, including the question of “experience,” which some cognitive psychologists and scholars of religion would like to expunge from the vocabulary of the human sciences entirely.

Here I want to insist that by “experience” I don’t mean some essential or “pure” immediacy that might ground religious or metaphysical claims or behaviors in the foundations of subjectivity. As we will see, I hold that experience unfolds within extensive networks of cultural materials, information technologies, and psychological apparatuses that are both individual and transpersonal. In that sense, experience is always “mediated,” which does not mean, however, that it disappears, or that its sometimes extraordinary singularity can be factored away by the invocation of psychological, sociological or neurological conditions. In this I also cleave to an older, often disparaged, but deeply relational approach to the study of religious events: a radical empiricism or phenomenological orientation that takes both the substance and surface of experience seriously, and that does not believe that robust explanations of experience—reductive or otherwise—suffice to resolve the existential and ontological enigmas and ruptures opened up by our most extraordinary, unsettling, and even pathological encounters.

Here, as an example of a singularly bizarre but strangely mediated experience, is a trip report included in Jim DeKorne’s 1992 text *Psychedelic Shamanism*, an innovative and imaginative discussion of psychedelic phenomenology that includes a good deal of DIY detail on various esoteric preparations. In the following account, an anonymous colleague of DeKorne concocted a pharmacological analogue to the Amazonian brew *ayahuasca* by combining eight grams of *Peganum harmala* seeds with ten grams of the traditional DMT-containing leaves of
Psychotria viridis, both purchased through a mail-order catalog. After swallowing the vile brew that resulted, the phenomenology began. He soon began to see mosaic tapestries, whose vaguely “Aztec” patterns seemed at once organic and calculated. “And then…

the high weirdness began. The tapestries disappeared and were replaced by darkness. Soon stalagmites and floor-to-ceiling columns appeared. I was in a cave with rock formations that resembled trees designed by Dali—seemingly vegetable and mineral at the same time. As I “moved” among them, I noticed one that was much larger than the others. Getting closer, I noticed a large crack in its side, and then that the interior was hollow and illuminated by a pale blue light.

It was then that I noticed the entity. About the size of a large dog, but with reptilian characteristics. (The word “dragon” popped in and out.) It moved toward me the moment our eyes met. Only about eight feet of approach was necessary for it to press its face against the crack in the column. (Have you seen the Sci-fi classic “It Came from Outer Space”? There was a slight resemblance between the space monsters and this being.) I feel now that here I blew it. This being wanted to get close to me, yet I did not speak nor did I move closer. I forgot that I was a participant and not merely an observer. Time passed as we stared at each other. Finally this creature made a kissing movement with its “lips” and a glowing blue ball emerged from its mouth through the crack and hung in space. The rest of the image faded, but the ball—in 3-D—hung in my bedroom for some minutes.

In this exemplary scene of high weirdness, mere experience is replaced with the more unsettling event of an encounter, an encounter with an Other who pops out of the phantasmagoric scene after returning the gaze. Here, as readers, most of us instantly fall away towards other explanatory registers, such as temporary psychosis, pharmacological derangement, or, as Jodi Dean does in Aliens in America, political alienation returned as an alien “symptom.”
The difficulty we have with staying close to the phenomenological account is, crucially, mirrored by the author himself. By remaining a mere “observer” of the scene, he falls short of the full encounter. Hovering around the pivot of reason and madness, detachment and delusion, he reflects an ambivalence that is crucial for high weirdness. Similarly key in this account is the presence of popular culture fantasies, which we find here in the reference to a B-movie monster, to Dali’s dorm-room biomorphs, and to the iconography of dragons. Just as the two-dimensional tapestry was replaced with a topologically complex imaginal space—the 3-D cave supported by hollowed pillars—so too might the entire encounter be placed in turn within the higher dimensional folds that characterize high weirdness, whose various psychological, neurological, cultural, political, and cosmic networks both compose and exceed the individual imagination. The complexity of this knot is considerable, and seems almost designed to elude attempts at easy mapping. One angle of approach, however, lies right under our noses: the concept, significance, and affective resonance of the phrase high weirdness, a wayward term of art to which we must now turn to set up the complex ontological template of what is to follow.

High Times

The high in my title High Weirdness is, on one level, a simple measure of relative intensity, as in high anxiety, or of large numbers, as in high frequency or high cost. These are only some of the resonances of a highly polysemic word, which can described a spatial location (high mountains), power (high status), and even liminality, as in high seas, which are beyond the legal jurisdiction or borders of any nation-state. But, in addition to these terms, the word high inevitably invokes exuberant states of intoxication as well, and while the high of high weirdness
is a measure of intensity, verticality, and liminality, it is most intimately tied to the condition of being high on psychoactive substances.

The OED tracks this use back to the seventeenth century, with Thomas May’s minimalist translation of Lucan: “he’s high with wine.” In the postwar era, the word was only infrequently associated with alcohol, but increasingly took up with a long list of pharmacological instigators: cannabis, psychedelics, cocaine, amphetamines, heroin. That said, the rhetoric of the high should never be reduced to a index of drug use or a synonym of intoxication. Indeed, the early seventies also saw the rise of phrases like “natural high” and “high on life.” Though often offered as a replacement for the drug culture, as in the Christian writer Louis Savary’s 1971 youth-oriented psychology book Getting High Naturally, these terms also remind us that the condition of being high is not identical to the presence of a substance or its particular psycho-physiological properties, but refers more to the way we hold, interpret, or ride those markers. As David Lenson notes, being high is less about what we perceive than how we feel about what we perceive; as such, “a drug’s affect outweighs its effect.”3 And these affects in turn encompass a wide variety of dynamic states and evocative feelings—buoyancy, bliss, dreaminess, detachment, exhilaration, mania, vision, ascent.

This latter note is particularly important here, as it points to the profound tug of verticality that hides in the high. Lenson observes that the term “high” suggests a “rising above, the obtaining of a superior overview.”4 From Lenson’s socio-political perspective, this rising above represents a very specific, anti-consumerist transcendence: a mode of pleasure that exceeds the insatiable desire driving capitalist consumption, what Burroughs calls “the algebra of need.” Given the ease with which consumer capitalism absorbs psychoactive states, Lenson’s

4. Ibid, 73.
stance may be excessively utopian. But we can go much farther, or higher, with this vector of ascent. For such rising above also invokes innumerable facets of religious discourse, where one will find copious images of mountain tops and stairways to heaven, of world trees and angelic spheres above the empyrean. Rhetorically, much religious language is marked with the immense exhortatory pressure to seek what is above, to ascend and quit the low world and the heavy flesh. The highness of the modern drug user, like the “peak experiences” of the New Age seeker or the penthouse suites of the ultrarich, is a secular trace of this transcendental legacy, one that in certain cases—with the psychedelics certainly, and cannabis as well—retains a complex interpretive and phenomenological engagement with spiritual and religious language and imagery.

Drugs make people “high” not simply because the modern West retains a cultural legacy that associates the heights with desirable or holy states of mind and being. Like the rhetoric and imagery of light, the figure of height pervades too many religious, mythological, and ethical domains to write off as a pure cultural contingency. That leaves us, then, with the suspicion that the links between height and abstract values like transcendence are rooted in some sort of general ontological condition. One way of sussing out this condition is through the sorts of comparativist moves enjoined by a figure like Mircea Eliade, who gathered hosts of examples from across the written records of religion, mythology, and ethnography to develop his influential and deeply contested arguments about the fundamental patterns of religious life. These debates are too arcane to enter into here, but it is important to emphasize that, for all his over-reliance on the notion of shared ontological structures (what Jung called “archetypes”), Eliade rooted many of his comparisons in the embodied actuality of human life on our particular planet. As such, some
of his evidence and argumentation can be relatively smoothly ported to the increasingly biological, neo-Darwinian, and cognitivist frameworks of contemporary scholarship.

For example, Eliade held that the cultural values of “the high” derive from the sky, the actual sky—blue, stormy, blazing and then blackened with points of light—that all sighted humans confront throughout their lives, whether or not they think of it as “the heavens.” For Eliade, some of the symbolic associations of height are, as it were, already carried by the physical existence of the sky. “The sky ‘symbolizes’ transcendence, power and changelessness simply by being there. It exists because it is high, infinite, immovable, powerful.” This sort of essentialism can be questioned of course—does the sky, with its weather and wandering stars, really embody “changelessness”? Nonetheless, Eliade is right to look for the kernels of comparison, especially around a basic notion like height, in some of the existential facticity we encounter as earthbound humans.

Today a more modest and empirical version of such thinking can be found in their anthropological notion of conceptual metaphors developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. The basic argument of the authors is that all human thinking—even abstract scientific concepts or philosophical reasoning—is inextricable from metaphors whose “experiential basis” lies in our bodies and our interaction with fundamental elements of nature and human culture, like food, or journeys. One category of such metaphors they describe as “orientational,” since they depend on our basic physical orientation in space. Though the authors acknowledge that different cultures interpret these orientations differently, they nonetheless argue for the vast and systematic extent of the positive metaphoric orientation of “UP.” In English, desirable instantiations of status, health, mood, virtue, quality, and cognitive power, are all described

through variations of UP, which of course also lies behind the many meanings of “high” sited above. Lakoff and Johnson’s carnal conceptual metaphors go a long way toward affirming the basic poesis of human cognition—including rationality—and I take these lessons to heart. At a time when the rigorous associations that undergird comparison remain highly unfashionable in the study of religion, Lakoff and Johnson point towards a bodily and biological domain of fundamental metaphors that can not only illuminate the “poetic” grounds of conceptual thought—including religious thought—but also suggest very concrete points for robust comparisons across cultures. Such deeply embodied work will, I believe, reveal more substance to Eliade’s admittedly excessive pattern recognition than is currently acknowledged.

That said, there is another current of thought that helps explain the metaphoric and conceptual depth of the high, a current that, I believe, turns us away from the confident materialist foundationalism that ultimately restricts Lakoff and Johnson and towards a more phenomenological view. In *Dream and Existence*, the existential psychoanalyst Ludwig Binswanger draws attention to the pervasive similes of rising and falling found in the description of moods, values, dreams, and concepts. He acknowledges the strength of the notion, which anticipates Lakoff and Johnson, that holds that language draws expressions from the sensory sphere to indicate “psychic characteristics and processes.” But he ultimately rejects this foundationalist move on existential and phenomenological grounds. Invoking Husserl and Heidegger, Binswanger writes

When, for example, we speak of a high and a low tower, a high and a low tone, high and low morals, high and low spirits, what is involved is not a linguistic carrying over from one sphere of Being [the sensory-motor sphere] to the others, but, rather, a general meaning matrix in which all particular regional spheres have an equal ‘share’…
In Binswanger’s view, what lies beneath the various uses of high and low is not the body orienting itself in physical space, but an “ontological existential” vector of movement from high to low or low to high, one that manifests itself in mood, in movement, in cognitive work. Though falling and rising are deployed in many contexts, they “are not themselves derivable from anything else. Here we strike bottom ontologically.” This phenomenological basis is also, “to be found in all religious, mythical, and poetic images of the ascension of the spirit and the earthly weight or pull of the body.” Binswanger thus resists the physicalist foundationalism of Lakoff and Johnson, which argues for a determined root in the diurnal body, and instead affirms a phenomenological root in experience itself, including the experience of only marginally sensory-motor domains. “Language, the imagination of the poet, and—above all—the dream, draw from this essential ontological structure,” says Binswanger. And we of course can add religious fabulation to this list as well.

However, it is in Binswanger’s attention to the dream that the deeper implications of this existential and phenomenological view come to the fore in ways that illuminate psychedelic religiosity and the high weirdness to come. To understand this, let’s return to Lakoff and Johnson, who based their anthropological theory on the notion that a metaphor “can serve as a vehicle for understanding a concept only by virtue of its experiential basis.” But what is an experiential basis for us? Who are we? Obviously our experience of tripping and falling, or of rising up refreshed from a nap, help shape the “general meaning matrix” of highs and lows. But the experiential basis for such a useful conceptual metaphor also lies in those dreams in which we soar into the empyrean, and plunge into infernal darkness. In this way, says Binswanger, we

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can understand these basic meaning matrixes more through poetry, myth, and dream than through science and philosophy, because the former acknowledge that our existential essence—Dasein, in Binswanger’s Heideggerean lingo—“in no way lies openly revealed, but…loves to conceal itself ‘in a thousand forms’.” Poems, myths, and, I will suggest, the visions of high weirdness (psychedelic or pathological), point to a self that cannot be snugly fitted into an “individual body in its outward form” but operates in multiple frameworks and ontological modes. This is the self without foundation, discovered to be already constituted through experience, and is phenomenologically bracketed or enigmatic from the get-go. This is “the primal subject of that which rises and falls” in all domains, very much including dream.

As Foucault puts it in his early essay on Binswanger’s text, dreams bring forth “that which in Existenz is more irreducible to history,” a transcendent mode of freedom and world creation linked to a dialectical mode of imagination whose dynamics we will return to later in this dissertation. What is important here is that Binswanger’s concern with the existential dimension of highs and lows shifts the discussion from an anthropological frame (which, like Lakoff and Johnson, “analyzes man as man within his human world”) to a properly ontological one concerned with creative being. “One must turn to the vertical dimension to grasp existence making itself,” Foucault writes. In other words, the vertical dimension “is existence itself indicating, in the fundamental direction of the imagination, its own ontological foundation.”

A more contemporary voicing of Binswanger and Foucault’s emphasis on the vertical dimension can be found in the work of Peter Sloterdijk. “Vertical tension” is Sloterdijk’s name for the force, at once ontological and anthropological, that compels us to craft and employ such

8. Foucault and Binswanger, 84.
9. Ibid, 75.
10. Ibid, 66.
technologies, to push and transform ourselves, to seek the heights. Sloterdijk’s notion allows him to understand and even valorize the call of transcendence and intense ascesis that characterizes so many traditional religious forms, from the Upanishads to Buddhism to Christian monasticism, but he does so without bothering with theology or metaphysics. What is animating these religious forms, essentially, is vertical tension, and the brilliant and sometimes desperate anthropotechnics that respond to that tension by transforming practitioners.

As such, Sloterdijk, who spent time at the ashram of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh in the 1970s, praises the power and ingenuity of many of the practices that undergird various religious traditions. But he also writes from and for a world forever changed by the Enlightenment and death of God announced by Nietzsche. Though the horizontal logic of immanent or this-worldly modernity has drastically diminished the pull of otherworldly transcendence and its attendant regimens, the Indian rope trick of vertical tension continues to compel. In contrast to the literally “depressing” attitudes of realism, vertical tension establishes a “primary surrealism” in the work of humanity’s self-crafting: the swerve of mutation.

Sloterdijk finds modernity’s surreal masters of the vertical among artists, athletes, psycho-spiritual practitioners, and, most poetically, acrobats. “Whoever looks for humans will find ascetics, and whoever observes ascetics will discover acrobats.”11 In other words, the vertical dimension is not something to resolve by grasping some metaphysical belief structure, or by prosaically anchoring oneself in quotidian habits, but by maintaining a precarious field of tension that we continually cross over, fashioning ourselves by overcoming ourselves through challenge, discipline, and practice.

Of course, we are still in the shadow of Nietzsche here, that great philosopher of the heights, of higher men and highest values, whose work, Sloterdijk writes, stands as “a witness to the vertical dimension without God.”  

Early in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche’s prophet of the future witnesses a tightrope walker prepared to perform in front of a crowd. And it is here that Zarathustra announces his famous doctrine of the übermensch, the overman, the superhero of the spirit. “All beings so far have created something beyond themselves,” says Zarathustra. “Do you want to be the ebb of that great tide, and revert back to the beast rather than overcome mankind?” Humanity is merely a rope “fastened between animal and Overman,” a rope that passes over the abyss. In premodern religions, Slotedijk’s vertical tension pulled upwards, but for we moderns it instead provides the tension that allows a leap forward.

That said, Zarathustra is unclear about the exact stages or techniques that might lead us mere humans to the übermensch, and Nietzsche is unclear about whether he thinks such a manifestation is an actual historical possibility given the cultural, technological, and spiritual quagmire he prophesied for the modern West. The question, in a sense, remains open, which leaves room, at the very least, for continued experiment with heights (which of course also means a continued confrontation with the depths). This is why, elsewhere, Nietzsche describes the philosophers of the future as *those who attempt*.  

Nondogmatic, often solitary, with a predilection for risky behavior, such philosophers and free spirits are “curious to a fault, researchers to the point of cruelty, with unmindful fingers for the incomprehensible.” Their truths are only their truths, not everyone’s, and they are “at home in many countries of the spirit, at least as guests.”

14. Nietzsche, 42.
Today such Overman experiments might remind us of the vitamin-munching, bio-hacking transhumanists, a catch-all term for a wide variety of groups and individuals fashioning the protocols and programs of radical human enhancement through science and technology. Here, in a deeply atheistic sensibility, vertical tension remains as the “up” in “uploading,” the fantasy of immortality through the algorithmic replication of the software of the self, who now can inhabit the cloud. But though transhumanists are fond of quoting Zarathustra on the Overman, their obsession with life extension—if not much of the program—also recalls the resentment against time and finitude that Nietzsche so loathed.\(^{15}\)

Another variety of such experimental philosophers, I believe, can be found in our avatars of high weirdness, who represent, to varying degrees and in varying ways, a more esoteric template for the transhumanism whose desires and discourse was only just beginning to emerge in their era. In these experiments and experiences, the self itself was put on the line, and the world revealed by science and technology was forced to resonate with the world revealed by the poetic and religious imagination. In this sense, they could be seen as shamans, but only in the specifically modern and acrobatic sense that Terence and Dennis McKenna gives the shaman in their 1975 text *The Invisible Landscape*, where they write that:

\begin{quote}
the shaman's psychic life is not unlike the unnaturally dexterous dances he performs at the height of his ecstasy; it is a constant balancing act, as though he were a psychic tight-rope walker on the razor's edge between the external world and the bizarre, magical, often terrifying world within.\(^{16}\)
\end{quote}

\(^{15}\) For more on the relationship of Nietzsche to transhumanism, see Michael Zimmerman, “Last Man or Overman?”, http://integrallife.com/integral-post/last-man-or-overman (Accessed March 2014).

Of course, the McKennas were transforming the anthropological archetype of “the shaman” into a model for their own activity, and it is in this sense that all of our avatars of high weirdness were functioning as experimental shamans. Whether or not their inner worlds were opened up through paranormal protocols, psychoactive substances, esoteric practices, or the vagaries of psychopathology, those worlds were bizarre, magical, and sometimes terrifying.

That’s interesting enough, and gives us some remarkable snapshots of how religious experience was mutating into weirdness. But high weirdness is something else, something more sublime and disorienting. High weirdness describes the tension on the psychic tight-rope walker’s razor’s edge: the surreal and flickering cross-talk between the external world and the inner world, whose distinctions begin to break down, to fold within one another, to blur. Balancing on such weirdness—and the willingness to fall—demands an existential commitment that, like both the shaman and the experimental philosopher, becomes an avocation of the outside, the beyond. But it also relies on a culturally coded and prepared inside—a meaningful or substantive interiority that itself is enfolded from an exterior symbolic realm inhabited by cultural stories, material idols, and collective practices. The singularity of individual experience can never be reduced to a purely sociological or cultural plane, but it can never be divorced from it either. To understand the shamans of high weirdness, then, we must look a bit more at the turbulent religious discourses that characterizes the sixties and early seventies, and particularly the language and methodologies of the occult. For something weird happens to the vertical tension during the counterculture: it starts to pull, not just up, but out—far out.
A Wayward Word

The roots of weirdness lie in the substantive *wyrd*, a common Old English word, related to similar terms in other northern tongues. In the old language of *Beowulf*, as well as the Middle English of Chaucer, *wyrd* is compassed by the operations of destiny, with auguries, and with the Fates as the personified agents of necessity. The adjective is first found in the phrase *weird sisters*, which was used by Scottish poets to describe the classical Fates—the Roman Parcae—before Shakespeare attached it to the witches of *Macbeth*. But Shakespeare’s spelling of weird is, well, a bit weird—“weyrd,” “weyward,” and “weyard” appear in the first folio, but never “weird.”

These three alternate spellings link weird with *wayward*, a word used frequently by Shakespeare to denote the capricious and willful refusal to follow rule or reason. This suggests to some *Macbeth* scholars that, in addition to their oracular knowledge, the three witches derive their unquestionable uncanny power from their willful resistance to the norm, a turning away from the center that one scholar calls “centrifugal.”¹⁷ The “weird” that enters modern English, then, suggests both the knowledge of necessity, and the perverse and chaotic twist away from the law. The weird is the way of the Other.

In its adjectival drift, “weird” develops an increasingly aesthetic register, one that bloomed, unsurprisingly, in the hands of the Romantics. Shelley especially enjoyed the term, with its occult aura, and compared himself in one verse epistle to “some weird Archimage…plotting dark spells, and devilish enginery.”¹⁸ Shelley also helped stretch the term,

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¹⁷. See Shamas, Laura Annawyn, *‘We Three’: The Mythology of Shakespeare’s Weird Sisters* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 14-17.
in an arguably wayward way, beyond the frame of fateful knowledge towards the eerie and atmospheric. In the fantastic “Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude,” he speaks of “weird clouds” and a night that “makes a weird sound of its own stillness”—a paradoxical, self-cancelling making that verges on the unnatural in its silent sounding. More importantly, Shelley also linked the word to a certain kind of story, as when, in “Witch Atlas,” the poet speaks of a “tale more fit for the weird winter nights / Than for these garish summer days, when we / Scarcely believe much more than we can see.”

Here the weird is playfully counterposed with the daylight mind that does not need to believe, but is satisfied to know, or to believe it knows, what it can see. Perhaps we can see in this daylight mind the sensible sensibility of the Enlightenment, which aids and abets the famous disenchantment of the world by insisting that, in Christopher McIntosh’s words, “the universe ultimately contains no contradictions, no mysteries and no miracles.”

Such is not the frame of mind best suited to tales of witches and wonders. Indeed, the Romantic reaction to Enlightenment’s diurnal rationality can be seen in part as a relocation of enchantment away from the sphere of religion—increasingly isolated from the naturalistic facts of the world provided by rational science—and into the human imagination, conceived at once as the site of uncanny aesthetic experiences and the “devilish enginery” of creative art and writing. In this sense, “weird” not only describes the witches in Macbeth, but Macbeth itself, a

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21. As Marcus Boon explains, this process of ensouling or enchanting literature arguably goes back to the Renaissance confrontation with classical paganism, when “the growth of literature as a cultural form in Europe was fueled by the need to find a way to express the ‘dark’ but fascinating energies of the pagan, natural world, while remaining ‘true’ to Christian dogma.” See Marcus Boon, The Road of Excess a History of Writers on Drugs (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 223.
supernatural tale whose telling, at least in the theater, is uncanny enough to warrant the superstitious demand that one refer to the work as “the Scottish play.”

Despite the fantastic atmospheres in so much Romantic poetry, the weird loomed much larger in the far more popular genre of the Gothic novel, which is generally considered to begin with the publication of Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* in 1764. Eventually, after various twists and turns through the expanding networks of nineteenth-century media, the Gothic novel’s chart-topping tales of ghosts, aberrant sexuality, decadent priests, and violent exotica bloomed into the modern genre of supernatural horror. As Victoria Nelson writes in her study *Gothicka*, this genre became “the preferred mode, or even the only allowed one, [that] a predominantly secular-scientific culture such as ours has had for imagining and encountering the sacred, albeit in unconscious ways.”22 By the early twentieth century, some writers and critics started referring to supernatural horror as the “weird tale,” and in spring 1923 the fantasy magazine *Weird Tales* started publication in Chicago. *Weird Tales* was a pulp magazine, one of hundreds of inexpensive fiction publications that helped define American print culture in the first half of the twentieth century. Printed on cheap “pulp” paper, the pulps are largely remembered (and collected) today for their lurid cover art and sensational tales of crime, lust, and violent heroism—as well as stories of supernatural horror and what would become known as science fiction.

*Weird Tales* unleashed Robert E. Howard’s wizard-battling Conan and the corruscating otherworlds of Clark Ashton Smith into the popular imagination, but the magazine’s eternal flame was unquestionably H.P. Lovecraft, a writer whose “eldritch” tales of forbidden books and loathsome cosmic monsters would directly influence some of the high weirdness that lies ahead.

in this book. In the 1920s, Lovecraft wrote an extended literary essay about supernatural horror and the “weird tale.” In his essay, Lovecraft stressed that weirdness was at once an affective, imaginative, and cognitive effect. “The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim.”

But to produce this effect, the author explained, writers of the weird had to finesse the all-important interaction between fantastic otherness—what Lovecraft called the “Outside”—and the daylight framework of realism and its naturalistic assumptions. Some weird stories introduce only a single supernatural or anomalous element, while others elaborate fantastic and unreal worlds that, when they work, accord with what Lovecraft believed were the human brain’s innate imaginative capacities. But for Lovecraft himself, the most powerful weird tales, as he famously wrote to Smith in 1930, must be rooted in the real, and “devised with all the care and verisimilitude of a hoax.”

For Lovecraft, the weird achieves its peculiar power through a close proximity to a more or less realistic portrayal of ordinary existence that it nonetheless deviates from. In this it resembles the uncanny, another atmospheric and emotionally laden term associated with supernatural or weird fiction, and one that, in part because of Freud’s well-known essay on the affect, retains an essentially psychological and naturalistic character. In his essay, Freud stresses the double character of uncanny objects or events: they are both familiar, even quotidian,

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25. The word “uncanny”, like the weird, also possesses important cognitive connotations—canny derives from the Anglo-Saxon root *ken*, for knowledge and understanding, and so the uncanny is, like Lovecraft’s “Outside”, beyond one’s ken.
and unexpectedly and exceptionally strange. One familiar example of uncanny objects are dolls or wax figures, nonliving things who nonetheless suggest, on a level of fantasy that adheres to their very form, an eerie animation—an effect that Freud links, in his developmental understanding of religion, to the “animist” psychology of children and early human cultures.

Another uncanny example, drawn from Freud’s own life, is the experience of wandering lost in a city but finding oneself returning to the same spot again and again. “How weird,” we might say, were this to happen to us. Such involuntary recurrence, Freud claims, stages an uncomfortable but strangely thrilling return of the repressed, a compulsion to repeat the object—cause of our own anxiety that the good doctor eventually linked to the death drive. The uncanniness of such unintended or “chance” recurrence also lends a spooky significance to seemingly meaningful coincidences, which for Freud is exemplified by the experience of encountering the same number over and over again through the course of an otherwise normally scattered day.26 Here we have one of the first descriptions in psychological literature of the phenomenon that Jung, moving in a transpersonal direction diametrically opposed to Freud, would later attempt to establish as the “acausal connecting principle” of synchronicity—a principle, or at least a phenomenon, that will play a major role in the episodes of high weirdness to come.

Despite the similar meanings of the two terms, the difference between the uncanny and the weird opens up when we consider the expressive forms associated with the terms, and the very different cultural locations those forms occupy in the twentieth century. In part because of Freud’s reading, the uncanny carries a subtle sophistication, a “literary” quality one might associate with modernist writers like Borges and Bruno Schulz, or with classic films like

26. 62 is Freud’s example, though others, as we will see, prefer 23. The irony of Freud’s position is that, like the superstitious believer, the psychoanalyst also has serious doubts about the role of “chance” in uncanny events.
Nosferatu or Robert Wise’s The Haunting. Weirdness, on the other hand, rears its pulpy head in trashy magazines, exploitation movies, comic books (whose mid-century titles include Weird Science, Weird Chills, Weird Fantasy and Adventures into Weird Worlds), and other unserious outposts of horror, macabre fantasy, and science-fiction. Weirdness is the uncanny’s low-brow doppelgänger, a demotic country cousin. This doesn’t make the weird any less uncanny, however. Indeed, popular genres arguably do an even better job of staging the repetition compulsion described by Freud, especially given the obsessive drive to repeat-with-a-difference that characterize the genre structures that organize the production and consumption of such forms.

More importantly, weirdness develops an aberrant or even delinquent profile that plays well with and is associated with social outsiders. Over the twentieth century, weirdness becomes not just an aesthetic effect or atmosphere to be cultivated or enjoyed, but a social site, a mode of rebellion, even a deviant, sub-hip identity of sorts—the “wayward” way of the weird sisters, twisting away from norms. Teenagers, hot-rodders, queers, bohemians, drug users, and odd-balls of all stripes have taken up the flag of the weird or found it draped upon them—since the 1940s at least, “weirdo” has denoted not only threatening (and possibly perverted) individuals, but those who are merely, even self-consciously peculiar. This aura of weird deviance also holds true throughout the long course of the increasingly self-conscious counterculture that is the main focus in this project. For example, cartoonist R. Crumb’s Weirdo magazine, which ran from 1981 to 1993, was an intentionally “low-brow” compendia of underground comix, outsider art, frank quotidian tales, and Church of the SubGenius-style agitprop clearly aimed, like Stang’s directory, at fellow “weirdos,” whether or not they might self-identify with the rather lowly term.
By the closing decades of the twentieth century, weirdness has drifted away from the oracular or supernatural, away even from the spine-tingling atmospheres of the uncanny, and towards a sort of trashy, pop-culture alterity. And yet: the sacred trace remains. In the seventeenth issue of *Weirdo*, which appeared in 1986, Crumb published a remarkably faithful illustrated account of one of the episodes of high weirdness that inspired this book, an account he boldly entitled “The Religious Experience of Philip K. Dick.” The un-ironic depiction of Dick’s mystically-informed experiences reminds us that weirdness carries a “supernatural” charge even as it trickles through the margins of a modern culture largely conceived and experienced as a disenchanted and secular space. After all, even in the most low-brow drive-in monster mash, weird culture generates a highly ambivalent blend of wonder and horror that directly recalls the widely resounding definition of the numinous provided by the religious historian Rudolph Otto in *The Idea of the Holy*, which appeared in English in 1923. Attempting to account for the non-rational element of the sacred, Otto characterized the encounter with the numinous Other as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—a mystery that at once repels and attracts, terrifies and fascinates. “The daemonic-divine object may appear to the mind an object of horror and dread, but at the same time it is no less something that allures with a potent charm.”

Otto’s weird distinction would in turn help Mircea Eliade, perhaps the most widely-read historian of religion in twentieth-century America, construct his own extremely influential account of the sacred. For Eliade, the sacred—which is always defined in contrast with the profane—is not only marked by the psychological polarity of attraction and repulsion, but by an ambivalence of values. Many examples of the “hierophanies” that manifest the sacred in a particular time and place are marked by such ambivalence. Many aboriginal cultures considered

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some objects—**taboo** or otherwise— to be both holy and dangerous, an ambiguity that Eliade also insists can be found operative in Christian mysticism and the literate classical world as well.\(^{28}\)

But there is a weirder ambivalence lurking in Eliade’s dynamic notion of the sacred, which is more complex and a bit less essentialist than many of his contemporary critics in the academy allow. For Eliade, the distinction between sacred and profane is certainly ontological, but the objects and processes that can come to embody the sacred for any given society are, in a sense, up for grabs, even contingent. “Anything man has ever handled, felt, come in contact with or loved can become a hierophany.”\(^{29}\) Though Eliade had a tendency to reify and essentialize certain hierophanies—the center or omphalos being only one example—the sacred can manifest though all manner of profane elements, “even the most alien.” This leads to the paradox of the idol, whose sacredness lies precisely in the fact that it is also profane, and “this paradoxical coming-together of sacred and profane…produces a kind of breakthrough in the various orders of existence.”\(^{30}\) This paradoxical coming-together, with its volatile ontological instability, is the pivot of high weirdness.

Eliade also notes that, at least in the elementary and “vivid” hierophanies captured in so many ethnographic writings, the sacred object is often, well, strange. “Everything unusual, unique, new, perfect or monstrous at once becomes imbued with magico-religious powers.”\(^{31}\) Twins, albinos, botanical oddities, the appearance of white missionaries—all such unusual sights were likely candidates for an ambivalent flash of the sacred, which may or may not last through

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28. Homo sacer, the “sacred” person who is exiled from their social location, signifies an exiled supplement to the law that is both hallowed and cursed. The term has become important in the contemporary political theology. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
30. Ibid, 29
the social incorporation of the unusual things in question. Here we establish a key element of the weird, whose best name—at once technical and resonant—is anomaly. The anomalous appears on the profane plane as nothing more or less than a sometimes striking deviation from the norm, a general category of phenomena that even the most hard-headed naturalist or reductionist must recognize. (Of course, what constitutes a meaningful anomaly is another question.) But such anomalies don’t only include spontaneous environmental or biological phenomena that must be explained or managed through cultural or mythological means. Anomalies, weirdnesses, can also be produced. Recall Shakespeare’s wayward twist on the word weird, and the implication that power of the weird sisters was in part a willful centrifugal turn away from the norm—a twist that can include, not only the statistical deviance of spontaneous environmental or biological anomalies, but intentionally “deviant” cultural performances as well.

**Weird Naturalism**

A wonderful example of weird performance is provided by Bronislaw Malinowski, a towering figure in the functionalist school of British anthropology. When Malinowski came to analyze the spells pronounced by the magic-workers he got to know in the Trobriand Islands, he identified what he called their “weirdness coefficient.” This coefficient—in mathematics, the term means a fixed multiplicative factor—was made up of secret names, “abracadabra,” unusual phonetic combinations, alliteration, “weird cadences,” and other deviations from ordinary colloquial language. The weirdness coefficient helped establish the otherness and power of magical speech, a power that did not depend on a conventional grammatical or semantic production, but was rather enacted in an emotional performance, often in sing-song, whose
meanings and force were generated out of that very performance of intense affect and esoteric knowledge. Such non-ordinary power was necessary, in Malinowski’s view, in order to compensate for the anxious uncertainty associated with important and sometimes dangerous human activities, like fishing or growing staples, that were “subject to chance and not completely mastered by technical means.” Magic was thus a kind of affective supplement to technical competence that was marked and generated, at least in part, through linguistic deviation.

Though Malinowski’s concept of the weirdness coefficient may or may not help explain the power of the Trobriand wizard gardeners, it does establish the notion that weirdness can be quantized as a degree of differential alterity, or deviant deviance. Indeed, it was precisely when Malinowski came to translating the texts of Trobriand wizard speech that the unusual variations became noticeable as a consistent linguistic pattern. “The better we know the Trobriand language the more clearly and immediately can we distinguish magic from ordinary speech. The most grammatical and least emphatically chanted spell differs from the forms of ordinary address.”

Today some scholars have attempted to rigorously quantify the “weirdness coefficient” within the computational paradigm of natural language processing, which demands the ability to gauge potentially meaningful statistical variances in vast arrays of linguistic values. Here we can only applaud Malinowski’s literary instinct regarding the word weird, which becomes, in some admittedly and necessarily fuzzy sense, a technical measure.

In more recent decades, the notion of “weirdness” has also became attached to discussions of quantum physics both inside and outside of popular science writing. The presence of such a ripe word within the discourse of physics—the still-reigning king of sciences, the most

metaphysical of non-metaphysical accounts of reality—is an almost poetic measure of the starkly counter-intuitive challenges that any thinking person encounters when confronted with both the experimental evidence and the theoretical implications of quantum mechanics. These elements, sometimes called “spooky” as well, include indeterminacy, the wave/particle duality, entanglement, and other unnerving marvels whose surreal challenges to Newtonian physics and naive realism alike we do not have time to rehearse here. Simply put, quantum mechanics is weird because, if it actually describes the real (which it very much seems to do, at least in its sub-atomic domain), then the real is really fucking weird. So when the physicist Heinz Pagels peppered his popular 1982 book *The Cosmic Code* with the phrase “quantum weirdness,” none of his colleagues batted an eye. As a quasi-naturalist category, then, weirdness represents, like the uncanny or the sublime, a trace of the sacred that even the most secular among us must acknowledge. Unlike the uncanny and the sublime, the weird is, for all its pathological air, the degree zero of the wonder and enchantment that modernity has in many ways defined itself against, but which never really disappeared.

The link between weirdness and quantum physics stretches back, not coincidentally perhaps, to the seventies, when the bizarre philosophical implications of quantum mechanics returned to scientific discourse after decades of being swept under the carpet of far more pragmatic and instrumental applications of the theory.\(^{34}\) In a 1976 essay on Quine’s game-changing essay “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” the philosopher Hilary Putnam favorably recalled Quine’s argument that analytic or “*a priori*” arguments—that is, statements resting on apparently ahistorical or transcendental logical foundations—were, despite appearances, essentially

historical and even “psychological” artifacts. That is, so-called Boolean logic, including the law of noncontradiction and the law of the excluded middle, aren’t written in stone.

To support Quine’s position, Putnam brought up the problem of how to interpret the fact that quantum “weirdness” and its various “anomalies” radically challenge these fundamental rules. For instrumentalists interested in results, he noted, the solution was not to worry about ultimate reality but simply figure out and use what works. Another approach, Putnam wrote, was to consider “the hypothesis that we live in a non-Boolean world.” Putnam wasn’t necessarily suggesting this move, but he was suggesting that to philosophically affirm quantum weirdness, we might just have to accept that a more anomalous logic rules the real.

A few years before Putnam, the author Arthur Koestler also described quantum mechanics as “weird” in his 1972 book *The Roots of Coincidence*. A “reluctant convert” to the paranormal, Koestler was not a wild speculator, and his intelligent chapter on the “the Perversity of Physics” contained only the lightest hints of the quantum mysticism that would come to the fore later in the decade with the enthusiastic reception of Fritjof Capra’s *The Tao of Physics* (1975) and Gary Zukov’s *The Dancing Wu-Li Masters* (1979). Instead, Koestler wanted to use the “negative affinity” between quantum physics and parapsychology simply to demonstrate that “in so far as both are unthinkable,…the weird concepts of one provide an excuse for the weirdness of the other.” That said, Koestler was also keen to point out certain interesting points of contact between quantum mechanics and parapsychology. In the attempt to become more rigorous statistically, modern parapsychologists had begun resorting to the same mathematical domain that replaces strict causality in quantum mechanical accounts: the domain of probability. In other words, individual instances of a guessed card—one of the dominant tests

at Rhine—are meaningless. Instead, the percentage of correct guesses over very large numbers of individual trials must be compared to what probability theory would dictate as the odds that chance alone was in effect; it is the degree of variation, or deviance, from this probability that becomes meaningful—that becomes, if it is consistent and statistically significant, the anomaly to be explained.

High weirdness, in this sense, could be understood in the light of anomaly, of encounters or experiences that radically undermine the framework of naive realism. But at the same time, these are anomalies that—like quantum models of entangled particles or the statistical oddities of parapsychological tests—never leave the plane of the world. As such, the rumor or trace of God is always twined with the pathological, or mutant—an aberration lurking in the shadows of immanence rather than an avatar of transcendent beyond. Even as weirdness retains an aura of the numinous, it also finds itself folded into the profane, as a centrifugal or “wayward” turn away from naturalistic norms to which it remains, nonetheless, intimately tied.

All this suggests the “weird realism” described by the contemporary object-oriented philosopher Graham Harman. In addition to being a massive fan of H.P. Lovecraft, Harman is a realist—the things we perceive in the world are in some fundamental sense real. But he is not a materialist, since his “ontology of objects” stretches to include, not just dogs, trees, and flames, but “societies, ghosts, gods, pirates, coins, and rubies.” For Harman, these objects have their own autonomous life but, in contrast to the confident correspondence theory of rationalists, which holds that the mind can understand the essence of objects, these things are also fundamentally opaque and unknowable, “mysterious and veiled,” their known properties separated by some “weird tension” from their essence as objects. This mysterious and veiled

quality is, in part, what makes reality weird, and that calls for philosophy to devote itself to “weird realism.”

Even incorporeal objects do not derive their reality “from some transcendent force lying outside the bounds of human finitude, but in a twisting or torsion of that finitude itself.”38 And yet that twisting finitude torques itself, at least at times, in precise manifestation of the vertical tension, of higher things, of things high, all remainders or reminders of the old transcendent forces of myth. Weirdness therefore characterizes a multidimensional and ambivalent space of esthetic effects, anomalous events, and deviant ontologies in which sacred and profane, the marvelous and the statistical, wonder and horror, all overlap and reveal the opacity of the real.

Uncanny experiences of this razor edge put tremendous pressure on what Bruno Latour refers to as the modern constitution: the conventional, almost instinctive division we moderns make between subject and object, nature and culture, mind and matter. Within this framework, we “place” the sometimes extraordinary phenomena associated with religious experience “inside” the subject, who in turn is strictly separated from an outside characterized by material forces that, nonetheless, ultimately underlies the subject. High weirdness scrambles this boundary, staging anomalous experiences that call up both the uncanny affectivity of the supernatural and seemingly deeper or “occult” forms of naturalist necessity.

Unsurprisingly, then, high weirdness overlaps with the paranormal, a liminal zone of modern thought and experience that, as Jeffrey Kripal has shown, restages the sacred in light of the massive historical shift from religion to science. Along these lines, Kripal insists that part of what characterizes paranormal phenomenon is a blurring of the categories of real and fiction—that weird realism again. Defining the space of the “Impossible” through formalist literary

theory, Kripal notes that this weird and paranormal ambivalence between real and fictional, in a
text or in a life, recapitulates what Tzvetan Todorov defined as the logic of fantastic literature,
which emerges through the “irruption of the inadmissible within the changeless everyday
reality.” Faced with such anomalies, characters (and readers) find themselves at a crossroads:
either they are victims of a sensory illusion, or they have glimpsed “an integral part of reality”
that is, nonetheless, “controlled by laws unknown to us.” This crossroads is a site of deep
uncertainty, a point of enigmatic insight, indeterminacy, and terrible temptation. “The fantastic,”
Todorov writes, “occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the
other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre.”

Kripal’s point is that, within the sacred paranormal, this dynamic—which places
everyday realism in tension with marvelous irregularities—exceeds the boundaries of literary
genres, and enters into the folds of experience itself, as well as those texts, autobiographical or
otherwise, that stage the folded or implied tension between reality and fiction in particularly
charged ways. In my tongue, the fantastic becomes the weird, a mode that, in my reading
anyway, makes an even more explicit engagement with the naturalistic fringes of immanence
even as it points to a Beyond that challenges reductive accounts.

Reality Construction Company

Bruno Latour’s recent project, An Inquiry into Modes of Existence, is of central
importance to this text, because Latour’s multiplication of ontological templates and his attention
to the craft of mediation is perfectly keyed to the vagaries of high weirdness, which itself can be

39. Kripal, Jeffrey, Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred (Chicago: The University of Chicago
Press, 2010), 34-35.
said to mediate between science and religion. Latour is principally a sociologist of science, and he deeply respects the networks of processes, technologies, institutions, and agents necessary for the construction—and emergence—of scientific facts. What he rejects is what he calls the “Great Divide” of modernity, the Western template that divides existence into human culture, with its projections and creative fictions, and an impersonal nature accessed and described through scientific procedure alone. Along with many other thinkers today, including anthropologists like Phillipe Descola and Viveiros de Castro, Latour sees the Great Divide as a particular historical arrangement or anthropological schema of ethics and knowledge production, rather than the only possible or “reasonable” template of existence.

Though he is sometimes accused of relativism by rationalists and old school realists alike, Latour recognizes that there is a qualitative difference between scientific facts and other human artifacts, and that any account of science that ignores the peculiar and particular claims of these units of truth has failed. For Latour, a fact is neither an unmediated avatar of objective reality nor a purely manufactured chunk of human culture. Instead, facts are the end result of careful, complex, and often laborious processes of construction that build bridges between different ontological domains, templates with their own particular rules of existence and appearance. At the end result of a successful scientific mediation, beings from a certain domain—the place we would conventionally call “nature,” but that Latour dubs the zone of reproduction—are able to “pass” into the domain of referentiality—the domain of knowledge and the material media required to organize and communicate that knowledge. What results is a fact, something that is both constructed through material and cognitive processes, and yet is rendered autonomous through that very process, appearing as something that must be wrestled with, must be taken into account. In his crucial essay The Cult of the Factish Gods, Latour compares the construction of
scientific facts to, of all things, the West African construction of “idols.” In both cases, a process requiring material protocols and human craft results in a kind of being that, in the end, takes autonomous flight, and is no longer constrained solely by the human artifice that produced it.

For Latour, following the philosopher and semantacist Korzybski, the map is definitely not the territory. But a well-constructed map does allow the topology of a mountain chain to “pass” into a two-dimensional zone of referentiality, such that you are better off making your way through the mountains with the map at your fingertips. As children of Korzybski, all our avatars would similarly agree that the map is not the territory. But in the face of extraordinary experience, they also multiply and willfully reassemble the range of possible maps, a constructive effort that in turn influences both the unfolding of their experiences and their accounts of those experiences. However, while much of the forthcoming text is devoted to analyzing the cultural, philosophical, and psychological building blocks that helped construct specific episodes of high weirdness, the phenomena themselves—what William James called the “wild facts”—still demand, or at least will be given, their own relative autonomy, a tricksy agency best established through Latour’s variable ontological modes.

In other words, “construction” here will be less a sign of contextual reductionism, than an affirmation of the potential emergence of surprising modes of being in the process of such construction. Such a tactic is particularly necessary, and particularly controversial, when the topic involves religious experience, to say nothing of its various paranormal and psychedelic analogs. For here, ontological or “supernatural” claims are routinely reframed by naturalistic and critical scholars today as “nothing but” constructions based simply on surrounding cultural, sociological, and psychological scripts and expectations interacting, perhaps, with neurological states of “arousal.” Latour, while sharing a constructionist sensitivity to the networks and
mediations that assemble anthropological reality, Latour offers an eloquent politics of metaphysical modes whose “weird realism” is a most welcome rejoinder to the poverty and distortion of this miserly *nothing but*.

By drawing attention to the way that social processes establish and mediate reality through cultural and linguistic codes, the notion of “construction” is often used to undermine “essentialist” accounts about the substantial meaning or objective existence of a thing or being. Racial difference, for example, is not a function of genetics (or souls) but a social and cultural construction which organizes a continuous spectrum or distribution of closely related differences into discrete categories. In this sense, the revelation of constructivism is often linked to an emancipatory politics.

However, as Latour points out, this use of construction tends to overwhelmingly stress the critical and deconstructive consequences of the concept rather than its positive or, paradoxically, “constructive” dimensions. “Construction,” as it is dominantly used in social theory, is too tightly coupled to that “nothing but,” as if the mediations required for constructive processes to work somehow render the resulting phenomena insubstantial, illusory, or worthy of dismissal or condemnation. It implies that we must choose between the artifice so exposed or some more genuine foundation beneath, explanations of foundations that could be Marxist or socio-biological.

Latour associates the most critical constructionism with deconstruction, which he characterizes, rather simplistically, as counseling a stoic resignation to the failure of mediation to present any foundations at all, a stance (or drift) that Latour believes reflects an excessive idealization. The flipside of this idealization, which forecloses all foundations, is fundamentalism, the notion that foundations are available without any manipulation,
interpretation, or other form of mediation. (In this sense, some naturalists and skeptics represent “fundamentalist” views of objectivity.) In contrast to both these positions, the pluralistic universe of radical empiricism demands attention to the extraordinary number of networks and linkages that allow real beings to pass between frames, to establish real continuities and smooth transformations, even to appear in the first place, in whatever manner of appearance is appropriate for their respective ontological modes.

In his attempt to bridge “the irreparable crack between what is constructed and what is true,” Latour presents an alternate definition of construction, elements of which are particularly germane to the weird beings ahead. Latour argues that the action of construction is intrinsically doubled: “when someone acts, others get moving.” The directional vector of the action between the purported author of the construction and these other beings is in turn uncertain, since it presents a fundamental circularity.

Here Latour draws from the crucial example of fiction. Balzac is the author of his novels, but according to the author, he often gets “carried away by his characters.” Though a Romantic and writerly cliche, the claim describes an oscillation in agency that is crucial for any robust notion of construction that passes beyond a linguistic game. For Latour, this oscillation reaches an extreme with the example of marionettes and their operators. “There can be no doubt about the manipulator’s control over what he manipulates: yes, but it so happens that his hand has such autonomy that one is never quite sure about what the puppet ‘makes’ his puppeteer do, and the puppeteer isn’t so sure either.” Expand the example to include a ventriloquist’s dummy, and some of the weird and uncanny implications of Latour’s approach become clearer.

But Latour himself gets weird enough when he adds a crucial demand to his robust portrait of constructionism, which he calls, with an infelicitous term that he draws from Etienne Souriau, instauration. One condition of instauration is that the action “has to provide the opportunity to encounter beings capable of worrying you.” Without defining them exactly, he describes them as “beings whose ontological status is still open but that are nevertheless capable of making you do something, of unsettling you, insisting, obliging you to speak well of them…” The “beings of law,” constructed through social and institutional processes but nonetheless emerging with their own particular ontological template, are enough, as Latour says, to force a judge to wake up at night, vexed by the question: “Did I make the right decision?”

These beings don’t have to be taken, at least yet, in anything like an esoteric vein, one that, as we will see later, Latour himself approaches in his descriptions of the template associated with “beings of metamorphosis.” But it is crucial to emphasize how much Latour’s realist and relational turn goes against dogmatic social constructionism, with its refusal of any sort of direct encounter or capacity to recognize beings epistemologically “outside” the frame.

What, for example, is a strict constructionist to do with the event that lies at the climax of Rilke’s poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo”? The poem is a preeminent example, in a post-theological key, of a spiritual encounter with a being arising from an artistic construction, and it is important to keep in mind later in this book, when we will encounter independent intelligences leaning through cultural and cognitive constructions. The stone “glisten[s] just like wild beasts’ fur” and “burst[s] forth from all its contours / like a star,” but it is the famous last two lines that strike a chord both uncanny and hieratic:

for there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

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41. Latour, 177.
In his book of the same name, Peter Sloterdijk limns this encounter in ways that, while
detuning Latour’s ontology into another key, respect both the significance of the event and the
important resonance it holds for discussions of spiritual encounter in a secular age. Here the
classically religious phenomenon of being “spoken to from above” redeployes itself within an
aesthetic construct, and the resulting poem becomes “a document of how newer message
ontology outgrew traditional theologies.”\textsuperscript{42} In Sloterdijk’s account, the statue’s being as an
aesthetic object is contracted into a message, more specifically a “message-thing” that does not
activate itself, “but requires the poet as a decoder and messenger.”\textsuperscript{43} For this “quintessential
metanoetic command” to be received, however, the poet must wager or extend her experience in
a peculiar way by “accepting that the torso sees me while I observe it—indeed, that it eyes me
more sharply than I can look at it.”\textsuperscript{44} Following Weber, Sloterdijk describes the capacity to make
this inner gesture, with all its improbability, as “religiosity,” an ability (or curse, according to
some skeptics) that some people evidence quite naturally.

Sloterdijk adds the crucial point that such abilities can also be practiced. What is required
is a certain “grammatical promiscuity” that swaps objects and subjects. “In the position where
the object usually appears, never looking back because it is an object, I now ‘recognize’ a subject
with the ability to look and return gazes.”\textsuperscript{45} In Martin Buber’s terms—which were important to
the generation we will be looking at—the “it” of the statue becomes a “you,” creating an
“encounter” where previously there was only and “experience” of the object world. In exchange
for the willingness to participate in this reversal, to endow the stone with the capacity to send

\textsuperscript{42} Sloterdijk, \textit{You Must Change}, 22.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 20.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 23.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 24.
discrete messages, the poet receives the reward of a private illumination, which in Rilke’s case takes the form of the demand for transformation itself. Sloterdijk’s conclusion: “religiosity is a form of hermeneutical flexibility and can be trained.” As we will see, much of the high weirdness to come is a consequence, in part, of such flexibility, taken to a heretical and sometimes atheist extreme.

Like Rilke’s statue, Latour’s beings, though they have their own resources, do not arise on their own. Once again, fiction and art continue to offer a privileged example, not because these crafts have little to do with the hard truths of science, and are therefore easier to make nebulous points with, but because they trumpet the dimension of constructionism too often ignored by most users of the term in an epistemological or social context: the value judgment bound up with the act of construction itself. “Constructed, yes, of course, but is it well constructed?” Latour asks.

The question of value or quality points to the ongoing negotiation and relational ethics that undergirds construction, a back-and-forth that, diagrammed, suggests the positive feedback loops of cybernetics and the language of “emergence.” The sculptor, as Latour says, is not the creator of the work but rather the “instuarator” of a work that comes to and through him, but that, without him, would never appear. If it is wrong to say that the statue is a form in the mind of the sculptor that is merely imposed on the block, however, it is equally wrong to say that the statue awaits “potentially” in the marble. The beings that Latour is interested in escape both registers, both “creative imagination” and “raw material.” To capture such beings, again, requires ontological templates that lie in the hybrid interzones between nature and culture, subject and object.

46. Ibid, 25.
47. Latour, 161-62.
Rather than the univocal language of substance or “being-as-being” that still supports the Great Divide, Latour instead opens the Pandora’s box of “being-as-other”: varieties of beings who pursue their continuity without reference to some foundational substance. “They do not head up or down to seat their experience in something more solid; they only move out in front of experience, prolonging its risks while remaining in the same experimental tonality.” To establish these distinct forms of alterity, and to encounter the beings that inhabit these modes, we must practice an “experimental metaphysics” that is indistinguishable from a radical empiricism that can “rediscover the thread of experience” and the pluralistic universe to which they lead.48

The role of this alterity in Latour’s capacious and congenial philosophy, recalls William James’s philosophy of mysticism, which includes, in G. William Barnard’s words, a “theoretical openness to a preexisting, partially-formed, autonomous ‘otherness’ appearing within experience.”49 In the pages ahead, I will reference this incomplete constructionism or openness to encounter by referring to the Other or the Outside, and hope that this account here suffices for such gestures, whose motivation is as empirical as it is ethical.

Uncanny Criticism

In his book on culture and surveillance in the American seventies, the cultural theorist Stephen Paul Miller writes that “the seventies were the uncanny decade, the undecade, and to understand it requires an uncanny methodology.”50 Uncanny criticism, Miller writes, “is not so

48. Ibid, 152.
concerned with cause and effect as it is with readings that become possible by noting relationships between phenomena.” The uncanny—or weird—historian, in other words, draws attention to “how patterns emerge outside the bounds of cause and effect,” as Don Delillo puts it in his JFK conspiracy novel *Libra*.\(^{51}\) Rather than offering explanations that privilege largely linear chains of influence, the critic constructs open networks of linkages that ripple across disciplinary frameworks and scales of explanation, a practice that allows unexpected patterns, meanings, and forces to meet and mutate in what Miller calls “illuminating interdisciplinary interfaces.” Though Miller rightly insists that uncanny criticism still involves causal explanations, cause and effect act “more as inflections than dominant keys.”\(^{52}\)

Miller’s method emerges from one of the axioms of critical theory: the notion that a nation’s or a film’s or a person’s surface narratives actively obfuscate the psychic or political conditions that underlie and give rise to them, and therefore conceal more than they reveal. As such, such phenomena need to be read against the grain. Here we tap into the famous “hermeneutics of suspicion” that Paul Ricoeur linked with the great late-19-century triumvirate of Nietzsche, Freud and Marx, and that continues to play such a decisive role in critical scholarship.

Nietzsche pierced the moralistic mask of Christianity to expose its resentment and warped refusal of the will to power. Freud’s diagnostic symptomology, on the other hand, tracks the peripheral details, recurrent elements, and unintended “slips of the tongue” of a patient’s speech back to the peculiar knots and blocks installed in the unconscious through repression. For some Marxist critics, particularly those following Althusser, the analytic goal is to show how seemingly innocent or even apparently commendable cultural objects actually function as

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52. Miller, *Seventies*, 35.
ideological support for bankrupt social relations, structures that are tucked away in what Fredric Jameson called the “political unconscious.” In this view, as Miller says (with Nixon and seventies paranoia in mind), “culture is a cover-up.”

Of course, such a symptom-driven approach sometimes follows the chain of cause and effect back to a linear source beneath the surface. Freudian or Marxist critics have often presented their methods dogmatically, as the secret keys to understanding a given cultural or psychological phenomenon. As their critics are wont to suggest, their more exuberant readings can even shift into a “paranoid” or conspiratorial direction in which the totality of elements all point ominously towards a core *explanandum*. Miller warns against a too-easy embrace of such hidden causal accounts. For the uncanny critic, the goal is not to reveal an underlying cause but to gesture towards an “absent totality” that, following the Lacanian notion of the real, structures the symbolic systems of culture and consciousness while remaining forever foreclosed to articulation or analysis. There is no “invisible but coherent cause,” Miller says. “Rather, absent causes generate uncanny connections.”

As we will see, such uncanny connections almost inevitably invoke modes of correlating and connecting data that resemble or recall the pattern thinking found in esoteric or occult discourse, with its doctrines of correspondences, signatures, and the acausal associations of divination and serendipity. For Miller, the uncanniness that characterizes both the object and the method of his study of the seventies is not so much “spooky” or “eerie” as “peculiar, astonishing, bizarre, and incredible”—a distinction that reflects the same semantic drift away from the supernatural and towards the secular that we identified with the word *weird* above.

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53. Ibid, 21.
54. Ibid, N. 5, 368.
However, in both cases, the evocative play of uncanny criticism, at least in my deployment, lies precisely in its ambivalent fluctuation across supernatural and secular registers, whether those zones are accorded ontological, psychological, or merely cultural consistencies. The “absent totality” of the real may be foreclosed for strictly structural reasons, but it is also a void whose present absences ripples and reverberates across the surface of things in a process that one of Philip K. Dick’s internal voices described as “perturbations in the reality field.”

Reality appears to be composed of multiple interacting fields, of course, cosmic and metaphysical dimensions as well as personal and political ones. Indeed, such dimensions may actually emerge (or appear) precisely through the construction of such uncanny connections.

To write your way through such a pluralistic zone requires a tool-kit of theories and approaches, a grab-bag of cultural, psychological, neurological, philosophical and even esoteric frameworks that may be called upon both to identify a particular empirical or ontological domain and to build “illuminating interdisciplinary interfaces” between them. Such a potentially haphazard approach, of course, has its own problems, and arguably only muddies the waters, especially when the phenomena in question are already so weird and heterogenous. Faced with the apparently outlandish pathologies, some readers would no doubt prefer the exacting slice of Occam’s razor to the on-the-fly assemblages of the nomadic bricoleur.

In order to provide a more visible through-line, I would like to cast high weirdness against the backdrop of a more conventional disciplinary concern, which is the discourse surrounding religious experience. Given the baggage this term carries, both inside and outside of scholarship, it might be said to just get in the way of our story—especially when that story in many ways concerns the astonishing emergence of noetic insights and intense visionary encounters within “secular” or countercultural contexts more or less freed from the religious
communities and transcendental ontologies that have traditionally given such experiences a name and a habitation. Moreover, there are many other options. I could—and will—speak instead of gnosis, or of spiritual or visionary or paranormal or transpersonal experiences. While there are problems with all of these terms, they all fit comfortably on one side of the distinction between extraordinary or numinous states of consciousness and the dogmatic frameworks of institutional religion. This distinction, though problematic on its own, is nonetheless fundamental to the countercultural period I am concerned with, which we can now see served as a crucial way-station for the development of the “spiritual but not religious” orientation that today has congealed into a recognizable identity and cultural current.

There are three reasons I would like to keep the term religious in play, however. One is that I am, among other things, a historian of religions. I cannot help but place the outlandish material in this study, much of which identifies itself as part of a skeptical critique of religion, within the context of America’s long religious tradition of inventive metaphysics and visionary alternatives. The high weirdness of the early seventies is not separate from America’s larger cavalcade of Mormon cosmologies, Spiritualist phantoms, Theosophical vibrations, Masonic plots, and channeled alien masters, nor from those mystic and otherworldly domains of pulp culture and the paranormal that are best considered, as Jeffrey Kripal has argued, ongoing mutations of the sacred more than replacements for it.

On a more theoretical level, I also see the discourse and protocols of our avatars of high weirdness squarely within the phenomenological pluralism that William James seeded in his still-resonant text The Varieties of Religious Experience. As we will see in the following chapter, James’ radical empiricism is foundational for many of the figures I discuss, as well as of crucial importance, in a more reflexive way, my own approach. Though I “weight” sociological and
cultural factors more than James did in his sometimes essentialist accounts of religious experience, I also follow his famous admonition that these phenomena are substantial enough that they urge us to refuse any “prematurely closing of our accounts with reality.”

A second reason for staying within the orbit of “religious experience” is to remain bracingly aware of one of the strongest critiques currently brought to bear on that discourse: that the unreflective language of “religious experience” falsely implies that there is something inherently or essentially “religious” about any particular kind of experience. So, rather than wrangle a more hair-splitting and determinate piece of jargon, I am instead interested in following the more constructionist approach suggested by the scholar Anne Taves. This approach foregrounds the processes by which anomalous, extraordinary, or—as she sometimes calls them—“special” experiences are staged, framed, and experienced as “religious” or “gnostic” or “mystical” or “visionary.”

This critical disaggregation, which draws attention to the tiny leaps that are made between experience and event, description and phenomenology, is arguably appropriate for all modes of extraordinary experience. But it is particularly germane to my study. One of the unusual and instructive features of high weirdness in the early seventies is that the process of constructing the appropriate language and associated ontological frameworks for extraordinary experiences of a broadly taken religious or mystical cast is brought radically and creatively into question by the experiencers themselves. In an iterative example of constructionist feedback, this reflexivity in some cases is fed back into the phenomenology itself, partly as a warrant for actively “programming” experiences in advance. Though we will not see much religion in these accounts, we will see something very much like “religious experience” both evoked and disavowed, self-consciously constructed and deconstructed, stirred up and then refused.
Finally, I want to underscore the way in which, in every single case that we will investigate, these experiences not only include astonishing synchronicities, striking perceptual anomalies, and blazing esoteric insights, but *encounters with nonhuman intelligences*. Though mercurial and often bizarre, the “presence” of these nonhuman agents bring us back to arguably the most archaic religious idea, or at least the first scholarly idea of archaic religion: the belief in, or communication with, incorporeal entities.

There are a few reasons for this stress. One is simply that some daemonic presences are fascinating and uncanny, and play, it seems, an outsized role in the particular time and space that interests me here. Another reason is simply that the possible existence of such intelligences is such a hard claim, one that is much less assimilable to normalizing discourses about spirituality that, say, offer naturalistic but non-pathologizing explanations for a profound sense of oneness with nature. Even though many contemporary experiences considered mystical, transpersonal, or spiritual are linked to at least the possibility of counter-normative ontological claims, they are, at the same time, relatively easy for insiders and outsiders alike to assimilate to individual psychodynamics. In these cases, the totality of the experience can be considered to be taking place within the subject alone.

But with the crucial exception of Jungian psychotherapy, with its discourse of archetypal interactions and its practices of active imagination, the sorts of “close encounters” with incorporeal intelligences we will be looking at make metaphysical and even ethical claims that put intense stress on naturalist accounts. In other words, these experiences widen the gap between the “emic” sphere of more-or-less religious beliefs, in which gods and other independent incorporeal agents are routine, and “etic” discourses that overwhelmingly tend to
reject, reduce, or pathologize such phenomena. As such, these beings call forth the fiercer ontological tensions I associate with the weird.

It is tracking the dynamics of this tension that interests me the most. Even as the high weirdness in this study is illuminated by resources found in the environs of religious experience—including mystical and especially occult experience—they also represent extreme examples of how extraordinary phenomena become detuned or divorced from religious explanations while they are reframed and reconstructed as something else. Another way of saying this is to point out that, during the relatively narrow slice of cultural spacetime covered in this study, the category of religious experience was itself undergoing intense contestation, multiplication, deconstruction, and recoding.

Religious experience was “up for grabs,” in other words, subject to a variety of transformative processes, some involving incoming new religious movements, some involving a host of emerging psychological frameworks, and others involving the hedonism of consumer culture. In this study, these transformative forces will be traced along three socio-cultural axes: psychedelics, the occult revival, and a self-consciously cybernetic media ecology. Within these three matrixes, both the phenomenology and the understanding of extraordinary experience fluctuate between materialist and idealist registers, suggesting a weird passage between subject and object, matter and mind, consciousness and culture.

Psychedelics are chemical substances, some of which emerge directly from the industrial laboratory, that trigger experiences that, at least for some properly prepared nervous systems, simulate or effect something very much like religious or mystical experiences. The seventies occult revival, though tapping into currents of esoteric thought and practice that can be traced back to the Renaissance if not antiquity, was also an eminently modern phenomenon wedded to
ideas of rationality and causality, as well as a concrete “anthropotechnics” of altered states, psychological concepts, and phenomenological protocols that were themselves propagated through electronic media, pop culture artifacts, and postwar transformations in publishing.

Finally, both the subjective modeling and material expression of these ambiguous experiences were inextricably bound up with the cultural dispositifs and technological frameworks of an increasingly self-aware and dynamically resonant media ecology. This ecology was characterized at once by a multimodal expansion of analog media and the first binary stirrings of a digital culture whose models and networks gained cultural and philosophical as well as technical force. As such, the seventies were marked not only by Marshall McLuhan’s reflexive Mobius strip of form and content, with its emphasis on tactile overload and archaic nonlinear perception, but by the proliferating paradigms of cybernetic systems and information theory, which suggested a rigorous language of mystical “wholes” as well as a technical account of mind and meaning.

By articulating the dynamics of these three socio-cultural conditions, I hope to illuminate many of the peculiar characteristics and curious similarities we will find among our otherwise singular avatars of high weirdness. By providing historical and cultural context, in other words, we can isolate some of the building blocks that individuals use to construct and narrate their own extraordinary experiences. According to the contextualist and historicist assumptions that dominate the humanities today, the placement of individual experience—or narratives of individual experience—against the backdrop of broad social phenomena and technological systems is, to put it lightly, a decidedly uncontroversial move. However, rather than focus on the origins of such heterogenous materials, I am more interested in drawing the network across a protean and heterogenous intertwingling of culture and consciousness, media and metaphysics,
empirical anomalies and otherworldly encounters. That is, rather than offer a specific interpretive key to such complex phenomena—some socio-cultural, psychological, or neurological baseline to return to—I also want to perform the work of mapping or constructing relationships or points of resonance between elements and dimensions of discourse and experience. As such, I will pay close attention to how extraordinary experience is constructed, to the autonomous “otherness” within experience, and to the strange loops of artifacts and discourses established between these domains.

The structure of the book will be relatively straightforward. Part one of the book attempts to set the stage by establishing something of the psychological, political, and sociological conditions of early seventies America, a period of time that remains elusive and enigmatic in cultural memory but whose political anxieties and fragmented cultural creativity form a significant background for our tales. The first chapter will address the centrifugal drift of subjectivity that followed the collapse of the counterculture’s millennialist dreams, including a fervor for extraordinary altered states of consciousness—“religious” and not—that I will read methodologically through William James. In the second chapter, I want to draw attention to two significant social and cultural forces that, though already well-established in the sixties, helped fashion the peculiar launching pads for the psychonauts in our scopes: the psychedelic amplification of consciousness, with its own associated religious discourse, as well as the occult revival that brought esoteric ideas, practices, and teachers East and West into the picture.

Part two of the book will address three avatars of high weirdness in turn, drawing connections less through explicit comparison than through shared themes and overlapping fields of resonance. In the first of these, we will follow Terence McKenna, on the lam after an international drug bust, when he travels to Columbia with his brother Dennis to perform their
now legendary “experiment at La Chorerra,” an event that inspired his later career as a psychedelic raconteur as well as the domestication of psilocybin mushrooms. In the following chapter, we will explore a similar science-fictional intrusion occurred to Robert Anton Wilson, whose study of conspiracy theories and exploration in sexual magic erupted into a fearsome bout of high weirdness in 1974, chronicled in his later book *Cosmic Trigger*. Wilson’s visit to what he famously called “Chapel Perilous” also coincided with the subject of our final chapter: the “2/3/74” experiences of Philip K. Dick, and his attempt to read and write his way through them.

In the face of the abstractions all too familiar in cultural analyses, I will respect the singularity of my subjects in their individual chapters, but common themes, moves, and constructs will point to what I believe is a significant mutation of American religious experience. As a heretofore ignored “culture of consciousness,” high weirdness offers new varieties of religious experience shaped by conceptual and affective networks drawn from cybernetics, popular culture, and postwar paranormal occultism.

This mutation represents, on the one hand, the prelude to the New Age, a prophetic development of postmodern religion and its playful and often antifoundationalist engagement with fictions and the figments of personal experience. On the other hand, our avatars also point to a more elusive but equally significant development: a post-religious stance of radical empiricism, or *weird naturalism*, that attempts to respect the phenomenology of extraordinary experiences while maintaining, however inconsistently, a skeptical and constructionist framework that allows alternative modes of affirming what would otherwise be supernatural suppositions. And it is to highlight this latter current that I have settled on the term high weirdness, because the overtones of the term precisely point to the ontologically ambivalent zone that flickers between the sacred and profane, romance and realism, gnosis and nature.
CHAPTER ONE. THE SEVENTIES SELF: 
SPINNING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

All the episodes of high weirdness I will discuss in this book took place between 1970 and 1975, which means that any attempt to understand them requires that we begin with a cultural spore-print of America during that time, remembering of course that such zeitgeist diagnoses are, like their mycological analogues, never entirely trustworthy. For the sake of convenience I will simply call this period the “early seventies,” an era whose outlines and character remain hazy in the nation’s cultural memory, as if it were cloaked in a kind of smog. Part of the reason for this lack of distinction is the period’s transitional placement between the highly overdetermined “sixties”—whose cultural and political dynamics are often considered to last into the subsequent decade—and the more garish and colorful markers of the seventies as a whole, like disco and punk, Pong and *Star Wars*, the Bicentennial and the first crystalline growths of the New Age.

Indeed, such liminal confusion is a key characteristic of the early seventies, as radical and transformative forces unleashed in the sixties fragmented, mutated, and dissipated into much broader segments of culture and society, generalizing a sense of unstable potential. On the one hand, this meant that one no longer needed to be an inhabitant of San Francisco, the East Village...
or Ann Arbor to explore the creative confusions of drugs, uncorked sexual experimentation, and the sort of alternative world-views associated with holistic healing or the occult revival. At the same time, and in stark contrast to the previous years, the horizon of large-scale social possibilities seemed to abruptly narrow. Despite the marvels and breakthroughs of those years, the nation drifted into a slough of despond perhaps unprecedented in American history.

In polls taken at the end of the 1970s, people looked back at a decade of “disillusion and cynicism, helplessness and apprehension,” a list we might as well round out with despair, paranoia, boredom, and frustrated rage. Indeed, one reason for our perpetual amusement at tacky seventies icons like sideburns, shag carpet, and smiley faces is that we need to keep the trauma and confusion of the era at bay, despite the fact—or perhaps because of it—that so many of the era’s bummers resonate with our own today: a merciless recession, fears about the environment and global terrorism, surveillance paranoia, political cynicism, foreign war fatigue, and a pervasive apocalyptic undertow that co-exists with an over-heated, desperately sexualized, and often bleak popular culture.

This doomy and unnerving cluster of feelings is enshrined in the nihilistic and “existential” tone of so many Hollywood films of the era, populated with errant cops, ominous conspiracies, lonely lovers, and the last cowboys drifting hard. An air of sweeter and more passive melancholy can also be heard in the plaints of the chart-topping singer-songwriters who emerged from the ferment of late sixties folk-rock. Don McLean had a huge hit in 1971 with “American Pie,” a tune whose plaintive mood and obscure lyrics—meant to eulogize Buddy Holly and the early years of rock’n’roll—“evoked intense feelings of collective loss, of ruined

innocence and diminished potency.”56 Any number of songs and albums by Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, and Leonard Cohen told a similar bipolar tale of anxious interiority and hedonic restlessness, of opportunities squandered or snatched away.

A good deal of this deflated air can be chalked up to the disappointment, frustration, and disorientation that followed on the widespread recognition that the millennialist dreams of large-scale collective transformation that characterized “the sixties” had hit the skids. This swift and bitter sunset was beautifully captured by Hunter S. Thompson in a retrospective rumination that occurs early on in 1971’s Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas. Standing on a hill outside the city of sin, his head momentarily above the weirdness he would chronicle like no other journalist of the era, Thompson reflected that “it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a whole generation comes to a head in a long fine flash.” He recalled the “fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning…We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave.” Looking West across the desert, toward the golden state that cradled so much of the counterculture, he notes that “with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back.”57

The roll-back occurred at different times to different souls, but the import was clear, and crisply put by the sociologist Steven Tipton in his classic account Getting Saved from the Sixties: “Large-scale social change in the direction of the countercultural ideals of mysticism, communalism, and socialism did not occur, either by radical political transformation of the old

order or by ever-expanding growth of the new psychedelic lifestyle.” Within Tipton’s words, of course, we also find a reminder that the act of sixties dreaming was always already polarized between the two central and often conflicting agendas of outer struggle and inner transformation. This split, of course, is perhaps the most characteristic distinction made in discussions of the sixties: the divide between New Left activists and psychedelic hippies, between Berkeley and the Haight, or between what Lawrence Leamer called the “Fists” and the “Heads.” The conventionality of this distinction mars many historical accounts of the sixties, which tend to ignore both the radical social possibilities of the consciousness movement and the psychedelic politics that Ken Goffman and Dan Joy describe as the “freak left,” a sometimes zany mode of anti-authoritarian radicalism that, at least according to Julie Stephens, directly informed, for better and worse, later postmodern modes of cultural politics. That said, the distinction remains a useful one, even as the developments in the early seventies united both sides in a sad but sometimes constructive aftermath.

The Fists arguably began to crumble in 1969, when the Students for Democratic Society, the spine of New Left activism, dramatically dissolved into a riot of rival factions, including the soon-to-be bomb-tossing Weathermen (a name quickly feminism-corrected into the Weather Underground). By the end of 1970, many countercultural leaders—including Huey Newton, Angela Davis, John Sinclair, and the Head ideologue Timothy Leary—were in courtrooms, jail, or exile. In the spring of that year, National Guardsmen shot and killed four Kent State students during a protest. Shock and anger impelled millions to protest over that summer, but by the end of the year, mass demonstrations had declined in numbers, force, and media presence. Though

58. However, Tipton does not include the anarchist possibility, always a crucial and ever-present thread of countercultural political imagination. Steven M. Tipton, Getting Saved from the Sixties: Moral Meaning in Conversion and Cultural Change (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 29.
protests against the war continued, many Fists felt they were pounding against a concrete wall, and, in Todd Gitlin’s words, “helpless fury turned to spleen or withdrawal.” Though new forms of social and environmental struggle were opening up, and radical impulses would continue to fuel the emergence in the seventies of the modern “terrorist,” for all intents and purposes the Movement as a collective field of radical possibility was over.

The dawn of the seventies found the Heads in retreat as well. Following the muddy collective ecstasy of Woodstock festival in August 1969, the Heads faced their own grim symbolic boomerang at the Altamont Free Concert in December that same year, when Meredith Hunter was stabbed by a crew of Hell’s Angels and three others died in a chaotic and nerve-wracking scene. Too much can be made of Altamont, but little can match the symbolic and existential punch provided that same fall by the Tate-LaBianca murders and the subsequent arrest and trial of Charles Manson and his peculiar “family” of glassy-eyed and knife-wielding girls and boys. With his mystic hippie rhetoric and apparent charisma, Manson perfectly embodied the silent majority’s fears about the amoral violence, mind rot, and hedonic excess that lurked in the permissive, go-with-the-flow ethos of the counterculture. Though embraced by some in the underground as a radical antihero, Manson not only bloodied the Aquarian dream in the mind of the mainstream but forced thoughtful freaks to reckon with the pathologies and moral drift of the scene.

All of this would have been tough enough without the political traumas and economic calamities that characterized the early seventies in America. Despite widespread opprobrium and Nixon’s campaign promise to end the war, the bloody mire of the Vietnam war continued to thicken. In April 1970, Nixon announced that American ground forces were invading Cambodia,

a country the administration had been heavily bombing, initially in secret, throughout the previous year. This “incursion” would trigger the Kent State killings, and three more years would have to pass before the last American troops withdrew from the country, and five more before the whole grim adventure was put to sleep with the loss of Saigon in 1975.

Economically, America in the early seventies slipped into a peculiar state of “stagflation,” in which inflation was accompanied by frozen wages and high unemployment—an anomalous conjunction as far as Keynesian economics dictated, and one whose psychological effect may be compared to trying to climb up a down escalator that’s moving faster than you can. In late ’73, in response to American support for Israel during the ominously biblical Yom-Kippur war, the Arab oil cartel OPEC declared an embargo on crude oil, triggering apocalyptic lines at service stations. These major news stories were interlaced with any number of unnerving and melancholy portents: highjacked jetliners, the Munich terrorist attacks, the pathos of Patty Hearst, and the last man on the moon. But the most epochal and psychologically significant political story in the early seventies was Watergate, an almost mythopoetic perversion of governance whose real and symbolic betrayals helped feed the paranoia and disaffection with consensual reality that plays such an important role in high weirdness.

Watergate was only the most spectacular peak in the mountains of government malfeasance and mendacity that came to light in the era. In 1971, after the Citizens’ Commission to Investigate the FBI burglarized a field office in Pennsylvania, the FBI’s COINTELPRO campaign was exposed. This clandestine and not infrequently illegal program was designed to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize” organizations and individuals considered “subversive”—a category that included Rev. Martin Luther King, the Black Panther

Party, the American Indian Movement, SDS, and the student protest movement. The paranoids in these largely countercultural organizations, in other words, were vindicated in their suspicion that their comrades were not entirely on the up and up. Also in 1971, the journalist Daniel Ellsberg began releasing the Pentagon Papers through the *New York Times*; these revealed that—in confirmation of conspiracy theories and ambient suspicions alike—the Johnson administration had extensively lied to Congress and the public about the causes and operations of the Vietnam war. Though this material besmirched an earlier administration, Nixon hated the leaks, just as he had hated the unauthorized news reports about the secret bombing of Cambodia. So he sicced an internal crew of anti-leak “plumbers” on Ellsberg. Charges of conspiracy and espionage against the journalist were eventually dropped after it was shown that Nixon’s goons had used unauthorized wiretaps, a break-in to a psychiatrist office, and other sleazy means to discredit him.

Nixon was not just a vindictive man; he was a profoundly insecure and suspicious one. William Safire, a one-time Nixon speechwriter, called the President America’s “first paranoid with a majority.” This temperamental twist was intensified during the re-election campaign of the 1972. Nixon’s Committee for the Re-Election of the President, aptly shortened by many to CREEP, practiced money laundering, bugging, and other dirty tricks, including COINTELPRO-style infiltrations dubbed “ratfucking.” CREEP was also largely responsible for the Watergate break-in whose cover-up eventually forced Nixon’s resignation in August of 1974. Roughly two years before, in June of 1972, five men were arrested for breaking into a floor of the plush Watergate building and attempting to bug the Democratic National Committee headquarters. It

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wasn’t until October of that year, a month before Nixon’s landslide presidential victory, that the
*Washington Post* revealed that this apparently isolated event was the tip of a nasty iceberg of
spying, graft, and sabotage directed by key Nixon staff.

Writing about the *Post* article just after it appeared, Hunter S. Thompson, who had been
covering the campaign all year and was already dejected by the poll numbers, declared that
Nixon personified the “dark, venal, and incurably violent side of the American character.” Then,
as if in a vision, Thompson waxed fantastic about the President:

He speaks for the Werewolf in us; the bully, the predatory shyster who turns into
something unspeakable, full of claws and bleeding string-warts, on nights when the moon
comes too close…

At the stroke of midnight in Washington, a drooling red-eyed beast with the legs of a
man and a head of a giant hyena crawls out of its bedroom window in the South Wing of
the White House and leaps fifty feet down to the lawn…pauses briefly to strangle the
Chow watchdog, then races off into the darkness…towards the Watergate, snarling with
lust, lopping through the alleys behind Pennsylvania Avenue…

Thompson immediately dismisses his fantasy as only “nightmares”—the President of the
United States, he writes, would “never act that weird.”63 But Watergate did initiate a period of
reality warp, as the nation followed a complex and bitter drama that lasted almost two years, a
criminal soap opera featuring hush money and wiretaps, evangelical conversions and threats of
impeachment, surreptitious recordings of Oval Office conversations and a mysterious 18 1/2
minute gap in one of the tapes, an analog aporia that Chief of Staff Alexander Haig attributed to
“some sinister force.” Watergate is inextricable from such tropes of the uncanny. As Stephanie

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Slocum-Schaffer writes, the Watergate revelations seemed “fictional, incredible, and unbelievable to most Americans, who still held a great deal of respect—even reverence—for the president of the United States.”⁶⁴ In other words, Watergate was weird stuff.

If, as I would like to suggest, the early seventies was a time when fictions took on an enhanced, world-weaving actuality, we might attribute this reality warp in part to the excessive, almost dreamlike dimensions of the Watergate scandal. Nixon’s secret actions paradoxically revealed the mythic sovereign that still lies, in potential, beneath the democratically elected president, a sovereign with a sacred charge who, in this case, turned to the dark side. If the sixties began with JFK’s King of Camelot, the era ended with Nixon’s hunchbacked Richard III.

When Ford took the oath of office after Nixon’s abdication, he referred explicitly to this plane of myth and dream. “My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over,” he promised.⁶⁵ A month later, in the speech announcing his full pardon of his former boss, Ford returned to this enchanted talk. “My conscience tells me clearly and certainly that I cannot prolong the bad dreams that continue to reopen a chapter that is closed. My conscience tells me that only I, as President, have the constitutional power to firmly shut and seal this book.”⁶⁶ With his garbled syntax, Ford shuttles back and forth between the figures of endless dream and biblical text, with the pivot of his own decision lying in nothing more apparent than “his conscience”—in other words, in his exceptional and sovereign power to grant a presidential pardon.

Ford would spend much of his lame-duck presidency attempting to plug the leak that Nixon had made in the body politic, a leak that let the dark archetypes of America’s political

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⁶⁴. Slocum-Schaffer, 27.
unconscious spill forth. This is why the literary leap that Thompson makes above—the lea from political journalism to weird fiction—should be seen as something more than a drug-added gonzo move. Instead, Thompson effected the kind of genre shift that sometimes becomes necessary within cultural analysis, particularly when the culture itself grows uncanny and strange. Indeed, in early 1974, Thompson offered one of the era’s most representative and oft-repeated quips: “When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro.”

This project aims to track a number of “pro” weirdos who made their way through the highways and byways of the seventies by plunging ever further into the weird itself (sometimes, it must be said, getting well more than they bargained for). As such, and for whatever pathologies stain their path, they should be seen as representatives of a culturally constructive, conceptually inventive, and in many ways psychologically courageous engagement with the peculiar exigencies of their times (and their minds).

The secret truth of the early seventies is that its dark politics, its anxieties and disappointments cloaked an extraordinarily fertile, heretical, and profoundly influential period of cultural, ecological, technological, and spiritual re-invention. However else the early seventies are remembered or referenced, they also represent an extraordinary and highly creative flowering of community arrangements, social movements, ecological relationships, spiritual practices, “weird” texts, fringe science, expanded visual and aural media, psycho-spiritual experiments, and the sometimes radical reinvention of sexual identity and practice. For some, the seventies became a golden if not rainbow-shaded opportunity for high weirdness and all manner of “limit experiences.” As I suggested in the Introduction, the weird may be peculiar, even traumatic, but its heresies also nourish novelty, provide an active sense of transformative possibility, and

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deliver a naturalist mode of enchantment and cultural encounter that can, at the extremes, become revelatory—even if what becomes revealed is nothing more than the fantastic structure of the locus of revelation itself: the meta-programming nervous system, the subject deconstructing itself, that famous oh-so-seventies Self seeking its elusive groundless ground.

The Centrifugal Self

Hunter Thompson’s image of the cresting wave captures the sour and disorienting return to limits that marked self and society in the early seventies. The collective surge towards visionary heights had ebbed, and the retreating tide exposed all manner of flotsam and wreckage in its turbulent wake. Some of the biggest ruins stood in the spots once held to be traditional foundations of authority. Public institutions were treated with suspicion and contempt, mainline church attendance declined, and the liberal consensus that supported the Great Society largely collapsed, especially among the half of the country’s population that were under 25. The citizen ideal forged in the fifties—the rational individualist, white and male, who blended self-sufficiency and well-defined social commitments—was dust. With these old models eclipsed, and the affective unity provided by “the Movement” in deep fade, many Americans—and not just refugees of the sixties—found themselves adrift in the world prophesied in Yeats’ famous and oft-cited lines: “things fall apart, the center cannot hold.”

Amidst this unravelling, a decentralized and “postmodern” nation emerged, one whose social norms, cultural logic, and political policies were increasingly driven by pluralism, the relativism of values, atomized desire, and the curiously liberated limbo that opens up with the recognition that the self as well as society are constructed and provisional. This pluralist shift

contributed to the “existential” and even nihilistic tang in the era’s cultural atmosphere, but it also inspired a creative if sometimes desperate inventiveness, one that intensely engaged the open field of possible identities and emerging “systems” of interaction, transcendence, and collective becoming. In the words of Stephen Paul Miller, “The undermining of a pre-sixties American consensus enabled, by the early seventies, a hopping from one performative identity-position to another.”

This turn away from consensus contributed to the distinctly centrifugal or “wayward” dynamic of the era. Constructions of identity, understood as both political and psycho-spiritual artifacts, were elaborated in a dynamic and pluralistic warp away from the central pivot of established authority structures. As Bruce Shulman put it, “After 1970, the great American centrifuge spun freely, distributing visionary communities, new subcultures with newly discovered identities, across the American continent”; Schulman dubs this process “Inventing Diversity.” Indeed, we misunderstand the early seventies if we play only to the downbeat drift, and ignore the vital and sometimes ingenious acts of re-invention undertaken by many individuals and collectives, aspirations perhaps best voiced by the name of one leftist commune founded near Taos, New Mexico around 1970: the Reality Construction Company. Reality, which had been expanded and savaged in the sixties, was ready for reconstruction. Falling apart provided the raw material for novel assemblages that included, as we will see, new modes of religious practice, empirical metaphysics, and forms of systems thinking that promised to at once develop or realize the individual self and to dynamically integrate or balance these singularities within emerging distributed wholes.

68. Miller, Seventies, 19.
69. Schulman, 100; also see the discussion on 68-72.
The most visible of the new collectivities took the form of identity politics. While the sixties undermined America’s mid-century norms, it was not until the early seventies that the politics of cultural pluralism—with its relativistic and multi-perspectival implications—gained a real foothold in American society. Policy makers, activists, and culture crafters alike engineered an opening to difference that was in equal parts chaotic and creative. As Miller puts it in his book on the seventies, “Identity-positions took on more credence, and the United States decreasingly was seen as a whole, except by the majority white identity-position.”

Black Power, the most visible identity movement of the sixties, continued to shape America in the early seventies, which saw the passage of affirmative action policies along with fierce conflicts over busing and desegregation. Taking their lead from the Panthers and other black activists, Chicano and Asian groups crystalized around non-majoritarian ethnic and cultural identities, while Native Americans renewed their struggle for recognition through the activist occupation of Alcatraz and later the burial grounds at Wounded Knee. The Attica Prison riots of 1971 drew attention to the Prisoner Rights Movement, while sharply growing concerns about pollution and overpopulation helped birth the “environmentalist,” which, while not depending on race or ethnicity, did shift identity towards a global and often systems-based framework. Gays and lesbians began to protest and parade as a block, collectively performing “personal” sexual and cultural differences in ways that changed laws and deeply held antipathies. At the same time, radical feminists continued to foreground the gender politics that had remained largely unexamined by New Left activists and bohemians alike, and their intense critique of traditional feminine roles birthed new (and sometimes spiritual) notions of feminine power while also helping propel the mainline women’s liberation movement through struggles over abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment.

70. Miller, Seventies, 50.
One widely shared axiom of the new identity politics, and even of environmentalism, was the notion that the personal is the political—that the concrete experiences and actions of private life both support and supplement citizen concepts of political agency. This turn to the personal can itself be tied, paradoxically perhaps, to the sexual and psychoactive experimentation of the sixties. If the personal became the political, in other words, it was because the personal itself had become a site of experimental and sometimes utopian transformation. Sex, alongside or combined with drugs, blurred the boundaries of personal identity and undermined the norms that organized pleasure, habit, and social relations, and its ecstasies offered mind-melting glimpses of a brighter and more vibrant world. Though this Dionysian logic is understandably identified with the sixties, “It was during the 1970s, not the 1960s, that sex outside marriage became the norm and illegal drugs became commonplace in middle America.”

By 1970, 20 million Americans were smoking cannabis; a few years later, over sixty percent of college students had tried the weed. Open relationships rose, along with divorce rates and the exposure to a myriad of sexual possibilities.

This latter cornucopia reflected the shockingly permissive policies around sexually explicit media that were recommended by the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography in the summer of 1970. Finding no connection between consumption of porn and misconduct, the panel recommended a progressive “Danish solution” that included sexual education efforts “aimed at achieving an acceptance of sex as a normal and natural part of life and of oneself as a sexual being.” The ideal program, they wrote, “should not aim for orthodoxy; rather, it should be designed to allow for a pluralism of values.”

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72. Slocum-Schaffer, 175.
73. Peter Braunstein, “Adults Only”, in Bailey and Farber, op cit, 131.
trickle-down effect of sixties excess: a move away from orthodoxy and towards pluralism, a shift whose explicitly heterodox overtones should not be ignored. After all, the widespread experimentation with our “hedonic circuits,” which carried forward from the sixties to the seventies without much diminution, conjured powerful and potentially ecstatic modes of being that rivaled older religious sources of value. At the same time, the disorienting effects of these experiences did not give people handy guides to navigate the morning after, which meant that hedonic and visionary exploits often left spiritual voids hovering in their wake.

The “great American centrifuge” of the era, with its forceful thrust of objects away from center, provides a dynamic image for two contrasting dimensions of the self that emerges in the seventies. On the one hand, the decentered self became a charged vector of exploration and creative re-invention; and, on the other, an aimless and lonely satellite drifting into random disarray and indifferent passivity. In his 1975 poem *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, which Miller draws attention to as a key site for seventies identity, the poet John Ashbery evokes the dynamics of the centrifugal self:

I feel the carousel starting slowly
And going faster and faster: desk, papers, books,
Photographs of friends, the window and the trees
Merging in one neutral band that surrounds
Me on all sides, everywhere I look.74

Ashbery describes a ride—or trip—characterized both by wayward propulsion and cool, even claustrophobic stasis. An “I” is discovered in this process, but it is discovered precisely in its

distance from any possible object of identification or stabilization, even with intimate things like friends, trees, or one’s own self, glimpsed in a mirror. “This otherness, this / ‘Not-being-us’ is all there is to look at / In the mirror.” The centrifugal self is at once scattered and singular, and its paradoxically inertial drive towards freedom throws it into a creative abyss, a perpetual identity crisis that commercial culture, hedonistic lifestyles, and those alternate reality constructs we call “new religious movements” or “cults” helped to cushion.

Indeed, one of the ways we keep the deeper implications of the seventies self at arm’s length is to mock the “Me Decade” for its narcissism without remembering that the “Me” in question was not so much a triumphant exclamation point as a question mark, the trigger for an experimental subjectivity, and a potentially endless derive.

In religious terms, this quest produced what the sociologist Robert Wuthnow characterized as a shift from an spirituality of “dwelling,” associated with home and hearth, to a more nomadic spirituality of “seeking.” As a self-description for spiritual Americans, the term seeker was already a century old at this point, an outgrowth of liberal Protestantism’s late nineteenth-century turn towards demythologized Christianity and religious pluralism. In addition, the nineteenth century also saw the emergence of bohemian, Transcendentalist and occult modes of seeking that aimed beyond the provinces of Christianity. In the seventies, the explosion of seekers reflected the diversity of the growing spiritual marketplace, as well as the sixties focus on phenomenological experience and the lingering discontent with any ultimate

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75. As Leigh Schmidt argues in Restless Souls, this earlier seeker culture possessed two dimensions: a sympathetic openness to alterity, and a desire for concordance and unity. The latter impulse developed into the religious philosophy of perennialism, whose ideas underlie a lot of the counterculture’s experiments with religion. However, it is the former element that resonates in the seventies: an openness to different perspectives and experiences of otherness. For more, see Leigh Schmidt, Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality. HarperOne. 2006 76. See Justin Martin, Rebel Souls: Walt Whitman and America’s First Bohemians, 2014. Also Michael Robertson, Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).
positions. This relativism and cut-and-paste consumerism contributed to the rise of New Age and the psychologized “Self spirituality” that lay at its core.⁷⁷

“You have the freedom to be yourself, your true self, here and now, and nothing can stand in your way,” wrote Richard Bach in the pellucid and whispy *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, whose paperback rights went for a record-breaking million dollars in 1972.⁷⁸ Indeed, almost 15% of the best-selling books in the seventies were self-help books like *I’m OK, You’re OK*, whose title alone suggested how difficult it was to actually inhabit that true self of absolute freedom for very long. But the constant iteration that organizes the narrative of seeking was part of the point. As Tom Wolfe explained in an influential 1976 article on the “‘Me’ Decade,” Bach’s sort of discourse reflects the widespread assumption that a “Real Me” exists beneath the sham layers of personality blamed on society and family, and that new psychological and spiritual practices can reveal this core self. To his credit, Wolfe realized that this search was not just a passive revealing but an active making as well. “The new alchemical dream is: changing one’s personality—remaking, remodeling, elevating, and polishing one’s very self . . . and observing, studying, and doting on it.”⁷⁹

In his writing on Ashbery and the seventies, Miller draws attention to another significant line in “Self-Portrait,” one that speaks of a time when “something like living occurs, a movement / Out of the dream into its codification.” The dream here, for Miller and for me, is the dream of the sixties, when the dominant accounts of reality were shattered and a temporary sense of freedom was unleashed, an opening that mutated, in the early seventies, into a more troubling sort of indetermination, something between a void and an entrepreneurial opportunity. On the

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⁷⁸. Schulman, 79.
one hand, dwindling enchantment impelled an attempted return to real life, or at least “something like” living. On the other, the fading dream—of freedom, of ecstasy, of new pleasures—was continued by other means, and especially through its own commercial and religious “codification.”

In other words, America in the seventies incorporated sixties mores and aspirations while tamping their subversive or radical potential, a transformation that Miller associates with the emergence of a new cultural logic: surveillance, and particularly self-surveillance, in the midst of an economy that was switching definitively to consumer spending (and consumer debt) as its main driver. “In the seventies the malleable identities and consumer patterns that we use to survey ourselves were put in place.”80 Shifts in values and personality were increasingly open to tracking, as new medical technologies like ultrasound and MRI literalized the scanning of the self. At the same time, “the silent majority as well as consumer-culture dropouts were canvassed and enlisted in the increasingly centralized marketplace.”81 Credit checks become more centralized, the UPC symbol appeared, and the productive possibilities of cross-checked databases were exploited by government, law enforcement, and business. Though technological tracking enforced its own kind of standardization, the interlocking paradigms of cultural pluralism and subjective authenticity assured that “a sense of the personal also became more prominently organized within the marketplace.”82 As with the SX-70 film that Polaroid made available in 1972, the techniques of identity formation in the early seventies let you see yourself develop before your eyes.

80. Miller, Seventies, 18.
81. Ibid, 3.
82. Ibid, 10.
The turbulence of the sixties was, in large part, a turbulence of consciousness, as both personal practices and mediated cultural environments shattered, transformed, and extended the boundaries of the phenomenological self. This produced a tremendous scattering and dissolving of subjectivity. By the early seventies, these new zones of experience were themselves increasingly codified, controlled, and directed through a veritable explosion of new religious movements, guru scenes, and psycho-spiritual “cults.” These groups were able to sustain and exploit the sublime cracks in consensus reality forged in the sixties, while, as Tipton showed, also providing new models of identity and collective belonging that reoriented the centrifugal self around new and charismatic centers of gravity and value. The explosion of self-help groups and religious cults in the seventies both intensified and organized the extraordinary experiences of the sixties, providing templates and rules that exploited their alterity while organizing their existential chaos. Even some activists heard the call, as two radicals in the celebrated Chicago Seven—Rennie Davis and Jerry Rubin—found their way into spiritual movements in the early seventies.

Tom Wolfe explained the new spiritual turn through the countercultural obsession with self and the alchemical quest for the “Real Me.” Wolfe argued that consciousness techniques and psychological tools like encounter groups could effectively strip away social and familial imprinting, and therefore open up a fantasized site of freedom and authenticity, one that Scientology referred to as “clear.” However, as innumerable practices of body and mind drew the self outside of the self, this process could also simply intensify a sometimes desperate search for greener grass. In this sense, the “Real Me” was a classic McGuffin, and the flip side of its hoped-for realization was the somewhat ominous possibility—supported by Buddhism, by psychedelic
rapture, and by constructivist psychological and sociological concepts—that there is no solid or substantial Me at all.

This vertiginous existential intimation is the dark secret of seventies narcissism, the Munch-like scream in the smiley face. Over time, the difficulty in locating or clarifying the “Real Me” meant that the new movements took on an increasingly “religious” character dependent on mystery, faith, and submission to authority. Wolfe points to many examples, such as the transformation of the California drug rehabilitation group Synanon into a religion, as well as the mystical foundation of many socialist communes. But the supreme example in the early seventies is the rise of (mostly) Asian gurus, accompanied by repackaged forms of unwavering spiritual authority.

Wolfe is also one of those great cultural observers who knows his history and knows how to deploy it to enliven contemporary criticism. In his 1976 article, Wolfe persuasively set the radical spiritual culture of the seventies within the history of American religion, proclaiming a “Third Great Awakening” two years before the religious scholar William G. McLoughlin broke academic dirt with a similar argument in Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform. Moreover, Wolfe also stressed the absolutely central role that individual experience played in this awakening, an experience he cannily if loosely assimilated to the esoteric idea of gnosis. “In one form or another [the new groups] arrive at an axiom first propounded by the Gnostic Christians some 1,800 years ago: namely, that at the apex of every human soul there exists a spark of the light of God.” The Real Me was the seventies face of this spark, with the Gnostic hatred and distrust of matter transmuted into a rejection of the facades of society and the manipulations of other people—individualistic frameworks that could paradoxically, through some Jung-like enantiodromia, flip into cult rapture and group minds.
By establishing seventies spirituality as a gnostic Great Awakening, Wolfe wanted to both underscore the religious dimension of California human potential institutions like Esalen and est, and to present a picture of American religion that emphasizes its dependence on extraordinary individual experience. The first two Great Awakenings in American history, which took place in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries respectively, were characterized by a collective upwelling of extraordinary behaviors and ecstatic states that manifested as everything from shouts to visions to rolling on the ground frothing at the mouth. These extraordinary revivals, with their well-named explosions of popular religious “enthusiasm,” both reflected and fueled the diversity and recombinant creativity of religious forms in the young United States. They were by no means uncontroversial at the time. What revivalists characterized as the actions of the Holy Spirit were reframed by outsiders—including more conservative religious leaders of the day—in more pathological or reductively psychological terms. In this way, the history of religion in America cannot be separated from the history of extraordinary experience in America—a history of how powerful and novel states of mind and body were cultivated, integrated, explained, contested, and condemned, both in religious-esoteric and secular-psychological languages.

The Great Awakenings remain central events in American religious history, and Wolfe’s insistence that the psycho-spiritual carnival of the seventies constitutes another iteration helps underscore the dynamic significance of the era. Wolfe argues that new religious movements do not begin with new theologies or values or cartographies of the afterlife, but with “some overwhelming ecstasy or seizure, a ‘vision,’ a ‘trance,’ a hallucination—an actual neurological event, in fact, a dramatic change in metabolism, something that has seemed to light up the entire central nervous system.” What fueled the Third Great Awakening was the riot of dramatic

83. See Taves, Fits, op cit.
“neurological” events—or “altered states of consciousness”—that characterized the
counterculture and seventies “Self” religion.

These events were, at the same time, cultivated and mediated through a variety of
registers: biofeedback devices, hallucinogenic drugs, trance rituals, meditational regimes, and
intense psychological therapeutic modalities like encounter groups. The centrifugal force of these
practices—whose attendant events unravel, fragment, or multiply the ordinary “centripetal” self,
opening up a search for a new foundation or norm—opened up the space for the cacophonous
diversity of seventies spirituality. Here Wolfe anticipates the argument that “religious
experience” is a portmanteau concept that laminates neurological phenomena, which can be
transparently described with explanatory terms like seizure and hallucination, with cultural
attributions like “vision” and “trance,” which Wolfe renders in the scare quotes that indicate their
merely cultural contextual force. As Wolfe explains regarding LSD, “It was quite easy for an
LSD experience to take the form of a religious vision, particularly if one were among people
already so inclined.”

But while Wolfe is willing to deconstruct the experiential foundation of new religious
movements in neurological terms, he did not waver from the notion that religion, or at least
American religion, begins with a religious experience and only later crystallizes into dogma and
institution. In supporting his argument, Wolfe invokes both Max Weber and Joachim Wach, two
scholars of religion that he also employed to similar effect in his 1968 book The Electric Kool
Aid Acid Test, where he argued that acid provided the galvanizing experience that gave Kesey’s
crew a religious character despite their resistance to religious rhetoric or form. But Wolfe would
have been better off citing William James, whose Varieties of Religious Experience in many
ways responsible for propagating the notion that “religious experience” is a distinct phenomenon
that can be isolated from the collective and cultural forces of institution, dogma, and collective practices.

While the modern discourse of religious experience can be traced back to Friedrich Schleiermacher, James re-articulated the concept in the context of American individualism and as forms of interiority that can be judged and integrated along pragmatist lines. “Churches, when once established, live at second-hand upon tradition,” James wrote. But the founders of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine.”

Indeed, when James famously characterized religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude,” he underscored the central role of extraordinary and direct individual experience in his account. As we will see, this model of original and immediate religious experience would prove enormously influential, not only on the analysis of religion but on its active development, particularly within the sorts of experience-hungry currents—psychedelia, occultism, radical psychology, positive thinking—that would feed both the intense spirituality and the experimental psychology of the seventies. James’ view, as well as the radical empiricism and pragmatic pluralism it rests upon, has also come in for increasing and sometimes vociferous attacks from a variety of angles. Since the problems attendant upon extraordinary experiences—whether they are considered religious, pathological, or simply “weird”—lie at the core of this study, we need to return, again, to James, and to the analytic, historical, and ultimately ontological implications of his still resonating views.

84. Wolfe, “‘Me’.”
The Varieties of Talking About Religious Experience

Authoritative, accessible, and more wily in its rambles than at first appears, William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* remains the single most influential American scholarly work on religion, and without doubt the most important book on that menagerie of extraordinary subjective phenomena whose expression and interpretations have so often demanded religious or mystical language. Making an enormous mark on both scholarship and the practice of American religion, the *Varieties* continues to illuminate—or, according to some critics, to obscure—how we talk, think, and individually relate to the more extreme, and sometimes extremely meaningful, dimensions of consciousness, perception, and feeling. Indeed, one of the principal markers of James’ influence lies in the seeming transparency of the notion of “religious experience” itself: a singular, individualized, and often transformative trans-psychological event whose immediacy and self-authenticating power clearly separates it both from the everyday run of quotidian consciousness and from the institutional, textual, and collective assemblages that constitute religion as a social force.

Indeed, by insisting on this distinction, James helped establish a particularly American current of informal, experiential, and individualistic spirituality that has congealed in our era into the massively popular post-religious identity of “Spiritual But Not Religious.” Though rooted in religious currents already flowing in James’ day, the identity of SBNR can in many ways be traced to countercultural spirituality, its rejection of mainstream Christianity and (most) religious institutions, and its embrace of practices that contribute to the sorts of twilight or exalted states of consciousness that are frequently identified as spiritual, mystical, or indeed, religious.
The productive religious influence of James’ frameworks—in other words, its constructive rather than deconstructive power—is one of the reasons that a host of contemporary critical religious scholars roundly reject *The Varieties*, which remains popular in religious studies. As we will see, these scholars raise legitimate concerns about the very notion of “religious experience,” and later we will suggest that there are more subtle ways of understanding and thinking through what I will be calling “extraordinary experiences.” That said, one way of grasping the psycho-spiritual carnival of the early seventies, including the high frontiers of high weirdness, is to recognize the era as one that took the Jamesian bait: the *Varieties* came to serve as a pluralistic model and permissive justification for an experimental spiritual psychology devoted to exploring and experimenting with “altered states of consciousness” by any mean necessary.

Based on a series of public lectures given in Scotland at the onset of the twentieth century, James began his book with a critique against the “medical materialism” of his day. To clear the air around his topic, James needed to push back against those biological determinists who insisted on reducing certain psychological phenomena—say, the raptures associated with revivalism and other forms of religious enthusiasm—to more or less pathological states of the brain, a reduction that in turn allowed the beliefs associated with or precipitated from those experiences to be written off as deluded flotsam of the meat-machine. In this view, Paul’s vision on the road to Damascus is “nothing but” an epileptic seizure, while Saint Francis is a “hereditary degenerate.” James’ response remains resonant today, a vital riposte to the simplistic neuro-reductionism of our era’s popular and sometimes scholarly discourse, and one that strongly informs my own non-reductive but non-essentialist take on “extraordinary experiences.”
Firstly, James noted that all productions of thought, all beliefs and skeptical arguments and empirical perceptions, are themselves states of the brain. “Scientific theories are organically conditioned just as much as religious emotions are,” James writes; if we knew all the facts “we should doubtless see ‘the liver’ determining the dicta of the sturdy atheist as decisively as it does those of the Methodist.” As such, the criteria for taking such productions seriously or not—of choosing, say, a biological account over a supernatural one—lies outside the domain of strict biological accounts. For James, we embrace certain states of mind over others because we enjoy them or because we believe in their “cash value” for life. This, in essence, is James’ version of pragmatism: the supreme criterion for beliefs is what they do for us. James elaborates his pragmatist point by underscoring the crucial difference between origins and function. Analytically establishing the origins of a given trait, belief, or phenomena, in the brain or elsewhere, does not establish its value, since what is important for determining this value is how that belief functions in the complex, jury-rigged, and endlessly negotiated field of life itself. Wrestling in his own way with Darwin, James believed that the conditions of existence itself exerted selection pressures on beliefs, and that this pragmatic pressure was the closest we get to “truth.” Playing with biblical language, James defined this “empiricist criterion” as “By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots.”

James’ broad definitions of pragmatism and empiricism are certainly debatable—James’ colleague Peirce, who offered a more stringent and logical characterization of pragmatic fitness, ultimately rejected it. Indeed, in the next section I will suggest that James’ basic orientation is less pragmatist than pluralist, in that his tolerance for multiple and divergent frameworks of belief rests on top of an ontological view of an open, evolving, and—most importantly—

86. Ibid, 14.
multiplex reality. But James’ attempt to shift the operations of valuation from origins to functions remains very useful. Within the psychology of religion, this move allows us to avoid a major problem faced by those attempting to positively evaluate historical or contemporary spiritual experiences: the evident presence of psycho-pathology within many religious personalities, and the difficulty in disentangling spiritual or mystical experiences from various forms of trauma or even psychosis. If we believe that phenomena can be reduced to their origins, then the sorts of arguments that, say, David Halperin makes in his book on Ezekiel—that the prophet’s language and visions show clear signs of psychosis—are sufficient to relieve us from the burden of trying to take the text seriously in its own terms. This sort of analysis is common found in skeptical arguments about religious believers or mystics proffered by scholars and popular pundits alike.

However, if we shift attention to the function of beliefs within individual lives and communities, the mere presence of pathological origins no longer intrinsically demands that we discount more potentially constructive or emergent forms and meanings. In fact, as Jeffrey Kripal decisively argues, something like trauma or pathology may be a necessary or at least highly correlated contributor to the most extraordinary visionary or noetic events, which he reads under the signs of the paranormal (and that I would categorize as weird) and what he calls the “traumatic secret”. “Psychopathology and the paranormal go just fine together, as do mushrooms and religious revelation, or madness and holiness, or car wrecks and near-death experiences, or mystics and sexual trauma; once the ego is dissolved, however it is dissolved, the imaginal, the supernormal, and the spiritual can come rushing in.” This point will be crucial later on, since our avatars of high weirdness at times display unquestionably pathological symptoms and

88. See David J. Halperin, Seeking Ezekiel: Text and Psychology (Penn State Press, 2010).
excesses, and it is vital to resist the understandable tendency to reduce the complexity of their tales by writing them off as “nothing but” druggies or nuts.

Equally important for our discussion is another consequence of James’ pragmatism, which we might call the “fictionalist” or fabulated character of religious consciousness. James insists that value emerges when our concepts and beliefs engage the sensory, empirical world, and therefore that abstract concepts of incorporeal entities like “God” and “soul” are, in themselves, meaningless or vapid. “Yet strangely enough they have a definite meaning for our practice. We can act as if there were a God; feel as if we were free; consider Nature as if she were full of special designs…”90 As we will see, many gods and monsters lurk in this “as if,” which is really not so far from the science fictional “what if?” This should be no surprise. For though James was attempting to underscore the value of pragmatist criteria, whereby the value of a belief can be judged by the effects it has on life, his “as if” also opens up room for what scholars now recognize as one of the fundamental threads of postmodern religion: the relative unconcern with veracity, and the corresponding willingness and exuberance to invent and inhabit belief structures that are, in origin or form, indistinguishable from fictions.

As we will see, while the imbrication of religious forms and conscious fictions has a long history, it comes to the fore in certain streams of countercultural fabulation that feed directly into the literature and experience of high weirdness, which draws a great deal from popular genres like science fiction and fantasy. Though this turn towards fabulation and “spiritual metafiction” certainly reflects the erosion of absolute truth claims in the west, we distort this development when we reduce it to an irrationalist or nihilistic “anything goes” sensibility. Instead, social agents recognize that fictions can become the site of a creative, self-consciously constructionist

practice—a practice that, in addition, may reveal unintended and tricksy ontological encounters over time. While some of these fabrications originated as manipulative lies or psychotic delusions—as critics of new religious movements would have it—their constructive and often collective characters are often difficult to extricate from a larger constructionist continuum that embraces social experiment, mythic theater, positive thinking, infinite games, and subcultural in-jokes. Beliefs, in this view, are valuable only to the degree they are operationalized; they are not so much “believed” as experimentally “held” as opportunities to produce creative effects in minds, bodies, and social situations.

James already points us in this direction through the first-person language he uses in the citation above. Beliefs not only produce effects for those others who hold them as absolutely true, but can retain a strange efficacy even for those of us that constitute the “we” that remains conscious, like James, of their “as if” status. In this, James was simply paying attention to the creative religious movements of his day: mind cure, New Thought, Christian Science, and other groups and individuals who developed the metaphysical pragmatism that has come down to us today as self-help psychology and the New Age notion that “we create our own reality.” These movements, which all redeploy the arguably “magical” notion that thought itself is causative, very much shaped James’s understanding of psychology and religion alike. His qualified embrace of such popular strategies reminds us of a fundamental bivalence in all accounts of reality: whatever the quality of their propositional content, such accounts are always also symbolic constructs that organize social, cultural, and psychological existence.

One crucial consequence follows from this interlocking field of social realities: all available accounts or scripts become potentially useful in the negotiation of the sorts of extraordinary events that are often considered “religious experiences.” This very much includes

90. James, 55.
scholarly accounts. The best example of this circular influence is none other than William James, whose *Varieties* was arguably designed to escape into popular discourse and authoritatively carve out room for other thinkers and seekers to pursue or shore up their own radical experiences. Along with “teaching both social scientists and religious individuals what it means to have an experience,” Courtney Benders argues, James produced a “pedagogical textual environment in which it is expected that readers will encounter the residue of others’ strongly resonant, singularly authoritative experiences and thereby seek their own.” James’ solitary vision of religious experience and mysticism produced models that were equally available to secular thinkers (psychologists and historians of religion especially), to religious liberals, and to the emerging culture of seekers; as Taves notes, James’ arguments basically gave “carte blanche” to the New Thought movement, with its supernatural vision of positive thinking. The “self religion” of the New Age begins here, with the notion that the source of power lays within the individual. This attitude, in turn, stages the epistemological relativism that, as described by Paul Heelas, remains one of the distinguishing characteristics of the New Age—an arguably vertiginous condition that is “shored up” though the intensified appeal to and reification of individual psychological experiences as furnishing—in contrast to social demands and religious dogmas—the most reliable basis for spiritual authority.

Indeed, James casts such a long shadow over contemporary religious developments, including the emergence of the category “Spiritual But Not Religious,” that the calls to retire him and the *Varieties* from the discourse of religious studies are guaranteed to fail, simply because he has written himself into the deep cultural discourse that in many ways structures modern

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By fashioning concepts with existential appeal and remarkable cultural force, James’ can-do religious pragmatism proved a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Both countercultural spirituality and the experimental psychology that emerged from it can be considered as returns to James. There are many reasons that James was beloved by heads and researchers at the time: his emphasis on personal experience, his openness of mind, and his profound—and profoundly American—pluralism. Another reason was that he was a highly regarded psychologist and philosopher who took drugs and talked about it. Though peyote left him with little more than a hangover, James’ intake of nitrous oxide produced an experience of “infinite rationality” in which all contradictions revealed themselves to be merely differences of degree in the “unbroken continuity” of being. Far from fetishizing this vision, however, James saw it as an expression of the errors of Hegelian philosophy, which too quickly papered over real distinctions in its quest for the synthetic absolute. For James, nitrous intoxication was not an

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92. In his essay in the reader *Religious Experience: A Reader*, Craig Martins closes with an almost strident plea: “While it may be the case that there could be something of value in James’ *Varieties or James’ legacy for religious studies in general, I propose that his canonical status be retired at present; given the ease with which his work is appropriated into what amounts to vulgar rhetoric, it should be relegated to the status of….a historical curiosity that is interesting in so far as it has informed the field of religious studies in the past, but—due to its embedded ideological assumptions—presently not of much use to critical scholarship on religion.” See Craig Martin, “William James in Late Capitalism: Our Religion of the Status Quo,” in Martin, Craig, Russell T McCutcheon, and Smith, *Religious Experience a Reader* (Sheffield; Bristol, CT: Equinox Pub., 2012), 196. Some of Martins’ concern with James clearly lies with how his theories can be and have been appropriated within more “vulgar” discourse, including the discourse of “Spiritual But Not Religious” and the divide so many liberals make between (good) spirituality and (bad) organized religion. The term “vulgar,” however, I read as something of a slip, since the notion of a “vulgar” deployment of an explanatory theory is most solidly welded, within social theory, to two faults: “vulgar materialism” and “vulgar Marxism.” The former sort of “medical materialism” was very popular in the nineteenth century, and forms the principle object of critique in the remarkable opening lecture of James’ *Varieties*—a critique whose continued relevance only underscores how little public discourse has changed when it looks for biological explanations for complex social, psychological, and arguably “spiritual” phenomena. Vulgar Marxism in turn represents those materialist critiques of the existing social order that too crudely insist on the determining force of economic and material “base” over the cultural, intellectual, and psychological world. The slip here, again, is that it is precisely these two discourses—a biologically-based materialism, and a sociological determinism of cultural scripts—that are most often resorted to by thinkers, inside and outside the academy, who are interested in the deconstruction of “religious experience.” Since Martin’s theoretical orientation lies within the Marxist stream of dialectical or cultural materialism, it is ironic that it is precisely the potential “vulgarity” of popular discourses about religious experience that becomes the justification for his own ideological house-cleaning.
avenue toward true revelation but a procedure in the “experimental metaphysics” that his pluralism demanded. Discussing his nitrous intoxication in *Varieties*, James proclaimed that

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. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question -- for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.\(^93\)

This passage frequently appears in the movement texts that establish the “consciousness culture” of the seventies, almost as a sort of mantra of permission. It is crucial for me as well, and for some of the same reasons. For one, James refuses the discourse of pathology while generously holding out the possibility that even highly discontinuous forms of consciousness have their “field of application and adaptation.” In other words, the proper philosophical attitude towards extraordinary altered states is not the deconstruction of their phenomenology so much as an experimentation with possible fields of application. Moreover, James is deliciously ambivalent about the ontology of these matters. While the outlandish “types of mentality” discovered through psychoactive drugs or mystical experiences can certainly be induced through psychobiological triggers—the application of the “requisite stimulus”—they are also, in some

\(^93\) James, 283.
irreducible or at least unavoidable sense, part of the pluralistic manifold of the universe itself. Unusual modes of consciousness are about the world as much if not more than they are about the brain: they perform work, they “open a region.” This is a perfect example of what G. William Barnard called James’ “incomplete constructivism,” a methodological principle that Barnard characterized as “James’ willingness to claim that we discover the world as much as we create our experience of it.”

Finally, as with James’ *Varieties* in general, the passage is also designed to exert a practical effect among readers. James is essentially giving permission to potential radical empiricists, encouraging them to both open up and experiment with their own consciousness and to take reports of other people’s extraordinary experiences, not literally, but seriously. This stance in turn accords with James’ pluralism. In the late essays collected in *The Pluralistic Universe* he argues that, regardless of the ultimate status of the universe as a single entity, its manifold character, which is abundantly evident, argues for a methodological approach which stresses the open-ended, ontologically variable, sometimes contradictory character of our models and descriptions of existence. This philosophical stance—which is really a kind of relational method or ethics more than a systematic structure of propositions—is itself rooted, at least in my view, in James’ embrace of the full gamut of extraordinary and empirically available dimensions of consciousness, forms which are of course always coupled to an environment or “region” that lies beyond the boundaries constructed through their particular activity.

**Illuminating Differences**

James’ pluralism does not deflect the considerable problems that remain with the category of “religious experience.” For some scholars of religion, in fact, the category itself is already too much of a fiction to be of much analytical use, and in fact obfuscates or disguises as much as it reveals or clarifies. (Others, as we will see below, say the same thing about “experience” itself.) The core argument is simple: there is nothing inherently “religious” about any sort of experience. Whatever sort of experience arises—a sense of profound identity with the cosmos, a cognitive fusion of subject and object, an ecstatic immersion in an affectively charged image—it only becomes “religious” after the fact through a process of social, cultural, or linguistic attribution. In James’ own terms, the idea that “religious experience” is a stable, well-bounded category is an “over-belief”: a well-developed and socially established “top down” conceptual framework that relies more on cultural code than empirical encounter. As such, the category of religious experience can be used as a sort of dodge or cover, since the identification of an experience as “religious” immediately throws up a block against rival explanations, especially reductionist accounts based in neuroscience, evolutionary biology, or sociology. As Wayne Proudfoot argued, to characterize any experience as a “religious experience” is to sneak in an explanation under the guise of a mere description.95

Essentialist arguments about religion, definitional or otherwise, are luckily not our concern here. Indeed, many countercultural seekers and consciousness movements—as well as our avatars of high weirdness—should be seen as exploring the unstable zone that is opened up when the panoply of extraordinary experiences available to some humans are detached or ripped

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from the rhetorical and institutional authority of (largely Christian) “religion.” Critics of the concept of “religious experience,” however, are not just concerned with the adjective *religious*; they also have some issues with the noun.

The very notion of experience itself plays a heated role in the contests between faith and freethinking that have been waged during the last few centuries. Proudfoot reaches back to Friedrich Schleiermacher, the German theologian who, in an influential apologetic 1799 text specifically targeting the “cultured despisers” of religion, turned to individual experience as an affective counter to disbelief. Schleiermacher argued that religion is ultimately not a matter of doctrine or ethics, but of feeling and intuition, an experiential site that is, in a proto-Jamesian move, characterized as individual, set apart, and perceptually “immediate.” Schleiermacher’s account, heavily influenced by both the emerging aesthetic spirit of Romanticism and the emotional Pietism of Schleiermacher’s own youth, attempted to respond to Enlightenment critiques, especially those of Kant, by shaping religious sentiment into an unassailable foundation of individual religious life. In the wake of Schleiermacher, Proudfoot argues, religious experience became a site whose appeals to immediacy, ineffability, and affective power acted as smokescreens thrown up against an encroaching skeptical critique represented, in the nineteenth century at least, by Darwin and the “masters of suspicion” Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx. Even as the doctrine, ethics, and historical veracity of the Bible were deconstructed, this story goes, the subjective stream of interiority within the self would safeguard the spirit and those infinite realms whose visceral intuition would enable individuals to, in Olav Hammer’s words now, “peek beyond the edges of the limitations set up by Kant.”

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In the Victorian America of William James, the move away from Christian doctrine towards individual experience took the form of a number of extremely liberal forms of Protestant religiosity—Emersonian Transcendentalism, New Thought, Unitarian Universalism, and other so-called “metaphysical” religions. These developments, which were paralleled in various ways by more bohemian and “esoteric” currents, abandoned many if not most forms and markers of conventional Christian belief and embraced an increasingly pluralist framework that allowed for all manner of individual aesthetic, contemplative, and increasingly psychologized experiences. Though more philosophically sophisticated than most of his brethren, James himself must be considered part of this radical Protestant current, one that the historian Leigh Eric Schmidt argues in *Restless Souls* is exemplified by the emerging spiritual category of the “seeker.” As such, the *Varieties* can and have been read as a defense and extension of a stream of Protestant spirituality that was attempting to navigate an increasingly secular modernity with modes of description and explanation—like psychology—that still might conserve what James called “the immediate content of the religious consciousness.” For these reasons, the *Varieties* is sometimes written off as a kind of crypto-theology of Romantic individualism.

However, a more capacious constructivist account of James would recognize the *Varieties* as responding creatively and productively to the modernist recognition that subjectivity is an active biological, psychological, and social process. As Charles Taylor has shown, the peculiar interiority and reflexivity of the modern subject develops historically, especially through evolving practices of reading, writing, and thinking, including reflexive thoughts about the source of subjectivity itself. Here the materialist imagination helps us: the flux of subjectivity itself can be seen to be molded and shaped by those media, practices, and social networks that compose its context and much of its content. The modern self therefore is not simply an

98. James, 12.
ideology, or a pure effect of social forces, or a tool of the emerging global market, but an emergent or constructed bio-psychological agent operating within a pluralistic matrix composed of these and other fields of force and interaction.

In this sense, James was not simply defending or protecting a trace of religion by storing it in an ideologically bounded rhetoric of ineffable experience. He was also affirming—and in part participating in—the constructionist framework of the modern self as an individuating singularity condemned to find and make itself out of its own contingency in the face of social complexification. In accord with the expansionist pluralism that structured his thought, James also suggested through the Varieties that the ontological questions closed by many materialists were still open, and that a capacious acknowledgement of the wide range of religious experiences suggested that there were modes of phenomenological encounter that demanded a much fuller accounting than they had received.

For James, the supreme example of such an encounter lies in mysticism. James declared that mysticism is the “root and center” of personal religious experience, a phenomenon of “inner authority and illumination” that he characterized according to four conditions that shifted the category, again, away from particular doctrinal positions. The first condition is the ineffability of the experience, its essential resistance to the transparency of language or expression. The second is its noetic quality; though elusive in expression and deeper than discursive reason, the mystical event nonetheless takes the form of insight, a kind of experiential knowledge very much captured by the esoteric term gnosis. Thirdly, James emphasized the usually rapid transience of the experience, and fourthly, its passivity. Though mystical states might be triggered through “preliminary voluntary operations,” the experience itself arises without decision, beyond will. (Here we can recognize the continued operation of Protestant notions of grace.) Though
acknowledging the pathological dimensions of mysticism, James was also keen to purify his category. While James noted that mystics experience many visual and auditory hallucinations, as well as a variety of “automatisms” and other marvels, he made a strong distinction between such phenomena and mysticism as such, whose “essential marker” he believed was the “consciousness of illumination.” There is much that could be said about this term and the religious and philosophical currents of light and fire it implies; here we need simply to note that illumination, unlike realization or insight, implies an external (or deeply unconscious) source, an Outside encountered by consciousness through a medium that radiates through cognition and “visionary” sensation alike. Despite its ancient roots, illumination is also a powerfully modern image; it stands as a principle term for gnosis within modern esoteric currents like Freemasonry, while also invoking, at least by James’ era of filament bulbs, a technical or technological process of incandescence.

By distilling a model of core religious experience from various psychological, cultural or doctrinal contexts, James also created a conceptual template whose referential power that allowed for a new way of comparing different religious and spiritual paths across cultures. As such, James’ portrait of mystical experience proved enormously influential on scholars, psychologists, and spiritual seekers alike. The full flowering of this comparativist drive in the twentieth century appeared as newly refashioned forms of “perennial philosophy,” an understanding of religious and particularly mystical experience that was adopted by many thinkers who held great sway over the psychedelic and spiritual counterculture, including Aldous Huxley, Carl Jung, and Huston Smith. These modern perennialists hold that beneath the world’s various religions and spiritual paths lie a set of generalizable core experiences that are not only independent of creed and cultural location but can be robustly compared with one another in

99. James, n.253, 299.
order to reveal essential and inherent human spiritual potentials. Such notions also became the dominant view among some scholars of religion, especially the Chicago school represented by Mircea Eliade, who himself strongly influenced the operating concepts and exploratory panache of the countercultural religious quest.

Among contemporary scholars of religion, however, the perennialist portrait of a sui generis mysticism, which might stand apart from religious tradition and serve as a point of comparativist contact, has taken a heavy toll. The barrage began in the late seventies, when Steven Katz fundamentally shifted the discussion by contesting the unifying moves of mystical comparativism in the name of cultural difference. Rather than being “immediate,” mystical experience is, like everything else, mediated, especially by language, cognitive templates, and socio-cultural networks of influence and practice. Crucially, Katz was not content to point out the differences in the language crafted by mystics in different cultural locations, but insisted that these differences marked the wet clay of experience itself. Katz’s concern was in some sense conservative, in that he wanted to preserve the autonomy of different mystical traditions by isolating them from one another, such that one could no longer legitimately compare—except by way of contrast—nondual Vedantic accounts with Jewish Kabbalistic ones. For other scholars following in Katz’s wake, the notion of an essentialized and sui generis view of religious or mystical experience was perceived as an act of discursive violence that seemingly unites diverse

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100. Though rooted in antiquity, the modern expression of Perennialism emerges from a variety of currents and conditions, most notably the deepening mutual encounter of world religions in an era of intensified industrial globalism, a process that radically increased the availability of texts and teachers while also staging the emergence of notions of unity or tolerant interdependence that might mitigate the inevitable conflicts. Though the experiences themselves were rarified, possibility of articulating a shared religious experience provided an even more direct discourse of global unity than the logic of tolerance and dialogue associated with ecumenicism.

101. One problem with this account, of course, is how to account for and compare mystical experiences that occur to individuals without religious training. More fundamentally, it is difficult to see how this model could account for the creativity and eccentricity of much mystical discourse, since it is hard to account for the generation of novelty within and around the mystical moment with such a conservative model of cultural programming. This problem becomes much more glaring in a “postmodern” (or what Deleuze would call postsignifying) domain like early
phenomena only through a kind of conceptual colonialism. Instead, these scholars suggest, we need to return to the field of historical differences and to assert the local dominance of culture and language over even the most ineffable and intangible experiences. Some extreme proponents of this view suggest that the whole notion of “experience” adds little to the discussion, since it amounts to little more than a site of inscription for power. As Craig Martin and Russell McCutcheon describe this ultimate Katzian position, “the available language one uses to explain one’s experience may in fact have produced the experience.”

Later we will discover ways in which a more complex form of this recursive, self-programming pattern informs the dynamics of psychedelic experience and the high weirdness of Philip K. Dick in particular. Here however I want to stress its existential inadequacy. For many if not most of us, the notion that our phenomenal experience is simply a product of language would have to be classed as a rather “mean” account of experience, in the sense of being at once stingy and abrasive—two tones that are too often confused, at least in social science, with the tang of truth. It seems self-evident to many of us that the hunches, novel sensations, aesthetic thrills, intuitive convictions, dreamscapes, and other powerful but inchoate experiences that arise within the flux of our lives are ill-served when seen as epiphenomenon of linguistics. As historically constituted identities, we may live in the prison-house of language, but consciousness as a phenomenological field appears to host encounters with all manner of nonlinguistic others: the sunbeams and gamma waves and odors of garbage that leak through the barred windows of talk. Moreover, even if we embrace the cause of reductive physicalist explanations, we may have rigorous reasons for keeping the question of consciousness radically open; indeed, Daniel

seventies America, to say nothing of California. What contexts dictate the fabrication of mystical experience when the maps and models are provisional, mixed and matched, and changing on the fly?

102. Craig Martin and Russell T McCutcheon, eds., Religious Experience a Reader (Sheffield; Bristol, CT: Equinox Pub., 2012), 110.
Dennett to the contrary, many cognitive scientists and philosophers do not believe that consciousness has been—or even can be—adequately explained. I offer nothing like a theory of consciousness here; my point is simply to resist rhetorical and ultimately authoritarian attempts to “close our accounts” with extraordinary experiences by papering over the philosophical and scientific issues that surround the open question of consciousness itself.

Here I cannot resist citing one such attempt, which is particularly relevant to the esoteric formations of extraordinary experience that concern us here. In Claiming Knowledge, a formidable text that extensively criticizes the “strategies of epistemology” employed by modern esotericists from Theosophy to the New Age, Olav Hammer suggests that modern esoteric thinkers who attempt to authorize their world-views generally appeal to one of three rhetorical sources: tradition, science (or “parascience”), and personal experience. Hammer has many insightful things to say about the latter, but in the midst of one argument, he offers up the remarkable assertion that “within the last few decades, the epistemological validity of personal spiritual experience has come to be successfully deconstructed.”

Now, there are different ways to define “epistemological validity” of course. If one considers beliefs or insights that crystalize out of personal spiritual experiences to be purely propositional claims, than their validity might be judged along the strictly rationalist or logical

103. Here we need only mention the persistence of what the cognitive scientist and philosopher David Chalmers has famously dubbed the “hard problem” of consciousness. Chalmers argues that there are many operations of conscious experience that can be explained—the focussing of attention, reports on mental states, acts of discrimination, the control of behavior—but that these are all comparatively “easy problems.” The hard problem is simply why we have phenomenal experience in the first place at all. “Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all?” Chalmers asks. This inner life is the home of what philosophers call qualia—the redness of red, the precise taste of beer, and any number of intimate and extraordinary experiences. To answer the hard problem, Chalmers argues that consciousness may be an irreducible part of the universe, a “panpsychist” take that must be considered a growing minority position. One outcome of this position is epistemic—“qualia” are not simply mirage-like effluvia of the meat machine, but in themselves speak directly to the constitution of reality as, at least partly, a field of experience. In addition, some philosophers and cognitive scientists who have no sympathy with panpsychism suggest, with a certain melancholy, that the human mind is, because of its own embeddedness in consciousness, constitutionally incapable of solving the hard problem. See David Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness”, Journal of Consciousness Studies 2 (3), 1995: 200–219.
lines that, in essence, already undergird a world reframed and reduced to a series of propositions. A stronger claim, worthy of such a triumphant note, would be the explanatory reduction of personal spiritual insights or encounters whose noetic or “gnostic” transcendence of propositional rationality provides more general knowledge about existence itself, including the constitution of the “knower” as she furthers her own ongoing engagement with the conundrum of reality. This is obviously not to argue for the acceptance of every religious or mystical “proposition”; instead, it is to emulate James’ open-minded, pluralist, and ontologically vertiginous approach to features of experience, including beliefs and remarkable phenomenological events, that are poorly treated by considering them only as propositions, and not also as pragmatic forms of life, as productions of immanence, as bootstrapped frameworks of novelty and surprise.

Indeed, to pretend, at our current moment, that we have “successfully deconstructed” anything fundamental about experience, including the sometimes apparently certain insights or radical intuitions of extraordinary experience, is a bit of slight-of-hand every bit as disingenuous as the religionist retreat into a walled-off category of ineffable “religious experience.” Hammer has certainly done his skeptical homework, but there are any number of outsize questions and zones of investigation that must be ignored or rendered cartoonish to make such confident claims.

Recall the basic socio-cognitive argument that, in the wake of some extreme experience, individuals locate the source and meaning of such experiences according to their personal symbolic frameworks, their available language, and their social position vis-a-vis various authorities who legitimate particular explanations. These days, of course, these authorities include those offering reductionist or rationalist accounts, especially popularized scientistic

104. Hammer, 338.
arguments that unquestionably function as social mythologies. But even good scholars like Hammer play the same sort of game: the language of outside authorities, working in other disciplines, is appropriated to fill in the enigmatic gaps of consciousness with explanations whose legitimizing presence serves to shut down alternatives—not only alternative explanations, but alternative ways of engaging and practicing with the residuum of experience.

In other words, just as the ineffability of spiritual experience can be used as a bulwark against sociological and scientific explanations, so too can the mere existence of rationalist explanations, however provisional and philosophically naive, act as a bulwark against the ontological, epistemological, and ethico-pragmatic problems raised by the striking phenomenological events that arise within and sometimes puncture the field of consciousness. James did not just bracket “medical materialism” out of respect for the singularity and actual diversity of experience; he also did it out of his respect for the multiplicity and necessary variability, even contradiction, of all our accounts of experience. “The fact of diverse judgments about religious phenomena is therefore entirely unescapable, whatever may be one's own desire to attain the irreversible.”

Again, this does not mean that the experiential claims of mystics or saints need to be accorded the weight of self-authenticating propositions. James is far too pluralist for that. James assured non-mystics, for example, that they were under no obligation to accept the authority of such experiences. At the same time, however, the noetic events of mysticism also undermine the “pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictator of what we may believe”—a pretension that, among many new atheists and skeptics today, takes the form of an almost religious militancy. James admits how “anarchic” his position sounds. And yet such a radical

105. James, 333.
pluralism is, as we will see in a moment, the necessary precipitate of a commitment to radical empiricism.

**Reconsidering Religious Experience**

In his portrait of religious experience, James erred in excessively isolating individuals “in their solitude” from the surrounding networks of language, cultural influence, and the vagaries of the flesh. Rather than wall off “religious experience” from such socio-cognitive frames of reference, what we need is more nuanced, capacious, and complex accounts that underscore how such experiences are constructed both socially and autopoetically, accounts that moreover do not paper over the unknowns surrounding the nature of extraordinary phenomenological experience.

Here Ann Taves’ recent text *Religious Experience Reconsidered* proves extremely helpful. In a turn both critical of and continuous with James, Taves argues that we need to “disaggregate” the concept of “religious experience” into “experiences deemed religious” (or “mystical,” “visionary,” “spiritual,” etc.). This distinction founds her “building block” approach, which in turn carries forward James’ important distinction between origin and function. In this approach, two crucial moves are identified: one is the initial act of setting aside a certain experience as being worthy of note, and the second is the further elaboration and embedding of this unusual experience into various discursive, symbolic, conceptual, and enacted registers. The first Taves identifies as *ascription*, which assigns qualities to experience in ways that may elude conscious intention, and the second is *attribution*, whereby causal explanations are elaborated to
contain or render experiences meaningful. What results then is a layered and sometimes intense negotiation between attribution and ascription, mediation and a rhetoric of immediacy.

Ascriptions of specialness may take place below the threshold of awareness; when this happens, it tends to make things seem inherently special. People can decide, upon reflection, that things that seem special are more or less special that they initially seemed. In the process of reflection, special things may be caught up in preexisting systems of belief and practice, may generate new or modified beliefs and practices, or may lose their specialness and become ordinary.¹⁰⁶

Taves’ favored term for unusual experiences is “special,” and experiences become special for one of two main reasons: either they seem ideal—a sense of absolute peace, for example—or they are anomalies. Examples of the latter include many of the “building blocks” of high weirdness: hallucinations, near death experiences, alien abductions, apparitions, and oracular dreams.

Since I am particularly interested in this weird stuff here, I prefer to use the term “extraordinary” rather than “special.” For one reason, extraordinary possesses a higher affective charge, one that suggests an overwhelming and unescapable salience rather than the calmer, more cultivated selection of “special” things. On a more literal or etymological level, extraordinary also suggests an event or episode that pops out of the quotidian grind precisely through its novel distinction, statistical or otherwise, from the ordinary run of causality, affect, symbolic consistency, or self-constitution. More than special, extraordinary also locates an event in a threshold of the Outside, and gestures toward an open ontology capable of handling the intense alterity of such “miraculous” or at least deeply peculiar encounters.

¹⁰⁶ Taves, Religious Experience, 162.
Given the dominance of contextualist and historicist models of understanding cultural experience, the constructionist process of attribution does not rock the theoretical boat. Ascription, however, is a subtler operation. Ascription can be seen to happen almost immediately, and this transparency abruptly raises the problem of how, and through what processes, experience is mediated in the first place.

Taves’ term *ascription* is fortuitous here, for it contains within it a scrap of “script,” a term whose polyvalence itself becomes a signature that binds together multiple domains of the scripting process. A script is the material body of writing, in an almost Derridean sense: a network of marks or incised differences that always already implicate and constitute the subject in a differential matrix of signs that severely complicates, without entirely erasing, native perceptions of agency and self-presence. Ascription is always inscription, an iterative riff or repetition on the codes that constitute subjectivity.\(^\text{107}\)

At the same time, if we are to grant any substance at all to extraordinary experience, we need to suggest the dramatic ways and places that such codes bind with phenomenologically meaningful human events. Here, ascription is something more like the script of a play: an already composed text that not only prepares speech acts but the persona who does the speaking. In this sense, scripts are performed, followed, and embodied. Finally, a script is, in coding lingo, a modest program or list of commands that are executed, or “interpreted,” by other programs rather than the computer’s own processor—a “cybernetic” overtone of the scripting process that will become more important down the line.

What comes from all this is a more operationalized image or model of what “cultural influence” amounts to. Many social constructionist accounts offer abstract generalizations about

\(^{107}\) To extend the Derridean theme, a script also refers to a prescription; that is, an inscription that provides access to the *pharmakon*, to the poisons we live through.
experience that give concrete actors little room to maneuver. By insisting on the deployment of the social scientific notion of the *script*, both overt cultural scripts used in attribution and the quasi-unconscious templates of ascription, we focus more tightly on the way various agents read as well as become written or conditioned by localized and often materially inscribed symbolic, narrative, or discursive “texts.” However, the language of script also helps clarify one of the more unusual elements found within seventies spirituality and the psychedelic and occult currents it to some degree rests upon: the intentional and sometimes ludic exploitation of *the scripting process itself*.

To understand the peculiar warp this introduces into the discourse and practice of spirituality, it is helpful to turn to a classic bit of anthropological jargon: the difference between the “emic” or folk discourse of those embedded within a field of interest, and the “etic” or professional discourse of those scholars describing or rendering an explanatory account of the field. What is a “demon” in emic speech might be paired with “hallucination” or “cultural script” in an etic one. The distinction, which seems common-sensical enough, is more squirrelly than it first appears. As a distinction made by scholars, the difference between emic and etic restates a more fundamental division in the field of knowledge: the basic division between subject and object that structures Western knowledge. This dualism, as such, fundamentally structures etic discourse—which, after all, represents the striving for an objective discourse that can both account for and distance itself from more embedded and symbolically overcoded phenomena. The social scientific model of scripting quite clearly belongs to the etic domain of discourse: it is useful for naturalist and functional accounts of phenomena often described by insiders in far more ontologically robust terms, especially regarding extraordinary “religious” experiences. Moreover, the concept of scripting also offers itself not only as a description but as an
explanation along more-or-less scientific lines that build on previous explanatory theories and can to a certain degree can be tested and falsified. At the same time, however, the emic/etic distinction by no means functions “emically,” since many of the religious, esoteric, and indigenous phenomena covered by that term often suggest far more permeable and hybridized membranes between subjects and objects.

Within the milieu of the sixties and early seventies, however, a peculiarly reflexive twist occurred: etic psychological and social scientific concepts and methods became hijacked for experimental, ecstatic, or reflective purposes by the experiencers themselves. In other words, a powerful element of reflexivity or self-reference enters into the emic discourse and practice of extraordinary experience. The clearest example is one of the most dominant operational dicta of psychedelic discourse coming out of the sixties: the notion of “set and setting,” first voiced by Timothy Leary and his co-authors in *The Psychedelic Experience* (1964). “Set” refers to the user’s conscious intention and unconscious dispositions and beliefs, while “setting” refers to the particular cultural and physical environment staging the experience; both are considered to actively shape if not significantly produce the trip.

Here the social and psychological scripting process that as it were brands extraordinary experience by determining its signatures is embraced as a phenomenological engine, a kind of “consciousness hack,” rather than an instrument of impersonal analysis and ontological deflation (although it sometimes serves those purposes as well). In a paradoxical half-turn reminiscent of a Mobius strip, the etic language of scripting thus becomes incorporated into the emic script, in which it is deployed not to sustain the rigid distinction between subject and object, skeptical outsider and naive insiders, but to precisely probe and scramble these distinctions in an empirical test of phenomenological possibility. As such, an in a move that Niklas Luhmann just might
describe as “re-entry,” the fundamental (Western) distinction between subject and object subdivides in turn the object of anthropological knowledge, such that the object circulates both the “folkloric” emic language and the formal discourse of scholarship, destabilizing both discourses as well as the relationship between them.

In a sense, this splice simply demonstrates the degree to which countercultural spirituality, like much of the New Age, is directly indebted in both form and content to the language of psychology. As Hanegraaff and Taves have shown, modern currents of occultism, Theosophy, and the New Age can be seen as liminal zones that mediate between religion and science, saving and transforming elements of the former while appropriating or at least mimicking elements of the latter. James plays a significant role in this process, as his apparently “etic” discourse was, as we have suggested, also designed in part to feed and encourage the meaningful development of religious experience in people’s lives. One of the most important mediating concepts in this process is, of course, the unconscious itself, particularly in its nineteenth century guise of the subconscious or Fredric Myers’ “subliminal” consciousness.

What I want to emphasize here, though, is not the way that psychology can perform a sort of ideological cover for religion, as James’ empirical discourse of “religious experience” arguably did for liberal Protestant subjectivity. Instead, I want to underscore the potentially operational character of such social and psychological knowledge from a practical and emic perspective. What is at issue here is less theory than techne. The reductive psychological model of scripting or “programming” becomes appropriated and adapted by those seeking to explore, intensify, and extract meaning from extraordinary experience itself. As with most reflexive

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operations, the recognition and self-conscious adaptation of the scripting process introduces unique instabilities. These pregnant curiosities will be dealt with as they arise.

**Bottoms Up**

Taves’ distinction between overt cultural processes of attribution and the subtler domain of ascription refines the texture of our accounts of “religious experience.” Nonetheless, these two analytic categories still can be assimilated to the general category of “scripts,” which therefore occupy a liminal space between unconscious operations and intentional or at least socially located hermeneutic work. But as Taves refreshingly insists, scripts do not tell the whole story. Though Taves gives plenty of room for the sort of socio-cognitive accounts of religious experience offered by many contemporary critics of James, she also remains within the expansive and empirical current of the *Varieties* by insisting that, at least some of the time, such extraordinary experiences cannot be reduced to pre-existing cultural scripts. In the face of the more extreme forms of social constructionism represented by Katz, Taves underscores the role that *nonlinguistic forces* play in the production of experience, forces that she associates with embodiment, affect, and, most interestingly, the “unconscious.” Avoiding the usual temptation to insist on binaries when gradients and differential values are more appropriate, she contrasts the “top-down” processes invoked by strict social constructionists from “bottom-up” processes that arise for the individual subject in an unwilled and unpredictable manner that sometimes radically exceeds their cultural expectations. “We need to abandon the constructivist axiom that beliefs and attitudes are always formative of, rather than consequent to, experience in any strong sense,
in favor of a model that takes ‘bottom-up’ or unconscious processing more seriously.” Taking bottom-up processing seriously means, at the very least, taking the body more seriously: its sometimes intense and ecstatic energies and affects, as well as that menagerie of sometimes inordinately bizarre and extraordinary nervous system flowerings we now know, somewhat ineffectively, as “altered states of consciousness.”

By paying attention to bottom-up processes, including potentially traumatic and overwhelming ruptures, scholarly accounts can begin to pay attention to something far too often lost in social constructionist accounts: creative novelty. Scripts are iterative, repetitive in force if not in every detail. By accepting a nonlinguistic unconscious and its potentially disruptive effects, we can “be more sensitive to experiences that are genuinely creative and generate new insights and, in some cases, entirely new meaning systems.” Such novelty was of great importance to James, who looked to the unconscious in part as a source for evolutionarily adaptive concepts, images, and affects. Such an embodied, emergent, and novelty-sensitive approach is particularly appropriate for the milieu of countercultural spirituality, in which individuals relentlessly pursued intense and sometimes shattering hedonic, pharmacological, and otherworldly experiences within often highly informal and eclectic scripting environments that include various (and variously sophisticated) religious, physiological, and social scientific discourses. At the same time, the emerging heterodox and bohemian spiritual marketplace rewarded those “spiritual virtuosi” who offered novel and creative formulations of practice, philosophy and cosmology. For both personal and social reasons, many individuals had a great deal of reasons for pursuing raids on the ineffable, and returning with novel goods, either to

109. Taves, Religious Experience, 93. Taves acknowledges that earlier scholars, especially Wayne Proudfoot, though emphasizing top down, also highlight the bottom-up force of affect: states of arousal to which we ascribe emotional labels that in turn may support religious accounts.

answer their own existential questions, to confirm alternate belief systems, or to assemble such systems and present—or sell—them to others.

This leads, of course, to another sort of reflexive loop between the domains of script and experience: the fact that, in the countercultural spiritual milieu and the New Age that sprouted from it, extraordinary experience itself became a script. For all its relativism and pluralism, the New Age that emerges from the chrysalis of the early seventies can be seen as a consistent religious culture running certain well-defined and programmatic scripts about the desirability, value, narrative form, and practical deployment of personal visionary encounters and other mystic experience.

In her contemporary ethnography The New Metaphysicals, Courtney Bender directly addresses this feature of New Age religiosity, showing in both subtle and sometimes uncharitable ways how social processes and narrative expectations shape and structure the supposedly ineffable singularity of individual mystical experience. Bender performed her fieldwork among New Age practitioners in Cambridge, Mass, which serves as a kind of geographical riposte to James’ individualist and sui generis account of religious experience. Part of her work analyzes the rhetorical templates that organize accounts of spiritual events, showing how the authority of experience is built within narrative, and how, for example, assertions of embodied knowing or emotional intuitions serve to “minimize the role of prior cultural or religious knowledge as well as social ties and relationships that might challenge the claim to a direct, unmediated experience.”

Though I believe Bender over-emphasizes the degree of scripting involved in these experiences, Bender’s attention to the various voicings of these accounts draws attention to an important aspect of their constructed character: their iterative, enigmatic and on-going
production of novelty and potential meaning. “‘Experience’ was not just something that people had,” Bender writes, “but…something that they made again and again.” In essence, my concern is simply with this “made”: what materials and practices it involves, and how it changes over time, and in light of time. Accounting for the open-ended quality of this ongoing construction project, Bender notes how “the open possibility, or even expectation, of interpretive uncertainty drives and galvanizes mystics’ interests in their stories, and is evident within (and expressed in) their attention to the ways that new experiences, events, and ‘insights’ change not only the meaning or past events but, at times, even their status as religious experiences altogether.” In other words, “religious experience” for these children of countercultural spirituality already contains, though its very openness to the future, the possibility of its own collapse.

Though Bender does not make the connection, the role of uncertainty and revision in this ongoing process of interpretation is, at least in some cases, directly related to another important observation she does make about the singularities of New Age accounts of experience. According to Bender, “the study of contemporary spirituality is made more difficult by the fact that the practice and self-understanding of many spiritual practitioners is already engaged at some level with scholarship and scientific research projects.” The re-entry of scholarly discourses into experimental spirituality—typified by James himself—recalls the recursive re-embedding of etic discourse within the emic quest described above, a strange loop that raises a number of fascinating ethical and philosophical problems. These remain largely unaddressed by Bender, for whom this circular appropriation produces “difficulty” because it blurs the clear

111. Bender, 63.
112. Ibid, 87.
113. Ibid, 81.
114. Ibid, 18.
distinction between insider and outsider that sociological discourse, however ethnographically sensitive, depends upon. Saying more than I suspect she intends through her own sticky metaphor, Bender writes that “professors and researchers are caught in particular ways by these imaginative webs.”

I appreciate the granular attention Bender pays to New Age narratology and interpretive strategies, including the open-ended rules that govern the ongoing construction of extraordinary experience. But her account remains blinkered by sociological assumptions that reduce psychological novelty and ignore the nonlinguistic forces Taves highlights above. “While acknowledging that claims of novelty are culturally associated with authenticity within certain contemporary movements,” Taves argues, “this should not preclude the attempt to understand how experiences might arise that are genuinely beyond the grasp of the experiencer.” In other words, the subject is still bound, at least potentially, to a convulsive novelty. However much the language, cultural dispositions, and operative self-concepts of any given subject result from socio-cultural scripts, the phenomenological intensity of extraordinary experience possesses the capacity to jam, interrupt, and radically distort such scripts, a trauma and ecstasy that may suggest meanings in their wake, and that sometimes demand a re-assemblage of fundamental conceptual and affective patterns. Experience has the potential to refract and rupture the constitution of the self at the edge of its own autopoetic boundaries, and to do so in surprising ways—perhaps wonderful, perhaps pathological—that exceed the predictable redundancies of cultural texts and sociological imprints.

Rather than focusing on etic explanations removed from the scene, the tack I will follow sticks closer to the phenomenological accounts, turning our attention to the production and

115. Ibid, 16.
dynamics of such experiences themselves, including their paradoxical and sometimes chaotic instabilities. While we need to track those cultural scripts and frameworks that condition, stage, invite and articulate extraordinary experiences, we must at the same time “be more attentive to situations in which people’s ability to explain breaks down.”

When Taves cites experiences that are “genuinely beyond the grasp of the experiencer,” the key word, for me, is beyond, which I cannot help but link to the related term outside. Both the beyond and the outside are important features of the discourse of the weird, and particularly of H.P. Lovecraft. But the somewhat dramatic or poetic qualities squeezed from these ordinary prepositions should not blind us to their pivotal role in the discussion of extraordinary experience. There are many ways to conceive or think about these prepositions, even as a paradoxical gestures or tokens within discourse that point beyond, or outside, that discourse. Hypostasized into a sort of unbounded boundary that might be diagrammed, the beyond or outside suggests the far side of a sort of membrane that surrounds the autopoetic field of consciousness, a surface that allows impressions from some barred noumenal realm, exterior to our system of representations and even spacetime coordinates, to register themselves. One of Philip K. Dick’s hypnagogic voices speaks of “perturbations in the reality field.”

Whether or not this Beyond is conceived in idealist or materialist terms, as a screen for signatures or an external chaos we organize on the fly, whether its perturbations are read as intelligent signals or iterative irritations, and whether we are dealing with a subconscious that speaks or an unconscious that merely repeats—in all these cases, the erasure of the outside or beyond from our accounts of extraordinary experience, “religious” or otherwise, simply impoverishes those accounts, submitting them to a closed model of circulation with no potential for rupture or rapture. This failing becomes particularly glaring is we are looking at

countercultural spirituality during its weirdest years, when, as we will see, the experimental psychology of altered states exploded in the wake of psychedelia and the discursive domain of available scripts was an unruly, highly eclectic, and heretical assemblage undergoing constant construction.

**The Altered States of America**

In 1979, two Harvard psychology PhDs edited and published a collection of articles, through a mainstream press, entitled *Consciousness: the Brain, States of Awareness, and Alternate Realities*. The title alone captures a perfectly “seventies” triangulation of biology, psychological experience, and esoteric possibilities, and the range of writers represented—neuroscientists, psychiatrists, journalists, scholars of religion, spiritual leaders—reminds us how capacious a tent “consciousness” became in the era. Articles on shamans and schizophrenia, methamphetamine psychosis, daydreaming, Buddhist cosmology, and action potentials not only speak to the varied interests of a public hungry for stories about the experiential self, but to the capacity of consciousness discourse to mediate between enchantment and disenchantment, the subject of spirituality and the object of experimental psychology. And while versions of this alchemical marriage have existed throughout modernity, particularly in esoteric currents that aggressively appropriated science and psychology, it was only in the seventies that this chimera “consciousness”—part spirit, part matter, part process—became a mass portal of mediation between different cultural stories and practices.

In the more “expanded” or populist edges of psychological practice, the floodgates opened to a whole host of occult, mystical, and non-western religious ideas and techniques. At
the same time, an empirical psychological discourse arose as a sort of double that shadowed this spiritual counterculture. For many seekers (including many transpersonal psychologists), this discourse did not so much provide naturalist critique as the operative permission to keep exploring. Experimental psychology therefore had less to do with the confirmation of the metaphysical claims of occultists and mystics that its own commitment to construct knowledge (and pleasure) out of altered states in light of that expanded cultural field.

The curious caduceus of consciousness studies in the seventies, interweaving sacred and materialist discourses, was launched in 1969 with another compendium that, though more hardheaded than *Consciousness*, was also more popular and far more influential. Edited by the experimental psychologist Charles Tart, then at the University of California at Davis, *Altered States of Consciousness* addressed all manner of what I am calling extraordinary experiences: lucid dreams, the cannabis buzz, transcendental meditation, hypnosis, hypnagogia, and exotic phenomena associated with Eastern terms like “zazen” and “samadhi.” Here EEG studies of yogis sat alongside anthropological accounts, therapeutic protocols, and drug experience reports. More important than any single article, however, was the title of the book, which no doubt contributed greatly to its commercial success. The very notion of Altered States of Consciousness (ASC) became a flag to rally around, conjuring up an alternate country of mind, one whose landscape, as varied as California’s, somehow overlaid and interpenetrated the everyday world of “consensus reality,” another, more sociological term that first rose to prominence in the seventies.

With some exceptions, most of the states that the volume drew attention to had been pathologized by psychologists or ignored as “superstitious” holdovers from a less enlightened era. Instead, Tart invited peers to study them using scientific methodology and analysis, but also
to recognize that ASCs possessed qualitative as well as quantitative characteristics that needed to be explored and characterized phenomenologically. As such, Tart’s volume initiated a more-or-less above-ground process that Jorge Ferrer identifies as “inner empiricism,” an attempt to bring a scientific spirit of rigor and analysis to the borderzones of the internal world. Rather than strictly differentiate his volume from the counterculture, Tart recognized that the empirical study of altered states he was calling for followed the rise of psychedelia and the youth movement’s experimental interest in the ASCs associated with sensory awareness, dream interpretation, Asian spiritual practices, and group encounter. As Tart makes clear in his 1971 introduction to the second edition, his work was designed not only to rigorously expand the domains of experimental psychology, but also to explore and speculate in ways that would shed light on the seeker culture, and especially to provide correctives to the “psychopathology” that haunted the spiritual path.

Though alternative terms have since been offered for the twilight zones of the mind, “altered states of consciousness” continues to hold sway, suggesting one way in which today’s far more reductionist and contested consciousness milieu is still shadowed by the seventies moment. By underscoring the multiplicity of such “states,” the term popularized by Tart suggests the centrifugal, differentiating, and open-ended possibilities of the mind. Moreover, the adjective “altered” implies, even when describing states like dreams that arise spontaneously, one of the key implications of the emerging consciousness culture: the capacity to actively cultivate and catalyze these experiences through various practices of body and mind.

That said, there are problems with Tart’s term. Many have pointed out that “altered” suggests that these phenomenological zones are distortions or malformations of a baseline state

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that anchors all the other transformations, rather than experiential domains with their own autonomy and integral character. The anthropologist Michael Winkelman has suggested “alternate” in its place, but either way, we still have, with the term, an essential affirmation of *alterity*. From the perspective of baseline consciousness, many of these states are not just different but *other*, an otherness that often extends to the subject itself. Indeed, part of the value of these states—very much including their entertainment value—is the transformation of the subject’s own conceptual, affective, and sensory set into an unexpected cognitive assemblage with new (and sometimes very weird) affordances. Though what one might call the “gamespace” of such states are generally recognized, organized, and routinized over time, such familiarity itself requires time and practice, and some states—lucid dreams for example, or high-dose psychedelia—rather reliably stage intense novelty. As such, altered states still imply, not just a shift from baseline, but a more existential immersion into alterity itself.

There are problems with “states” as well. Tart’s project partly reflects a cartographic desire to map these nebulous features of consciousness, and maps imply bounded territories. But though qualitative distinctions and autopoetic boundaries are crucial, “states” is arguably too static and imperial for experiences so often characterized precisely by their capacity for deterritorialization. Indeed, the dynamism of so many ASCs is perhaps better diagrammed through a dynamic “phase space” model, such as the three-dimensional “AIM” model offered in a 2001 book by the neuropharmacologist J. Allan Hobson, whose three axes include Activation (high-low), Input-output grating (external or internal information), and Modulation (by chemical amines or cholines).  

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provided by experimental psychologist Roland Fischer in a 1971 diagram published in *Science*, which places an array of states on a continuum of arousal, ranging from ecstatic “ergotropic” intensities to meditative states of “trophotropic” hypoarousal.

In keeping with the tenor of the times, Fischer’s map includes Asian terms—*zazen* and *samadhi* again—whose particular cultural origins are erased through the perennialist presumption that these terms refer to measurable, universally accessible states capable of sitting alongside Goldstein’s “coefficient of variation” (whatever that is) and the usual EEG brain wave ranges. At the same time, Fisher’s diagram cheekily suggests the paradoxical limitation of quantification, and the warping, if not rupturing return of a Beyond. At the bottom of the diagram, Fisher unites the two polar extremes of hyper-aroused ecstatic rapture and tranquil samadhi with an infinity symbol, a mathematical glyph that also functions as a place-holder for a zone of consciousness that, in some distant echo of Cusa, exceeds quantification and mysteriously unites opposites. This, we might say, is what some psychologists of the seventies
came to refer to as the transpersonal dimension of experience, a domain of consciousness no longer framed by the subject.

Of course, things are trickier than implied in Fischer’s or Dobson’s diagram. Even if we acknowledge the problems of perennialism and the adoption of complex cultural practices like “zazen” as if they were relatively discrete “states,” we are still left with the issue of mapping ASCs with any sort of reasonably referential language. As Wouter Hanegraaff laments, there isn’t much agreement among social scientists on how to name or define these states—what an anthropologist calls a “trance,” a psychologist might call “dissociation,” or a scholar of religion “participation mystique.”121 Over forty years after Fisher’s drawing, there is still little agreement on how to study even those ASCs that lend themselves most easily to measurement, to say nothing of the various epistemological problems that are opened up when the measurement and representation of brain states are involved in the constitution of cultural and psychological claims about experience.

Nonetheless, in this text I will continue to use “ASC,” though I would like the acronym to wobble. At times, “states” may become “stages,” and “altered” become “alternate” or even “altering,” all of which suggests more dynamic conditions. The most radical rewrite of the acronym, which I also should resound here, was suggested by anthropologist Robert J. Wallis. Discussing the shamanic recourse to non-ordinary mindstates, Wallis argues that “Adjusted Styles of Communication” is a more anthropologically generous and accurate account of the situation.122 Here modes of experience are considered not so much as discrete internal states, but rather as transitive modes of engaging or interfacing with an Outside whose

own communicational capacities are themselves reconfigured with the emergence of the ASC in question.

Wallis’s suggestion shifts the discussion from the qualitative and quantitative descriptions of the state itself toward both the active agency of the experiencer and the communicative substance or “information” that appears, or calls, at the membrane of experience, where visions, discursive “downloads,” and even encounters with beings take place. Wallis’s term reminds us that, from an anthropological perspective at least, non-ordinary mindstates can also be treated and understood the way that some experiencers themselves treat and understand them: as modes of mediation. As we will see in a later chapter, this expanded notion of consciousness as “media” that can tune into “alternate realities” (and technological media as a portal to such realities as well) is itself part of the Zeitgeist of the early seventies, and significantly informs the practice and rhetoric of high weirdness and the emerging New Age.

By organizing novel assemblages of memory, perception, and symbolic processing, ASCs are not only associated with alternate modes of experience but with the possibility of alternate modes of knowledge about reality (or “alternate realities”) as well. In a 1972 article on the emerging science of ASCs, Tart called this the “state-specific” dimensions of consciousness. There may be certain memory functions or sensory modalities, for example, that are accessible in certain states and not in others. For Tart, this raises the possibility of a “state-specific science.” In such an undertaking, scientists would themselves become proficient in navigating ASCs from the inside; in addition, they would need to articulate, collaboratively and self-critically, new forms of verification, conditions for observation, and even “state-specific” logics.

Whether or not such forms of verification are possible, Tart makes a sharp and intriguing distinction between his state-specific science of ASCs and religion, whose history and
institutions are of course saturated with protocols and methodologies for the production and interpretation of ASCs. Tart notes the similarity between the two endeavors, but with religion, he asserts, “what we have is a state-specific technology operated in the service of an a priori belief system.” In other words, religions contain technical protocols or technologies for producing ASCs, but introduce them along with explicit and even authoritarian interpretive keys or symbolic overlays that confirm and construct those experiences into quasi-empirical confirmations of the symbolic assertions in question. In contrast to the religious technician of the sacred, the inner empiricist is called to emulate the self-critical and always evolving character of science by constantly reexamining his or her own biases, constantly refining models, and submitting findings to a network of like minds.

Tart’s vision raises a number of complex questions about the nature of scientific inquiry and method; here I simply want to note one significant issue. Inner empiricism erodes, necessarily, the crisp distinction, available to baseline consciousness, between subject and object. For some, this passage through the looking glass, which necessitates both an intense reflexivity and a degree of constructionism, means no more science.

The issue is excellently posed by the psychopharmacologist and chemist Alexander Shulgin, whose careful, methodical, and courageous exploration of novel psychedelic inventions makes him one of the twentieth century’s greatest and most influential inner empiricists. While continuing to work for decades in industry, Shulgin and a tight-knit coterie of peers developed a variety of protocols for synthesizing, ingesting, and assessing the effects of newly invented psychoactive compounds, though the most famous Shulgin compound—MDMA, also known as “ecstasy”—actually represented the re-synthesis of a previously-invented compound. In the

introduction to his text *PiHKAL* (1995), written with his wife and fellow explorer Ann, Shulgin reflected on the pressure his manner of research placed on the traditional stance of scientific objectivity. Since what was being tested were unmeasurable psychoactive effects that unfolded only within a person’s inner sensorium, the most basic axiom of pharmacological research—the necessity of blind studies—is, strictly speaking, impossible. For one thing, it is generally quite obvious who did or did not receive the drug. For another thing, it is potentially unethical; the initial risk, Shulgin believed, should be born by the inventor. As Shulgin recognized, his inner empiricism introduced a Mobius-strip like twist in the traditional distinction between the observing experimenter and the subject of research. In his research, “the subject is the observer, and objectivity in the classic sense is impossible.”

Perhaps it was the sense that he had left the confines of “classic” science that also gave Shulgin, who was no New Ager, the courage and space to risk religious or mystical language in the accounts of his experiences, language that, moreover, showed the fingerprint of the seventies consciousness movement. With his coterie, Shulgin developed a rating scale that judged the subjective effects of different doses of a given compounds at a given time. Plus-one (+) indicates that activity is definitely noticeable, but its specific character remains difficult to assess. Plus-three (+++), indicates that the subject is totally involved in the chronological unfolding of an experience whether they want to be or not. But Shulgin also made room for a Plus-four (++++), a category of experience that emerges *beyond* the empirical register of the other categories, “in a class by itself.” A Plus-four is, importantly, no longer a matter of causal attribution. “It is a serene and magical state which is largely independent of what drug is used—if any drug at all…It cannot be repeated at will with a repetition of the experiment. A Plus-four is that one-of-

a-kind, mystical or even religious experience which will never be forgotten. It tends to bring about a deep change of perspective or life-direction in the person who is graced with it.”

Thankfully, it is not my business to assess whether Shulgin’s “report” of Plus-four experiences truly constitute “data,” or whether Tart’s “state-specific science” is an incoherent concept, or whether an authentically self-correcting inner empiricism is, or is not, truly possible. These questions lead us into philosophically vexed, passionately controversial, and acerbic political arguments that, if I may say so, in the end often boil down to a conflict of axiomatic positions that are themselves resting on top of an abyss of contingency. Throughout this work, I will be speaking about empirical and naturalistic attitudes and practices, but I want to insist that I am not interested in assessing the methodological purity or theoretical sophistication of the “inner empiricists” I will be studying.

Similarly, I will not be spending much time adjudicating the more “religious” or occult claims of psychedelic freaks or other fellow travelers in the consciousness movement, or in trying to offer the sorts of robust sociobiological “explanations” for these experiences that constitute, for some anyway, the end of the matter. Instead I am interested in how the essentially secular cartography of “altered states of consciousness,” and the inner empiricism it implied, was operationalized by thinkers, seekers, and explorers working outside—sometimes far outside—conventional scientific institutions. In this process, something like “science”—taken here, more than anything, as a provisional, empirical, and expansively naturalist attitude—was directed towards experimental states of consciousness that, at the same time, were already or were becoming embedded in rival religious, mystical, perennialist, and popularly psychedelic discourse. By emphasizing how these notions were operationalized—that is, articulated self-

125. Shulgin, xxv.
consciously through practice, and therefore productive regardless of their objective merit—we leapfrog over the problem of their truth in light of the reality of their constructive vigor.

**Magnetic Currents**

The intensely hybridized “consciousness culture” of the early seventies, which established an open circuit between altered states and the maps and models different actors use to organize them, did not arise in a void. In fact, it describes only the latest twist in a story of science and spirituality going back at least until the end of the eighteenth century. The current kicks in with the magnetic researches of Anton Mesmer and the more sedate hypnotic practices associated with his student Puységur, practices which opened up access a strange new continent within (and beyond) the mind. Throughout the long and tangled history that followed, which included the popular rise of stage-show mesmerism and the Spiritualist seance, various twilight states of consciousness were triggered, probed, and identified in the various names of naturalism, spiritism, and entertainment alike. Throughout this long and highly contested encounter with the far side of consciousness, the fluctuating boundaries between skepticism and faith, physiology and psychology, and psychology and the occult were regularly redefined and reframed.

For example, addressing the rise of physiological analyses of mediums that came to prominence in the 1880’s, Anne Taves shows how neurologists like George Beard helped define their own emerging profession through a critique of Spiritualism that divided the phenomenon of mediumship into valid and invalid objects of study. “Trance” was a physiological if pathological fact, while clairvoyance was nonsense. However, rather than disappearing, this rejected remainder—the second sight—simply migrated into the emerging world of the “occult.” By the
end of the century, psychological thinkers like James, Théodore Flournoy, and Frederic Myers, who worked under the aegis of the Society of Psychical Research, had embraced the capacious concept of the “subconscious” in order to hold space for the varied phenomena of consciousness reported by mystics and psycho-physicists alike. As such, the subconscious became what Taves calls a “mediating” concept, an “open” concept that allowed for interdisciplinary exchanges and ontological ambiguities. Taking a page from Myers’s notion of the “subliminal,” James suggested that the vast underbelly of consciousness is itself, at least potentially, linked to more supernatural and even divine possibilities.

The occult possibilities of extraordinary experiences came into their own in the latter half of the nineteenth century, which was a particularly transformative era in the western history of esotericism. Though the term gnosis has only become a central part of esoteric discourse in the twentieth century, it remains the best word to characterize the extraordinary noetic and visionary experiences—often brought on by specific psychophysiological techniques—that have been described and proscribed in esoteric and mystical texts since antiquity. By way of example, Hanegraaff points out that the ancient hermetic writings, whose rediscovery helped catalyze the emergence of modern esotericism in the Renaissance, continuously refer to “specific bodily conditions combined with unusual states of consciousness.” In addition to being anomalous—notice Hanegraaff’s dependence on the term “unusual”—these states of consciousness are historically as well as psychologically significant.

Indeed, Hanegraaff places gnosis alongside faith and reason as one of the three foundations of knowledge in the West. In the early modern period, he explains, these foundations were often in harmony, with mystic illumination crowning the valid claims of

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religion and science, and occult practices like alchemy and astrology inextricably interweaving elements that today we would disaggregate into “science” and “superstition.” In the late nineteenth century, which saw a highly influential “occult revival” and the esoteric beginnings of the New Age, the appeal to gnosis becomes more central to esoteric writers and practitioners, a shift that itself speaks to the changing role that “experience” itself played as a bulwark against an increasingly disenchanted world. In the late nineteenth century, whose own “occult revival” was marked by Theosophy, Eliphas Levi, the Order of the Golden Dawn, Symbolism, and emerging Western forms of yoga and sexual magic, esoteric currents increasingly casts themselves as “countercultures” providing an experiential alternative to the rationalism or dogma pushed by reason and faith.

At the same time, many if not most esotericists and occult thinkers began appropriating, engaging, and parasitizing aspects of science—drawn from physics, biology, and psychology—in a more or less conscious attempt to mediate between an emerging naturalist order and a continued spiritual or transcendental current of extraordinary experience. As such, esotericists used science as both a foil and a base of support, at once a source of naturalistic confirmation of belief and a more ambivalent indication that the holistic integration of religion and science has yet to arrive—or, better yet, could only be achieved through the development of the esoteric current in question. Though it is hard for us to recognize today, the seances of Spiritualism were considered by many to offer empirical proof and energetic confirmation of the capacity of altered states to tune into reality of spirits. Another crucial example here is Madame Blavatsky, the co-founder of Theosophy, whose vision of cosmic “evolution” offered an esoteric rejoinder to
Darwin, and whose texts hitched various occult entities—the Fifth Element, the Akasha, the anima mundi, etc.—onto the now-discredited concept of the interstellar luminiferous ether.  

In *Claiming Knowledge*, Olav Hammer frames modern esotericism as a paradoxical product of post-Enlightenment in that “it rests on the very pillars of secularization that it overtly rejects: anti-Christian rhetoric, confidence in science, the unproblematic adoption of experience as a litmus test of true faith.” In this light, his text offers an extensive critique of the esoteric turn to science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a source of legitimation. Most esotericists, he writes, understand “science” as “the body of statements, the terminology and/or the technical applications of science.” Unfortunately, this largely ignores what Hammer and others argue is the most crucial characteristic of science: its method of inquiry. Defining this method as “intersubjective, repeatable, and error-correcting,” Hammer cites Carl Sagan: “the method of science, as stodgy and grumpy as it may seem, is far more important than the findings of science.” Although studies of science in the wake of Thomas Kuhn have significantly qualified Hammer’s idealized Popperian view of scientific progress (especially in regard to the concrete practice of falsification), the scientific method remains intrinsically open, self-correcting, and essentially provisional. And it is this method, Hammer states, that one “rarely if ever finds in Esoteric movement texts.”

Historically speaking, Hammer’s claim is not entirely convincing. One of the most influential manifestations of esotericism in the immediate wake of Theosophy was the “Scientific

129. Hammer, 322.
130. Hammer, 204.
132. Hammer, 204.
Illuminism” of the notorious occultist Aleister Crowley. Crowley cut his magical teeth with the floridly esoteric Order of the Golden Dawn, but he was also heavily influenced by William James and experimental psychology, and the motto of his magical order the A.’.A.’, founded in 1907, was “The Method of Science, the Aim of Religion.” On the surface, this is not terribly far from William Q. Judge’s roughly contemporaneous claim that Theosophy was a “scientific religion and a religious science.”133 But there is an important difference between these claims. Crowley believed that it was possible to base an experiential spiritual school like the A.’.A.’. not on theory but on “practice and methods.”134 This pragmatic methodology was, he claimed, sufficient to achieve Illumination, or “Spiritual Experience.”

As a methodology, of course, this does not resemble normative applications of scientific method—as with Shulgin’s mysterious chemicals, “results” imply an ineradicable subjectivity that challenges notions of repeatability falsification. Nonetheless, Crowley’s invocation of “practice and methods,” and his sometimes highly reductionist neurological language—he once referred to the dark spirits of Goetia as “portions of the human brain”—represent a reflexive, pragmatic, and quasi-naturalistic attitude toward esoteric claims and evidence, and stands as one of the earliest articulations of an esoteric inner empiricism. We will return to Crowley’s Scientific Illuminism later in this book, as he cast a long shadow over the early seventies.

Overall Hammer’s claim is true: most esotericists and occultists in the twentieth century turned to science for its language and the metaphysical wiggle-room or the resonance afforded by its most cosmic and outlandish concepts. This helps us understand one of the unique features of the seventies, when some seekers and experimenters, probing a multi-dimensional spectrum of ASCs that included mystical experience, psychedelics, eros, and the paranormal, brought

133. Cited in Hammer, 222.
something of science’s “intersubjective, repeatable, and error-correcting” attitude to their explorations. I want to insist that, again, I am more interested in this attitude than in adjudicating the adequacy of these attempts from some academic position as a gate-keeper of authentic science. Such policing functions are not, in my opinion, a particularly worthy or noble goal for a historian of religion, despite the righteousness with which it is frequently deployed. Instead, I am interested in how this loosely “skeptical” attitude, which translates into concrete practice and concepts about practice, transforms the fundamental nature and meaning of what a comparativist like James would identify as a religious or mystical experience. This seems to me to be of great significance, even if the “inner empiricism” of the seventies was rarely rigorous, and generally fell short of even Tart’s somewhat unclear notion of “state-specific science.” That said, it is crucial to identify a current of experimental, naturalistic, or skeptical consciousness culture whose discourse and practices needs to be distinguished from the more devotional or obscurantist ideas found among followers of Oriental mysticism or the various new religious movements of the era.

The Third Great Awakening—and the spiritual marketplace of books, lectures, and spiritual centers that supported it—opened up a Pandora’s box of religious or spiritual practices. At the same time, many of these practices were disaggregated from traditional texts or practice forms and reframed and recombined along more informal, secular, and sometimes hedonistic lines. Rituals became practices, and practices protocols. As a paradigmatic example, one might look at *Mind Games: The Guide to Inner Space*, a popular 1972 publication issued by the psychologist Robert Masters and Jean Houston, who had already made an important early intervention into consciousness movement with their Jamesian 1966 text *The Varieties of*  

Psychedelic Experience. Mind Games presented a host of spiritual and psychological practices, including enhanced sensory awareness, self-initiated trance-induction, meditation, dreamwork, fasting, music, chant, and intensified imagination. David Toolan, comparing the text to Patanjali and Ignatius of Loyola’s Spiritual Exercises, described it as “a ritual manual and an encyclopedia of spiritual disciplines, much as if Mircea Eliade’s Patterns of Comparative Religion were translated into a ‘how to’ book.” By reframing the spirit as “mind,” and religion as “games,” Masters and Houston helped transform spiritual disciplines into what George Leonard would identify as “methods and tools” of human potential.

The notion of “human potential” played a key role in the secularization or operationalizing of extraordinary mind states in the seventies. We owe the concept to Aldous Huxley, whose 1960 lecture on untapped “human potentialities” greatly impressed Richard Price and Michael Murphy, who would go on to found the Esalen Institute, a veritable cornucopia of extraordinary experience and consciousness hacking. There Huxley’s belief in transhuman possibilities would merge with the humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow’s influential notion of “peak experiences”—experiences that were not only beyond the normal run of a person’s psychological life, but possessed the enormous transformative potentials that Huxley invoked.

Initially, most Esalen workshops were led by intellectuals like Maslow or Gregory Bateson, but within a few years after its founding in 1962, the offerings had largely shifted towards the production of extraordinary experience: the terrors of encounter groups, the Freudian Zen of gestalt, tai chi, yoga, art, meditation, and, tucked away in the background, psychedelics. Most of these practices were deeply psychologized, which placed their catalyzed states on more or less the same plane of immanence as the techniques that produced them. At the same time,

135. David Toolan, Facing West from California’s Shores: A Jesuit’s Journey into New Age Consciousness (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 81.
many of these experiences were functionally “transcendent” in their creative, uncanny, ecstatic and sometimes traumatic encounter with the Outside. For all its California hedonism, immanence alone would not do. As Murphy himself said, “Only practices that enhance our psychological and somatic functioning while making special ‘drafts upon the Unseen’ are likely to facilitate a balanced growth of our greater capacities.”

In his history of the institute, Jeffrey Kripal identifies the psychological current of Esalen as the confluence of two lineages, a “psychoanalytic stream” that involved occult and erotic understandings of embodied energy, and a “gestalt stream” that focused on the construction of reality and the awakening of consciousness. For Kripal, the dynamic intertwining of these two streams helped forge an ecstatic and expanded culture of the bodymind that, fired up with inspirations and yogic traditions from Asia, becomes a kind of American Tantra. Here Tantra does not simply to refer to erotic ritual or the raising of sexual energies—though these energies are crucial sources within the counterculture. For Kripal, American tantra is a “psychedelic orientalism” in which “the American visionaries saw their own altered states accurately, fantastically reflected in the mythologies and mystical systems of Asia.”

Though such reflections and appropriations worry many scholars today, in part because of the comparative operations they rest upon, we might consider such “dangers” simply as indices of the fundamental heterodoxy of the Esalen mission. For as Kripal points out, the Asian tantric traditions being sampled and remixed were in many ways already heretical vis-a-vis their own cultural locations, especially in Hindu India. That said, Esalen was also defined by its

137. Ibid, 138.
139. Indeed, the extreme psycho-spiritual bodymind practices of Esalen in the early seventies was nowhere better mirrored than at the tantric rascal Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh’s ashram in Pune, India. For Rajneesh’s debt to the
quite intentional rejection of the formal structure of a guru-led ashram. A deeply devoted meditator, Murphy had spent some of the fifties at Auroville, Sri Aurobindo’s ashram in Tamil Nadu, which ultimately convinced Murphy that gurus were not the path. At Esalen, then, there was no single authoritative ideology, but a constant conversation and often explicit rivalry of views about method and theory. As Murphy often put it, “no one captures the flag.” In this game, the secular orientation of psychology proved a perfect nondogmatic cover for the mediating space of practices that Esalen had created between the academic world of professional research worlds and the romantic and phenomenological wilderness of the counterculture.

In the game of not-capture-the-flag, authority is, ideally, distributed through a mobile assemblage of focii rather than congealed into an institutional hierarchy. While this ideal may not reflect the reality of Esalen’s institutional politics, it does express the increasingly relativistic, pluralistic, and multi-perspectival turn that comes to characterize the New Age and postmodernism alike. This organizational pattern announces the paradigm of the network that begins to emerge in the seventies, but here I wanted to emphasize that this open-ended (and deeply Jamesian) approach is articulated partly through the analogy and practical distribution of psychological techniques, spiritual regimens, and other praxis-oriented “mind tools.” The reframing of spiritual practices as “tools” is part of an expansive postwar humanist technical culture that embraced both the mainstream consumer culture, which multiplied gadgets throughout domestic and leisure space, and the counterculture, in which Stewart Brand’s Whole Earth Catalog remains paradigmatic, as well as the reframing of religious traditions as containers of mind tools, “techniques of ecstasy” and other discrete practices of altering consciousness or divining information.

There are many consequences of this shift toward tools. In *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, Fred Turner traces Brand’s hippie technophilia use to the cultural politics of *Wired*, and the growth of the libertarian neo-liberalism that Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron refers to as the “California ideology.” The specific notion of psycho-spiritual tools also fits all too comfortably into an increasingly commercialized spiritual marketplace, where discrete packages of appropriated material are sold and where expensive retreat centers like Esalen are all too easily seen as manifestations of “spiritual privilege.”

However, economic questions only get us so far towards an understanding of the “cafeteria religion” of contemporary syncretism, in which seekers pick and choose from a myriad of options, paths, teachers, texts, and systems. Addressing such “mystical cosmopolitanism,” for example, Courtney Bender argues that the “the recent focus on contemporary spirituality’s connection to consumerism (in the ‘spiritual marketplace’) as the engine of appropriation only gets us so far toward understanding the logic of spiritual borrowing.” By giving into the imperialism of the marketplace as the supreme conceptual fetish, scholars of religion obscure non-market factors and create too sharp a divide between contemporary conditions and the eclectic syncretism, romantic othering, and cultural appropriations that characterize religion in earlier eras. Indeed the notion of “cafeteria religion” is perhaps better thought of as “tool-box” religion. Here a variety of discrete practices, gods, artifacts, and micro-belief systems are collected together or assembled into novel configurations in order to achieve productive and transformative effects, rather than the pure consumption implied in the cafeteria analogy. Spirit, here, is not found in the cafeteria but in the workshop.

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141. Bender, 154.
The notion of a “tool-box religion,” in which techniques for navigating or “hacking” consciousness are drawn from a variety of sources, also helps us bang together a connection between the countercultural and New Age framework of spiritual tools to Michel Foucault’s notion of the “technologies of self.” An important conceptual operator for this project, Foucault’s notion emerged is his late career against the backdrop of his earlier and vastly influential theories of power. Throughout the course his writings, Foucault had for the most part gave pride of place to what he called “technologies of domination”: concrete institutions and discourses (or, earlier, “epistemes”) which deterministically constitute the subject through various assemblages of power, knowledge, and biopolitical regulation.

In the mid-seventies, when he began spending a significant amount of time in California, Foucault embarked on a history of sexuality that in turn staged a significant turn in his thought, away from structures of domination and towards an analysis of those methods and practices whereby individuals actively participate in their own subjectification. Foucault focused his research in late Antiquity, and particularly in the tension between the Stoic “care of the self” and a subsequent Christian “truth game” that subjugated the self in light of a confessional logic of transcendence and juridical asceticism. In both cases, Foucault insisted that knowledge and belief are not separate from specific practices or “technologies of the self,” which he defined as those “techniques that permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner
to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power.”

Such techniques do not only help engender the subject; they also contribute to what Foucault calls “forms of experience.” Though the postwar French analysis of the subject that Foucault participated in had moved decisively away from phenomenology, the study of sexuality and the “aesthetics of existence” encouraged Foucault to subject the events of experience themselves to his archaeological method. In order to avoid producing yet another determinist deconstruction of consciousness, Foucault had to establish an operator or singularity that, without invoking phenomenology, remained “irreducible” to “the concrete determinations of social existence.” For Foucault, this operator was thought itself. “There is no experience that is not a way of thinking and cannot be analyzed from the viewpoint of the history of thought.” Indeed, experience as such only steps away from the matrix of social determinations by way of “the forms, transformations, and events of thought.”

As such, thought can be conceived, not as abstract cognition, but as a framework of subjectification that runs on three axes, each of which imply articulation, decision, and what Niklas Luhmann would call the “cut” an observer makes in order to establish distinctions. These axes consist of “questions of the true and false, of the acceptance or rejection of rules, and of relations to the self and others.” While these three axes are of course intimately intertwined with various social, institutional, and discursive assemblages, Foucault’s historical identification of “technologies of the self” suggests that the subject is, to use a contemporary term, also able to

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143. “Preface,” in Ethics, 201.
144. Ibid, 201.
hack itself, to mobilize the reflexivity of thought by putting its own contingent determinations to the test in an iterative process of training or learning.

For a historian of religions, Foucault’s notion of “technologies of the self” provides an exceptionally tempting tool of analysis. In You Must Change Your Life, to take a recent example, Peter Sloterdijk modifies Foucault’s concept into the notion of “anthropo-technics.” Essentially, by anthropo-technics, Sloterdijk means practices that, over time, transform the practitioner in an iterative fashion. “Practice is defined here as any operation that improves the actor’s qualification for the next performance of the same operation, whether it is declared as practice or not.”¹⁴⁵ Though Sloterdijk designed his concept to cover regimens we now recognize as secular, such as athletics and acrobatics, he uses it principally to revise what we mean by religion. Provocatively, Sloterdijk argues that religions as such don’t exist; what exists “are variously misinterpreted anthropo-technic practice systems and sets of rules for molding one’s inward and outward behavior.”¹⁴⁶ These “spiritual regimens,” which the cybernetically-canny Sloterdijk also characterizes as forms of feedback, help humans construct and maintain “symbolic immune systems and ritual shells.”¹⁴⁷ In so doing, they also shape, stimulate, and articulate the varieties of religious experience. These include, again according to Foucault, transhuman models of perfection, hedonic goals of happiness, as well as the potentially paranormal experience of “supernatural power.”

In his late studies of antiquity, Foucault pays little attention to hermeticism, mystery religions, or Gnosticism—currents whose visionary and “mystical” anthropo-technics would of course seed and inspire the various revivals of occult thought and practice in the modern era. That said, in a 1982 lecture at the College de France, Foucault did offer some intriguing

¹⁴⁵. Sloterdijk, 4.
¹⁴⁶. Ibid, 84.
comments on the Neoplatonic tradition. Foucault writes that the Neoplatonic “care of the self” finds realization in self-knowledge, but specifically in a knowledge of the self as divine. As such, this particular technology of the self becomes an access point to a more mystical apprehension of sacred reality. Neoplatonism’s anthropotechnics become therefore “the leaven, the soil, the climate” for a range of spiritual movements, including Gnosticism. This is all well known. But Foucault also makes an intriguing observation about Neoplatonism’s “double game,” which plays spiritual experience and the question of knowledge off against one another. The double game is effected by “continuously and repeatedly raising the question of the necessary conditions of spirituality for access to truth and, at the same time, reabsorbing spirituality in the movement of knowledge alone, of knowledge of the self, of the divine, and of essences.”

As we will see, such a game can be played seriously, but it can also be played skeptically, or perhaps playfully, creating a ludic tension between esoteric experience and “knowledge alone.”

However you parse his biography, Foucault’s “late turn” cannot be seen apart from his own exploration of altered states of consciousness, or what he famously termed “limit experiences,” a number of which he first underwent while living and working in California in the late seventies and early eighties. Here Foucault dropped LSD for the first time and explored the “creation of new pleasures” through “postsexual” S&M practices, which included the inculcation of extreme, drug-fueled hedonic states. In visits to Japan, Foucault also submitted in the disciplinary rigors of Zen meditation in order to understand how its “driving forces and rules” eroded individuality within the subject; the philosopher declared the practice simply as “very hard.”

While Foucault insisted at the time that his new object of study was precisely not the

147. Ibid, 3.
“California cult of the self,” I believe he was rejecting the essentialism and rhetoric of authenticity that marked so many New Age and sexual-identity currents, rather than those California technologies of the self whose operations and results embraced more critical, hedonic, and inventive experiences.¹⁵⁰ Something like this is certainly the case in his 1984 interview with the Advocate, wherein he criticizes the personal quest for sexual identity and the “liberation” of desire, and offers instead a discourse of erotic “innovations,” “good drugs,” and friendship through pleasure.¹⁵¹

Foucault’s critique of the California self, like many of the attacks on the narcissism of the age, reflected the assimilationist or normalizing rhetoric of these movements more than the wilder facts on the ground. To discover a more intimate resonance between Foucault’s experimentalism and the culture of high weirdness, we need only turn to his introduction to the second volume of The History of Sexuality, where Foucault discusses his own obstinate curiosity. This is “not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself.” While such limit experiences were hardly the dominant expression of countercultural psychedelia or the human potential movement, they do remind us that, as we will see, LSD and other consciousness practices directed attention towards the games of truth that constitute the subject. Foucault is not speaking of himself alone when he artfully summarizes the desperation as well as the desire that opened up the Pandora’s box of altered states for some: “There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think

¹⁵⁰ See Michel Foucault, “On the Geneology of Ethics,” Ethics, op. cit., 271. For further reflections on Foucault in California, see Josef Chytry, Mountain of Paradise: Reflections on the Emergence of Greater California As a World Civilization, (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 110-118.
differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one
is to go on looking and reflecting at all."\textsuperscript{152} And one of those times, clearly, was the seventies.

\textsuperscript{152} Foucault, Michel. \textit{The Use of Pleasure}. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, 8.
CHAPTER TWO. MAGIC MOLECULES:

THE BIRTH OF PSYCHEDELIC OCCULTURE

In 1975, in an attempt to clear the air from the miasma of Watergate, the Senate tasked the Church Committee with investigating America’s major intelligence agencies—the CIA, the FBI, and the then rather faceless NSA—for evidence of illegal activities and other abuses of power. Amongst a treasure trove of malfeasance, the Committee revealed the existence of a long-running CIA program known as Project MKUltra, a remarkable human research operation whose *raison d’etre* lies encoded in the program’s name—Mind Kontrol, ultra-size.

The project started in the early 1950s, when fears of Chinese Communist “brainwashing” techniques were running high. Whatever actuality they reflected, this discourse indicated a significant shift in the postwar mindscape: the notion that intimate and significant modes of thought and awareness could be directly controlled or created using new technologies, drugs, and psychological techniques. MKUltra explored the radical modification of human thought and behavior through a variety of extreme, baroque, and sometimes impressively nefarious means that many of us would classify as forms of abuse and torture.

But these means also involved strategies that targeted the twilight zones of human consciousness, which in some fundamental sense were operationalized in the postwar theater of
political, ideological, and corporate struggle. Subjects were subjected to sensory deprivation, hypnosis, and strategies of isolation, as well as a wide range of drugs, some of which were used, without knowledge or consent, on military personnel, mental patients, and even the hapless johns in a San Francisco brothel. Among these chemicals, which included heroin, amphetamine, mescaline, and sodium pentothal, was a newcomer to our planet’s extravagant pharmacy of psychoactive agents: lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD-25.

The story of LSD is a paradigmatic narrative of the postwar world, one that links together, in an almost synchronistic web, discourses and practices related to madness, mysticism, mind control, and revolutionary ontology. Though other psychedelics will play an important role in the second half of this book, LSD’s mimetic drift helps set in motion one of the key dialectics of weirdness: the tension between religion and secular accounts of extraordinary experiences that, at the very least, resemble the sorts of visionary journeys and noetic insights recorded and elaborated within the discourse of religious experience, mysticism, and shamanism. After all, the acid experience itself gave immediate evidence of the transrational capacities of consciousness, states that might range from a sense of unitive vibratory fusion with the cosmos, to a mythopoetic explosion of visionary symbolism, to a perceptual merry-go-round of trickster synchronicities and paranormal possibilities. Acid undermined the instrumental schemes of individual agency, and it returned many users to baseline with a growing taste for loosely associational thinking, ecstatic states, and the resplendent overtones of sensory experience. As we will see in the next section, the use of LSD and other drugs also encouraged a kaleidoscopic engagement with spiritual practices, metaphysical systems, and occult arcana, all of which came to supplement, refract, and to some degree substitute for acid’s unsustainable noetic raptures.
Though elements of these esoteric discourses are apparent in Albert Hoffman’s account of his first LSD trip, LSD nonetheless arrived in the world more or less as a blank slate, springing like Athena from the modernist brow of European industrial chemistry. Unlike organic compounds with similar phenomenological properties known at the time, like the mescaline found in peyote, LSD had no recognized ethnobotanical context. As such, its early history provides a clear reminder of the complex imbrication of culture and chemistry in the construction of the effects—and therefore the meaning—of psychoactive drugs. Sandoz originally marketed the substance to psychiatrists under the trade name Delysid, which was advertised as a “psychotomimetic” capable of unleashing unconscious materials in patients and producing a “model psychosis.” Importantly, this first “frame” of LSD stressed its mimetic qualities—LSD was valued for its capacity to produce similitudes so intense they became simulacra.

As such, when the UCLA clinician Sidney Cohen first took the compound in 1955, he expected a phantasmagoric horror show. Instead, he discovered “a majestic, sunlit, heavenly inner quietude”—a discovery that helped inspire another ten years in LSD therapy. These sorts of sublime peaks and noetic insights complicated the picture generated by acid’s early clinical trials, not to mention MKUltra’s clandestine experiments in lie detection and cognitive modification. The personal experience of Cohen and other fifties researchers, in other words, set in motion a contest over the functional characterization, pharmaceutical profile, and phenomenological understanding of LSD. Indeed, within a few decades of its discovery, the drug

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153. The story of LSD’s discovery by Albert Hoffman at the Sandoz Laboratory in Switzerland has been told too many times to bear repeating. Within this vast literature, the two best book-length accounts of LSD remain Jay Stevens, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987); and Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties, and beyond* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992).
would come to be seen, not only as a simulator of psychosis, but as a facilitator of psychoanalytic insight, a cure for alcoholism, a truth serum, a liberating agent of revolution, a repressive tool of counter-revolution, an aphrodisiac, a cognitive amplifier, a creativity booster, a holy sacrament, a profane sacrament, and a compound with no “currently accepted medical use” and “a high potential for abuse” (the definitions of Schedule One substances in the United States).

With its conceptual and phenomenological plasticity, LSD gives clear evidence of a conditions that in some sense implicates all drugs, but especially psychoactive ones: what is the relationship between the material and its particular effects in any given psyche or cultural group? The usual approach to such a question is to draw a distinction between a drug’s hard-wired pharmacological effects or potentials and the various ways that different human agents or institutions construct or frame those effects. This may not be the most helpful ontological template, however. In a remarkable article on the difference between methadone and heroin, subtitled “Six Effects in Search of a Substance,” the science studies scholar Emilie Gomart questions “the assumption that drugs are non-temporal [and] un-changing while human uses and strivings are historical and temporary.”\(^\text{155}\) Gomart compared two different studies, one in France and another in America, that looked at methadone’s effects on heroin addicts. The studies offered quite different portraits of methadone, and Gomart wanted to understand how this difference emerged from the two studies.

There are two conventional ways of considering this difference. The naturalist perspective appears the most like “common sense”—in this view, one or perhaps both studies have misrepresented an unchanging historical substance. The “social constructionist” position,

\(^\text{155}\) Emilie Gomart, “Methadone: Six Effects in Search of a Substance,” *Social Studies of Science* vol. 32 no. 1, 94.
now de rigueur for much of the humanities and social sciences, would insist instead that different cultural perspectives and interpretive frameworks had constructed the same substance in various ways, even in the supposedly rigorous scene of science. Both positions, Gomart argues, rest on the idea that the substance in question is without history, and that its inherent properties should be more or less comprehensible through either good science or good stories.

Rather than talk about what a drug “is,” Gomart instead employs the actor-network theories developed by Bruno Latour and other science scholars in order to portray how different research methodologies and laboratory practices actually constitute the drug by staging its emergence or performance on different sorts of historical stages. The point is not to essentialize the drug, which Gomart considers a kind of “entity” with its own sort of open-ended agency, but to see the compound as a co-operative partner in the collaborative production of events or effects.

This approach draws attention to what Gomart calls the “set-up” or dispositif, a term that Michel Foucault adapted from film theory in order to refer to the implicit and often hidden apparatus of institutional practices and conceptual operators which are coextensive with the control of living beings and the social production of knowledge. Agamben, for example, has defined the dispositif as “literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings.”

With this mediating dispositif in mind, as Gomart puts it, the focus of analysis “switches to these actions that localize, temporize, embody, subject, ‘frame’ the entities in question.” In this sense, a drug’s effects precede their causes; it is only after the fact that the cause of an event—the drug, or its social construction—is selected as a causal agent out of the

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156. Giorgio Agamben, "What is an Apparatus?" in What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 14.
multiple points of activity that surround and implicate the drugs’s register of effects. This reverse causality is not unrelated to the question of extraordinary experience posed in the previous chapter, where events are attached to causes—mystical or otherwise—through a constructive process that follows their punctuation of individual experience.

While her study is restricted to the laboratory, Gomart’s approach is particularly amenable to LSD and other psychedelics, whose famously wide-ranging effects have long been attributed not to the “drug in-itself” so much as the matrix of expectation, protocol, and environment that stage the emergence of its effects for any given voyage. This matrix has been enshrined in psychedelic lore—therapeutic and countercultural alike—in Timothy Leary’s famous notion of “set and setting,” a notion that remains perhaps the most consistent conceptual framework for understanding and staging psychedelic phenomenology. As mentioned earlier, “set” refers to the user’s conscious intention and unconscious dispositions, while “setting” refers to the tripper’s particular cultural and physical environment. In essence, “set and setting” singularizes or individualizes the social notion of the dispositif in the construction of psychedelic experience. Rather than providing an essentialist template of the direct effects of a drug “in itself,” “set and setting” points to a second-order effect: the staging of a metabolic theater of transformations that unfold potentials already implicated by the “set and setting” of the subject coupled with the drug and his/her environment.

Here we discover the subtle distinction that David Toolan makes in his incisive and critical reflection on the human potential movement: LSD does not act as a “causal agent” but a “catalyst,” which we might understand in systems theoretical terms as an external irritant that provides the opportunity for a self-regulating homeostatic system—the body-self-mind—to reflect, magnify, and intensify its own dispositions, dispositions that are themselves, to a degree,
embedded in collective and social processes. The fundamental circularity of this situation introduces two important consequences. One is that, as Shulgin noted, even the most rigorous investigation of the compound’s effects on humans necessarily and structurally erodes the crisp distinction that (supposedly) underlies the experimental division of subject and object. The other consequence, related to this, is that the constitution or investigation of a psychoactive compound begins with the necessarily relational form of an encounter. Shulgin, who invented and subsequently characterized whole classes of psychedelic compounds, claimed that “It is only with the development of a relationship between the thing tested and tester himself that [the characteristics of the compound] will emerge, and the tester is as much a contributor to the final definition of the drug’s action as is the drug itself.” This recursion, however, is not static, but produces through the dynamics of encounter a new and emerging construction. “The process of establishing the nature of a compound’s action is synonymous with the process of developing that action.”

All this of course leaves open the question of what exactly is subject to psychedelic catalysis within us. Here we might recall Janiger’s etymology for the word *psychedelic*, a term we have been using unreflectively up to this point but which remains, for my money, the best overall term for the class of compounds that includes materials like peyote, psilocybe mushrooms, DMT, ayahuasca, ketamine. In contrast with the later term “entheogen,” which contains its own god or “theos,” the use of *psychedelic* requires assent to nothing more demanding than psyche or “mind.” This allows psychedelic discourse to place one foot firmly in psychology. This basis allowed Stan Grof, one of the crafters of transpersonal psychology and a clinician who oversaw thousands of aboveboard psychedelic sessions, to define LSD as an

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“unspecific amplifier of mental processes.” For Grof, however, these processes emerged largely from the “unconscious,” a term he understands in both Freudian and Jungian registers, the latter of which ultimately propels his texts beyond the boundaries of biological psychology into a “transpersonal” ontology that includes cosmic planes of visionary reality inhabited by incorporeal agents.

The point here is not to defend or critique this view, which we will be playing with through this book. Instead, the point is to track how concepts create their own operative links and portals that recursively shape the phenomenology in question. As Anne Taves has persuasively argued with respect to William James and Fredric Myers, two earlier phenomenologists of extraordinary experience, the definition of “the unconscious” can become so capacious (and so proximate to spiritual or supernatural realities) that it functions as a “mediating concept”—in other words, a placeholder or rhetorical “amplifier” for other forces and concepts, in this case, religious ones. With these ideas in mind, we can understand the vertiginous implications of LSD, not so much as a chemical catalyst, but as a medium or “amplifier” that intermediates another medium: the mediating space of the unconscious, criss-crossed by pathologies, fixed ideas, cultural scripts, cognitive templates, symbolic archetypes, and, possibly, avenues toward other domains of being.

With the widespread acceptance of the doctrine of “set and setting,” psychedelic discourse embraced an element of self-reference whose recursive logic, with its emphasis on construction, mediation, and expectancy, directs us toward a particularly cybernetic account of psychedelia. At the same time, these modern metrics were superimposed upon a conceptual and phenomenological space with a very different etiology: “religious experience.” In the rest of this chapter, we will show how LSD helped install a model of psychedelic mediation whose psycho-

158. Toolan, Facing West, 57.
cybernetic formalism renegotiated the boundaries of religion and particularly religious experience in ways that not only amplified a variety of “occultural” discourses and esoteric practices, but reframed extraordinary experience as a new sort of gnosis, a meta-function lodged somewhere on the middle way between biological reduction and religious overcoding.

**Good Friday Any Day**

Before it crossed Albert Hoffman’s blood-brain barrier for the first time, LSD-25 was not only a tasteless and colorless compound lurking in a laboratory, but remained fundamentally free of associations with religion or mystical experience. Nonetheless, Albert Hoffman’s account of first strong trip, on April 19, 1943, includes witches and demons, and the passing phantasmagoric conviction that he had already died. Though devoid of specific religious content, we should underscore the upwelling of such weird and imaginative phantasmagoria, which here we might simply consider as “weirdness.” Hoffman’s account was not published until the late 1970s, of course, and it appeared in a book that made Hoffman’s own poetic nature mysticism and transpersonal leanings quite clear.159

The timing was right. Twenty years after Hoffman’s legendary trip, LSD was enveloped in a language of grace, cosmic unity, metaphysical insight, and visionary encounter. From its initial characterization as a psychotomimetic, LSD underwent a kind of mimetic drift in the fifties and sixties, and became attached instead to some of the more sublime and consternating states of consciousness in the human arsenal. LSD’s visionary similitude in part rests on the more concrete fact that, pharmacologically and phenomenologically, LSD is *something like* the

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psilocybin found in some mushrooms, the DMT found in yage, and, to a lesser extent, the mescaline found in peyote. Yage, mushrooms, and peyote were all plants or plant preparations deployed for magical, medical, and visionary ends within indigenous contexts that were, in various ways, considered to fall under the broad category of religion. At the same time, it is very clear that, with a few important exceptions, mysticism was not part of the picture associated with these LSD-like hallucinogens before the war. In his thorough study of drugs and literature, Marcus Boon notes that, aside from ethnographic accounts of peyote use among American Indians, the vast majority of psychedelic “experience reports” written before World War II are cast in aesthetic, phenomenological, and pathological terms rather than religious or mystical ones. And yet, psychedelics became one of the most significant discursive sites in the postwar and countercultural period to explore, contest, and reconstruct the boundary zones between nature and gnosis, between sacred and profane, between psychology and transcendence.

The literature on this topic is immense and complex, and here I only want to suggest three cultural strategies for navigating the relationship between drugs and religion, which I will identify as perennialist, prankster, and shamanic.

**Perennialists**

The perennialist account of psychedelic mysticism begins with Aldous Huxley’s game-changing *The Doors of Perception* (1954), in which an afternoon on mescaline in the Hollywood Hills becomes the occasion for an immensely influential meditation on consciousness that is deeply informed by religious and mystical literature, along with poetry and Western art. A major concern of Huxley’s essay is the character of “is-ness” or spiritual immanence radiating through

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ordinary objects, like flowers and the folds in a trouser leg. Huxley ably captures this confounding of sacred and profane with his assertion that “Of course the Dharma-Body of the Buddha was the hedge at the bottom of the garden.” Huxley’s experience, or rather his account of his experience, is laminated with mystical discourse, and particularly with the allusions and resonances echoing from Huxley’s own earlier and influential research into comparative mysticism. This work, which followed years of personal searching and research, took shape in Huxley’s 1945 *The Perennial Philosophy*, a book whose immense erudition and grace is somewhat drowned out by its now roundly criticized thesis: that beneath the world’s various religious paths, and buried deep in the psychological self, lies a universal and ineffable experience of Reality that is, with a little luck, available to those willing to commit themselves to ethical behavior and spiritual practice.

Though *The Perennial Philosophy* aspired to the sort of global view offered in William James *Varieties*, Huxley’s own biases—rooted partly in the spiritual smorgasbord of Los Angeles and partly in his own misanthropic distrust of human personality—lay towards the impersonal and nondual modes of mystical experience exemplified by neo-Vedanta and Buddhism. That said, while it is important to emphasize that Huxley’s very big brain was already “pre-loaded” with mystical material, these concepts had an operational rather than interpretive effect within his mescaline swoon. As Boone put it, “Huxley was proposing an experiential model of the imagination and the imaginal realms that ran counter to the symbolic, representational structures that had governed Western thought for centuries.” This shift from symbol to experience implied a shift from systems of representation towards pragmatic effects that depend upon a “theory of consciousness that was at once materialist and cosmic.”\textsuperscript{161} The core of this theory relied on Huxley’s “reducing valve” model, wherein ordinary mind is viewed
as a reduction of a larger field of consciousness made necessary by evolutionary constraints and the exigencies of a precarious existence. However, these valves also can be opened, revealing religious or mystical ontologies whose seeds lie in potentia within all human beings—including, it seems, human beings on a decent dose of mescaline.

Establishing a mimetic or analogic relationship between psychedelic experience and religious mysticism is one thing; establishing or grounding this connection is another. For the philosopher W.T. Stace, who developed a seven-point model of mystical experience that is still used by some researchers today, argued in 1964 that psychedelic mysticism was not just “similar” to traditional mystical experience but “is mystical experience.” For some critics and religious thinkers, this too-easy correspondence and its materialist implications proved rather threatening in its establishment of a continuum between nature and transcendence.

In his 1957 book Mysticism, Sacred and Profane, the Catholic religious scholar R.C. Zaehner attacked Huxley’s perennialist drift by insisting on the wide variations within mystical experiences, texts, and underlying ontologies. Zaehner’s motivation was to immunize theophanic Christian mysticism from its less authentic rivals. As such, Zaehner restricts the vision vouchsafed by mescaline to “nature mysticism,” a profane experience of unity or depersonalized identification with the material cosmos. Zaehner also finds these visionary experiences, which he identified with the manic side of bi-polar psychosis, among poets and madmen. For more sacred types of mysticism Zaehner turns to Christianity and Hinduism, which was his academic specialty. Here too he finds crucial distinctions between the cold “isolationism” of Samkhya or the impersonal monism of Vedanta and the theophanic mysticism of Islam and Christianity, in which the self as person encounters his or her transcendental ground in a relationship of love. As

161. Ibid, 252.
such, Zaehner underscores the impersonal register of Huxley’s experiences, in which the folds in a pair of trousers possess more interest than the other people in the room. In later writings on mysticism, Zaehner will also approvingly cite Martin Buber’s distinction between experience, unitary or otherwise, and genuine encounter, which always involves an “I-You” relationship. Intriguingly, Zaehner does not discount Huxley’s mescaline experience as ersatz mysticism or mere derangement, but rather considers it an authentic expression of a “nature mysticism” that involves a psychophysiological capacity to manically and impersonally identify with the natural world.

Zaehner was spitting into the wind, since Huxley’s visionary perennialism set the stage for the florescence of psychedelic mysticism in the sixties. Indeed, the “Asian” flavor of so much psychedelic mysticism to come can in some ways be tracked back to Huxley’s own predilection for nondual philosophy and comparative religion, whose threads are embedded in the discursive warp and woof of The Doors of Perception as well as The Perennial Philosophy. Relatively early into his mescaline experience, Huxley confronts a garden chair whose radiant and absolute beauty absorbs him into an “event” so wonderful it becomes terrifying. Huxley considers the possibility of madness, at which point the chair transforms into something like “the last Judgment—or, to be more accurate, by a Last Judgment which, after a long time and with considerable difficulty, I recognized as a chair.”

Huxley panics, a panic he later limns as the inevitable outcome of man’s petty ego confronting the divine light.

Moving outside the Judeo-Christian frame of judgment, Huxley then compares the writhing chair to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, a highly influential collection of texts from the Bardo Thodol whose translation and considerable repackaging had been effected by the

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independent scholar and sometimes Theosophist W. Y. Evans-Wentz in the twenties. These texts of Tibetan tantra, presented in the form of scripts to be read out loud to the newly dead, outline the series of *bardos* or liminal “in-between” states that, upon the death of the body, confront the mind-stream with ferocious phantasmagoria and opportunities for transcendence. This cross-cultural literary artifact was this theater conjured up by Huxley’s chair, especially the scene wherein the soul, newly freed from the body, shrinks in agony from the Clear Light of the Absolute and seeks shelter instead in the “comforting darkness of selfhood as a reborn human being.” Whether Huxley actually thought of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* at the time of his trip or later is unclear. In the narrative, his narrative his wife Maria attempts to calm him of his terrors by suggesting he try and “fix your attention” on the Clear Light, which is one of the more memorable admonitions found in Evans-Wentz’s text. “Only if there were somebody there to tell me about the Clear Light,” Huxley responds. “One couldn’t do it by oneself.”

Religion also played a major role in the only psychedelic publication in the fifties that matched *The Doors of Perception* for impact: R. Gordon Wasson’s legendary 1957 *Life* magazine story about the Mazatec curandera Maria Sabina and the “magic mushroom” cult in Oaxaca, Mexico. Given the great deal of evidence we have for the ritual use of *Psilocybe* mushrooms in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, Wasson, who was an obsessive and learned mycophile as well as wealthy banker, believed that he had discovered the smoldering embers of an ancient tradition. This evidence in turn fueled Wasson’s overriding intellectual agenda, which was to prove that the roots of religion lay in the Paleolithic use of psychedelic mushrooms, including both *Psilocybe* and the more harrowing red-and-white capped *Amanita muscaria*. Largely using the associative and data-dense armchair methods associated with James Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, but publishing his lavish books on his own dime, Wasson went on to argue that

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psychedelic fungi contributed the secret sauce for *soma*, the mystical brew lovingly described in the Vedas, as well as for the *kykeon* consumed during the ancient mystery rites of Eleusis. The details of these arguments are not important here: what is of note is that the magic mushroom entered the modern Western imagination as an icon, or idol, of ancient world religion, a vision constructed, at least in part, with the popular tools of comparative religion.

As Andy Letcher convincingly argues in *Shroom*, his controversial and rather unforgiving account of modern mushroom lore, Wasson went to Huautla expecting a benign religious experience, and a benign religious experience, at least to judge from Wasson’s classic account of his trip, was what he got. Becoming an Emersonian “disembodied eye,” the banker soared over exotic landscapes, beheld the Platonic forms, and arrived at the dark gates that concealed “the presence of the Ultimate”—gates that, as most future shroomers would not be surprised to learn, remained closed. But as Lechter argues, Sabina’s *velada*, though it included prayers to Catholic saints and censors sputtering with copal, was not about propitiating the Ultimate but about healing maladies or finding lost objects. “To find God, Sabina—like all good Catholics—went to Mass.”

With its grandiose sacred claim, however, Wasson’s account struck a chord, and trickle of intellectuals and bohemians made their own treks to Mexico to sample the mushroom, including Harvard professor Timothy Leary. After his life-changing experience there, Leary returned to Cambridge to kickstart the Harvard Psilocybin Project, a series of psychological experiments that used synthetic psilocybin pills, based on Wasson’s samples and produced by the same Sandoz Corporation responsible for LSD. However, even before psychedelics were scheduled, Leary’s research project and the emerging youth drug culture soon fell head over

heels for LSD, which was considered by many heads—incorrectly—to provide a more powerful
trip.\textsuperscript{165}

Leary’s career at Harvard also shows how the discourse and ethos of comparative
religion helped transform an atheistic social psychologist and elite intellectual into a psychedelic
change agent. Leary’s first book, 1957’s \textit{The Interpersonal Diagnosis of Personality}, offered a
dense personality typology cast in terms of social roles and established interpersonal scenarios
that both resisted and absorbed the reigning behaviorist models of the day. In 1960, he
discovered psilocybin mushrooms, and began the transformation that, in just a few years time,
would see him emerge as a grinning psychedelic guru openly cannibalizing the sorts of texts—
like Lao Tzu, the \textit{Tibetan Book of the Dead}, and the \textit{I Ching}—that characterized the emerging
postwar canon of spiritual seeking. What enabled Leary to embrace the game of “applied
mysticism” without entirely abandoning social psychology or naturalism was a version of
Huxley’s perennialism.

In addition to a friendship with Huxley, Leary became pals with Huston Smith, a media-
savvy MIT professor of religion whose work—especially his 1958 text \textit{The World’s Religions}—
became one of the more important vectors of perennialism in the history of comparative religion
in America. Indeed, psychedelics play a privileged if under-acknowledged role in the ascendency
of perennialism in the American discourse of comparative religion in and outside the academy.
Though perennialism certainly was well-established before the postwar turn towards
psychedelics, drugs helped propagate the notion, and not simply by providing experiences that, at
least with the proper expectancy, lent themselves to reframing through a variety of different
religious or mystical lenses. More operationally, the relationship between the material drug and

173-181.
the individual’s trip modeled the assumed relationship between an underlying perennial stratum and a localized “cultural” interpretation of those effects.

As a young man, Smith made a pilgrimage to visit Huxley; by the time he met Leary, Smith had, while remaining a Christian, adopted a meditation practice, joined the Boston Vedanta Society, and talked about yoga on television. But only when he took LSD with Leary in 1961 did Smith finally drink down the full-blown mystical experience he had been searching for—a fact he would continue to acknowledge throughout his successful academic career and bestselling books, even while later finding fault with Leary and the drug culture. In 1962, Smith participated in the so-called Good Friday Experiment, a legendary research project directed by a graduate student at Harvard Divinity School named Walter Pahnke under the auspices of Leary and the Harvard Psilocybin Project. Pahnke wanted to see if psilocybin could induce an unqualified mystical experience when taken in a religious setting by people who were spiritually inclined. Later researchers would find fault with the methodology of the double-blind experiment, especially concerning the problem of expectancy, or the tendency to shape an experience through expectation or “leading.” That said, a follow-up study of sixteen of the original participants conducted by Rick Doblin in 1984 found that most still held their experiences to have been “genuinely mystical,” though without a thorough critical engagement with the adjective “genuine,” this finding still begs many questions.¹⁶⁶

Shortly before his death in 1963, Huxley met with Leary and suggested that he write a psychedelic guidebook based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead. After getting booted out of

¹⁶⁶ In 2006, a more rigorous study by Roland Griffiths at Johns Hopkins seemed to confirm essentially the same result: psilocybin can facilitate something like religious experience with lasting positive effects for a significant percentage of properly predisposed subjects. Critics have pointed out that the study still begs the problem of expectancy, and that the questionnaires used to establish Griffiths’s conclusions featured a perennialist bias. Griffiths, R.R., Richards, W.A., McCann, U., & Jesse, R. (2006). Psilocybin can occasion mystical experiences having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance. Psychopharmacology, 187, 268-283.
Harvard, Leary began working on the text with his colleague Richard Alpert and his student Ralph Metzner. According to Metzner, Leary said “Let’s take the text of the Tibetans and strip the particular cultural and religious language and rewrite it as a manual.” Translating the texts into “psychedelic English,” Leary and team mapped the stages of a generic psychedelic trip onto the various Tibetan bards. On the surface, this seems clear support for the Buddhist scholar Donald Lopez’s argument that Leary’s rewrite was an aggressive act of “radical decontextualization” that rested on a perennialist, quasi-scientific “theology” of culturally unmarked and therefore universal mystical states. True enough, but Lopez misunderstands the pragmatic thrust of Leary’s text, which had much less to do with establishing the timeless basis of Tibet’s complex visionary ontologies than with rendering some basic tantric notions operational for psychedelic experimentalists. Though Leary’s model has not aged well, and the vast majority psychedelic therapists prefer much less heavy-handed “games,” The Psychedelic Experience was quite influential during the early years of mass psychedelia. If nothing else, the text helped solder psychedelic experience onto the loosely “Asian” or Hindu-Buddhist spiritual template that provided the “go-to” ontology for many mystic trippers during the heyday of the counterculture.

The Psychedelic Experience also introduced one of the most influential technical principles in the design of psychedelic protocols: the afore-mentioned notion of “set and setting.” Again, this principle holds that the content and dynamics of a trip are fundamentally reflexive; that is, they depend on one’s conscious and unconscious expectations and state of mind (set) in

167. Nicholas Schou, Orange sunshine: the Brotherhood of Eternal Love and its quest to spread peace, love, and acid to the world (Macmillan, 2010), 28.
169. The irony is that the initial context for the Tibetan texts rested on a fundamental ambiguity between the literal understanding of their descriptions as a guidebook for the newly dead, and the visionary or operational use of these scripts as tantric rehearsals of bardo experience undertaken by advanced yogis.
synergy with the material, atmospheric, and aesthetic conditions of the environment (setting). This model bears comparison to Foucault’s notion of disposatif, and it reminds us that the tools to deconstruct the “immediate” phenomenology of a trip after the fact were already contained within psychedelic protocols. But Leary also recognized that such reflexivity could also be exploited to “construct a ‘program’” for a trip in advance.\textsuperscript{170} “One can envision a high art [of] programming psychedelic sessions, in which symbolic manipulation and presentations would lead the voyager through ecstatic visionary Bead Games.”\textsuperscript{171} Such a design program—coupled with the psychoactive chemical catalyst—can certainly be seen as a Foucauldian “technology of the self” in the sense of an anthopo-technics that allows humans to participate in their own subjectification. Leary’s use of the term “ecstasy” here also reminds us that, for him, this “high art of programming” lies on an erotic or neo-tantric continuum with Leary’s more demotic and utilitarian notion of “hedonic engineering,” which he once defined simply as “designing one’s life for pleasure through chemical turn-ons and turn-offs.”\textsuperscript{172}

Leary’s interest in religious rhetoric had an even more practical basis in legal strategy. When he founded the cheekily-named “religious” organization League for Spiritual Discovery in 1966, Leary wanted to reframe LSD as a legitimate and constitutionally protected religious sacrament for those seeking the “divinity within.” The legal precedent here—which was not reflected in any concrete gestures of political solidarity with American Indians—was the Native American Church, which had incorporated in Oklahoma 1918 partly to protect the right of practitioners to ritually consume peyote.

\textsuperscript{170} Timothy Leary et al., \textit{The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead} (New York: University Books, 1964), 139
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid, 139; the Bead Game is a reference to a visionary and intellectual game played in Herman Hesse’s novel \textit{Magister Ludi} (1943), an important source for Leary’s comparativism and ecstatic notion of game-playing.
\textsuperscript{172} Cited in Timothy Miller, \textit{The Hippies and American Values}, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 119
And Leary wasn’t the only one who recognized that psychedelicists might take advantage of the state’s biopolitical establishment of certain marginal religious rights by underscoring the religious dimensions of tripping. Arthur Kleps, who lived at Millbrook during Leary’s reign, founded the Neo-American Church in 1966 to similarly assert psychedelic use as a religious right. But unlike Leary, Kleps also used to occasion to satirize religion and society with the sort of psychedelic humor that, as will see, characterized Discordianism and, later, the Church of the Subgenius. The heads of Kleps’ church were called “Boo Hoos,” their mascot was a three-eyed toad, their house organ called *Divine Toad Sweat*, and their supreme goal the “bombardment and annihilation of the planet Saturn.” That said, Kleps was no mere sarcastic hedonist—he sincerely accepted the metaphysical and mystical sublimity of psychedelic experience, but he questioned the usefulness of religious models and the “programming” proffered by Asian gurus. Instead, he wrote that his followers were inheritors of a “more honorable (if less popular) western history of visionary and mystical experience coupled with the vigorous advocacy of human liberty and political radicalism of every kind.”

All of our avatars of high weirdness, as we will see, belong in this particular current.

**Pranksters**

With its blend of satire and organized intent, Krebs’ church stands closer to the anarchic and carnivalesque style of psychedelic culture associated with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters than with the Leary team’s reverent and perennialist appropriation of Eastern religious forms. The Pranksters, of course, emerged in the Bay Area, and they brought an absurdist,

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experimental, and willfully demotic attitude towards psychedelic ecstasy that drew more than a little from California’s hands-on, hedonic, and DIY approach to subcultures. Though the East/West tension between Leary and the Pranksters has certainly been overplayed (by Tom Wolfe and others), the difference remains instructive, particularly in terms of their diverging relationships with religious and mystical material. The Prankster ethos is a crucial reminder that, alongside the perennialist construction of psychedelic spirituality, there were other cultural forms that cultivated the extraordinary and even mystical phenomenology of LSD and other drugs within an essentially freethinking, anti-authoritarian, and absurdist-existential framework.

Like Krebs, the Pranksters mocked or side-stepped the perceived seriousness of religion; Wolfe reports, for example, that when the Pranksters visited Millbrook, Ken Babbs dismissed Leary’s fascination with the Tibetan bardos as a “crypt trip.” In contrast, the Prankster diagram for transformative psychedelic experience, which was reproduced through the legendary and influential acid tests the crew staged around the West Coast in the mid-1960s, represented an improvised scrambling of cultural codes and techniques rather than a disciplined, quasi-scripted transcendence. Indeed, their collaborative experiment in consciousness mutation was in some sense premised on the explicit evasion of obvious forms or mimetic models, religious, psychological, or otherwise. When an interviewer from the Haight street rag The Oracle asked Kesey about Leary’s League and their attempt to define LSD as a sacrament, Kesey responded that “It can be worse to take it as a sacrament.” As Wolfe explained in his portrait of the Pranksters, “That in itself was one of the unspoken rules. If you label it this, then it can’t be that…”

175. Ibid, 112.
That said, Wolfe perceptively identifies the Pranksters as a “true mystic brotherhood.” The group never used the words “religion” or religious” to describe their trip, but there was an “unspoken thing” that they refused to put into words. On the one hand, then, the Pranksters avoid and reject religion—there is no ism, no explicit dogma, and even the charismatic Kesey served only as a “non-navigator” who offered his crew little more direction than enigmatic quips like “You’re either on the bus or off the bus” and “Nothing lasts.” On the other hand, there is an experiential mystery at the heart of the scene: the “Now” of the LSD trip, understood and staged through improvisatory multimedia performance and a rhetoric and practice of spontaneity and willful, synchronistic juxtaposition. Even the raucous laughter and joshing of the Pranksters is laced with “a precognitive Early Churchly Gnostic note” according to Wolfe, who historically frames the singular and ambiguous hijinks of the Pranksters in terms lifted from the decidedly square religious scholars Joachim Wach and Max Weber.\textsuperscript{176}

The basic notion here is that the great religions began, not with a new theology, but with a “an overwhelming new experience.” There are different names for such experiences of course—Wolfe tries out ecstasy, kairos, “the flash”—but the notion here is that religious movements begin when such novel events are shared among an early in-group of initiates, those who are “on the bus.” Over time, such passionate sects either dissipate or congeal into dogma, as charisma is handed off to more impersonal institutional mechanisms. This underlying framework, which Wolfe is correct to ferret out as a working assumption if not an accurate account of all religious formation, helps us understand the complex phenomenon of psychedelic humor vis-a-vis sacred topics.

For the Pranksters, the Neo-American Church, and the Discordians, the ironic juxtaposition, metaphysical evasion, and rank silliness surrounding religious topics and images

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid, 164.
do not simply express irreverence, skepticism, or the sort of satire that the British call “taking the piss.” In addition, these are apotropaic or protectionist gestures that aim to prevent the reification of extraordinary experiences into congealed concepts and institutional forms. This sort of dodge, of course, can itself become a form, and moreover can be recognized against the backdrop of old-time American religion. As discussed above, the very move toward “experience” that William James effects, and that underlies a figure like Kesey, is, despite its veneer of empirical psychology, a characteristically American religious stance that reiterates the Protestant sectarian gesture of returning to an original intimacy or transparent encounter with the spirit. In this light, it is important that Wolfe spends a chapter dwelling on the curious connections that emerged between the Pranksters and the “Young Turks” among the Unitarian Universalist church, one of whom hosted an (officially) LSD-free “acid test” at a Unitarian church in the San Fernando valley.

One of the key sites for locating experiential spirituality of the Pranksters lies in their sensitivity to, and intentional production of, those serendipitous eruptions of meaningful coincidence that have come to be called synchronicity. For the Pranksters and many of their acolytes, synchronicity—the term is used by Wolfe, not Kesey—was experienced and interpreted as a kind of psychedelic grace, a sometimes shared phenomenon that slyly suggested or referred to a paranormal network of meaningful interconnection attributable, if such attribution was necessary, to what Kesey calls “cosmic control.” Wolfe lists a number of examples of this “weird shit,” like the time Neal Cassady ran out of gas driving the bus into the lonely High Sierras, only to encounter, the next morning, a Chevron gasoline tanker which stops and gives them a tankful of gas before heading further up the isolated road.
Synchronicities of sufficient magnitude disrupt the attribution of conventional causality, which opens up cracks in quotidian reality where alternative metaphysics sprout. While the vision of cosmic control suggests determinism (or, in possibly more appropriate Christian terms, predestination), “one could see the larger pattern and move with it—Go with the flow!—and accept it and rise above one's immediate environment and even alter it by accepting the larger pattern and grooving with it.”\textsuperscript{177} This is not the only way to interpret synchronicities, of course. Art Kleps, for example, for whom synchronicities also served as a central vehicle of metaphysical revelation, rejected the notion of a cosmic controller for the assertion that synchronicities are evidence that waking reality is nothing but the individual’s solipsistic dream.

One of the many weird paradoxes of synchronicity is that, while it suggests that everything is written, those perceptions themselves can be cultivated and, if not exactly produced, then at least staged or nourished. The Pranksters accessed these perceptions principally by taking LSD, which reliably catalyzes the perception of synchronicity in many users, particularly as doses and circumstances rise towards high weirdness. There are other tools as well. As with many beatniks, hippies, and freaks, the Pranksters were enormous fans of the \textit{I Ching}, an ancient Chinese oracle book that, in its legendary Wilhelm/Baynes edition, was accompanied by the Jung essay in which he announces the concept of synchronicity. As such, the \textit{I Ching} was perhaps the most reliable disseminator of “meaningful coincidence” throughout the occult revival of the sixties and seventies. Equally important, and deeply significant, was the deployment of media technologies in nonlinear arrays that staged serendipity. In their private parties, bus trips, and acid tests, the Pranksters creatively deployed a kaleidoscopic assemblage of sound and light technologies in order to both scramble and magnify the cross-talk between

\textsuperscript{177} Ibid, 143.
various media and perceptual streams while forming larger nonlinear “media ecologies.” Here, for example, is Wolfe’s description of the multimedia array at the Trips Festival in 1966:

Lights and movies sweeping around the hall; five movie projectors going and God knows how many light machines, interferrometrics, the intergalactic science-fiction seas all over the walls, loudspeakers studding the hall all the way around like flaming chandeliers, strobes exploding, black lights with Day-Glo objects under them and Day-Glo paint to play with, street lights at every entrance flashing red and yellow, two bands, the Grateful Dead and Big Brother and the Holding Company and a troop of weird girls in leotards leaping around the edges blowing dog whistles…

Events like this can be understood as social synchronicity machines—an immersive, cybernetic, and McLuhanesque celebration of Burroughs’ cut-up war on control. Similarly, Art Krebs set up more humble multi-media environments that exploited the potential for synchronistic connections. For gatherings of Boo Hoos, he suggested setting up “three, six, or nine television sets, with sound off,” and then distributing a variety of texts to be read, randomly, out loud, including SF novels, fantasy books, and the I Ching, which itself can be considered a kind of synchronicity machine. Indeed, this Boo Hoo practice—with its half-ironic, half-serious mixture of imaginative literature, esoterica, and media jamming—can be considered emblematic of the weird mutations that extraordinary experience undergoes in the sixties and seventies as it approaches but resists “religion.”
Ride The Snake

Alongside the perennialist mysticism of Leary and the sacred irony of the Pranksters and their ilk, there is a third mode of psychedelic religion that comes to the fore in America in the sixties and seventies, a mode that is at once the most traditional and the most fabricated. The best term for this mode is “shamanic,” recognizing that the anthropological term itself arguably reflects a perennialist bias in the sense that it presumes to identify a shared function across a dizzyingly wide variety of magical and healing traditions found in archaic, aboriginal, and hunter-gather communities around the world.

The prologue for the refashioning of this current in the modern West occurs when the investment banks and amateur mycologist Gordon Wasson publishes his legendary 1957 Life magazine story that announced the discovery of a sacred “mushroom cult” among the Mazatec Indians in Oaxaca. Here Wasson introduced the world to the curandera Maria Sabina, a living traditional healer who employed hallucinogenic substances in magical rites. As explained, he also directly tied these rites to the ethnobotanical origins of religion, with the mushrooms giving insight on everything from the soma described in the Vedas to the mysterious contents of the kykeon in the Eleusinian mysteries, which would become a major topos of psychedelic spirituality. As Andy Lechter tartly argues in his controversial critique of Wasson, the banker’s view was not only indebted to deeply speculative works of comparative religion—especially Frazer’s Golden Bough and the work of Wasson’s friend, the poet Robert Grave—but also ignores the way in which Sabina’s practices were themselves only partially “religious.”

What Wasson wanted to see “as a form of proto-Christian mysticism, with mushrooms

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178. The dialectic is paradoxical: if conventional media are vectors of conventional social control, the cut-up liberates the space for another order of “cosmic control” to operate, or at least appear to operate.
foreshadowing the sacrament of blood and wine,” was in reality a healing ceremony that had little or nothing to do with either worship or mystical experience. While traditional Mazatec practices were infused with prayers and mythopoetic material, the notion of an “ancient mushroom cult” unfairly distorted the ethnographic situation to fulfill comparative religion’s speculative quest for an underlying anthropological basis for religious mysticism.

Many hippies made pilgrimages to Oaxaca or to the more northern lands of the peyote-using Huichol Indians, an influx whose motivations uncomfortably blended a hunger for traditional earth wisdom with a desire to score. But the most significant and influential shamanic model of psychedelic religiosity that emerged in the sixties was, of course, Carlos Castaneda’s bestselling 1968 book *The Teachings of Don Juan*. Here the UCLA anthropologist began a multi-volume account of his initiation into Native American sorcery by the Yaqui “Man of Knowledge” Don Juan Matus. Though the initiation was supposedly completed in 1965, the most important volumes in the series came out in the seventies and remain signature signposts to the decade. Initially accepted by most readers as authentic accounts, Castaneda’s pretense of anthropological realism eventually fell under critical scrutiny, which revealed his books to be artful pastiches of fiction, anthropological material, and a host of mystical texts from around the globe. While some inveighed against Castaneda for exploitation and fraud, others accepted the dubious ontology of his texts as a form of trickster wisdom whose delivery could have no better form than a half-fiction fused into fact.

Along similar lines, Dan Noel has characterized Castaneda’s books as metafictional “shamanovels” that seamlessly juxtapose multiple genres and draw from the Jungian depths in order to bring “nonliteral reality” into the dream of textuality.180 Moreover, Castaneda’s texts

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179. See the discussion on Wasson in Lechter, *Shroom*, 88-113.
were stuffed with practices and operative concepts like “seeing”; many readers embraced them as practical manuals and metaphysical trainers as much as entertaining narratives. As such, Castaneda’s influential and popular oeuvre—which included some of the most important occult texts of the occult-saturated seventies—is a crucial exemplar of the blurring of fact and fiction that takes on increasing importance in counterculture religion, and that deeply informs the dynamics of high weirdness.

It is important to emphasize that the fictional character of many of Castaneda’s details do not obliterate the ways in which his tales were rooted in the general anthropological discourse surrounding indigenous Southwest shamanism. As such, their immense popularity (and hands-on occult practicality) helped install a neoshamanic or animistic cosmology into Western psychedelic culture. An example of such discourse in a contemporary anthropological context can be found in a 1975 text on Native California shamanism by Lowell Bean, a well-regarded anthropologist who studied shamanism at UCLA alongside Castaneda, who himself may have based some of Don Juan’s datura lore on a native California informant. (It should be noted that Castaneda did not speak about “shamans” in his early texts, since, as he later explained, Don Juan did not care for the imported term.) The central concept in Bean’s account is power, a potential to act that is widely and dynamically distributed between various agents throughout three major levels of reality: the upper world, home to celestial entities and often the spirits of the dead; the middle world, inhabited by humans and various non-mortal powers; and an underworld filled with reptilian and often malevolent beings.

One key element of this cosmology is the distribution of active and ambiguous agents throughout all three levels of reality. Rocks and plants are potential agents of power as well as animals and disincarnate beings, but neither their presence nor their intentions are easily
detectable, since such powers are “capricious, unpredictable, and amoral.” Agents need to be tested by “empirical indicators,” and they may deceive; as such, humans live in a profoundly ambiguous world where power is always being contested. “While there is constant opposition between power sources and a struggle among them to acquire more power, no one source of power has the ability to obtain ultimate superiority or to alter the condition of the universe so long as man conducts himself in a manner that aids in maintaining the equilibrium.”

In 1971’s *A Separate Reality*, the second and highly popular volume of the series, Castaneda establishes this model in relationship to psychoactive drugs. In the book, the “druggiest” of the series, Don Juan introduces Castaneda to a number of “allies,” including datura, peyote, and hallucinogenic mushrooms, all of which reveal slices of “nonordinary reality” that stage an enigmatic interpersonal encounter with nonhuman persons and forces. In particular, Don Juan speaks of the entity “Mescalito,” a benevolent plant teacher or protector spirit associated with peyote whose independent ontological status becomes, within the narrative, increasingly convincing to the reader despite the protests of the ever-skeptical Castaneda.

The journey from Don Juan’s paperback *brujeria* to today’s global ayahuasca shamanism is a rich and complex story of psychedelic construction and encounter, but here it is important to emphasize two key elements that will play a role in the high weirdness of the seventies. One is the mercurial, morally ambiguous, and sometimes treacherous world created by shape-shifting agents and allies struggling for power in a networked universe of real differences. The other is the irreducible ontological presence of distinct agents, entities who are difficult to assimilate either to internal psychological frameworks (with the possible exception of Jung) nor the Manichean moral polarities of the Western religious imagination. If we recall R.C. Zaehner’s

critique of Huxley, the significance of this “shamanic” move grows clearer, since the animist world of power suggests neither the impersonal unity of the Zen acid-head nor the monotheistic love fest of the Christian mystic; instead there is a polytheistic cosmos of multiple others and perspectives.

The mythopoetic stakes of this worldview are brought to the fore by a famous story told by the anthropologist Michael Harner, who later become a key figure in the growth of (non-psychedelic) neo-shamanism in the seventies. In the early sixties, still an “atheist anthropologist,” Harner drank ayahuasca with a Conibo elder. During the trip, which he believed took him to the edge of death, he encountered huge gloomy dragons who told him their cosmic secret: they had fled to the planet Earth from deep in the cosmos and had become the hidden masters of the world. Soon afterwards, the somewhat disturbed Harner felt compelled to relate this information to some missionaries in the area, who immediately identified the dragons as fallen angels, proof of satanic command over the local native medicine. Then Harner told the story to a blind shaman in the village; not possessing a Conibo word for “dragon,” he described them as “giant bats” who said they were the overlords of the world. “Oh they are always saying that,” said the smiling fellow. “But they are only the masters of outer darkness.”182 Since Harner had not told the man about their claims of cosmic origin, he felt a chill along his spine, as if the man’s speech confirmed the independent character of the entities he had glimpsed.

Here we have one “synchronistic” characteristic of high weirdness: a level of confirmation that implies that visionary experience transcends the boundaries of the individual imagination into a greater objective collectivity. But even more important, at least for our story, is the shift between the settled moral narrative of the Bible and the far more ambiguous,

situational, and ecological perspective of the shaman, for whom even fallen angels are just hucksters holding down one corner of the scene with a good rap.

During their postwar fluorescence in the West, psychedelics worked to confound the distinctions drawn in so many ways between sacred and profane, religious and secular, mystical and material. From the perennialist framework, which itself emerged as a way to manage the complexities of religious difference in a global world, the noetic and aesthetic power of psychedelics pointed towards a universal, quasi-scientific essence within human psychology that affirmed the value of diverse forms of religious mysticism while simultaneously relativizing the exclusive claims of any particular path. Such religious or mystical phenomenology was also recognized by what we can call the Prankster perspective, but there the content and affect of religion were far more intensely relativized and even mocked through irony, satire, and a strategy of disavowal, misdirection, and evasion. Finally, shamanic models, rooted in but also fabulated out of the ethnographic realities of aboriginal New World psychedelic use, underscored the ambiguous and animistically enchanted ontological openness of psychedelics, which acted as portals into a “nonordinary reality” populated by incorporeal and nonhuman entities with their own agendas, tricks, and blessings. In all cases, psychedelics opened up a cultural space that both appropriated and resisted religion. But they did so by providing access to an even more aboriginal phenomenon, something not yet marked in either sacred or religious registers, and which for the sake of simplicity we can simply characterize as the state of being high.
Mystic Sixties

A week or so before Halloween in 1967, tens of thousands of demonstrators, including New Left activists, pacifists, and hippies, massed in Washington D.C. to protest the Vietnam war. The final rally staged during the weekend stands out not only as the most surreal demonstration of the sixties, but as the one that most reflected the peculiar role that the occult played in the counterculture: the mass attempt to levitate the Pentagon. After hearing speeches on the Mall by civil rights leaders and Dr. Benjamin Spock, around 50,000 people set off towards the Pentagon, a crowd that included what the *East Village Other* enumerated as “witches, warlocks, holymen, seers, prophets, mystics, saints, sorcerers, shamans, troubadours, minstrels, bards, roadmen, and madmen.”

The very diversity and excess of this sacral list already tells us something: not only were spiritual practitioners present in force, but they were present though an imaginative, heterogenous, and history-hopping performance whose “madness” tells us something about the era’s spiritual politics. Allen Ginsberg led Buddhist chants, Hare Krishnas danced with their ringing chimes, the New York underground folk group the Fugs led a (partly?) tongue-in-cheek exorcism, while the West Coast experimental Kenneth Anger performed hidden magickal rites without the slightest bit of irony. The crowd attempted to surround the ominous, five-sided seat of military power, but were arrested or cut with bayonettes. The building, it need to be said, did not budge, but something else had been shaken up: the idea that serious political protest...

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needed to be serious. Instead, the event became an icon for a heterodox politics of consciousness that was at once enchanted, oppositional, satirical, and ludic.

This march was the Yippie brain child of Abbie Hoffman, whose emerging brand of politics was driven by a desire to bring together the two wings of the counterculture—the Fists and the Heads—into a yin-yang expression of cultural struggle that mixed absurdism and activism into guerrilla theater. The attempted levitation of the Pentagon— which somehow also involved turning the building orange—fits in very well with what Todd Gitlin described as the Yippie “politics of display,” of ludic and media-savvy pranks. A couple months before the march on the Pentagon, Hoffman had drawn a lot of attention by organizing a crew of hippies to release a flood of dollar bills onto the trading room floor of the New York Stock Exchange.

Beneath the pranks and their obvious media hooks, something more significant was going on. One of those things was psychedelics: the development of the Yippies and their confreres is impossible to imagine without the Prankster legacy of psychedelia described above. Though the Pranksters themselves were not activists, their aesthetic and metaphysical style could be appropriated in more clearly politicized situations. Historian Julie Stephens describes the Yippies as representatives of a new “anti-disciplinary politics,” a style of activism that not only rejected hierarchy and organizational leadership, but “was distinguished from the New Left by its ridiculing of political commitment, sacrifice, seriousness and coherence.”

In their work to performatively break down the distinctions between politics and everything else—art, sex, dream, popular culture—these groups and individuals also gave a decidedly psychedelic twist to

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a protest movement that was aimed not only at political structures but at forms of rationality and psychology which supported the Establishment.\(^{186}\)

As Theodor Roszak argued in his classic 1968 book on the counterculture, the occult was one of a number of strategies that actively undermined scientific rationality and "assault[ed] the reality of the ego as an isolable, purely cerebral unit of identity."\(^{187}\) Witchcraft fit in fine alongside rock’n’roll, free love, and psychedelics as Dionysian theaters that rejected the technocratic logic of mainstream institutions and gestured towards the emergence of new forms of being and perceiving that would, in essence, fill out the "personality structure and total life style that follow from New Left social criticism."\(^{188}\) In other words, psychedelic and occult consciousness alike became modes, even instruments, of politics, ones that probed beyond or beneath ideology to confront and recode fundamental forms of being in the world. By attempting to levitate the Pentagon and exorcise the war machine, the Yippies were drawing on currents of occult and esoteric lore that saturating the counterculture. Public media and private lives alike were populated with zodiac signs and secret mantras, Tarot cards and *I Ching* hexagrams, Eastern meditations and Western magics, parapsychological tests and rumors of UFOs. In 1968, *Time* magazine declared that a "mystical renaissance" was at hand.\(^{189}\)

How do we account for this upsurge? Since its origins, the United States has played host to divergent and sometimes contradictory cultures of alchemy, mysticism, gnosis, and popular

\(^{186}\) Stephens goes on to make an intriguing argument that the anti-disciplinary politics of the sixties set in motion, for better and worse, many of the features of cultural politics that later came to be called "postmodern": the erosion of the line between aesthetics and politics, the widespread sampling from popular culture, the rise of parody and irony, all of which ultimately contribute, against their more liberating impulses, to the political impasse of the postmodern moment. I am not convinced that the zaniness of the Yippies were responsible for the exhaustion of postmodern cultural politics. But the connection between postmodernism and Yippie-style politics is tight, tight enough to suggest that we must see psychedelics themselves, not simply as tools of social disruption, cultural imaginings, and spiritual reinvention, but as a catalyst for the postmodern condition itself.

\(^{187}\) Roszak, 55.
\(^{188}\) Ibid, 66.
Many of these ideas and practices found a welcome home in bohemian scenes and artistic avant-gardes, including the counterculture’s immediate cultural ancestors: the Beats. Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Gary Snyder were all seekers and visionaries of one sort or another, and their earnest explorations of Buddhism, Scientology, magic, tantra, Zen, psychedelics, and Hinduism helped provide models and templates for the sixties generation. It is important to note that these men were all writers, because, despite the importance of music and especially visual art to the modern occult, the most tangible cultural products that fueled the occult revival in the late sixties were books: works of comparative religion, psychology, mysticism, and fiction that hurtled out of McLuhan’s supposedly fading Gutenberg galaxy. By the late sixties, hundreds of “metaphysical” bookstores had popped up in urban areas, often near campuses, and they did good business. In 1969, over 350 titles related to astrology, parapsychology, and the occult sciences were published, almost 200 more than in 1967. Even more important are the paperback numbers, perhaps because, in McLuhan’s view, the inexpensive and mobile “mosaic” of the pocket book satisfied the new taste for “depth experience.” In 1968, publishers issued 169 occult paperbacks, a number that jumped past 500 the following year, when Anton LaVey’s bestselling The Satanic Bible went through the first of its many printings.

Beyond this literary upsurge, the late sixties birthed a universe of objects, fashions, music recordings and visual art that communicated or played with esoteric material, including both novel cultural productions and the intensive mediation and repurposing of existing sources.
Though explicit occultism and non-Christian spirituality were, like drugs, more apparent in the music of the seventies than the sixties, the well-known sixties high-points remain significant, whether or not they were gimmicks: the Stones’ *Their Satanic Majesty’s Request*, the Hendrix cover that apes Krishna’s *vishvarupa* or “universal form” appearance in the Bhagavad Gita, the enchanting koans of the Incredible String Band, and of course the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s*, with Aleister Crowley and Paramahansa Yogananda on the jacket and Harrison’s sitar on the wax.\(^{193}\)

Other important sources of imagery were rock posters and underground comix, notably the work of Rick Griffin, whose posters featured Native American imagery, and whose kabbalistic designs were set alongside scatological pirate yarns in the influential *Zap* comics. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the esoteric products that fed the occult revival were by no means restricted to the counterculture. Indeed, the most visible mystic science of the sixties and seventies—astrology—was already well ensconced in middle America, with sun sign columns peppering American periodicals long before head shops started selling zodiac ashtrays or the 5th Dimension love-bombed the radio with “The Age of Aquarius.”\(^{194}\) Perhaps the most mainstream occult commodity that boomed at the time was the Parker Brothers corporation’s Ouija board, a low-seller for forty years until, in 1967, over two million units were purchased, outpacing even *Monopoly*.\(^{195}\)

All this might lead some to think that the occult revival was simply the result of changes in cultural production. But that would be to forget the other actor on the stage: not culture, but

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193. Here we need to add a fannish shout-out as well for Coven’s 1969 *Witchcraft Destroys Minds and Reaps Souls*.  
194. Key astrologers for the counterculture included the Haight resident Gavin Arthur—who contributed to the Haight Street Oracle—and Dane Rudhyar, who decisively shaped modern astrology by introducing more humanistic and Jungian interpretative conventions. At the same time, the Republican governor of California, future President Ronald Reagan, chose the time of his inauguration based on an astrologer’s advice. See Truzzi, “Occult Revival”, n. 10, 19.  
195. Truzzi, 16-17.
consciousness, and particularly consciousness’s capacity for extraordinary experiences. The occult revival is part of the larger stream of esotericism in the modern west, and esotericism cannot be reduced to texts or cultural products, but must also be seen as a historically malleable current of practices that seek an escape from history through the staging of extraordinary experiences that, for the sake of simplicity, we can call gnosis. In the sixties, various threads of this earlier occult counterculture were revised in a bohemian context that juxtaposed the extraordinary experiences associated with esotericism and the extraordinary experiences associated with hedonism—in other words, the triumvirate of sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll.

Already in Kerouac’s Dharma Bums, from 1958, the Bay Area hipster Japhy Ryder (based on Snyder) is offering hints about the Tibetan tantric position yabyum; by the end of the 60s, sex clubs were hosting black masses, and a myriad of adventurers were exploring the delights of coitus reservatus, group fertility rites, and “tantric” techniques of ritual sexuality.

Rock shows themselves grew more ritualistic, as changes in technology, musical forms, and audience expectations encouraged “Dionysian” collective events that were both ecstatic and ceremonial, a commercialized derangement of the senses. And pot and psychedelics, sometimes unintentionally, brought many minds to the verge of the gateless gate, as psychoactive users uninterested in the history of religions discovered profound noetic insights, complex “archetypal” visions, and sublime emotions in the midst of their melty pleasures.

As Camille Paglia explained in her robust overview of “cults and cosmic consciousness” in the decade, the widespread valorization of sex and the “concrete power” of rock music “redefined heaven as present sensual ecstasy.” The result of this was the emergence of what we can only call spiritual hedonism, an occult stance in which the difference between the sacred and profane was, if not exactly abrogated, then alchemically transformed: “The sixties at their most
radical collapsed spirit into matter.” 196 The occult was valued not only for its descriptions of extraordinary altered states, or its cosmological concepts, but for the capacity of its protocols to amplify, thicken, and unfold sensory experience. In other words, the occult not only provided a variety of uncanny maps to organize reality and identity, but amplified realtime experience through mysterious resonances and synchronistic references. For many, the occult was not just about going in, or heading far out, but about getting it on.

**Head Masters**

Though the occult sixties was not a primarily intellectual revolution in religious sensibility, there were a number of scholars and writers who definitively influenced the turn towards Eastern mysticism and Western esoterica. One major figure was Carl Jung, whose highly original texts and psychological theories underpinned much countercultural religiosity and stimulated all of our avatars of high weirdness to varying degrees. In the early 1950s, Jung’s collected works began to be translated and published in English through Princeton University Press and their remarkable Bollingen Series, which also published the first major edition of the *I Ching*. As a psychologist blazing his own trail in the wake of Freud, Jung was able to gain a foothold in a country then ruled by an ego-centered version of Freudian psychoanalysis. Jung enjoyed wearing the mask of the scientist, and worked hard to maintain an aura of technical rigor around theories and texts that were fundamentally inspired by the the lore and ethos of esotericism. By the early sixties, Jungian ideas about the persona, the archetypes, the collective unconscious, and synchronicity were seeping into the vocabulary and worldview of seekers and scholars alike. These notions encouraged a fresh appreciation for the creative potential of the

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“psyche”—even in its pathological dimension—as well as offering a way to embed personal issues within cross-cultural symbolic networks that helped frame ordinary complexes and lend them imaginative context and greater resonance.

In contrast to his one-time mentor Freud, who held that a resigned acceptance of repressive social regulatory forces was the best shot we had as screwed up human animals, Jung encouraged individuals to withdraw their investments in the social mask he called the persona. This release would then open gates to the collective unconscious, an uncanny carnival of phantasms, creative urges, and weird if not paranormal phenomena that uncovered, beneath the messy Freudian basement, the more archaic and collective strata of the archetypes—the anima, the shadow, the wise old man. Discovering and engaging these patterns set the individual on the path towards the psychological integration that Jung called individuation. It was no easy journey—Jung described it in decidedly occult terms as a “longissima via, not straight but snakelike, a path that unites the opposites, reminding us of the guiding caduceus, a path whose labyrinthine twists and turns are not lacking in terrors.”

The good doctor knew of what he spoke. Following his famous break with Freud, Jung spent over half a decade wrestling with spectral imaginal figures, precognitive dreams, and “rampages of fantasy.” Jung feared that he was slipping into psychosis, but he also recognized the lineaments of the mythopoetic imagination in his visionary upsurge, material he had become familiar with during the deep reading into the history of religion and mythology that informed 1912’s Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido. Overwhelmed by his own mental productions, unable to read scientific literature, he resorted to what he referred to as an “experiment”: rather than try to ignore the figures who seemed to be vexing him, he developed imaginal relationships with them—principally with a young woman named Salome and an old man named Philemon,
who became a kind of guru figure. Following these encounters, Jung would then attempt to step away from the phenomena and interpret them from a more detached perspective, a process that became “the matrix for the formation of the ideas that composed his original psychological system.” This particular imaginal two-step—one step forward into the depths of extraordinary experience, and then two steps back to a more aesthetic or critical position—is key to the weird reframing of religious experience we will be exploring. To respond to his experiences without pathologizing them, Jung also turned to artistic practice, and produced the remarkable designs and vital visionary text that finally saw light in 2009 as *The Red Book*.

Like psychedelic discourse, Jung’s analytic psychology wavered ambiguously over the question of the ultimate ground of extraordinary experience. In order to engage with figures like Philemon and Salome, Jung accepted them initially as external entities rather than talking phantasms. On the one hand, this was not necessarily the “religious” move of a potential believer—as a reader of William James, Jung followed radical empiricism’s call to stick to the phenomenological surface of even the strangest fringes of consciousness. However, this more empirical angle of approach did not diminish Jung’s more theoretical hunch that these figures expressed archetypal patterns—like the wise old man and the anima in this case—that lurked in potentia in a collective unconscious that exceeded the boundaries of the individual psyche. By locating the collective unconscious (somewhere) outside the individual ego (though still “within” the subject), Jung was able to attribute an ontological density to these inner Others that would otherwise have been quite a tough sell. By the time he was deep into his alchemical studies, in

199. Though Jung found James’s attention to phenomenology a great help in approaching unusual states of consciousness from a non-pathological perspective, he also found pragmatism overly “business-like,” preferring a more creative response rooted in Romanticism. For more on James influence on Jung, see Sonu Shamdasani, *Jung
the forties, he had embraced a more hieratic language on top of this speculative realism. “In so far as the standpoint of analytical psychology is realistic, i.e., based on assumption that the contents of the psyche are realities, all these figures stand for an unconscious component of the personality which might well be endowed with a higher form of consciousness transcending that of the ordinary human being.” In other words, the archetypes are not only Outside, they are potentially Above.

Again, I am not so interested here with the “truth” of this approach as I am with its practical entailments. Given that Jung considered the collective unconscious to be a species-wide phenomenon reaching back into the archaic roots of civilization, its exploration counciled a certain method. When confronting the unconscious—a process Jung acknowledges can convince even a “hard-boiled rationalist” that they are going mad—one needs to contextualize and elucidate its wild and threatening images. This process, even from the perspective of secular pathology, “leads logically into the depths of religious phenomenology”—in other words, into the interpretation and orchestrated resonance of gods, stories, and tropes discovered in the world’s store of mythology, folklore, and religious imagery. As such, Jung’s authority became a portal for many readers and seekers to discover the cornucopia of comparative religion.

Indeed, with the extensive legend tripping he took through the symbols and artifacts of the human imagination, Jung resembled no-one so much as his sometime Eranos colleague Mircea Eliade, the Romanian historian of religion whose vibrant and impressionist cross-cultural studies of mythology and religious patterns were, like Jung’s work, extremely popular and influential in the sixties and seventies. Eliade wrote rich and definitive tomes on two topics dear to the counterculture’s heart: yoga and shamanism. *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom,* which was

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partly based on Eliade’s personal experience as a yoga student, exhaustively connected Indian philosophy with tantric practices and psycho-physiological techniques of transformation, while the shamanism study furnishing a term—the “techniques of ecstasy”—that almost seems designed to be appropriated by young freaks—despite Eliade’s insistence that the use of psychoactive plants represented a “degenerate” form of shamanism.

Eliade also fundamentally broadened the meaning of “religion” by providing sympathetic portraits of archaic, indigenous and tantric traditions as complex and sophisticated bodies of lore and practice. Though Eliade and the comparative enterprise was later harshly castigated as an ideological mask for colonialism, his work must also be seen as a strong and deeply influential turn away from the cultural superiority of the Christian West and towards the possibilities of spiritual difference. In some sense anticipating Latour’s ontological generosity, Eliade believed in a plurality in the modes of being, and that religious material, like works of art, “exist on their own plane of reference, in their particular universe.”

In his foundational Patterns in Comparative Religion, Eliade attempts to establish the validity of comparing traditions separated by space and time by focussing on the physical environment all humans find themselves in: a world of time and space, of sky, sun, moon, rocks, water. Eliade argues that these various elements possess certain core structural characteristics that authorize scholars to elaborate a symbolic morphology that can cross continents and span time, even resonating with what Eliade saw as a benighted secular West. The moon, for example, is a particularly dynamic natural symbol, since it presents an image of change with a regular pattern, a basic template that can be shown to underlie many different mythic formations whose recurrence might at first seem synchronistic. So, for example, Eliade shows that the connection

between the moon and the snake—which he finds in various locales—can be understood in light of their shared transformative character. While the sheer mass and variability of human cultures can always be set against such generalizations, the notion that humans share cognitive templates based on our shared biological experience of earthly life is proving to have considerable staying power, even if few dare to whisper Eliade’s name.

Along with laying out a possible morphology of symbols, Eliade also introduced his powerful notion of *hierophany*, a much-needed revision of the more theologically bound category of theophany. A hierophany, as a manifestation of sacred power, is, in Eliade’s vision, capable of being revealed—or, more accurately, concealed and revealed at the same time—*anywhere*. This is a stance he insists on at the very outset of his foundational work, and it is a point that his critics too often either ignore or misunderstand in their quest to condemn Eliade as an essentialist. Hierophanies, as different “modalities of the sacred,” can happen anywhere, and in anything: what is crucial is not the thing that manifests the sacred, or even, arguably, the sacred “itself.” What is crucial is the capacity of this event to happen anywhere, a relativism that, as Bryan Rennie rightly argues, places Eliade closer to many postmodern thinkers than is usually supposed (as does Eliade’s insistence on the related, and rather weird, ambivalence between the differential categories of sacred and profane). In part because Eliade wanted to bridge the gap between the ancients and the “existential” moderns, Eliade sought to remain within the immanent dimension of our cognitive and embodied situation, and for the most part resisted establishing a transcendent cosmological code or principal. That said, he was interested in the way that such possibilities—stirred up by exposure to other traditions, or by the peculiarities of consciousness—might rupture the only apparently continuous flow of mundane secular history.

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and therefor produce transcendental or transtemporal events capable of galvanizing a transformed view of time and cognition alike.

Despite the towering role that both Eliade and Jung played over a generation of scholars, readers, and seekers, their thoughts and works have lost a great deal of their shine in the halls of humanistic academia. One of the strongest complaints that self-consciously “critical” scholars have is that both men were practicing a sort of crypto-religion defined by intellectual hubris, colonialist entitlement, and sneaky ontological commitments. Eliade did feel that modern humans were lacking something that archaic and non-Western humans had access to, and he hoped that his hermeneutical prowess and immense and highly networked erudition could re-awaken sacred forces that are only “camouflaged” in the scene of modernity. Jung also wanted to rescue modern man from anomie, and his own trial by visionary fire unquestionably left him with a rather inflated image of himself as a sort of solar prophet resparking the pagan fire smoldering in the souls of Europeans only then throwing off the smothering blanket of a dead Christianity.

For the mystic sixties, of course, these sorts of aspirations—which started within a critique of modernity and gestured towards the breakthrough of spirit without reverting to dogmatic religion—went down like organic honey. Besides bringing some scholarly authority to bear on the exploding interest in exotic spiritual practices, archaic religions, and altered states of consciousness, Eliade and Jung acted as psychopomps for the Pandora’s box that had been opened up. Jung in particular played the trustworthy curator, providing introductions to crucial

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texts like the *I Ching* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, as well as the Taoist classic *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, and Paul Radin’s study of North American coyote lore. With their images and generous citations, Jung’s books on alchemy were essentially alchemical works themselves. With the illustrations and accessible language in *Man and his Symbols*, whose Dell paperback edition, as Gary Lachman notes, became a “campus craze” in 1968, Jung also helped turn attention toward precisely the sort of visual language—magical glyphs, mandalas, and surrealist alchemical diagrams— that resonated with the exploding visual universe associated with psychedelia and psychedelic art. But even more importantly, Eliade and especially Jung gave people permission—permission to explore the possibly traumatic shadowlands of consciousness, to search helter-skelter through the growing global archive of “archetypal” images and esoteric lore, and to construct comparative assemblages out of their own melange of sacred and profane.

In “Cultural Fashions and the History of Religions,” written in the seventies, Eliade for once turned his eye on contemporary Western culture and decided to “decipher some hidden meanings” from some current “fashions.” He chose the evolutionary mystic Teilhard de Chardin, the structuralist anthropologist Levi-Strauss, and the influential and popular French magazine *Planete*, “a curious mélange of popular science, occultism, astrology, science fiction and spiritual techniques.” Eliade reads Teilhard and *Planete* as both offering a sort of literary escape from the grim historicism of existentialism and Marxism that then dominated the university Zeitgeist. Instead, these texts “presented a living, fascinating and mysterious cosmos in which human life again became meaningful and promised an endless perfectability.”

The irony is that Eliade was himself on the edge of becoming another one of these sixties cultural fashions, and one whose influence similarly radiated from his own personal and
intellectual attempt to flee the prison-house of history and scientific language by remaining within the intellectual shadows of sacred possibility. Like Jung, as well as William James, Eliade himself manifested the weird modern oscillation between sacred and secular registers by writing books that crossed over from the university to the spiritual public, books that ultimately had as much if not more influences on seekers than on scholars. As part of the older generations who served as an intellectual cover for the wayward dreams of the sixties and seventies, all three men helped carve out a lasting cultural (and countercultural) space for a “spiritual but not religious” sensibility that could thereby fortify itself on the gathered lore of anthropology, Asian religion, and esoterica.

**Media Mysteries**

The occult revival was well established by the end of the sixties, propagated and supported through music, popular art, head shop paraphernalia, and book publishing. So what happened in the early seventies, with the great ebbing of the messianic tide? Magic and mysticism did not go the way of peace buttons or the New Left—if anything, the occult revival only intensified. Indeed, just as the hedonic ways of the sixties avant-garde spread into mainstream culture in the early seventies, so too did the occult go pop. While a number of popular television shows in the sixties featured occult powers—examples include the gothic soap *Dark Shadows* (1966-1971) and the comedies *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965-1970) and *Bewitched* (1964-1972)—the mediascape of the seventies was saturated with supernaturalism and mysticism. Whole new genres, like heavy metal and progressive rock, tapped occult themes, while the spiritual journeys of major rock stars brought gurus and mystic associations to FM

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Comics, poster art, science fiction, fashion, and even the demotic arts of airbrushing advanced an increasingly cosmic and trippy iconography. Esoterica was becoming big business—major publishers like Doubleday established occult imprints, while the UK’s BPC Publishing released the remarkable *Man, Myth & Magic* encyclopedia. The Thoth Tarot Deck, created by Aleister Crowley and Freida Harris, was first issued to the public in 1969; two years later, US Games issued their enormously popular (and exclusively copyrighted) version of the famed Rider-Waite Tarot deck. A riot of publishing also marked independent and underground outfits already identified with the spiritual counterculture: Llewellyn issued an American witch’s version of Gerald Gardner’s legendary *Book of Shadows* in 1971, while the Church of All Worlds and other nature religions developed Goddess and Pagan discourse through a lively network of periodicals, the flagship being Church of All Worlds’ *Green Egg* magazine.

During the early seventies, the explosion of occult materials—books, oracular tools, popular narratives, ephemerides, etc.—helped shaped the deterritorialized flux of counterculture consciousness as it engaged a darker and more paranoid era with its yen for enchantment and altered states very much intact. At the same time, a far more intense and organized response to the same flux was manifest in the extraordinary rise of so-called “new religious movements,” the explosion that Tom Wolfe rightly pegged, in 1976, as the “Third Great Awakening.” Facing what Wolfe called the decade’s “Grim Slide,” individuals sought a kind of symbolic immunity in religious identities and novel psycho-spiritual practices. Droves of people, deeply alienated from a sluggish System, and frequently disoriented from years of sexual, political, and psychoactive

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204. For more on this story, see Peter Bebergal, *Season of the Witch: How the Occult Saved Rock and Roll*, (New York: Tarcher, 2014).
chaos, sought structure and value within a fertile and inventive field of gurus, radical self-help therapies, ecstatic and other collective experiments.²⁰⁵

Many of these movements were explicitly or what one might “paranormally” secular. From the perspective of the history of religions, however, the most notable development was the unprecedented growth of what came to be called new religious movements, like the Unification Church, Siddha Yoga, and a wide variety of Jesus People sects, as well as earlier groups like ISKON (aka the Hare Krishnas) and Scientology. Usually led by charismatic teachers or gurus and sometimes relying on the counterculture’s already established ecstatic and occult sensibilities, these movements internalized the era’s utopian and collective expectations while providing crystallized social and metaphysical structures in the place of existential drift or hedonic confusion. Protean organizational forms simultaneously intensified, collectivized, and routinized extraordinary experience; even those groups that offered an ascetic rebuttal to countercultural hedonism, like the Moonies and the various sects of the Jesus Movement, still affirmed the core claims of experience, ecstasy, and inner knowledge.

At the same time as they produced extraordinary experience, however, many of these groups tightly managed them as well, providing authoritarian moral or cosmological frames of these events. Some experiments grew exceptionally rigid, others aggressively antinomian, and these sometimes pathological excesses catalyzed anxieties about “cults” fomented by the usual fear-based media. Most of these concerns revolved around the apparent loss of agency among followers, whose seemingly mindless devotions conjured fears of “brainwashing” that in turn led to a fad for aggressive “de-programming” measures to reintegrate individuals into mainstream

²⁰⁵ Again, perhaps the most classic sociological account of this process remains Steven Tipton’s Getting Saved from the Sixties, which showed how three spiritual movements—the Jesus Freak church, the San Francisco Zen Centre, and the Erhardt Training Seminars (est)—offered a moral rudder to refugees from the sixties. See Tipton, op. cit.
society. Indeed, with its secular insistence on cultural “programming,” the anti-cult movement of the seventies marks another ambiguous space where religious and secular narratives clashed and flipped into one another.

There is an enormous literature on NRMs in the seventies, but we misunderstand the spiritual movement of the era if we concentrate too much on organized collectives and formal institutions. This is particularly true for the story told in this book—with only a few important exceptions, all of our avatars of high weirdness had little contact with either new religious movements or explicitly sectarian communities, though some were interested in certain occult schools. Like many of the spiritual seekers of the era, they are better seen as singularities, though singularities who define themselves through and with a broad and heterogeneous range of materials that draw from the same well as many novel religious collectives or occult groups. Indeed, we will never understand the spiritual counterculture unless we make as much room for such singularities as we do for collective social forces.

To clarify the spiritual atmosphere of the early seventies, we need to develop a better sense of this “well,” and to do so we should invoke perhaps most helpful sociological concept that emerged during the early seventies to understand the era’s peculiar religious dynamics. This is the notion of the “cultic milieu” developed by the British sociologist Colin Campbell in 1972. Campbell wanted to map the forest rather than the trees: not so much the “cults” (which he meant in a nonjudgemental sense), or even the core beliefs that drew people into these groups, but “the collectives, institutions, individuals and media of communication associated with these beliefs.”

In other words, Campbell wanted to characterize the vast sea of methods, media, and memes within which a wide variety of actors—including cult leaders and followers, but also all manner of individuals—swam. Campbell derived his concept in part from Ernst Troeltsch’s notion of mystic religion, which was set against Troeltsch’s famous sociological distinction between churches, which are conservative establishments, and more innovative (and divisive) sects. Neither of these institutional forms, however, encompass what Troeltsch describes as the “radical religious individualism” associated with mysticism and Protestant Dissent. “This type had no desire for an organized fellowship; all it cared for was freedom for interchange of ideas, a pure fellowship of thought, which indeed only became possible after the invention of printing.”

As we’ll see, Troeltsch’s attention to the constitutive role of media in the emergence of the modern Christian “mystic” is key, but what is important here is the emphasis on his or her singularity and intellectual freedom. “The isolated individual, and psychological abstraction and analysis became everything.”

Of course, these individuals are not perfectly isolated, but located within loose networks of conversations, cultural artifacts, texts, public lectures, and all manner of institutions. This, for Campbell, is the cultic milieu, a concept that covers both the recombinant diversity of esotericism, and the more immediate informality of countercultural activity in the sixties and seventies. Indeed, it is Campbell’s amorphous milieu, rather than specific institutions, lineages, or even books, that form the context of high weirdness in the seventies. Elements of the milieu will be dealt with in the individual sections in part two of this book, and, given the creative freethinking that characterizes all our avatars, particular attention will be played to the texts, media, and concepts drawn from the ambient cultural stew. In this light, though, it is perhaps

208. Ibid.
helpful to replace Campbell’s somewhat awkward phrase with Christopher Partridge’s more resilient notion of *occulture*. A term first used by Genesis P. Orridge, a potent carrier of high weirdness memes and practices, occulture is defined by Partridge as “the contemporary alternative religious milieu in the West,” a zone “includes often hidden, rejected and oppositional beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism, and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices.”

I prefer this intentionally capacious notion of occulture to the “cultic milieu” for a number of reasons, not least of which is its diminishment—but not removal—of the controversial term “cult.” The spiritual media, practices, ideas, and collective forms that constitute the milieu are all satisfyingly classed as culture; indeed, they are perhaps best scene as a kind of marginal or recondite dimension to a popular culture that itself increasingly absorbs this esoterica until occulture finds itself riding its contemporary paradox of being both “alternative” and pervasive. Finally, “occulture” has a wider connotation than the cultic milieu, which can be more narrowly seen as the environment out of which more formalized New Age or other alternative sects and practice communities crystalize. Occulture, on the other hand, overlaps with the more consistently informal and piece-meal nature of popular culture in general, and gives far more room for a variety of relationships—belief, fascination, amusement, entertainment—that people develop with occult material.

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Seventies Occulture

At once heterodox and heterogenous, early seventies occulture is a particularly challenging spiritual domain to parse. On the one hand, religious currents within the sixties counterculture are both fragmenting and reconstellating, while the “New Age”—which Hanegraaff defines as the cultic milieu becoming “conscious of itself as constituting a more or less unified ‘movement’”—has yet to fully emerge.\(^{210}\) (Hanegraaff dates its emergence to 1975; others place it in the eighties.) As such, the early seventies must be seen, esoterically, as a rich and turbulent time when traditions, texts, practices, and identities were all in flux. When the sociologist Marcello Truzzi tried to get a handle on this occult upsurge in a 1972 essay, he defined five distinct areas: astrology, parapsychology, witchcraft and Satanism, Eastern religion, and a “waste-basket” that contained things like the Loch Ness Monster, UFOs, Nazi lore, and the prophecies of Nostradamus\(^{211}\). These are in some ways unhelpful categories, but their difficulties in a sense reflect the challenge of categorizing a moving mutant target, and the importance of all of these threads—with the exception of astrology—to the high weirdness ahead makes them worth briefly discussing.

The notion that “Eastern religion” is part of the modern occult, for example, raises a number of problems, some of which have, admittedly, been overstated. On the one hand, in the guise of neo-Vedanta and a variety of Buddhisms, “Eastern religion” had established itself in the United States in distinctly religious forms long before the early seventies. Institutions were formed, canons of “classics” were presented, and Asian spiritual leaders developed devotional

\(^{211}\) Truzzi, “Definition and Dimensions of the Occult,” op. cit.
followings; these processes would in turn explode during the seventies efflorescence of New Religious Movements.

At the same time, Western forms of Asian religion and mysticism often drew from western materials like Transcendentalism and liberal Protestantism which are only marginally engaged with the occult proper. Making this division also accords, to some degree, with those scholars of religion who insist that esotericism is an implicitly Western current, rooted in historical dynamics that go back to Antiquity.212

At the same time, other scholars argue that the Western embrace of Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist practices and concepts are best seen, not as transplants, but as signs of a Western Romantic idealism that has been projecting its dreams—including esoteric ones—eastward since well before the nineteenth century.213 And indeed, many dimensions of “Easternization” during the countercultural period represent less the importation of Asian traditions than the projection of Western categories, although the appropriateness of classing these mirror tricks with “the occult” remains unclear. On the one hand, many freethinking countercultural readers were influenced philosophically by Asian texts, by the Upanishads, Zen and the Taoist texts of Lao Tzu and Zhuangzi especially. On the other, many spiritual libertarians appropriated Eastern practices with the intent of developing esoteric powers or communing with oracles. Here the supreme example, which runs throughout our otherwise rather western story of high weirdness, is the widespread use of the *I Ching*.

212. See Wouter Hanegraaff’s discussion of definitions in Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 1–17. For an extensive discussion of the “Easternization” thesis, see Partridge, *Re-Enchantment of the West, Volume 1*, 87-118. Though arguing from a perspective less grounded in the historical current of Western esotericism, Partridge also agrees with Hanegraaff that the modern occult revival should not be seen as an instance of “Easternization.”

Another, more interesting problem lies with the category of parapsychology, a problem that in an oblique way points to ontological and discursive ambivalence that, I believe, drives much of the complexity of the zone we are investigating. While the occult has long attempted to appropriate the concepts and ambiguities of modern science for its own ends, the protocols of knowledge production among occultists—diviners say, or astral pathworkers—are generally divergent from those public and more narrowly empirical procedures of data collection, theoretical production, and dissemination that constitute institutional sciences in the twentieth century. Of course, the earliest proponents of “psychical research” considered their work scientific, or at least psychological, and establishing and maintaining that credibility was vital to many subsequent researchers, particularly the school established by Joseph Banks Rhine at Duke University in the twenties. After weathering decades of critique and skepticism, the field of parapsychological research could, by the postwar period, almost be defined by the attempt to adopt (or simulate, skeptics would say) precisely those procedures, discourses, and forms of agreement that would inoculate it from attack.

In the seventies, the widening discourse of altered states, Asian meditation, and other extraordinary psychospiritual possibilities meant that research parapsychology itself expanded beyond the intentionally dry and boring boundaries set by Rhine and company. At the same time, an explosion of the sort of popular literature that Truzzi considers plunged even deeper into the fantastical, and provided plenty of support for the skeptical position that parapsychology is “really” just the occult in pseudo-scientific disguise. However, this blurring of boundaries also invites us to recognize that, in the seventies at least, the umbrella of the “occult” stretched beyond the boundaries of the numinous to encompass the zone we have previously identified as weird naturalism—a zone of materialist indeterminacy, already suggested in the occult’s
historical roots in the “secrets of nature,” whose recourse to experimental protocols and biophysical theories complicates a strictly mystical or supernatural identification of the field.\textsuperscript{214}

This dimension of the seventies occult alerts us of a very important point: while commentators like Roszak emphasize the anti-technocratic “irrationalism” of the new mysticism, parapsychology also needs to be seen as an ontologically open or permissive mode of empiricism, a complex meshwork of psychological practices, experimental protocols, anthropological frameworks, and weird—or paranormal—phenomena, all knitted together, more or less, through various alternative or “bastard” modes of logic, physics, biology, and modes of causality. While, as Hanegraaff and Hammer have shown, the modern occult is in some sense constituted by its quasi-parasitic relationship to the discourse and practice of science, the parapsychology of the seventies is far more deeply woven into the apparatus and protocols of science, particularly through its imbrication with the disciplinary space of experimental psychology and its concern with ASCs.

If the category of parapsychology shows us that the boundaries of the seventies occult extends beyond sensationalist supernaturalism towards a weird materialism, so does Truzzi’s category of “witchcraft and Satanism” show an almost reverse boundary dissolution in the direction of pure fiction. Indeed, the peculiar ambiguity of high weirdness partly represents the widespread commingling of esoteric materials with fabulous narratives drawn from weird fantasy, comparative mythology, poetry, and science fiction. This proximity produces the second-order problem of where to draw the line between actual occult forces and freely invented

\textsuperscript{214} For my money, the single best account of the socio-cultural complexities of parapsychology and the paranormal lies in George Hansen’s \textit{The Trickster and the Paranormal} (Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris Corp., 2001). For an account of the paranormal as a contemporary reformulation of the religious discourse and confrontation with “the sacred,” see Kripal, Jeffrey John, \textit{Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred} (University of Chicago Press, 2010).
fictions, but it more intriguingly suggests that a powerful imaginal charge lies in the “postmodern” suspension of that very difference.

The modern revival of witchcraft can be said to have begun with Gerald Gardner’s publication, in 1954, of *Witchcraft Today*, in which he related his experiences of the New Forest Coven and his initiation into the ancient witch cult by a certain “Old Dorothy.” Though scholars now consider much of this account a fabrication, Gardner’s presentation and enthusiastic reception depended strongly on the second-order “myth” that his presentation reflected an authentic and actual historical tradition. When witchcraft entered the United States in force in the 1960s, home-grown groups began to pop up alongside the proliferating lineages of British Wicca. By the seventies, these mutant witchcrafts would come to be classed within a broader “Pagan” movement—a term that was first used, in this modern context, by an early architect of high weirdness and invented religion, the Discordian co-founder Kerry Thornley.215 Among these Pagans were groups who did not ground their legitimacy in tradition and transmission, but explicitly and unabashedly appropriated some of their religious lore from fiction and mythology, and especially from the fantasy and science fiction novels whose consumption and attendant fandoms have long overlapped with occult and witchcraft practitioners. The Church of All Worlds, an early Goddess religion, based some of their rituals and cosmology on Robert Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land*, while, in San Francisco, the New Reformed Orthodox Order of the Golden Dawn freely acknowledged the role of fictional bricolage and the creative imagination—however divinely inspired—in the composition of liturgies whose authenticity was rooted in their power to effect rather than their historical origins.

Similarly, contemporary Satanists, especially the media-savvy Church of Satan leader Anton LaVey, quite consciously played with the “fictionality” of the occult imaginary. LaVey naturalized the ontology of Satanic ceremonies by describing them as forms of “psycho-drama” whose purely performative elements nonetheless possessed to power to effect psychological transformation. Helping to define one of the pre-eminent currents of occulturally appropriated fictions, LaVey also included, in his popular 1972 manual *The Satanic Rituals*, ceremonies that drew and adapted from the weird tales of H.P. Lovecraft. LaVey was not the only occultist to fold Lovecraft’s fictions into “actual” occult discourse and practice—Kenneth Grant had claimed some rather fanciful connections between Lovecraft and Aleister Crowley in 1972’s *The Magical Revival*. Unlike LaVey, who was always smiling out of the corner of his mouth, Grant’s degree of irony or meta-fictional play was more usually opaque. As we will see, Robert Anton Wilson also drew heavily from Lovecraft (and Crowley) in his *Illuminatus!* trilogy, wherein the infectious potency of the weird fiction writer’s work also serves as a “second order” reflection on one of the novel’s themes, which is the very impossibility of distinguishing fiction and actuality, particularly in those zones of culture and consciousness associated with occultism and conspiracy theory.

Fabulations, and those more communal fictions we call “modern folklore,” also play a role in Truzzi’s final category, the open-ended “waste basket” overflowing with weird things like the Loch Ness Monster, Nostradamus, Nazi sorcery, and UFOs. Compared with Truzzi’s other categories, the waste basket most clearly reflects the informal, marginal, and heterogenous character of occulture. That said, it too emerges from specific historical precedents.

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216. These were principally the work of LaVey’s disciple Michael Aquino. See my “Calling Cthulhu,” in Erik Davis, *Nomad Codes: Adventures in Modern Esotericism* (Portland, OR: Yeti, 2010), 114-135.
The immediate point of origin for this weird and paranormal lore vis-a-vis the counterculture is the work of the Frenchmen Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, who ran *Planete* magazine and wrote *Les Matins du Magiciens*, which appeared in the U.S. in 1964 as *The Morning of the Magicians*. The book, which Eliade discussed in an essay described above, included a rich smorgasbord of speculations and lore about pyramid power, alchemy, Gurdjieff, hollow earth theories, super-consciousness, Nazi occultism, Easter Island, and the Nazca lines, whose important implications of ancient astronauts Erich von Daniken would later, in 1968’s best-selling *Chariots of the Gods?*, take all the way to the bank.

With the spirit of surrealism very much in mind, Pauwels and Bergiers dubbed their approach “fantastic realism,” which they claimed represented not an escape into exotica or imagination but an attempt to understand the fantastic as an aspect of “natural law.” More specifically, fantastic realism depended on experience: it was “an effect produced by contact with reality—reality perceived directly and not through a filter of habit, prejudice, conformism.” This strategy—which of course proffered the MacGuffin of “reality perceived directly”—allowed *The Morning of the Magicians* to combine a rather sensationalist obsession with marginal or repressed cultural histories, conspiracies, and other esoteric enigmas with a more spiritual or transpersonal concern with “ultra-consciousness and the ‘awakened state.’”

However, though *The Morning of the Magicians* is an important precursor, it seems more fitting to lay the waste basket of fantastic realism—or weird naturalism—at the feet of one of the heroes of Pauwels and Bergier’s book: the American writer and “collector of coincidences” Charles Fort, who died in 1932 in the Bronx. An independent researcher, polymath, and

218. Ibid, ix.
219. For a marvelous discussion of Fort in light of the sacred character of the paranormal, see Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 96.
satirist, Fort compiled tens of thousands of examples of anomalies, oddities, and other wild facts, drawn from scientific reports, newspapers, and other testimonies. He called this data “damned” because it contradicted or escaped the explanatory regimes of the sciences of his time, and was, for this reason, largely ignored. While the substance of many of Fort’s speculative models read like Radium Age science fictions, his Mencken-like satire of arrogant scientistic cant and his overwhelming “procession” of enigmas helped create a crack in the dominant materialism spilling out of the nineteenth century. Fort showed that science, like all “systems,” strives to maintain and extend itself in part by managing its boundaries, and this involves excluding material that cannot be assimilated into what Thomas Kuhn would later characterize as its paradigms. “Science is not objective” explain the Forteans Pauwels and Bergier (who was a chemical engineer). “Like civilization, it is a conspiracy.”

By tracking and compiling counter-normative evidence—most of Fort’s first book is devoted to peculiar things falling from the sky—Fort tried to chase this conspiratorial mechanism out into the open, where its power bid for clarity and control could be set against what Fort believed was the fundamentally indeterminate character of reality. Though Fort’s selection was qualitative, he also proceeded quantitatively, as it was the sheer mass of similar reports, often from farflung places, that suggested to him that more than fancy or delusion was involved. Like a statistician, and like a diviner, he searched for patterns that transcended mere coincidence, even if those patterns themselves could not be pinned down.

Fort’s metaphysic is worth touching on briefly here, as it undergirds high weirdness. Sounding like a propounder of Buddhism’s theory of dependent co-arising, Fort argued that, at root, the objects, processes, and beings in reality are essentially interdependent, only different expressions of “an all-inclusive cheese.” Nonetheless, these appearances are continually striving

220. Pauwels and Berger, 92.
to achieve an independent and full existence capable of transcending our uncomfortable quasi-reality, which Fort characterized as an “intermediate” zone between Order and Disorder, the Universal and the Local, the Absolute and the Relative. Appearances pursued their quixotic quest for individuation by drawing boundaries around themselves, and excluding or “damning” elements of the inevitable Outside that remains.

This metaphysic suggested a particular (and peculiar) Fortean approach to knowledge, an ethics of the marginal well limned by Jeffrey Kripal. “If Truth lies outside every system, if every system is only an approximation or partial actualization of this Truth, then a better approach to the Truth can only be had by going outside the present system, that is, by transgressing the proper order of things.”221 For Fort this transgression translated into a sociological, philosophical, and ultimately quotidian practice, one that, in contrast to mystical wool-gathering, directly confronted ordinary life and the bizarre things that keep puncturing that ordinariness. Moreover, because the world of appearances is only quasi-real, it possesses an “essential fictitiousness,” an element of fabulation that had significant consequences for Fort and his closest readers. Linking together the impossible data in his archive of damned facts, Fort wove imaginative patterns and scenarios that would later be developed by science fiction writers. More importantly, however, he drew attention to the essential ambivalence earlier identified as the ontological pivot of weirdness, one that eludes conventional naturalism and religious mysticism alike, just as it eludes truth and fiction. One of Fort’s many marvelous quips points to this indetermination, and grounds it in the pragmatic experience of an irredeemably indeterminate

life. “I cannot say that truth is stranger than fiction, because I have never had acquaintance with either.”

Fort’s wacky humor, his transgressive suspicion of both religion and science, and his taste for cosmic “truth-fictions” endeared him to the counterculture. In 1973, the British fringe researcher (and science fiction fan) Bob Rickard began publishing *The News*, a “miscellany of Fortean curiosities” that continues to this day as *Fortean Times*, the best print magazine source for “the world’s weirdest news stories” (and one of the most entertaining magazines of the period). While modern Forteans are, by and large, more naturalistic and skeptical than Fort himself, they nonetheless continue to speak for the potent role of anomaly in the constitution of reality. Leaving issues of rationality and transgression aside, one might instead speak of the temperamental difference between, on the one hand, those who view anomalies as something to be avoided if possible and explained if necessary, and, on the other, those who view anomalies as a kind of *raison d’être* of thought, research, and even experiential practices. Fort, and all avatars of high weirdness, speak for the latter.

Indeed, when the sociologist Truzzi attempted to tie together his somewhat scattershot account of seventies occultism, he characterized the objects of occult knowledge and experience as “things anomalous to our generally accepted cultural-storehouse of ‘truths’.” As such, the ambiguous site of anomaly became an almost structural location capable of characterizing the highly heterogenous contents of occulture. In Truzzi’s decidedly sociological account, anomalies derive their frisson and their aura of inexplicable mystery, not from any essential characteristics of their own, but precisely and solely from their degree of divergence from more conventional

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and “establishment” social systems and cultural narratives. In other words, the seventies occult is best defined by something like Malinowski’s “co-efficient of weirdness,” a measure that must always in turn be measured against some sort of norm. This sort of differential analysis also accords with some of the best modern historians of the occult.

The pioneering British writer James Webb, for example, defined occult lore as “rejected knowledge” in his watershed 1974 book *The Occult Underground*, which traced sixties-style countercultural esotericism—in which occult material interacted with avant-garde politics and art—back to the nineteenth century. More recently, Wouter Hanegraaff, who persuasively identifies esotericism as a “third stream” of Western culture that shadows and to some degree mediates the two more visible streams of faith and reason, has provided an archaeology of what he also calls the “waste-basket.” In Hanegraaff’s view, the construction of the esoteric and the occult have largely resulted from strategies of scholarly exclusion that emerged in the West following the Renaissance rediscovery of ancient hermetic texts.

All of these definitions of the occult depend on a purely “negative” sociological or discursive characterization, one that marks the esoteric as a form of knowledge and practice that absolutely depends on conventional discourses for their very definition. On the one hand, we have here an admirable example of the interdependence of our intermediated world. At the same time, and following Fort, I would like to make a slightly more ontological suggestion: anomaly is a necessary zone of the real, or rather, of our various constitutions of the real. Whatever frameworks of explanation are brought to bear on experience—cultural narratives, common sense, statistical analysis—we seem to inevitably encounter data, events, claims, and apparent evidence that resist, undermine, and escape those frameworks, if only temporarily.

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223. Truzzi, 245-6.
Anomalies are avatars of the “Outside” that is produced through any act of demarcation, the potential rupture or crack in any boundary that organizes the real, from scientific accounts to the structured dance of our quotidian perceptual habits. Here we might think of Derrida’s insistence that a vein of differance at once parallels and undermines all systems of clarified distinctions, or Lacan’s insistence that any symbolization of the Real leaves a remainder, or shard—an unassimilable, traumatic kernel that resists symbolization. One name for this resistance, I would suggest, is anomaly, and the uncanniness that radiates from the damned data of psychedelic occulture in part reflects the ontological ambivalence introduced by the directly indirect “pointing out” of these indeterminate cracks in the real (or the accounts of the real). As such, we should resist the idea, pervasive in conspiracy culture and the New Age alike, that individual anomalies offer privileged access or “proof” about an essential or substantial order of the real that can be definitively established. Instead, and like Fort, I suggest that we suspend the aspirations of those systems of knowledge that promise to expunge or solve paradoxes and anomalies, and instead carve out an almost phantasmic opening for Fort’s procession of the damned—the “naive and the pedantic and the bizarre and the grotesque and the sincere and the insincere, the profound and the puerile.” In other words: the weird.
CHAPTER THREE. LA CHORRERA:
THE SCIENTIFIC ROMANCE OF THE BROTHERS MCKENNA

On February 5, 1971, when Apollo 14 finally made it to the moon, its lunar module landed with something of a cultural thud, evincing little of the dazzle sparked by Neil Armstrong’s giant leap less than two years before. Both cosmic highs were delivered by America’s aero-space industry, of course, and the grim inertia of the Vietnam war may have throttled down public exultation in America’s military-industrial prowess on all fronts. The technological audacity of the Apollo program, with its largely symbolic payload, was also sinking into the trivialization that Guy Debord had identified the decade earlier as the underside of the spectacle, whose repeated gestures of mediated novelty become, through that very repetition, a TV rerun devoid of surprise. When commander Alan Shepherd strapped a six iron to a lunar excavation tool and whacked two golf balls across the Fra Mauro Highlands, he became, in a sense, the typical tourist, that agent of commodification whose freedom of movement, as Debord writes, is “nothing more than the leisure of going to see what has become banal.”

That said, the cosmic is not so easily put down, especially, perhaps, in the early seventies. During the voyage home, Shepherd’s fellow astronaut Edgar Mitchell, drifting into a weightless contemplation of the onrushing earth, performed unofficial ESP experiments with planetside comrades-in-PSI. He also experienced an ecstasy of “universal connectedness,” seeing, with an intuitive clarity deeper than rational calculation, that his body and the spacecraft were alike composed of molecules forged in the maw of stars, that the current incarnation of these molecules as a manned space vehicle was part of an unfolding and intelligent cosmic process, and that the universe was “in some way conscious.”

Months later, after diving into the sort of esoteric literature served up so readily by the publishing houses of the day, Mitchell came to identify his epiphany as savikalpa samadhi, a mode of transcendental consciousness, widely described in Vedantic literature, that preserves a degree of duality between knower and known within the otherwise nondual condition of absolute consciousness. However, before Mitchell employed the slippery tools of religious comparison to identify and ground his singular flash in a particular cultural map of stages and states, he was floating, and feeling, without a net.

Mitchell’s extraterrestrial peak is a fit standard to fly over the far more obscure journey that is the subject of this chapter, a journey that began a day after the lunar landing when a handful of young Americans left the gritty Columbian river town of Puerto Leguizamo for the remote jungle village La Chorrera. They were embarking on a mission that could be described at once as hippie escapism, an ethnobotanical expedition, and an errant metaphysical derive. The instigators of the voyage were Terence McKenna and his younger brother Dennis, both of whom who would eventually leave significant marks on psychedelic culture, both above and underground—Terence as a popular raconteur, celebrated for his entertaining speculations and

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apocalyptic obsessions alike, and Dennis as an ethnobotanist and neuropharmacologist who studied ayahuasca and other Amazonian psychoactive preparations. In 1971, however, the McKennas were just a couple of intellectually precocious and highly imaginative young psychonauts mutually obsessed with botany, alchemy, science fiction, Marshall McLuhan, and mind-bending drugs (which, it is important to emphasize up top, very much included the associative engine that is cannabis). The experience they were about to stage in the jungle—an epic Sci-Fi psychedelic operation that came to be known as “the Experiment at La Chorrera”—would change the direction of their lives, inspire the domestication of *Psilocybe cubensis* mushrooms in America and, through, Terence’s widely distributed psychedelic raps and rants, kickstart the millennial return of the Mayan calendar that became the 2012 phenomenon.

We have three published accounts of the McKennas’s Columbian adventure. In 1975, the brothers put out *The Invisible Landscape: Mind, Hallucinogens, and the I Ching*, a formidable and arcane monument of speculative weirdness that includes two chapters on the concepts, protocols, and psychological after-shocks of the Experiment. In stark contrast to the dry and abstract tone of that text, Terence McKenna stretched out in his 1993 book *True Hallucinations*, an evocative and playful narrative that indulges in descriptive exuberance and funny lines. Dennis’ solo contribution was the memoir *The Brotherhood of the Screaming Abyss: My Life with Terence McKenna*, which he self-published, not coincidentally, in 2012. That was the year that Terence, who died in 2000, had selected as the most likely date for the apocalyptic culmination of the historical process whose secret structure, which he came to call the Timewave, was his central revelatory “take-away” from La Chorrera. All three texts in essence mediate one another—Dennis and Terence both cite Dennis’ 1971 diaries, Dennis quotes (and for the most part agrees with) his older brother’s account, and the theories in their joint text are
illuminated by the back story provided in the later memoirs. This meshwork is appropriate, for, as we will see, the Experiment was hardly a linear operation of strictly causal operators; instead, it mobilized and unleashed the sorts of inter-mediating network of resonances that pass back and forth between times, concepts, practices, and artifacts.

However, instead of plunging into the ontological maw of their preternatural encounters, I would like to begin with a more modest map of this network, with its building blocks and circuits of reference and feedback. I am interested, first of all, in the diagram of texts, cultural mores, and empirical practices that led them to the jungle in the first place, and that subsequently enabled them to build the protocols for the experimental invocation of what they called the Other. As one of the primal scenes of what Wouter Hanegraaff calls “entheogenic esotericism,” this “Experiment,” with its appropriation of occult, electronic, pharmacological, and fictional discourses and practices, also stands as a supreme example of weird naturalism, in which the orientation towards the fantastic holds fast to a materialism at once biological and alchemical.

**Freaky**

Early in *True Hallucinations*, before the crew head off to Columbia, Terence makes a telling comment to Vanessa, one of his companions on the voyage. “The political revolution has become too murky a thing to put one’s hope in. So far, the most interesting unlikelihood in our lives is DMT, right?”227 We will turn to the peculiar phenomenology of dimethyl-tryptamine in a moment; here, it is important to foreground the youthful radicalism that fed Terence’s project.

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Unlike most of the classic sixties psychedelic narratives, including texts by the likes of Aldous Huxley, Alan Watts, Timothy Leary, and Tom Wolfe, the McKennas were baby boomers who came of age in the bloom of the counterculture. Though most of their reflections were written far after the fact, their accounts provide a remarkable insight into that peculiar moment when, as discussed in an earlier chapter, esoteric and psychoactive experience were woven into radically emancipatory politics that came to express itself ontologically.

Terence arrived at Cal in the fall of 1965 during the Free Speech Movement, and as an Ayn Rand fan, he soon found himself “fighting the police at the Berkeley barricades shoulder-to-shoulder with affinity groups like the Persian Fuckers and the Acid Anarchists.” Later he participated in the Human Be-In and the “rolling orgies of the Summer of Love in the Haight.” These cultural imprints force us to reconsider, once again, the overplayed distinction between the “Heads”—which Terence most certainly was—and the “Fists.” As mentioned, groups from the Yippies to the Weather Underground combined activism and LSD, birthing a creature that Jerry Rubin called “Marxist acidheads.” But though highly scornful of the Establishment, Terence was not so much a man of the collectivist left as an anti-authoritarian “ontological anarchist” for whom technology, esotericism, and psychedelics were all crucial vectors aiming toward “the most interesting unlikelihood”: a revolution in reality itself.

In that sense, Terence is less of a head or a fist than a freak, a self-description adopted by many outliers in the era and one that, unlike hippie or radical, embodies a weird ambiguity at once political, cultural, and hedonistic. In True Hallucinations, Terence refers to his group of friends more frequently as “freaks” than as anything else, which makes the term worth unpacking here. The groundbreaking 1966 album Freak Out!, by the Mothers of Invention, is

228. Ibid, 185-86.
229. “Heads” and “hippies” get only one instance each.
the clearest point of origin for the term’s leap from the deviant spectacles of the circus sideshow to the emerging underground. The LP included an uncharacteristic and rather unfreaky exegesis by group leader Frank Zappa: “On a personal level, Freaking Out is a process whereby an individual casts off outmoded and restricting standards of thinking, dress, and social etiquette in order to express creatively his relationship to his immediate environment and the social structure as a whole.”

In Zappa’s LA, freaking out was also associated with a specific ecstatic practice: a wild style of free-form dancing devised by the charismatic beatnik Vito Paulekas, who would bring his crew of young, sexy, and outrageously costumed dancers to clubs along the Sunset Strip. In 1967, some sociologists working on the Haight also drew some impressionistic distinctions between heads, who used hallucinogens or possibly meditation “as a means of self-realization or self-fulfillment,” and freaks, who were more interested in drug kicks as such, and whose excesses could lead toward undesirable bouts of “freaking out.”

A year later, Tom Wolfe gave a different spin, writing that freak referred to the outlandishly stylish or the obsessive, as in “a Tarot freak.” The profane irreverence of underground comix, including Zap and Gilbert Shelton’s less pornographic Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, helped solidify the sensibility, which rejected straight reality but equally dodged the belief systems associated with new religious movements. By the early 70s, freak had a strong connection with various psychedelic, urban underground, and progressive rock scenes, and was even claimed, with a doubled act of reappropriation, by the anti-drug “Jesus freaks.”

230. The Mothers of Invention, Freak Out! (Verve, V6-5005-2, 1966). The term did not arise with Zappa but with Vito Paulekas.
I offer this excavation of a slippery term to point towards a different way of conceiving the relationship between psychedelics, consciousness, materialism, and politics, one that places less stress on the stereotypically hippie ideals of peace and love—and their corresponding spiritual rhetoric of unity and harmony—and more on the radical and sometimes mocking subversion of reality itself, a subversion I will suggest is perhaps better seen as “occult” than “spiritual.”

In his 1972 book *Freak Culture*, the sociologist Daniel Foss deploys the term freak as an “ideal type” to cover both the early hippie scene and the wilder New Left agitators like the Yippies, both subcultures united in their desire to effect the “complete discontinuity with the conventional reality.” One sign of this, according to Foss, was “an assertion of self-conscious weirdness directed at the disorientation and destruction of [the mainstream] culture,” an assertion expressed not only through scandalous modes of dress and comportment, but also though “the annihilation of meanings, the scrambling of communication, and the repudiation of culturally accepted principles of causality.” Hedonic excess, ridiculous satire, and general weirdness effect these goals in a secular or naturalistic vein. But so can many of the ideas and practices associated at the time with witchcraft, occultism, and shamanism, all of which repudiated “accepted principles of causality” not by rejecting causality altogether but by offering archetypal and esoteric alternatives to the idea of individual agency, Aristotelian logic, and science’s disenchanted billiard-ball universe.

The idea that the romantic woolyness and hardened street politics of the sixties youth culture share an overlapping cognitive orientation—and that this shared rejection of the technocratic System deserves the name “counterculture”—we owe to Theodore Roszak’s justly

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234. Ibid., 154.
famous book. Making this link, Roszak concluded that the counterculture was therefore opposed to reason and technology, and devoted to the “subversion of the scientific world view.”

Indeed, this opposition is retained in the stereotypical image of the hippie, with his organic food, pre-modernist identifications, and hazy, “mystical” discourse. Today, due to pioneering work by historian Fred Turner and many others, we have come to recognize the opposite point: that important countercultural actors and events were deeply marked by technological values and proved highly influential on a wide range of emerging technological “systems” and media practices that come down to us today. This hybrid consciousness was also evident in the case of Terence McKenna, whose ontological radicalism and interest in extreme states of esoteric consciousness was fused with an abiding interest in natural science, physics, and the visionary potential of a technological future. Even in their freakiest flights from consensus reality, the brothers McKenna kept a “naturalistic” eye on the ball, an attention to method and detail that paradoxically contributed to the intensity of the high weirdness they would face—and subsequently foment.

Terence fell in love with geology and natural history as a kid growing up in western Colorado. He collected and machine-polished rock specimens, amassed beetles and butterflies through the mail, and sometimes let Dennis tag along when he visited the once submerged badlands outside of town to hunt for fossilized shark’s teeth. Cosmology and natural history impregnated the imaginations of both brothers with vast evolutionary forces while also encouraging them to sharpen the sensory capacities required to register the sort of fine details

235. Roszak, 50.
that help identify biological and geological objects. The brothers were also stone-cold S-F fans. Their bookish father had been a long-standing fan of the pulps, and regularly brought home copies of Analog, Fantasy and Science Fiction, and the more paranormal Fate. The boys read widely among the mid-century greats who followed the Golden Age of the genre, but Dennis singles out Arthur C. Clarke, and his two classic novels Childhoods End and The City in the Stars—of which more in a moment—as being particularly important. At the same time, Terence (and subsequently his brother) was also drawn to the nightside of reason, and gobbled up the weird tales of H.P. Lovecraft and the even weirder alchemical texts of Jung, which he started reading while still in high school.

When Terence arrived at Berkeley in his 1965, his roving and arcane intellectual sensibility and predilection for minting “funny ideas” was already well established, along with an intense anti-authoritarianism nursed by Ayn Rand and J.D. Sallinger. Terence lucked out at Cal, where he was invited to join an experimental college run within the university by the political philosopher and education reformer Joseph Tussman. The two-year program gave no grades, met in a Tudor Revival house on the edge of the campus, and focused on discussion- and writing-heavy seminars that encouraged big-picture independent thinking outside of the usual disciplinary boundaries. As much a “great problems” program as a “great books” program, the college focused on the political tensions in various “cultures in crisis” throughout western history. But even as the Berkeley campus itself became a culture of crisis, Tussman—which Dennis casts as an “intellectual father” to Terence—was no radical, and held that the freedom necessary for democracy required the moral development of the intellect. Plato was a big part of the curriculum, a figure that influenced McKenna deeply even as the young man found his own

237. For more on the college, see Trow, Katherine., Habits of Mind: The Experimental College Program at Berkeley (Berkeley, Calif.: Institute of Governmental Studies Press, University of California, Berkeley, 1998).
way into the broiling currents in contemporary thought, discovering many writers who would
fundamentally shape his later ideas, including Mircea Eliade, Husserl, and Marshall McLuhan.238
Terence gained a modest campus following as well, as people began to gather at his flat—
already filling up with his first library of esoterica, Western magic, and Eastern mysticism—just
to hear his freaky pot-fueled raps. As Dennis explained, “Unlike most people, who get high and
grow quiet, cannabis…only made him more articulate, more talkative, and more able to weave
his enrapturing narratives.”239

Though seemingly too unstructured to be of much larger significance, this sort of stoned
conversational gathering, with its labile conversational modes, is absolutely central to the
spiritual and cognitive life of the counterculture. Though the frequent triviality of pothead
“insights” is itself a constitutive feature of cannabis lore, insights are nonetheless made and
reported. Moreover, there are important characteristics of cannabis thinking that would play out
throughout Terence’s thinking life, which was frequently spent stoned. One of the principle
characteristics of “cannabis consciousness” is the rich growth of associational links between
different domains of knowledge and perception. In his 1980 ethnology of American pot users,
William Novak cites one Terence-like subject. “When I’m high, the ideas just keep on coming.
Sometimes I wonder whether marijuana actually creates these ideas—or whether, perhaps, it
functions more like a magnet, drawing together the various iron filings of thought from different
parts of my mind (and perhaps elsewhere) and bringing them together at the same time and
place.”240

238. Though Dennis implies that Terence discovered these authors directly through the Tussman program, a
syllabus included in Trow, op cit, suggests that these more au courant thinkers were supplementary to the main
curriculum.
239. McKenna, Brotherhood, 147.
The religious scholar Robert Fuller links this intriguingly “magnetic” action to the experience that users often report of connecting the same sensory data to two or more distinct sets of concepts. Fuller argues that this appreciation for “multiple perspectives” in turn informed the “unchurched spirituality” of the postwar era and its underlying pluralistic and eclectic embrace of alternative worldviews. “Informal gatherings of marijuana smokers provided a forum for the transmission of the various mystical philosophies that made up the era’s alternative spirituality…The ‘increased conviviality’ and ‘feeling of enhanced interpersonal rapport and communication’ associated with marijuana use grounded these newly acquired beliefs in a sense of community and thus gave them greater credibility or support.”

Cannabis not only bathed these new ideas in convivial credibility, but staged the resonant and playful dance of comparison between ideas. As Novak noted, “for some, marijuana has served as a teacher whose principal lesson has been that life holds multiple forms of reality.” This dance was itself part of the freak art of bending and blending consensus, a cognitive labor aimed at both revolutionary and otherworldly possibilities, and one that Terence perfected like few of his generation.

Crypto Rap

After completing the two-year Tussman program in 1967, McKenna left Cal and hit the global hippie trail. Like many of his wandering peers, McKenna’s pop existentialist sensibility led him to see exotic travel as a vector of both personal authenticity and what Ben Brazil

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describes as an “idiom of fantasy.” He wound up in the Seychelles, where he holed up and wrote his first book, a short visionary rant called *Crypto-Rap: Meta-Electrical Speculations on Culture*. A fascinating and sometimes erratic combination of radical social criticism, psychedelic esotericism, and S-F media theory, *Crypto-Rap* crystallizes McKenna’s first Berkeley phase, and lays down many of the conceptual circuits that would help construct the Experiment at La Chorerra (and the interpretations of that experiment), as well as establishing some of the major themes of his later public career.

Reflecting McLuhan’s powerful media-centric influence on the text, McKenna offers an early “stylenote” to the reader. Here he explains the “discursive and conversational” qualities of the text by referring it to his own preferred medium: the verbal “rap.” Terence characterizes the rap as “mercurial and elusive, yet illuminating.” Because of its evanescence, live conversation is “humble and electric,” and its audience “a matter of synchronicity, being chosen by the constituents of the moment.”[i] Though prioritizing voice over writing, McKenna is less interested in full presence of speech then in the shifting and unexpected emergence of meaning and associations from the particular embodied situation of dialogue—a preference that is impossible to separate from his own enjoyment of cannabis-fueled vectors of eloquence. Nor was this the only way that cannabis, which he defines here in no uncertain terms as “psychedelic,” informed *Crypto-Rap*. As Dennis relates, when Terence arrived at the Ile au Cerf, he decided to plant a bed of cannabis seeds and write until both the book and the crop had reached maturity. This intertwining of text and psychoactive biology had an almost recursive effect, as one stream of mind-craft bled into another. When the grass was ready, Terence got totally stoned and decided

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that what he had written was terrible. And so he kept smoking, day and night, as he rewrote the
text over a month of extended stay on the island.

No publisher was interested in the resulting book, something that Terence eventually saw
as a good thing. Dennis similarly and accurately characterizes the text as “the kind of book that
an intense, angry young intellectual, fueled by psychedelics and radical politics, would write in
the waning years of the 1960s.”245 *Crypto-Rap* includes references to Cream, Dylan, and Syd
Barrett’s “The Gnome,” along with occasionally histrionic lines like “Stop the bullshit, the
warmachine, the hatemachine, the deathmachine.” [67] Indeed it is Terence’s anger at America’s
“Bullshit” (often in caps) that is perhaps the most important affective take-away from the text, a
key towards understanding the intensity of McKenna’s own psychedelic escape velocity. At the
same time, and perhaps reflecting Tussman’s influence, Terence rejected Marxism and the New
Left as well as the pastoral ideals of the “hip community” associated with the Haight. “Sacrality,
return to nature, and introversion is not an answer at all…We cannot turn away from our science
and our technology—we must purify ourselves so that we can magically and intuitively apply
these things for the force of Good.” [117] Terence called his own radical ethos “crypto-
anarchism,” whose radical transcendence of history would take place “through love, cybernetics,
alchemy, idealism, and Tantric Philosophy.” [1]

An eschatological, “metapolitical” process, crypto anarchism appears as a sort of fusion
of psychedelic experience, various esoteric traditions of consciousness transformation, and the
radical technological possibilities of media, whose developments Terence understood largely
through McLuhan. Like many of his youthful peers, Terence shared a fascination with the trendy

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244. As of this writing, *Crypto-Rap* remains unpublished per the author’s wishes. For one afternoon, the McKenna
estate graciously provided me limited access to a copy of the original typed manuscript. I have opted to include page
citations to the original manuscript in brackets inline.
Canadian media theorist, who announced the arrival of an electronic media universe whose kaleidoscopic sensations and tribal resonances were eroding the linear perspective and rationalist individualism he famously tied to the Gutenberg era of print. For McKenna, McLuhan provided a literate and historically-informed discourse that did not reject technology, but insisted on its active and reflexive role in the construction of reality and human perception. “Man is modeled by his symbols and his tools,” Terence wrote. “Both are forms of media.” [26] If human reality is recursively dependent on media technology, then the technological transformations of the latter would shake up the possibilities in the former—releasing, for McKenna, potential states of mystical consciousness and communion hinted at and described in esoteric texts East and West.

McLuhan’s approach to media was also informed by a deep if mischievous traditionalism. In contrast to the dominant tendencies of modern thought—whether understood as rationalism, empiricism, or the abstract dialectics of philosophy—McLuhan was an avowedly analogical thinker, which means that he saw himself in the tradition of those grammarians devoted to the “allegorical exegesis of natural phenomenon.”[246] Nature, in this view, is a text to be interpreted, not a mute object to be analyzed or a chaos to be mastered. As such, McLuhan was quite sympathetic to the revival of pagan humanism in the Renaissance, which turned away from the dry logic of medieval scholasticism and embraced the juicier—and sometimes hermetic and esoteric—interpretive frameworks that tied the cosmos into resonating networks of correspondences and analogies. Such analogic thinking deeply informed McLuhan’s media ecologies, and particularly his characteristic figure-ground reversal of form and content. The legendary slogan “the medium is the message” folds the content of media back into its form, whose technical, sensory and cognitive characteristics act as analogic templates for shifts in
consciousness and perspective that occur outside or through the parsing of any particular set of messages or explicit meanings. For example, by leading the eye towards visual gestalts and multi-dimensional figures, television was supposedly crafting a new cognitive capacity that itself could be read as a symptom of larger changes in consciousness and culture.

With their imaginative punch and visionary, even apocalyptic undertow, McLuhan’s ideas were superficially easy to assimilate into the druggy discourse of the youth culture. At the same time, it’s important to note that drugs also inspired McLuhan’s pronouncements on the electronic age. In his 1969 Playboy interview, for example, McLuhan characterized hallucinogens as “a means of achieving empathy with our penetrating electric environment, an environment that in itself is a drugless inner trip.” Using the same sort of “mystical” language adopted by many acidheads, McLuhan declared that LSD mimes the “all-at-oneness and all-at-oneness” of the new media environment of saturated information; that it “revive[s] senses long atrophied;” and that it gives a youth generation already “retribalized” by media technologies like television and transistor radios a further intensification of communal experience. Terence agreed, arguing that with the emergence of electrical media and cybernetic computers after World War II, the “eschatological rapport with the alchemical idea of the Spiritus Mundi” was re-established after centuries of interruption. [87]

As such, crypto-anarchism represents “a mysticism of electric culture,” the mercurial manifestation of an “electrically collectivized humanity.” [56] But it remains, for all its allegorical resonances, technological and material. Indeed, alongside calls for de-urbanization and gardening, the crypto-anarchist program that McKenna offers at the end of his text includes a


number of specific engineering goals: global standards for electronic components, the
development of holography, a computerized library capable of cybernetically automating
scholarship, and an “All Media Recorder” that would enable the recording and sharing of
individual experience. Presciently, Terence also notes the radical implications of the ongoing
miniaturization of electronic components, a vision that helps explain the origin of one of his
more charming later prognostications: a totally electrified world saturated with devices so small
that, “to the observer, the citizens of that collectivity appear to live in a sacral, nature-dominated
world that is totally lacking in machinery or technical accretions of any kind.” [135] McKenna
even gestures towards a kind of transcendental eugenics, envisioning the moment when
humanity can “scrap all our machines, all our cybernetic equipment, and place the means of the
God consciousness and eschatology within our own genetic material.” [161]

While these technological visions are not terribly surprising coming from a serious S-F
fan, McKenna also tied them to a radical countercultural metapolitics. He did so, moreover, years
before Timothy Leary made his early own seventies shift towards “Psi Phy” futurism. At the
same time, Crypto-Rap is also saturated with esotericism, including some important early
influences that largely disappear in Terence’s later raps. For example, Crypto-Rap carries on an
extensive and reasonably well-informed engagement with the “uncorrupted and unfragmented
tradition of gnosis” contained in the Tantra Shastras, which he read through Herbert Guenther,
Arthur Avalon, and less scholarly writers like Lama Govinda and Evans-Wentz. At the same
time, and with the great exception of the I Ching, McKenna’s heart lay in the West, with the
traditions of hermetic gnosis, Neoplatonism, Renaissance magic, and alchemy. Here, however,
he makes an important—though hardly original—distinction between the harsh anti-materialism
of gnostic dualism and the pro-cosmic orientation of hermeticism and alchemy, expressing,

unsurprisingly, a distinctly “tantric” preference for the latter. One of the central tropes of the text is the Neoplatonic One, a “nexus of logic and intuition” he contrasts with the Many. [39] In an Eliadean twist, McKenna also links this emanated multiplicity to the sweep of mundane history.

All history, the fall of light in a Van Eyke[sic], the dreams of Luther, Rome burning—all is about the One; its drive to appear in the material matrix, and the mercurial shifting of that matrix as it refuses to mirror the One, its scattering and reflecting, playing our the vast worlds of Maya. It is the stilling of that surface and its perfect mirroring of the One that makes all things become possible to the perceiver. [42-43]

The notion of history as the tension between the many and the One helps us understand the topology, if you will, of one of Terence’s most central ideas: that a kind of realized object, a perfected culmination of the “material matrix,” might fulfill history by merging with the One. In another text from the era, “stilling the surface” might refer to the sort of mystical illumination granted in yoga or zazen. But here the image is operationalized in a technological form. Terence tells us that the ultimate machine, the philosopher’s stone at the end of time, is “solid state.” In contrast to vacuum tubes or electro-mechanical devices, the moving electrons in a solid state device are entirely confined to the fixed materials that make up the apparatus. The transistor, the first breakthrough solid state device, was invented a year after Terence’s birth and a decade later bloomed into the first integrated circuit, which kickstarted the miniaturization of digital computers. As a technology nerd, Terence would have known about these developments, but his insistence on “solid state” also derives from his love of Arthur C. Clarke’s aforementioned 1956 novel *The City and the Stars*. In the novel, the homeostatic city of Diaspar is run on a largely hidden Central Computer that has reached what Clarke describes, in a brief précis on the
evolution of technology, as the “ideal of the perfect machine.” This ideal was important enough for Clarke to italicize it in the text: “No machine may contain any moving parts.”

This technical vision of mechanistic perfection, with its invocation of the unmoved mover, was then “esotericized” by Terence through exposure to McLuhan’s poetic media theory. For McLuhan, the formal, visible and structural characteristics of a given medium produce a sort of hermetic signature that expresses itself through and around the internal “content” carried through the medium—the famous “medium is the message.” In this profoundly analogical view, all electronic media share something of electricity’s particular signature, which McKenna associated with mercurial flux and the creative feminine. Electricity needs a form or body, however, and for this other side of the polarity, McKenna looked to solid state components.

In one passage, McKenna argues that the “Two sulphurs” described in some alchemical texts can be seen as, on the one hand, “the shakti-like mercurial element, the electrically circulating gnosis of the One,” and, on the other, “the heavy, Saturnine and Shiva-like, earthy cybernetic component.” The linking of these two sulphurs is accomplished through the intercession of an organic component—in other words, the human artificer. Even as McKenna overlays electronic, alchemical, and tantric polarities, however, he makes a crucial operational distinction between technological and esoteric expression. McKenna argues that, in the past, eschatological consciousness depended on psychological constellation around rituals, metaphors, and symbolic systems. Technology, on the other hand, holds out the possibility of creating a kind of post-metaphorical media. “Electrical solid state eschatologies however, by

248. I thank Finn McKenna for pointing out this connection to me.
249. In The Order of Things, Michel Foucault explains the logic of the hermetic signature: “The system of signatures reverses the relation of the visible to the invisible. Resemblance was the invisible form of that which, from the depths of the world, made things visible; but in order that this form may be brought out into the light in its turn there must be a visible figure that will draw it out from its profound invisibility.” Foucault, Michel, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 27.
investing the symbol in an electro-material matrix having no moving parts, creates a self-
sustaining symbol that is not dependent for its purity upon the transmission of a ritual or an
ideology.” [133] In this way, crypto-anarchism is able to instantiate, or “electrically numinize,”
older magical metaphors into hardware.

This solid state philosopher’s stone also owes a lot to McKenna’s long exposure to the
alchemical studies of Carl Jung. As with most of Jung’s work, Jung’s alchemical writings are
now strongly criticized by many scholars of religion and esotericism, but he deserves credit, at
least, for making the ancient art a topic of modern intellectual study. Where historians of science
saw the deluded chicanery of mountebanks, Jung found instead a visionary religious literature
and iconographic universe that staged and reflected the multi-phase work—or opus—of
individuation, the core self-development process of Jung’s system. In *Psychology and Alchemy,*
which the teenage Terence devoured, Jung argued that even as the alchemists explored the
transformative chemical potentials of matter with their retorts and sublimations, they were also
staging a parallel psychic process through their experiments. “Everything unknown and empty is
filled with psychological projection,” Jung explains. “It is as if the investigator’s own psychic
background were mirrored in the darkness. What he sees in matter, or thinks he can see, is
chiefly the data of his own unconscious.”

Two crucial points are important to note here. One is that Jung was not, as his more
recent critics sometimes forget, interested in “spiritual alchemy” alone, but rather in the
mobilization of psychic processes through laboratory practices and a confrontation with
enigmatic or anomalous matter. [251] (In fact, Jung suggested that alchemy entered into decline
when it became decoupled from actual chemical transformations.) The second is that, whether

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considered as a mystical or physical operation, the opus is not proscribed according to a standardized ritual form. Instead, it requires an “experimental” attitude towards the unknown potentials of transformed matter, an experimentation that includes a necessarily singular conceptual assemblage. “Every original alchemist, as it were, builds himself a more or less individual edifice of ideas, consisting of the dicta of the philosophers and of composite analogies to the fundamental concepts of alchemy.”

This construction is not just conceptual but semiotic and procedural, as much a work of mediation as of materiality. In Jung’s idealist account, the investigator’s psyche, or imagination, constitutes the “necessary medium” of the work, but also serves as its “cause and point of departure.” Jung casts this recursive process in the language of film projection, with the camera-mind’s images “mirrored in the darkness.” Here subjectivity establishes and propels its new “existential territories” recursively, though what Felix Guattari calls the “power of self-positioning, self-production, and a capacity to secrete one’s own referent.”

Defending the claim that some early alchemists were aware of this process of psychic projection, Jung points to the “Liber Platonis quartorum,” a text contained in the seventeenth-century *Theatrum Chemicum* but of considerably older origin. Here we find the insistence that the operator must himself recursively participate in the work (“oportet operatorem interesse operi”), a self-referential gesture captured by the alchemical symbol of the ouroboros and condensed in the artifact that the “Liber Platonis” author suggests as the ideal vessel of transformation: a human skull.

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253. Ibid, 258.
ambiguous is the early modern cry of the alchemist Gerhard Dorn, also cited by Jung:

“Transform yourselves from dead stones into living philosophical stones!”

If one of the features of science fiction as a genre or semiotic engine is the concrete literalization of metaphor, then we can say that Terence and his brother squeezed science fiction from a fusion of their esoteric sources and McLuhanesque media theory. As the literary critic Seo-Young Chu notes, “Every science-fiction world is a metaphysical conceit literalized as ontological fact within a narrative universe.” And the core metaphysical conceit of Crypto Rap, an invention that profoundly informs the Experiment at La Chorrera, is the living, if solid-state, philosopher’s stone. During the run-up to the Experiment, as the crew were plunging into psychedelic ideation of the mushroom trance, Evi had a vision of an “elf-like creature” rolling a polyhedron whose every facet opened like a window onto a distant time or place. In a striking act of comparison—which could also be seen precisely as the literalization of a conceit—Terence connected this vision to the lapis philosophicus of his alchemical studies, a connection that in some sense initiated the La Chorrera crew, imaginally at least, into a current of material metamorphosis. “I could feel the golden chain of adepts reaching back into the distant Hellenistic past, the Hermetic Opus, a project vaster than empires and centuries; nothing less than the redemption of fallen humanity through the respiritualization of matter.”

However, in order to grab ahold of this golden chain, McKenna also had to twist it, to render old alchemical dreams into a specifically science fiction vision: “the image of the philosopher's stone as hyperdimensional jewel-become-UFO—the human soul as starship.”

Though claiming that he had “never seen or imagined” the lapis in this manner, he was not the.

256. Ibid, 256.
258. McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 77.
first to make space opera from the highly polyvalent symbol of this “stone, which is no stone.” In his prescient 1959 book on UFOs, which the McKennas were very familiar with, Jung linked the lapis to the mandala, a symbol of the individuated Self whose upwelling from the collective unconscious he directly linked to the forms and behavior of flying saucers. Jung’s cosmic pulp-culture act of comparison, amplified with a shamanic and science-fictional overlay that we will later unpack, directly contributed to the McKenna’s belief that the end result of the Experiment would be the creation of “the ultimate technological artifact,” an apocalyptic device similar to “starships, time machines, crystal balls, magic mirrors.”

Note here the roping together of “science fictional” and “esoteric” devices, which can also be seen as the combination of technologies that penetrate space and time with those that mediate different ontological orders of reality.

However, the McKennas’ stone has a further, “living” twist: it is, at least in part, biological and metabolic. In contrast to Jung’s understanding of alchemy as a purely psychic operation of projection onto passive matter, or of UFOs as nothing but symbols of the collective unconscious, the McKennas wanted to construct a “biophysical technology,” one that would enable them to build an apocalyptic lapis, as Dennis put it, “out of our own bodies.” This respect for the productive forces and even agency of matter partly reflects the hedonic approach to consciousness expansion that marked their generation, which saw no conflict between spiritual and metaphysical pursuits and the exploration of pleasures, intensities, and corporeal, even erotic energies. More fundamentally, this visionary materialism encoded the brothers’ profound respect for the transformative effects of certain anomalous alkaloids, molecules whose metabolic action in the human body is inextricable from an ontological order of visionary encounter.

260. Ibid, 134.
Pharmakon

Though Terence enjoyed talking, thinking, and reading about drugs as much as he enjoyed taking them, they don’t make an appearance in Crypto-Rap until the second half of the text, when he offers up a metaphysical hierarchy of psychoactive substances. Cutting against the grain somewhat, Terence places mescaline and synthetic psilocybin above LSD, while “still higher up the tantric scale towards the One” is DMT, a potent hallucinogenic tryptamine that Terence had first tried in Berkeley in 1966. Though rather widely distributed in the natural world, the DMT in Terence’s day was generally restricted to synthetic powder or gum. When smoked in a glass pipe, DMT rapidly plunges the smoker into a vividly seething, intricately patterned, and cognitively overwhelming domain, only to return the user almost equally rapidly to baseline well within the hour.

Dennis writes that there is often the sense of crossing a distinct threshold, both sonic and visual, “of briefly poking one’s head into a parallel dimension where the most astonishing things imaginable were going on, all in a frenetic, circus-like atmosphere of hilarious ecstasy.”\textsuperscript{261} Terence compared the experience to “an audience with the alien nuncio”—an image whose crucial note of hieratic science fiction complements the Lovecraftian adjectives he regularly uses to characterize DMT space in True Hallucinations: “elf-haunted,” “unambiguously peculiar,” “hair-raisingly bizarre,” “titanically strange.” One thing is clear: with the metabolized molecules of DMT, or at least the DMT in Terence’s nervous system, we have entered the domain of the weird.

\textsuperscript{261} Ibid, 156-57.
Though DMT was marginally available in the underground throughout the sixties, the compound is largely absent from most sixties discourse, in part, perhaps, because many people found it a bit too much to take. In a 1966 article on the substance, Timothy Leary reports that William S. Burroughs hated it, and that Alan Watts compared it to being “fired out the muzzle of an atomic cannon with neon-byzantine barreling.” One psychiatrist Leary met had provided over 100 people with DMT, and only four of them had a positive experience. (Leary, needless to say, had a blast. 262) The McKennas were enraptured with the stuff, and their rapture, in turn, led to them to Columbia. The specific object of the their quest was an indigenous, DMT-containing concoction of Virola sap known as oo-koo-hé, which they had read about in a recently published Harvard Botanical Museum paper by the remarkable Amazonian ethnobotanist Richard Schultes. 263

While various DMT-containing snuffs were known to exist throughout the Amazon, oo-koo-hé was that rare Virola preparation that was orally active, which implied that it provided a more slowly metabolized and consequently less overwhelming journey into the bejeweled wonderland of DMT. In his article, Schultes explained that DMT was generally assumed to be pharmacologically inactive when orally consumed unless accompanied by monoamine oxidase inhibitors. The Banisteriopsis caapi vine found in ayahuasca, he explains by way of example, allows the DMT in the brew’s admixture leaves to become psychoactive, significantly enhancing and extending the visions. The McKennas were already familiar with ayahuasca, or yagé, from William Burroughs, who had come to the same depressing Columbian river town in the 1950s to

find and drink the brew. But the McKennas were more interested in the oo-koo-hé, in part because of a peculiar detail offered by Schultes’ Witoto informant, who explained that oo-koo-hé allows one to “see and converse with the little people.”

This last line “rang a bell” with Terence, one of those resonances that sound the uncanny networks of correspondences that drive both the perennialist spirituality and comparative religion of the sixties and seventies. McKenna knew the lore of the little folk through his reading of *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*, a collection of folkloric accounts of fairies gathered by the independent scholar, Theosophist, and Tibetan Buddhist popularizer W.E. Evans-Wentz in the twenties. Evans-Wentz’s text also proved to be of pivotal importance to the UFO researcher Jacques Vallee, who heavily influenced Terence with his argument, in the 1969 book *Passport to Magonia*, that the bizarre behavior associated with UFOs and their occupants may have less to do with outer space that whatever braided strands of culture and consciousness led to the often strikingly similar narratives and images of fairy lore.

These suggestive acts of comparison were, in Terence’s head anyway, magnified by his repeated empirical impression that the DMT space was inhabited by creatures he memorably characterized as “self-transforming machine elves.” In *True Hallucinations*, Terence describes one early DMT trip in which “dozens of these friendly fractal entities, looking like self-dribbling Fabergé eggs on the rebound, had surrounded me and tried to teach me the lost language of true poetry.” We will be returning to the “technopoetic,” S-F enigma of such entity encounters throughout this chapter and this book, but here it is important to note that Terence was and is hardly alone. In his own DMT account, Leary also reported “a band of radar-antennae, elf-like

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insects merrily working away.” Though influenced no doubt by Terence’s colorful testimonies, Dennis’ first DMT trip also staged an encounter with cartoon-like entities who seemed to welcome him—“so happy to meet you, meat-worm”—and invite him to join the cavorting. As a number of studies have since shown, entity encounters remain a persistent feature of DMT experience reports, even among users largely free of such expectations.

Schultes wrote that oo-koo-hé was restricted to a few Witoto tribes in the Columbian Putumayo region, near the mission town of La Chorrera. And so, with an audacious sense of daring-do not unmixed with a naive sense of entitlement, the young men set their sights on La Chorrera. The brothers were still grieving for their mother, who had died the previous fall, a fact that may help explain why their father allowed Dennis to take a break from his freshman year at the University of Colorado. Terence flew to Columbia directly from Vancouver. He hadn’t stepped foot in America since the low-key hash-smuggling enterprise he had been operating from India had been discovered by the Colorado authorities in 1969. With his name on Interpol’s rolls, Terence had been living like a fugitive; before arriving in Canada with a false passport, he had spent a long and lonely stint hunting butterflies in Indonesia. This isolated work allowed him to combine his love of Nabokov with his romantic attraction to natural history, and especially to the Victorian naturalist, evolutionary theorist, and sometimes Spiritualist Alfred Russell Wallace, who also explored the Indonesian archipelago.

Accompanying the McKennas on their “expedition” were three folks that Terrence calls, in True Hallucinations, “Vanessa,” “Dave,” and “Ev.” Vanessa was a Tussman friend from Cal,

266. Timothy Leary, “Programmed Communication During Experiences with DMT (dimethyltryptamine).” Though noting the presence of these “elves,” as well as various insect creatures (“Venutian crickets”, lobsters, etc), these play a relatively minor role in his experience.
while Dave was a “gay meditator” that Terence had met hitch-hiking around Berkeley. The crew had met Ev and her boyfriend Solo in Columbia before arriving in Puerto Leguizamo. The couple were white-robed fruitarians, members of an obscure “religious happening” known as the New Jerusalem. Ev was breaking up with Solo, and afterwards hooked up with Terence; Solo, who sometimes claimed to be the reincarnation of Jesus, Lucifer, and Hitler, and who communicated regularly with the “Beings of Light,” joined the expedition for a short time as well.

The crew thus made up a singular but still representative spore print of young countercultural values—values that were also announced through their expeditions’ cargo list, which included tape recorders, botanical guides, copies of the I Ching and Finnegans Wake, peanut butter, and lots of dope. Like hordes of young Western travelers finding and making the “hippie trail” across the globe, they were exploring the exotic backwaters of the globe in search of something hovering between enlightenment and fantasy, an arguably exploitative appropriation of otherness that nonetheless recognized the value of the encounter with worlds and cultures relatively untouched by western capitalism. Although the obscurity and remoteness of their destination was impressive—a town mentioned in a scholarly article, requiring multiple river hops and a four-day slog through the jungle—their search for a rare psychedelic El Dorado resounds with the echoes of colonialist natural science. Their expedition was certainly a romance, but it was as much a romance of science as of spirituality.

Equally explicit, and certainly more playful, was the phenomenological resonance between edge travel and visionary experience, a topography of the derive that in some sense underlies the construction of the whole global hippie trail. As their boat left Puerto Leguizamo, and dimethyltryptamine (DMT): Psychopharmacology, phenomenology and ontology. Journal of the Society for Psychical Research, 75, 26-42.
puttering onto the broad expanse of the Putumayo, Terence noted the deliciousness of the moment “when one has done all that one can for a journey and is at last in motion, no longer responsible, since that burden has been given to pilot or engineer, boatman or ground control. The world one is leaving has been truly broken away from and the destination is still unknown.” In *The Psychedelic Experience*, Leary had already described the function of a trip guide as “ground control,” so Terence’s analogy was clear: their river trip was setting the metaphoric stage for another trip deeper along, one that required a release of any cybernetic controls. At the same time, flowing in a kind of reverse current, Terence recognized that the Outside, when truly faced, ultimately defeats analogy.

The unfamiliar was everywhere, drawing inane analogies into common conversation. The Putumayo is like the Holy Ganga…The sky is similar to the skies of the Serengeti Plain, and so on. The illusion of understanding was a lame way of getting one’s bearings. The unfamiliar does not give its secrets in this game—the Putumayo does not become like the Ganga. The unfamiliar must become known as itself before it is correctly recognized.

Here, as he sets off onto the river of psychedelic Romance, McKenna acknowledges the stark limits of the imagination. As Patrick Lundborg points out in *Psychedelia*, Terence’s words also stand as a perceptive reaction to the wide varieties of institutional, countercultural, and psychological analogies which, by 1971, had attempted to conceptually wrangle psychedelic experience over the previous two decades. As noted earlier, psychedelics had already been constructed as psychotomimetics, as weaponized brainwashing agents, as dress rehearsals of tantric bardo journeys, and as percolators of revolutionary subjectivity. But though Terence and

Dennis carried many such building blocks with them, the McKennas had yet to construct the vessel, or the athanor, of their encounter.

Arriving at La Chorrera, a paradisal bug-free oasis near a gushing cataract, the crew discovered to their amazement that the cow dung strewn throughout the cattle pastures abutting the village hosted a riot of *Stropharia cubensis*, the “magic mushroom” species now known as *Psilocybe cubensis*. Terence had stumbled across one of these Columbian mushrooms before arriving at Puerto Leguizamo, after a more knowledgable freak pointed it out. He enjoyed a mellow experience, bookmarked the possibilities, but moved on to La Chorrera, hardly expecting to find cows—and the coprophagic fungi—in such a remote backwater. With no sense of dosage, the crew immediately started munching pairs of mushrooms.

In his journal entry of February 23, Terence describes his “gentle and elusive” trip in terms that waver between the animistic and cosmic. On the one hand, the mushroom is benevolent and, like peyote, “teaches the right way to live.” On the other, the mushroom is depersonalized, a “transdimensional doorway” left open by even more spectral Others. This latter sense of the psychoactive flora as a medium rather than a messenger was underscored a few days later, when the addition of smoked shavings of *Banisteriopsis caapi* to their mushroom explorations gave rise to a phenomenon the crew dubbed “vegetable television.” However far they believed themselves to have come from civilization, they brought their technological frameworks with them, along with the McLuhanesque reminder that form and content were folded within one another.
Shroom With a View

Today the magic mushroom has become such a ubiquitous logo of psychoactive tomfoolery that it is hard to remember that, in 1971, very few heads in North America had much knowledge or experience of them. Despite the lore about Mazatec curandera Maria Sabina that Wasson had leaked into the world, the pride of place in the underground imagination of the sixties went to LSD, which was considered by many heads—incorrectly—to provide a more powerful trip. While recognizing the logistical and market forces involved in this modest erasure, Lundborg wonders whether some of it might be chocked up to what Wasson identified as the long-standing human ambivalence around fungi and their liminal and vaguely animistic “behavior.” Mushrooms, we should remember, pop up profusely out of nowhere, often emerging from rot or turd, in damp caves or along dead tree stumps—in worlds, that is, that lie between life and death, animal and plant. Given how peculiar and suggestive their bodies often appear, is it hardly surprising that so many cultures, making their way through the enchanted landscapes of life before science, associated mushrooms with the uncanny, with mischief and sorcery, with spirit transport and immortality.

A far more pressing source of ambivalence is the fact that these evocatively flavored morsels—or their indistinguishable cousins—could sometimes kill. Wasson argues that folk

270. Never easy to procure, mushrooms fell out of symbolic favor when LSD hit the underground. Though some Canadians were caught intoxicated on local shrooms in 1965, it wasn’t until the early seventies that psychedelic users began to realize that psilocybin-containing mushrooms naturally grow across north America. And nobody had figured out a good way to cultivate them.  
271. See Patrick Lundborg’s discussion in Psychedelia, 173-181.  
272. The mushrooms that do show up on the surface of things, we know now, are themselves just transient representatives of a more lasting organism: the branching tangle of multi-cellular fungal threads that lies hidden beneath the soil. Under certain conditions of temperature and moisture, this network of mycelium—sometimes vast, and sometimes very, very old—sends up fruiting bodies like periscopes in order to distribute reproductive spores. The mushroom, then, is already an icon of itself, appearing in our visible world of fields and forests like an avatar of some more incorporeal spirit.
taxonomy records the attempt to resolve this ambiguity by distinguishing edible “mushrooms” from toxic “toadstools.” But this distinction is challenged in turn by nonlethal but psychoactive fungi, since the question of whether to classify their nauseating, disorienting, and sometimes terrifying effects as poisonous or not is to some degree a cultural affair—in other words, it partakes of the ambiguous logic of the pharmakon.

Some of the effects of Psilocybe mushrooms were recognized by Europeans no later than the fifteenth century, but there is no evidence they were consumed by Westerners intentionally until the twentieth. As Lechter argues, “for a psychoactive plant to become legitimated or even institutionalized there must also exist a culturally agreed context into which the strange experiences it elicits can easily be slotted, and thus made meaningful and comprehended.”273 Indeed, despite the healthy distribution of Psilocybe and other psychedelic mushrooms across the planetary surface, there is very little evidence, with few exceptions, that nearby human beings did anything other than opting to take a pass.

The Witoto who lived in and around La Chorrera, for example, certainly had room in their shamanic pharmacy for powerful hallucinogenic tryptamines like DMT, which possesses a strong structural similarity to the psilocybin and psilocin tryptamine alkaloids. Their apparent lack of interest in the fungi lends some support to the possibility that the cubensis was a recent arrival to the region, having followed the excrement of the zebu cattle, who of course were following humans settling into agriculture. Recognizing the Witoto’s indifference to the marvels in their midst, Terence makes a very telling remark in his February 23, 1971 journal: “This particular mushroom species is unclaimed, so far as I know, by any aboriginal people anywhere and thus is neutral ground in the tryptamine dimension we are exploring.”274

At first glance, this statement is both unwarranted (the Mazatec tribe that Wasson visited used cubensis) and domineering—the arrogant thrill of the colonialist, delighted to stumble upon undiscovered terrain or a raw material unexploited by the benighted natives. At the same time, we should at least note how remarkably far Terence is here from the stereotypical Rousseauian hippie-seeker, searching the landscapes of exotica for a wise master or noble savage. For Terence, the plant and not the man is the “teacher,” which is why he just wanted to get his hands on the goods directly and to examine them (and the dimension they open) on “neutral ground.”

Whether or not we believe that neutral ground is a real possibility for us perspectival humans, it is clear that Terence’s desire gestures towards natural science’s objective gaze and rhetorical degree-zero, and thus, once again, suggests a romance of science, or a romantic science, rather than the romance of religion or even shamanism. (Here we should recall how the chapter headings and subtitle for True Hallucinations—“Being an Account of the Author’s Extraordinary Adventures in the Devil’s Paradise”—allude to nineteenth-century natural history narratives.) Not unlike Jung’s analytic psychology, Terence’s psychedelic “science” is romantic in an almost topological sense.

For one thing, it requires the vector of empiricism and “exploration” to turn within, and to affirm extraordinary subjective experience as “data.” At the same time, such experiences have, in Terence’s view, a collaborative effect as their accretions partly construct the dimension encountered. Notice that Terence grants that the indigenous relationship with plants is a real claim that has real effects, effects that go beyond the usual understanding of cultural narratives as subjective, psychically localized projections onto an outside “natural” phenomenon. Instead, Terence implies that cultural practice and scripts, in mediating a particular species of psychedelic material, change the phenomenology of the “medium” for all future consumers of the material—
even for those outside and even unaware of that cultural “set.” Psychedelic phenomenology is therefore inseparable from a realist anthropology of the human imagination. In Crypto-Rap, Terence had already declared that “Objects, thought, dreams, hallucinations, metaphors and memories—all are real.” [20] As such, the extraordinary subjective experiences of psychedelics become framed within a natural (rather than supernatural) matrix, one characterized by multiple “planes of experience” or Latourian “phenomenological modes”—modes that Terence connects, not so much with tantric or even shamanic universes, but with the mathematical and science-fictional discourse of “other dimensions.”

This is the “weird naturalism” that the McKenna brothers brought to La Chorrera: a framework of radical empiricism and speculative excess that authorized their extreme and innovative attempt to cobble together, in real time, a schema worthy of their experiences. In his memoir, Dennis McKenna reminds us that he and Terence believed themselves to be quite different than more typical freaks like Ev and Solo, who used a wooden knife to cut their fruit rather than a metal one, “lest the blade destroy the fruit’s etheric body.” For Dennis, this crossed the line into “hippy-dippy foolishness,” compared to which, he says, he and Terence were “hidebound rationalists.” The older Dennis, writing in 2012, is being ironic here—as a professional ethnobotanist and trained chemist, his older eye recognizes how mythopoetic his and Terence’s ideas were at the time, and that the line they drew then between foolishness and reason was already already off the rails.

But this crucial qualification does not negate the elements of “rationalism” that helped organize the brothers’ perceptions, at least as they conceived and practiced them. Though Terence was hardly systematic in his account of rationalism, it certainly involved elements of skepticism (questioning appearances, and especially supernatural claims), empiricism (paying
close attention to phenomenological detail), and realism (the dimensions and particularly the entities encountered have some sort of ontological consistency). That these different orientations led to contradictory positions is inarguable; the point is that, in contrast to many young countercultural seekers, Terence’s dominant metaphors for the search for “higher knowledge” were, with the important exception of alchemy, not drawn from religious or esoteric mysticism, but a naturalistic S-F-inflected media theory keyed towards Fortean anomalies, visionary possibilities, and the ontological warp of limit experiences. As Terence once said, long after La Chorrera, “I think the proper way to contact the Other is with hard-headed rationalism exercised under weird conditions.”

In contrast to most psychedelic thinkers of the era, the McKennas did not adhere to a single conceptual model of psychedelic experience as being “tantric” or “shamanic” or even “Jungian” or “transpersonal.” Instead, they extracted elements from all these discourses and more to experimentally construct a conceptual, ritual, and pharmacological apparatus for encountering that intensive degree of alterity they dubbed the Other. As Lundborg explains, “Instead of trying to fit the contents of the trip into some presumed parallel from the field of religion or psychology, their novel ideas had been developed inside the psychedelic experience.” Where Wasson expected to find the affective and even philosophical source of human religion in the mushroom trance, the McKennas expected to confront an ontological “Other” capable of radically undermining expectations. While the “Unknown” or the “Other” or

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276. Cited in Lechter, 260. One of the later Terence’s most consistent pieces of advice for the prospective tripper was to “pay attention”—not the meditator’s open field of consciousness, but the rock collector’s sharpened eye, maintaining perceptual coherence amidst the maelstrom. Terence would often deploy scepticism, history, and naturalism to distinguish himself from currents of the spiritual counterculture that flowed closer to his own work than was comfortable. In his later public career, for example, he regularly ridiculed “nuts and bolts” UFO believers and New Age mystics, even as he promoted tales of extraterrestrial mushroom allies and glittering transcendental objects sucking us towards the end of history. To his credit, Terence was aware of the irony.
277. Lundborg, 44.
the “Outside” are all different templates that come pre-charged with their own logics, they establish a clearing for the appearance of an incomprehensible alterity that nonetheless possesses real effects, including the radical transcoding of cultural scripts and the uncanny possibility of encounter—an encounter that is, moreover, always relational. The McKennas’ orientation towards the unmarked, though itself a mark, therefore stages its own set of possibilities, a template whose ontological tension between natural facts and the fabulous Beyond mark the particular dynamics of the weird.

In other words, the McKennas’ romance of the Other derives less from a religious faith in incorporeal beings and more from the transversal thresholds in imaginative fiction. In The City and the Stars, for example, the young Alvin attempts to escape the city Diaspar, a utopian arcology whose inhabitants are terrified by the planet and cosmos beyond the city’s sealed boundaries. The topography of Diaspar reflects Clarke’s study of information systems and cybernetics, and cleverly stages the crucial distinction between a homeostatic system and the surrounding environment, while exploring the effect of perturbations in the boundary that dynamically links the two. Early in the novel, Alvin climbs the Tower of Loranne with a friend to show her one of the few places in the city where the surrounding desert and stars can be seen. His friend is too terrified to look, but Alvin peers though a stone grille that caps the end of a long tunnel. He sees a vast desert of dunes whose wind-carved whirlpools and gullies are so striking that “it was sometimes hard to realize that none of this sculpture was the work of intelligence.”

278 The nonhuman Outside, glimpsed in fragments between the hardened filter of human categories, is, it seems, ghosted by the Other. And indeed, when night falls, Alvin sees a perfectly elliptical constellation of stars in the sky—a star group that, the reader will eventually discover, is actually a center of galactic intelligence.
This concern with the Outside also deeply animated another one of the McKennas’ favorite writers, H.P. Lovecraft, whose weird fiction blended elements of fantasy, horror, and science fiction into a strikingly original and infectious narrative universe characterized by occult grimoires, atavistic cults, and a swarm of bizarre extraterrestrial pseudo-gods inimical to human life. In contrast to the supernatural ambiance of most ghost stories or gothic tales, the metaphysical background of Lovecraft’s stories is, ultimately, a “cosmic indifferentism” not so far removed from the nihilistic naturalism that Lovecraft himself took as his philosophy. The old symbolic universes still have some meaning, however, since ceremonial magic and the archaic rites of primitive cults encode, amidst their degenerate drivel, implacable truths about the cosmos. These truths include the existence of hidden dimensions of reality, whose quasi-believability Lovecraft was able to suggest by parasitizing on the increasing bizarreness of the actual astrophysicists of his day, such as the non-Euclidian geometry used to describe Einsteinean space-time, deployed to to such great effect in “The Call of Cthulhu” and “The Dreams in the Witch House.”

Alongside rituals and forbidden texts, Lovecraft’s portals to the Outside also included specific technologies, or what Eugene Thacker calls “weird media.” These are apparatuses whose mediation “only indicates a gulf or abyss between two ontological orders;” such media do not so much communicate as reveal “an absolute impasse” that communicates only through a kind of excommunication. In 1934’s “From Beyond,” for example, the scientist Crawford Tillinghast builds a device whose resonating waves, registered on the ear as a drone, stimulates the human pineal gland, allowing it to tune into domains of existence normally hidden from human perception. At first this new visibility appears as a “kaleidoscopic” whirlwind, a psychedelic

“jumble of sights, sounds, and unidentified sense-impressions.” This vision then gives way to a vision of semi-incorporeal jellyish entities filling all of space with their woozy mutual penetration.\textsuperscript{280} However, as Tillinghast warns a friend, the most frightening thing about the medium is that it stages, not just vision, but encounter: “in these rays we are able to be seen as well as to see.”\textsuperscript{281}

The key element here is not the horrors that lurk in visionary consciousness but the Lovecraftian equation of knowledge and trauma. In his tales, the pursuit of hidden realities, through scientific or other means, often lead his characters to madness if not towards the possible destruction of mundane reality. These are primordial scares, of course, as well as primal scenes. As kids, Terence and Dennis loved this sort of thing—“or at least we loved scaring ourselves with the notion that just beyond the veil of the mundane world were multiple realities that could manifest themselves at any time.”\textsuperscript{282} Terence used to torment Dennis with whispered late-night stories of the gruesome “No-body People,” invisible wraiths who haunted the shadows in the corner of their shared bedroom.

This youthful dalliance with spectral ontologies also came to mark their generation, whose psychoactive explorations of liminal consciousness helped charge protocols and metaphors lurking in weird media—including the S-F pulp horrors of Lovecraft and other weird fiction writers, whose paperback reprints through Lancer and Ballantine helped fuel the occult

\textsuperscript{282} McKenna, \textit{Brotherhood}, 121.
revival. Indeed, the leap of ideas, images, and characters from fictions towards metaphysical or psychedelic possibilities, glaringly obvious in Crypto-Rap, was a signal feature of the countercultural imagination. Such imaginal samplings set the stage for the emergence of “postmodern religion” as a self-consciously “fabulist” mode of spirituality able and willing to overtly appropriate fictions for its work of building invisible worlds. But while weird fiction informed the McKennas’ construction of their fantastic apparatus, the operation was even more informed by a “weird naturalism”: a conviction that, for all the vagaries of psychedelic mediation, the Outside was real, and able to make its own marks.

Grammatology

Nearly a decade before the book True Hallucinations was published in the early nineties, Terence’s account of La Chorrera appeared as a collection of cassette tapes. This reminds us that no account of McKenna’s cultural production is possible without acknowledging that his main expressive medium was his own weirdly charismatic vocal performances—“raps” and “raves” that, when the tapes first appeared in 1984, were beginning to crystalize into public and eventually profitable performances and audio recordings. Given the multiple mediations of the Experiment and its apparatus (fantastic or otherwise), it is important here to draw attention to McKenna’s singular relationship with the spoken—and sometimes recorded—word. Though Terence wrote influential and fascinating books—including the two texts he wrote with his brother Dennis in the seventies, the head classic The Invisible Landscape and the pseudonymous, game-changing handbook Psilocybin: Magic Mushroom Grower’s Guide—Terence’s practice as

a writer needs to be put into strong, unresolved tension with his role as a speaking thinker and an often improvisatory raconteur. This tension not only informs his creative production, but more important for this study, it points toward an underlying metaphysical instability between speech and writing that informs both the protocols and interpretation of the Experiment.

These days, the tension between spoken and written language cannot help but invoke the specter of Derrida, whose entire project begins with a grammatology—a study of writing systems or scripts—aimed at dethroning the “metaphysics of presence” associated with the spoken word. Deconstruction seeks to dissolve the “logocentric” drive to discover philosophical foundations in the spoken word into the distributed and iterative networks associated with writing’s inscription machine, a post-metaphysical materiality of marks whose endless webwork of semiotic differance necessitates a perpetual game or deferral of meaning that refuses to align with a world of things or resolve into a stable meaning. Though “the Logos” was a key topos for Terence and his brother, his metaphysics moves in a somewhat more jumbled direction. On the one hand, as a child of McLuhan—who, along with Walter Ong, pursued a less critical form of grammatology—Terence was comfortable with the concept that the technical or formal dimension of a medium fundamentally shaped and constrained its expressive or even ontological possibilities. On the other hand, he did hold out the possibility of a direct, “post-symbolic” contact with the Logos, a notion grounded both in traditional Western metaphysics and his own psychedelic experiences, particularly while smoking DMT.

That said, Terence’s vision of the Logos was principally that: a vision rather than a conceptual system or even the hearing of a call. With smoked DMT, he emphasized, “language was transmuted from a thing heard to a thing seen,” as “syntax became unambiguously
Terence in turn hitched this revelation of language’s inner code to the ocular bias that historians of philosophy have traced back at least to Plato. In *Invisible Landscape*, for example, Terence and Dennis cite the philosopher Hans Jonas’ account of Philo Judaeus, the thinker who fundamentally shaped Christian theology by bringing together Greek philosophy and biblical hermeneutics under the sign of the Logos. Discussing Philo’s allegorical gloss of the word “Israel” as the one who “sees God,” Jonas describes the idea that a “a more perfect archetypal logos, exempt from the human duality of sign and thing, and therefore not bound by the forms of speech, would not require the mediation of hearing, but is immediately beheld by the mind as the truth of things.”

Terence’s most famous analogy for such “post-symbolic” mediation was the vibrant, signifying skin of the octopus—a pure surface of expression that in essence turned the mind inside out, freeing it from the sort of “depth” associated with the layered and displaced meanings of words and symbols. Such post-symbolic communication is the mode of mediation that Alexander Galloway characterizes as “iridescent” rather than “hermeneutic:” a rainbow-like effulgence of immanent intelligence that manifests as an “ecstasy of immediacy, producing a short circuit of hyper-communication.” It is this ecstatic, rather than philosophical, sense that McKenna meant when he described “the Logos” as a source or channel of information.

In the La Chorrera tale, the voice represents something trickier than vision, actually a polyphony of voices that reverberate, call, and interfere. Along with the seductive narrative voice of Terence on tape, we have the keening voice of Dennis, whose “machine-like” squeal catalyzes

284. McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 16.
the Experiment, as well as the mysterious Voice of the Other who appeared within the flow of their own internal conversations with an alterity impossible for them to ignore. But this trial by voice begins with a more humble and playful scene of inspired if not exactly Socratic dialogue. The associative logic of cannabis conversation, already well practiced by the McKennas and their friends, was only amplified when the group began spicing up their diet with the cubensis mushrooms found in the fields. In his memoir, Dennis describes their effect on conversation: “Puns came easily; our conversation was threaded with merriment and cleverness, all spilling out spontaneously, with no apparent effort.”

As the substance intensified the associative ping-pong of conversation, the McKennas also found that their “funny ideas” were becoming increasingly arcane and speculative. Half-remembered botanical articles triggered leaps into weird physics, ceremonial magic, anthropology, and personal trip tales, with the result that the outline of the psychedelic philosopher’s Stone and the experimental protocols to forge it began to appear. This was, it is important to emphasize, a collective dialogic operation: while many components from Crypto-Rap re-appeared, Dennis was more than capable of keeping up with Terence, and would take the lead in the technical fabrications to come.

The circuit of their wild theorizing ramped up to the point where they began to sense that an “other” was present for their conversations, a kind of ontologically independent overtone of their dialogue—or, arguably, a mascot for their growing folie a deux. Dennis writes that this Other seemed to lead them in some “nonverbal or perhaps metalinguistic” way toward certain conclusions. “We came to think of this other as ‘the Teacher,’” he writes, “though it was unclear

288. McKenna, Brotherhood, 234.
289. In Brotherhood, Dennis also mentions the influential friend John Parker, who befriended Terence in high school, corresponded intensely with Dennis, and whose wide-ranging interests in magic, drugs, and biology, along
whether that meant the mushrooms themselves, or if the mushrooms provided a channel for communicating with some unidentified entity." As noted in an earlier section, their accounts of this Other are unstable; sometimes it appears to speak, other times to communicate in “nonverbal or perhaps metalinguistic ways”; sometimes it seems to be the animist spirit of the fungi, at other times a far more galactic intelligence streaming through the portal of the compound.

**Resonance**

By this point, the Experiment was already being prepared, and with it the inevitable question of psychopathology. The undomesticated storm of ideas spilling out of the two brothers led to a significant social divide in the group, as Vanessa and Dave, holding to their skepticism and uncomfortable with the increasingly feverish tenor of the talk, moved their accommodations while the brothers and Ev continued their mushroom explorations. In a sense this social break prefigures the one that impressed on all hearers and readers of this tale, which like most accounts of high weirdness tends to polarize audiences between pathology and poetry, diagnosis and delirium, explaining and listening. Here, however, listening is the line in.

One evening in their hammocks, after consuming a hefty pile of nineteen fresh fungi, Dennis described an inaudible buzzing in his head that reminded him of some of the glossolalia-like phenomena Terence had reported on DMT. Terence asked him to imitate the noise, but Dennis demurred. As Terence narrates,

\[
\text{with this “hashish-filled conversations”, minted “many of the ideas that Terence and I would later call upon to force open the portal to hyperspace at La Chorrera.”}
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While we talked, the drizzle lifted somewhat, and we could faintly hear the sound of a transistor radio being carried by someone who had chosen the let-up in the storm to make his or her way up the hill on a small path that passed a few feet from our hut. Our conversation stopped while we listened to the small radio sound as it drew near and then began to fade.

What happened next was nothing less than a turn of events that would propel us into another world. For with the fading of the radio Dennis gave forth, for a few seconds, a very machine-like, loud, dry buzz, during which his body became stiff. After a moment's silence, he broke into a frightened series of excited questions. “What happened?” and, most memorably, “I don't want to become a giant insect!”

This blast of high weirdness kickstarted the Experiment proper, unleashing a flood of conceptual production in Dennis, and giving the McKennas the core theoretical and expressive element of their protocol: resonance. Before we continue with the story, we need to briefly address this concept, which, as noted earlier, itself reverberates across and between mythic, discursive, physical, and technical registers.

Recognizing the central importance of resonance to La Chorrera, Dennis provides a formative example in *Brotherhood of the Screaming Abyss*. During high school band practice, his instructor demonstrated the principle of sympathetic resonance: plucking the pitch (or frequency) of A on a bass string caused nearby strings tuned to A to vibrate as well. When the first string’s vibrations, rippling through the fluid-like air, encounter an energetic system tuned to that same frequency, its oscillations feed energy to the second system, causing it to sound in sympathy. Resonance here means two systems entering into energetic relationship mediated by frequency, a mutual oscillation that, once begun, allows the second string to continue to sound even if the first string is dampened. The phenomenon of resonance also allows

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a powerful singer to, at least theoretically (or in advertisements from the seventies), shatter a wineglass by singing at a frequency that produces a standing wave in the vessel that produces enough energy to put stress on flaws in the glass. Such a standing wave is known as the glass’s “resonant frequency,” which is that particular frequency that causes a physical system to oscillate with a self-reinforcing—or recursive—amplitude.

The phenomenon of resonance operates in many different physical systems, among molecular particles, in neural tissue, and in a host of electronic technologies, and can therefore be seen as one of the fundamental figurations of a cosmos that vibrates as much as it does anything else. But resonance also resounds within symbolic, philosophical, and phenomenological registers. The term derives from resonantia, the Latin “echo,” and one thing that physical resonance echoes is earlier magical doctrines of sympathy, which Kocku von Stuckrad describes as “a fundamental motif of esoteric discourse.” Among the Pythagoreans and Stoics, the doctrine of sympatheia establishes linkages between different parts and planes of the cosmos, and it also undergirds the famous correspondence between macrocosmos and microcosmos established in the hermetic doctrine “As above, so below.”

This essentially erotic model of the cosmos, centered on attractive conjunctions and networks of intimate relations, re-entered European thought through Marsilio Ficino in the fifteenth century to eventually become part of the modern hermetic underground as well as a significant topos for Romanticism. This resonant legacy took a particularly fascinating turn in the nineteenth century, when the scientific investigation and theoretical description of the electromagnetic spectrum laid the ground for a shift in esoteric language. Practitioners of mesmerism and hypnotism spoke of the necessary rapport or sympathy between operator and

291. McKenna, True Hallucinations, 53.
subject, while Theosophists began painting and describing astral “vibrations,” a term that itself would be recoded by later New Agers as “frequency.” Indeed, one generalization one might make about contemporary esoteric and New Age currents is that they frequently stress, in both theory and psychophysical practice, a vibrating realm of “energies” that simultaneously follow physical wave dynamics while eluding the measurement devices that normally detect such frequencies. As such, despite their at least tacit relationship to a phenomenology of resonance and other wave relationships, contemporary spiritual or esoteric discourses based on “energies,” “vibrations” and esoteric “frequencies” are frequently discounted as pseudo-science. But sometimes, as with the McKennas, a zone of indeterminacy is reached, where the systems that are set in resonance cross multiple fields of physics, sound, symbol, and phenomenology.

And as the musicologist Veit Erlmann notes in his book Reason and Resonance, even the physical phenomenon of resonance seemingly presents a challenge to the rationalist legacy of modern philosophy. With its notorious ocular bias, the rationalist tradition frequently characterizes the mind as a kind of mirror capable of capturing accurate representations of the outside world while retaining separation from that world. “Resonance is of course the complete opposite of the reflective, distancing mechanism of a mirror,” Erlmann writes. “While reason implies the disjunction of subject and object, resonance involves their conjunction. Where reason requires separation and autonomy, resonance entails adjacency, sympathy, and the collapse of the boundary between perceiver and perceived.”

Erlmann explains that the dichotomy between the resonating string and the mirror of reason lies at the root of some conventional models of historiography. These include both

293. For a brief discussion of this term, see Hammer, Claiming Knowledge, 238.
Derrida’s distrust of the “metaphysics of presence” carried by the spoken word, and McLuhan’s division between a premodern “acoustic space” of oral communication and a linear modern world based on literacy and visual images. Pointing to contrary traditions like Romanticism and twentieth-century phenomenology, however, Erlmann sets out to characterize resonance, not as a vector of McLuhan’s “‘prescientific’ magic,” but as a contemporary feature “inextricably woven into the warp and woof of modernity.” Here, however, McLuhan would agree, since in many ways he saw and described electronic and electromagnetic media in terms of a paradoxically resonant modernity, an archaic echo resounding through contemporary technology.

For example, let us look at—or rather listen to—the curious transistor radio that the McKennas heard that evening. This radio seemed to play a catalytic role in the production of Dennis’ eerie cry, as if the “small radio sound” filling the air coaxed Dennis’s inner audio—which he compared in the diary entry he wrote the following day to “a signal or very, very faint transmissions of radio buzzing from somewhere”—into expression. In Understanding Media, McLuhan underscored the connection between the radio and the phenomenon of resonance. “The subliminal depths of radio are charged with the resonating echoes of tribal horns and antique drums,” he wrote in 1964. “This is inherent in the very nature of this medium, with its power to turn the psyche and society into a single echo chamber.” Behind McLuhan’s claustrophobic and colonialist language—with its hint of Jung’s “subliminal depths”—is the specter of Hitler’s radio performances, and the widespread concern, among Anglo-American intellectuals both during and after the war, that the fascist ability to mobilize such irrational and seemingly

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295. Ibid, 15.
296. McLuhan, Understanding Media, 299.
“mythic” identifications on the part of the crowd was directly tied to the medium of radio and the almost spectral power of the broadcast human voice.

For McLuhan, radio was the ultimate example of the extension of the central nervous system, one that created “depth involvement for everybody” by echoing and resonantly distributing the power of the previously most important extension of man: human speech.297 By intimately and immediately delivering the human voice into the listener’s head, radio created a condition where “hearing is believing.” McLuhan pointed to Orson Welles’ famous (if overly dramatized) 1938 broadcast of “The War of the Worlds” as an example, though science-fiction phantasms usually took second place in his account to more premodern formulations of unseen forces, such as astrology and clairvoyance.298 “The effect of radio as a reviver of archaism and ancient memories is not limited to Hitler’s Germany,” he wrote, perhaps providing the words for what Terence would much later refer to, far more hopefully, as “the archaic revival.”299

McLuhan uses resonance as a conceptual figure to indicate an immediate sense of involvement and intimacy that draws multiple individuals into a shared, potentially Dionysian depth. This “all-at-oneness and all-at-oneness” also recalls Deleuze and Guattari’s frequent but very different use of the term, particularly in A Thousand Plateaus, where it is linked to the “subjectivity of communication.” Resonance, for these thinkers, is a key engine of stratification, the process whereby—in their jargon—singularities and molecular intensities are locked into molar aggregates and larger systems of redundancy, whether geological or social.300 Resonance is what organizes individual personalities into, for example, a nationalist identity. In addition to

297. Ibid, 299.
298. “The new society will be one mythic integration, a resonating world akin to the old tribal echo chamber where magic will live again: a world of ESP. The current interest of youth in astrology, clairvoyance and the occult is no coincidence.” McLuhan, “The Playboy Interview”, op. cit.
giving them a sonorous code for redundancy, Deleuze and Guattari use the term resonance because its simultaneously technical, discursive, and mythological force accords with their overall project, which is to produce transversal concepts that describe patterns and processes that cut across both material registers (nature and technology) and cultural ones (language and subjectivity).

This oscillation between material assemblages and psycho-social expressions is, from this angle anyway, not so far from McLuhan’s own less rigorous characterization of the “subliminal depths” of the radio. After all, McLuhan’s analogic interpretation of resonance as a conceptual figure for radio’s power—and what is analogy but a kind of figurative resonance?—is replicated exactly in the operational domain, since the strictly physical phenomenon of resonance defines the technological action of radio tuners. That is, in order to select and amplify a single radio frequency out of the thousands picked up by an antennae, radios use an adjustable oscillating circuit, known as a resonator, to resound with the desired frequency. Here, then, is the secret link between Marshall McLuhan and Timothy Leary: to tune in is to resonate.

In the diary entry he wrote the day after he first made the buzz, on February 28, Dennis described the sound he heard inside his head: “something like chimes at first, but gradually becoming amplified into a snapping, popping, gurgling, cracking electrical sound.”\textsuperscript{301} Such sounds, again, are a regular feature of anecdotal accounts of psychedelic phenomenology, especially in response to high doses of the tryptamines like psilocybin and DMT.\textsuperscript{302} By

\textsuperscript{300} “Strata are acts of capture, they are like ‘black holes’ or occlusions striving to seize whatever comes within their reach.” Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, \textit{A Thousand Plateaus Capitalism and Schizophrenia} (London: Continuum, 2008), 40. In this sense, resonance is not a term of liberation but of redundancy.

\textsuperscript{301} McKenna, \textit{True Hallucinations}, 68.

attempting to give physical voice to this virtual or “inner” sound, Dennis had to probe the resonating capacities of the various cavities in his body in order to find, and construct, a sympathetic vibration out of his voice. Once Dennis began imitating the inner signal, the voice and the sound “locked onto each other” until “the sound was my voice.” Here we can see how the nonlinear effect of resonance erodes the question of origins, and stages the conjunctive relations Erlmann describes as adjacency, sympathy, and the collapse of the distinction between perceiver and perceived.

Like the vibrations of an electrified guitar feeding back through an amplifier, the sound Dennis was making—and that was making Dennis in turn—became “much intensified in energy.” The mechanistic buzz took on a terrifying life of its own, as Dennis feared he might somehow “become” the intensely resonating vibratory circuit that he and the sound in his head were co-creating—a metamorphosis outside of speech and language that he imagined, or bodied forth, as a giant S-F insect. But just as the concept of resonance operates on at least two levels—the “a-signifying” behavior of physical vibrations and an analogic hermeneutics of esoteric echoes—so too did Dennis’ buzz establish a circuit between self and its alterity, between noise and sense, between a neurological artifact of pharmacological metabolism and the irruption of the sort of spontaneous meaning-events that Peter Sloterdijk discusses in terms of a “message ontology.” Dennis’s cry is at once a chaos and a call and response, and the indeterminacy is itself a vector of the intensity, of the ontological warp. As McLuhan asked in The Medium is the Massage, “What’s that buzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzing?”

303. Good singers can use the vibratory sensations or buzzes in their head and chest as feedback cues to guide their vocal performance; in overtone or “throat singing,” these buzzing performances produce eerie higher-pitched wails that transform a pure physical effect into expressive material that rides adopt the fundamental like a mirage.
In *True Hallucinations*, Terence tells us that, following Dennis’ terrifying first encounter with the buzz, he opted to “calm us all” by telling a story, a narrative from his time in the East that is presented to the reader as a chapter in his book, the remarkable “Kathmandu Interlude.” Not only does this metadiagnostic narrative embedding subtly draw the reader into the scene at La Chorrera, placing us alongside Dennis and Ev, but it sets up an act of comparison that suggests the “universality” of the sort of experience Dennis just had. In essence, Terence attempted to tame (or amplify) the anomaly through narrative “resonance” across time.

While living in Nepal and studying Tibetan with a lama, Terence took LSD with a British woman on the roof of his domicile. Smoking a large hit of DMT at the peak of his trip, he hears a “high-pitched whine and the sound of cellophane ripping.” He encounters the “chattering of elf machines,” which soon give way to a vision of flight over the Great Plains of Shang in the company of an undetermined number of “silvery disks.” Returning to the roof, he and the woman unexpectedly make love, howling and singing and devouring one another. “Everything had been transformed into orgasm and visible, chattering oceans of elf language,” Terence explains. He then sees something that utterly startles him: an “obsidian liquid” flowing over every nearby surface, glittering with lights, a surface that seemed to reflect the contents of his own mind. Staring into the surface, Terence sees a scene of his Tibetan teacher looking into a mirrored plate, a mirror he then realizes allows the lama to see him at that very moment. Finally, Terence looks away.

This story, which mediates the weird events of La Chorrera through its own retelling, is itself full of mediation, and particularly the fluid destabilization of two different sensory and semiotic boundaries. One boundary is between a-signifying sound and signifying voice, the “chattering” of machines and the “chattering” of language. This instability in turn sets up a more
significant boundary crossing or blurring between speech and the visible—in Erlmann’s terms, between the resonating string, which takes in every surface through fusion and contagion, and the mirror of mind that registers a world of external objects.

The striking image of the “obsidian liquid” also tripped something in Dennis, who, in a bout of journal writing the next morning, connected this material to a peculiar shamanic substance described in a 1968 *Natural History* article by the anthropologist Michael Harner.306 In his article, Harner describes how Jivaro (Shuar) shamans regurgitate “a brilliant substance in which the spirit helpers are contained,” a material that can be chopped up and apportioned with a machete.307 Running with the comparativist football, the McKennas blended Harner’s scant details with alchemical echoes and their own experiences, experiences that were themselves shaped by a crudely home-brewed ayahuasca the brothers added to their evolving drug regimen at La Chorrera. Out of all this, they developed the vision of a magical “psychofluid” or “translinguistic matter” that could extrude itself or leak from the psychedelicized body.

Whatever its degree of coherence, occult or otherwise, the paradoxical notion of “translinguistic matter” reminds us that the McKennas were plunging into the abyss that conventionally separates words and things, culture and nature, subject and object.

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305. McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 60-63.
The Stone

Over the few days following the buzz encounter, Dennis began to compulsively scribble bio-ontological theories and design protocols in a feverish technical language. This information, which he believed he was receiving from the Teacher, included the conceptual background and procedures for a psychedelic operatio he believed would help produce and subsequently fix the translinguistic substance of the Stone. At the core of these hypothetical protocols lay the phenomenon—and analogy—of resonance. Dennis believed that the psychofluid could be generated through the vocal effect he had discovered, a “psycho-audible warp phenomenon” that generated “a specific kind of energy field which can rupture three-dimensional space.“As

According to this wild theory, the buzz that Dennis heard was caused by the “electron spin resonance” of the metabolizing psilocybin alkaloids inserting themselves into the base pairs of his neuronal DNA, a sound that was picked up and amplified through the “antennae” created through the similarly resonating harmine alkaloids of the internalized ayahuasca. By imitating this sound with his voice, its harmonic frequencies would be cancelled out, causing the harmine-psilocybine-DNA complex to drop into a stable, superconducting, hyperdimensional state, with apocalyptic results.

Though the challenge of understanding this account is in no way assuaged by directly citing Dennis’ journals, it is worth doing so here in order to note the tone of the language and its reliance on the physics of resonance as a passage between acoustic, electromagnetic, and psycho-cosmic registers.

When the ESR tone of the psilocybin is heard via tryptamine antenna, it will strike a harmonic tone in the harmine complexes being metabolized within the system, causing its ESR to begin to resonate at a higher level. According to the principles of tonal physics, this will automatically cancel out the original tone, i.e., the psilocybin ESR, and cause the molecule to cease to vibrate; however, the ESR tone that sustains the molecular coherency is carried for a microsecond on the overtontal ESR of the harmine complex. This leaves the momentarily electrically canceled and superconductive psilocybin suspended in a low energy electromagnetic field generated by the harmine ESR. In so doing, it will regain its original, but now superconductivity amplified, ESR signal, which will permanently lock it into a superconductive state.

This superconductive condition would produce a standing waveform, a visible translinguistic object or fluid hologram, that would—again through resonance—begin to broadcast the information stored in the DNA. “The result will be a molecular aggregate of hyperdimensional, superconducting matter that receives and sends messages transmitted by thought [and] that stores and retrieves information in a holographic fashion in neural DNA.” This information would, in turn, become interactively available to their no-longer-quite human minds. Extending the eschatological speculations of Crypto-Rap, this assemblage of biological, electromagnetic, and acoustic forces would result in a “solid-state hyper-dimensional circuit” capable of defeating the tyranny of Time and initiating all of mankind into “galactarian citizenship” in the “hyperspatial community.”

308. McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 69.

309. The importance of human genetics to the circuit in part reflects Timothy Leary’s own enshrinement of DNA, which comes to play the role of God or dharma in his visionary materialism of psychedelic rapture. “That intermediate manifestation of the Divine Process which we call the DNA Code has spent the last two-billion years making this planet a Garden of Eden….We were all born Divine mutants, the DNA Code's best answer to joyful survival on this planet.” See Timothy Leary, *Start Your Own Religion*, (Millbrook, N.Y.: Kriya Press of the Sri Ram Ashrama, 1967), 1.

How are we to understand this fantastic apparatus? For one thing, Dennis’ more-or-less automatic burst of technical writing, scribbled under the guiding hand of the Teacher, offers further support to Wouter Hanegraaff’s suggestion that the Experiment must be seen, at least in part, as an instance of modern channeling. As Hanegraaff notes, channeling remains a poorly understood phenomenon, but it can be characterized from a social scientific view as an automatism that features inspired or articulated communication from higher entities providing spiritual guidance and education. Unlike spiritualist mediums, with whom they heavily overlap, channelers rarely make contact with the dead, and in this sense the practice is more harmonically aligned with esoteric and occult traditions of intercourse with angelic, demonic, or other praeternatural intelligences. There is, in addition, no shaking the technological overtones of the term channel emerging in the nineteen-fifties, in the middle of the first century of electromagnetic civilization.

One distinguishing characteristic of modern channeling is precisely the “technical” quality associated with the term by the UFO contactees who first employed it, and who were keen to distinguish the ontology of their practices from spiritualist mediumship. In the early postwar years of the contactee movement, figures like George King and George Van Tassell emphasized the quasi-electromagnetic factors involved in their communications. Van Tassell

312. See Hanegraaff, New Age Religion, 23-34. Unfortunately, Hanegraaff does not emphasize the “technical” or science-fictional aspects of channeling that help to distinguish it from spiritualist trance.
spoke of “vibration reception” and the need to be “tuned in” in order receive “transmissions”; some other contactees achieved communication through radio-telegraphy. 

Like so many of the esoteric currents of the contactee movement, this language shows the heavy influence of Theosophy and its discourse of “vibration,” but here there is a more central focus on the technical mediation and apparatus. Moreover, some early contactees also channeled technical designs for machines that also frequently relied on analogues of conventional wave physics. In the mid-to-late fifties, when he also organized the influential Giant Rock Spacecraft Conventions in Landers, CA, Van Tassel built the still-extant Integratron from instructions received from the space being Solganda. Though never activated, the barn-sized structure relied on a Multiple Wave Oscillator to generate ultra wideband EMF signals capable of “resonating” with and thereby rejuvenating human cells. Other contactees received plans for unusual media that would, in turn, improve more conventional communication techne. In The Saucer Speaks, George Williams tells the possibly apocryphal tale of an early fifties ham radio operator who received channeled instructions for a new antennae, a “screwy kind of skywire, like nothing in the books.” With his new device constructed, he was rewarded with a conversation with a Martian.

The hypothesis and protocols driving the Experiment at Lo Chorrera are far denser and more intellectually sophisticated than most contactee lore, especially as they are formulated in 1975’s Invisible Landscape, which the brothers penned together. However, in his 2012 memoir, Dennis writes that while many of his earlier words resemble “scientific jargon,” they are “nonsense.” Having spent decades as a professor of ethnobotany and a commercial research

scientist, Dennis speaks here with the well-earned voice of reason—a voice that I suspect well have been clamoring in the reader’s head these last few pages as well. The voice of reason here is the mind in the mirror, the mind whose very capacity to render account of its knowledge of the natural world rests on the clear separation between subjects and objects. The younger Dennis’ discourse still speaks with the voice of resonance, a feature of material existence that—both for the polyvalency of the term and the phenomenological fusion it represents—erodes the crisp boundaries between subject and object, mind and nature. Though this language may not be science, the machine that it diagrams is still a machine, a weird or science-fictional device that, as it were, orchestrates resonance and transversal conjunctions across a multiplicity of domains, including imaginative ones. Hanegraaff notes the science fiction here, arguing that Dennis’s language “sounds exactly like the type of technological jargon familiar from the Star trek (sic) series, which is at the origin of the ‘warp’ terminology as well.” For Hanegraaff, this S-F language helps underscore the delusional quality of Dennis’ ideation, though, as he feels the need to reassure the readers, “there is no doubt that the two brothers took it completely seriously.”

But this only begs a larger question: what is “science fiction,” and what do we do with it when we find it within the protocols of extraordinary experience and the language of spiritual anthropotechnics? Here we are helped enormously by a recent theory of science fiction offered by literary critic Seo-Young Chu. Chu’s argument inverts Darko Suvin’s influential account of science fiction as a nonmimetic discourse that produces its effect of “cognitive estrangement” through the construction of at least moderately plausible imaginative extrapolations. Instead, Chu argues that S-F, like realist fiction, remains a form of mimesis and representation. What has changed is the sort of objects represented.
In contrast to the ordinary objects encountered in realist fiction, like chairs and tables, the mimetic representations found in science fiction are anomalous but real objects—like cyberspace or black holes—that “are nonimaginary yet cognitively estranging.” These estranging and elusive objects somewhat resemble the “hyperobjects” characterized by Timothy Morton in a book of the same name, which he defines as objects—like climate change and relativity—that are so vast in space and time that they severely challenge our normal modes of reasoning about or picturing that vast category of “objects.” In Chu’s view, then, science fiction is a general mimetic strategy that attempts “to perform the massively complex representational and epistemological work” of making inaccessible referents available to our understanding. As such, she suggests that surrealism could be seen as a mode of S-F whose referent is “the phenomenon of dreaming.” The referent belonging to fantasy’s is “the prodigious working of the human imagination” while gothic horror bodies forth “the occulted-yet-irrepressible unconscious.”

As we saw with Crypto Rap, both Terence and Dennis took the discourse of science fiction seriously, as both a speculative engine and a representational interface for engaging cosmic (or naturalistic) alterity. If we read Dennis’ circuit diagram as a science fiction in Chu’s sense, what elusive object is it attempting to mimetically represent? Beyond the immediate bizarreness of the mysterious buzz, Dennis’s diagram could be said to provide a fictional representation of the phenomenological characteristics of the high-dose tryptamine trance itself. Once again, the medium is the message, and the message, driven by a metabolic compound perturbing the human nervous system into creative symptomology, is weird. The relatively stabilized patterns of waking cognition are destabilized into a chaosmos of energetic, perceptual, cognitive, temporal, and, yes, ontological rhythms and intensities.

316. Hanegraaff, “‘And End History, and to the Stars’”, 299.
317. Chu, 3.
Many of these phenomena—most obviously perceived in certain audio-visual phenomenological patterns—feature an iterative, reverberant, and vibratory character that is rather easily assimilated to the semi-formal language of frequency and signal processing. James Kent, an independent researcher, has described a number of these effects in his book *Psychedelic Information Theory* (2010). Though not a work of peer-reviewed scholarship, and not without its own science-fiction twists, the text is a deeply researched and largely level-headed speculative attempt to account for psychedelic phenomenology along neurological lines. Kent too turns to the language of oscillation, entrainment, and resonance. For Kent, psychedelics destabilize the top-down control that maintains the continuity of waking consciousness across multiple neural oscillators; “when the modulatory driver maintaining global oscillator coherence is interrupted, uncoupled oscillators will naturally fall into synchrony with [the] most energetic periodic drivers in the environment.”319 This openness to environmental feedback not only feeds cross-sensory or synesthesiac effects (think “visible language”) but helps explain the often powerfully entraining effects of external drivers, including many shamanic (and EDM party) techniques. Dancing, drumming, singing, chanting and rocking back and forth all act as periodic drivers. As such, Kent writes, “the shaman is the primary energetic driver, or resonator, stabilizing attractors

318. Ibid, 9.
319. James L. Kent, *Psychedelic Information Theory: Shamanism in the Age of Reason* (Seattle, WA: PIT Press/Supermassive, 2010), 51. Kent’s theory has received some support by one of the more significant psychedelic studies of late. In 2011, Robin Carhart-Harris and his colleagues used fMRI to show that psilocybin decreases blood flow to the brain, especially in hub regions, such as the thalamus and anterior and posterior cingulate cortex. Some of the heaviest hit regions have been associated with the “default mode network”, often associated with a sort of resting state of subjective awareness. These results strongly imply that the subjective effects of psychedelic drugs are strongly correlated with decreased activity and connectivity in the brain’s key connector hubs, enabling a state of unconstrained cognition.” Carhart-Harris RL, Erritzoe D, Williams T, Stone JM, Reed LJ, Colasanti A, Tyacke RJ, Leech R, Malizia AL, Murphy K, Hobden P, Evans J, Feilding A, Wise RG, Nutt DJ (2012) Neural correlates of the psychedelic state as determined by fMRI studies with psilocybin. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 109:2138-43.
within the chaotic hallucinogenic interference patterns created in the consciousness of the subject.”

The plans for the solid state philosopher’s circuit can thus be seen, in part, as a science fictional attempt to model the impossibly complex interference patterns and oscillating resonance effects that energetically characterize high-dose psychedelia, at least “from the inside” (whatever that exactly means). However, on the eve of their Experiment, Dennis and Terence were not just speculatively diagramming circuit-board representations of psychedelic limit experiences. Instead, they were preparing to activate those schema as productive programs within the vertiginous ontological theatre of metabolizing psychedelic phantasms. As Dennis writes, “The goal wasn’t simply to test the hypothesis but to fabricate an actual object within the alchemical crucible of my body.”

To articulate the creative dynamics of this event, to which we now turn, we need more than the language of neural oscillators and resonance effects. This is true whether or not such terms are being used in an “etic” or “emic” sense—that is, as neurological explanations or New Age codifications. Instead, we need a way to recognize and articulate the specific creative tensions, anthropo-technical procedures, and cognitive scripts that stage, construct, and crystalize extraordinary experience on the fly. Given the assemblage being constructed, such an approach will necessarily be heterogenous, sensitive to both naturalistic accounts of consciousness and the productive and even ontological dimensions of imaginative discourses like science fiction and esoteric discourse. In other words, Dennis’ turn to the warp of science fiction—which is also a turn to the weird—represents more than a tripper’s hazy sampling of a TV show in order to mimic the authoritative discourse of science. It also represents the selection of a module for a

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320. Kent, 55.
bootstrap program of psychedelic constructionism, and an enunciation of the creative potential of the weird as both a genre of wayward representation and a practice of unrepresentable wonder.

The Experiment

The Experiment began on March 4th, a date whose homophonic overtone was not lost on the brothers McKenna. They drew a circle on the floor of their hut marked with the four directions, and then set drawings of I Ching hexagrams at each of these cardinal points. In the center of the circle, they set a large fresh mushroom, which would provide the material template for the holographic Stone. They then suspended the chrysalis of a blue morpho butterfly nearby, an ancient archetype for the sort of material metamorphosis they were aiming for. Whatever mad science was running about in their brains, in other words, their ritual diagram certainly represents a more than “naturalist” array of figures and forces, however coherent the naturalism. Moreover, this diagram was to be performed. As Terence noted, “We were operating in a world where scientific method, ritual, and participation mystique were inseparably intertwined.”

The protocols and conceptual apparatus of the Experiment unite unlikely electromagnetic and acoustic wave phenomena, working across vast scales, with explicitly occult designs. How to interpret this heterogenous and partly fantastic assemblage of forms and forces? Here I am reminded of the Electric Pentacle that appears in some of the Carnacki occult detective stories written by the early weird fiction master William Hope Hodgson. In many of the occult detective stories of the era, investigators solve problems with clever ratiocination, but as Eugene Thacker explains, Carnacki combines “rational ‘scientific’ thinking with the appropriate tools for the

322. McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 94.
These tools include occult devices like the Electric Pentacle, which uses a steampunk array of battery-powered vacuum tubes to construct a more or less traditional magic circle. Carnacki’s inspiration for the device, a lecture on “Astral Vibrations Compared with Matero-Involuted Vibrations below the Six-Billion Limit,” reminds us once again how the fringe vibration models of Theosophy reverberate in the gap between electromagnetic action and occult forces. But unlike many traditional magic circles, Carnacki’s Electric Pentacle does not act as a protective barrier between the natural and supernatural. Instead, it serves to focus and intensify “the passage between them.”

The invocation of a fictional device is appropriate here, and not just because the McKennas took science fiction and supernatural horror seriously as models of the mysteries they were pursuing. As Thacker notes, Hodgson’s early twentieth-century blend of science and sorcery is not simply a fictional gesture. At the same time, nonfiction writers like Charles Fort were plying similar waters, which we might characterize as proto-paranormal, or, truthfully, as “Fortean.” What unites both fictional and parafictional or paranormal strategies, I would argue, is the genre or generation of the weird, an uncanny zone of possibility whose play between the natural and the supernatural already tropes the literary ambiguity between fiction and factual prose. This zone, in other words, can be approached from the other side, something that Chu already suggests by arguing that science fiction is a strategy of representing real objects that otherwise elude representation through their elusive, cosmic, complex, or monstrous character. In these terms, Hodgson uses the Electric Pentacle to stage a glimpse of the impossible but real limit of supernatural horror. For Chu this final object suggests the unconscious, while Thacker

323. Eugene Thacker, In the Dust of This Planet (Ropley: Zero, 2011), 68.
324. Ibid, 72.
more intriguingly argues that the object of horror is at root simply the opacity of nature itself, an occulted world that can never show us anything more than its own hiddenness.

But what were the McKennas attempting to capture or construct with their weird device, which loops together binary oracles and resonance effects, Attic symbols and alkaloids? One thing to emphasize is that their goal was not simply or even primarily a matter of the soul or “spiritual” dimensions—in other words, of interiority. Instead they wanted and believed they would manufacture an artifact out of material potential; if theirs is still a psychedelic mysticism, it is an object-oriented psychedelic mysticism.

Faced with these sorts of alchemical claims, many will be led to take the view that, absent a coherent scientific or even technological orientation, the most such peculiar rituals could achieve are purely interior psychological effects. Whatever their weird protocols might achieve, these productions arise only on the inside, making them less a matter of discovery or invention but a mere phantasm of projection, association, and delire.

There is another approach we might take, however, one that foregrounds the particular form that characterizes the sort of multimodal assemblages the McKennas had built in their heads and in their hut: the form of the network. As Bruno Latour remarks, the network approach, in which every node has a role to play, asks us to replace the binary split between psychological insides and material outsides with an account of the apparatuses necessary for the “production of interiorities.”

In other words, interiority takes place within extensive “psychogenic networks” that stage subjectivity precisely by crossing inside and outside. In his account of such productions, Latour offers a partial list of interiority networks, which include drugs, television,

325. Latour, Inquiry, 186.
326. Ibid, 188.
romance magazines, psychotherapy, horror movies and kid’s toys. It is perhaps not accidental that a number of these characteristic networks rear their heads in the run-up to the Experiment.

In this way we might say that one underlying intuition driving the Experiment is the active role played by psychogenic networks in the transformation of psychedelic subjectivity. The alchemical materialism at La Chorrera, with its networked resonance effects jumping scale between electrons and voice and symbol, could be seen as a kind of allegory for the very exteriority of the material and incorporeal arrays that help produce, or stage, extraordinary experiences on the perceptual organ of interiority.

This inside-out move helps explain one peculiar feature—or one particularly peculiar feature really—of the McKennas’ earlier speculations about translinguistic matter. In their thoughts, this shamanic phlegm was the result of the “rotation” of tryptamine through the fourth dimension, such that the resulting “trip” was on the outside of the molecule. In his book, Dennis attempts to clarify this doozy with the image of the inert molecule as a 3D score that requires the instrument of the human body in order to unfold into the “pharmacokinetic symphony” experienced as the trip. A wild, impossible notion for sure, but it also reflects the dimension of exteriority internal to their experiences, the pharmacological, technological, and discursive networks that drove their subjective transformation. In this way, their science-fiction fantasy—their apparatus of weirdness—refuses the usual model of drug action as a metabolic process internal to the body that triggers endogenous effects in the nervous system. With their protocols, the McKennas were inserting themselves into an array that stitched together of biological agents, cosmic resonances, and inherited cartographies, shamanic and fictional alike.

After setting up their ritual array, Ev, Dennis and Terence drank a small amount of home-brewed ayahuasca, ate some mushrooms, and lay back in their hammocks in anticipation. Dennis
then performed his vocal operation three times in succession that night, each time releasing an “unexpectedly mechanical” yowl Terence compares—in the account he gives in True Hallucinations, which Dennis cites at length in his text—to a bull-roarer, whose vaguely electronic and undoubtedly ritualistic buzz was first engineered in the late Paleolithic. How might we characterize Dennis’ catalytic sound? It seems at once a ritual vocalization and an energetic trigger, an invocation and an amplification, both a reflection of and a technique for breaking down the difference between his own sounding and the object-sound within.

Here we might recall Felix Guattari’s transversal notion of enunciation, of “enunciative substances which can be, on one hand, linguistic, but on the other, of a machinic order, developing from ‘non-semiotically formed matter.’” This criss-cross of sign and signal, of moon-howl and the “unexpectedly mechanical” buzz, installs itself, Guattari says, alongside and before subject/object relations. For Guattari, this zone of prepersonal fusion—which registers as empathy, as psychosis, as suggestion and participation mystique—contains the existential seed for the further production of subjectivity, rather than the usual signifying suspects: cultural or genetic scripts, or binary codes that obey the law of the excluded middle. Guattari calls this process “subjectivation,” resulting in a “transversal” conception of subjectivity that emphasizes both the active rupture of dominant semiotic redundancies and the conjunctive or mutant crystallization of novel subjectivities at the creative edge of becoming.

As a model of human subjectivity, Guattari’s deeply “interdisciplinary” views may seem excessively recondite, even eccentric. But they are almost tailor-made for understanding the protean phenomenology of psychedelic experience, whose pathologies veer into the psychotic terrain Guattari gestures towards, and that the man was thoroughly familiar with as a practicing

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327. McKenna, Brotherhood, 246.
328. Guattari, Chaosmosis, 24. The quote is Hjelmslev’s.
albeit unconventional psychiatrist. Faced with the high weirdness of La Chorrera, we are, as interpreters or experts, confronted right off the bat with what Guattari names an ethical choice. “Either we objectify, reify, ‘scientifise’ subjectivity, or, on the contrary, we try to grasp it in the dimension of its processual creativity.”\textsuperscript{329} This latter path, which emphasizes both singularities and the multiplicities that stage them, follows an “ethico-aesthetic” paradigm that creatively relates the project of subjectivity to its emmeshment within external, non-discursive machines and its investment in new cartographies of forces that emerge from the very diagrammatic processes that map them in the first place. “One creates new modalities of subjectivity in the same way that an artist creates new forms from the palette.”\textsuperscript{330} These creative if abstract machines move transversally and conjunctively across multiple domains of knowledge and expression, constructing both “self-referential existential Territories” and new incorporeal “universes of value and reference.”

These are weird words of course—Guattari writes his own kind of science fiction. But more simply said, the act of enunciation draws from both discourse and vibration, but most essentially it acts in a manner that grounds its own referents in the “event of their appearance.” Enunciation is therefore a bootstrap affair, a “mutation” of subjectivity that generates both new places to be and “incorporeal domains of entities we detect at the same time that we produce them, and which appear to have been always there, from the moment we engender them.”\textsuperscript{331}

This doesn’t mean you get the entities you expect. As the third siren-like sound died away, the brothers and Ev heard a cock crow three times. But despite this spontaneous and vaguely biblical addition to the resonating network, and despite their conviction that they had indeed passed into a world rending \textit{novum}, the mushroom in the center of the circle did not

\textsuperscript{329} Ibid, 13.
\textsuperscript{330} Ibid, 7.
disappear, or explode, or spontaneously cool to absolute zero, leaving the expected lens-shaped hologram hovering over the floor. This is almost certainly because, Dennis now says, “such an event would have violated the laws of physics.” However, the two brothers did experience a shared hallucination, as Dennis gestured towards the stubbornly untransformed mushroom that appeared to Terence, at that moment, like the big blue marble on the cover of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. “It is our world,” Dennis declared. Later, Terence reflected on his own transient impressions of this moment. “I did not understand, but I saw it clearly, although my vision was only a thing of the moment.”

*A thing of the moment*—what a subtly felicitous phrase. For what is a hallucination but a “thing of the moment”—an evanescent object whose phantasmic but real existence is marked precisely through its absence of the usual modes of substantial continuity? A nameless creature fluttering at the edge of our vision, our own name cried in a crowd, a leering face in the slipstream cracks of a nap. It is the short duration of such figments that allows them to appear without needing to be or suggesting anything other than the event of their appearance. It is time, rather than some manner of substance, that initially lends consistency to anomalous perceptions, whose duration often determines the degree to which we or anybody else feel compelled to account for such appearances. To see an anomalous object, like a miniature earth, is one thing if it is seen but for a moment. To see it for an extended period of time could of course still be considered as a hallucination or a delusive perception, but it is a hallucination that installs itself in a continuous enough fashion that both the experiencer and the careful observer have to deal with it, one way or the other.

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331. Ibid, 17.
Weird Media

For nearly two weeks after the Experiment, Terence and Dennis had a lot of high weirdness to deal with. Dennis spent most of the time “definitely disengaged from reality,” while Terence was unable to sleep, and witness to an array of synchronicities, time-slips, paranormal events, and seemingly posthuman states of cosmic consciousness. In most of these, however, we can recognize how visionary experience, however novel and striking, offers a play between present anomaly and past program, or script. Let’s take, as one example, the matter of the silver key. While Dennis raved, Terence placed himself in the position of alternately egging on and questioning his brother, even demanding that he produce the Stone as promised. During one conversation, the brothers recalled a tiny silver key from their childhood, a long-lost item that once had opened the secret compartment in a box of inlaid wood owned by their grandfather. In their conversations, it had come to serve as an “alchemical analogue” for the philosopher’s stone, and Terence asked Dennis to produce it as evidence of his new powers. After wrangling back and forth, Dennis asked for Terence’s opened hand, and then slapped a small, silver key into his palm.

At the time I was thunderstruck. We were hundreds of miles from anywhere. He was practically naked, yet the key before me was indistinguishable from the key of my childhood memories. Had he saved that key over all those years to produce it now, in the middle of the Amazon, to completely distort my notion of reality? Or was this only a similar key that Dennis had been carrying when he arrived in South America, but that I had somehow not noticed until he produced it? This seemed unlikely...

333. McKenna, True Hallucinations, 109.
On stage, in a seance, or in a parapsychology lab, this sort of apport or manifestation would smack of legerdemain. Out in the jungle, it takes on a more jagged and anomalous character, one that Dennis does nothing to dispel in his account, which backs up Terence’s story while claiming total ignorance about how he pulled off the performance. Of course, the tale is still nothing more than an anecdote, and from less than reliable witnesses at that, splashing as they were in the deep end of folie a deux. But unlike the purely verbal or semiotic character of many synchronicities, the physical manifestation of the key adds a concrete twist to the tale, establishing a “thing of the moment” that stubbornly lingers, both for the McKennas and—unless we call them liars—us. Perhaps Dennis just happened to have a small, silver key on him. Perhaps it was a mutual hallucination, whatever that is. In either case, the absence that the key is for us, reading this report, is inextricable from the presence of an empty lock that remains locked, an impossible box that no mere razor, Occam’s or otherwise, can open.

The matter of the silver key itself is part of a larger discursive network, as Terence himself admits ironically. He and Dennis were both fans of H.P. Lovecraft, whose work featured, as Terence wrote, “many dimensions, strange beings, a cosmic time scale, and reckless, oddball adventurers like ourselves.”334 One subset of Lovecraft’s stories have been classed by critics as the Dream Cycle, and some of these tales featuring the the dream adventurer Randolph Carter concern a silver key. At the beginning of “The Silver Key,” Carter, no longer the great dreamer he was a youth, has become a dull dreamer and a quotidian mind. “Wonder had gone away, and he had forgotten that all life is only a set of pictures in the brain, among which there is no difference betwixt those born of real things and those born of inward dreamings, and no cause to value the one above the other.”335 In other words, Carter is mired in an everyday rationality that

cannot recognize the extraordinary consequences that follow even from neurological
constructionism. In a dream, Carter encounters the shade of his grandfather, who tells him of a
silver key in the attic, a key that when discovered returns Carter to the world of his childhood,
and eventually leads to his physical disappearance. In a later story, “Through the Gates of the
Silver Key,” the peculiar Swami Chandraputra tells the deeply psychedelic story of Carter’s
return to the Dreamlands, a tale “full of those paradoxes, contradictions, and anomalies which
have no place in waking life, but which fill our more fantastic dreams, and are taken as matters
of course till we return to our narrow, rigid, objective world of limited causation and tri-
dimensional logic.”

Part of the game of fantastic literature is of course to bring the reader to the threshold between the two worlds of waking life and dream.

A similar “psychogenic network” of weird tales and paranormal concepts also inform the
remarkable UFO sighting that Terence reports toward the end of their La Chorrera stay. Warned
by the voice that appeared regularly in his head to pay attention to a particular site in the
landscape, Terence was rewarded with the vision of the haze over the horizon separating into
four perfectly similar lenticular clouds that subsequently merged, “as if nature herself were
suddenly the tool of some unseen organizing agency.” The swirling clouds then coalesced into
UFO shape that sped his way with a high-pitched whine. Terrified, and finally convinced “in all
that had happened to us,” Terence watched as the shape approached him before banking steeply
upwards and disappearing from view. The vision was classic: “It was a saucer-shaped machine
rotating slowly, with unobtrusive, soft, blue and orange lights. As it passed over me I could see
symmetrical indentations on the underside. It was making the whee, whee, whee sound of science fiction flying saucers.”

336. H.P. Lovecraft, with E. Hoffmann Price, “Through the Gates of the Silver Key,”
http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/tgsk.aspx
These genre resonances, however, did not match the peculiarity of the three half-spheres on the craft’s underside, a detail that rendered the object identical to an infamous George Adamski photo that was not only “widely assumed to be a hoax” but analyzed by some debunkers as the end-cap of a Hoover vacuum cleaner. Terence, who maintained skepticism about the UFO phenomenon throughout his life, was greeted not only with a vision of a classic flying saucer, but a vision that simultaneously revealed itself as a script: “Was it a fact picked up as a boyhood UFO enthusiast? Something as easily picked out of my mind as other memories seem to have been?” Echoing the theories of UFO researcher Jaques Vallee, who argued in the mid seventies that the meaning of UFO encounters lay precisely in the frequent absurdity of their details, Terence reckons that it was the ridiculous echo of a pulp culture hoax that, in his case, “achieves a more complete cognitive dissonance than if its seeming alienness were completely convincing.”

Other scripts can be recognized in the background of one of the most central features of the high weirdness that emerged with the Experiment: the impression that Dennis, or an entity within Dennis, had access to an “enormous, cybernetically stored fund of information.” Within psychedelic discourse, we can trace this figure to Huxley’s deeply influential account of the “Mind at Large” in the Doors of Perception. Huxley speculated that, rather than adding new information to the mind directly, psychedelics simply dampen or block the cognitive filters that normally restrict the overwhelming manifold of reality to the pragmatic constructs we require to get through the day. As David Luke explains the concept, “Under such psychedelic disinhibition of the brain’s inhibiting function, the mind is thereby capable of potentially remembering

337. McKenna, True Hallucinations, 168-9. As Terence himself noted in Crypto-Rap, this dissonant power is itself related to one of the core polarities of the modern mysteries “Wherever the sacred comes tangential to the profane a certain cosmic ridiculousness is generated.” [112] This notion bears sustained comparison with Eliade.
338. McKenna, True Hallucinations, 110.
anything it has ever experienced and sensing everything within its immediate environment.”

Though the uncorked perceptions and memories of a single nervous system might still generate the impression of infinity, Huxley expanded his notion of the Mind at Large to include a more mystical and supernormal account of knowledge and consciousness. In this view, consciousness is not so much generated by the brain as tuned by the brain, a more-than-individualized field that by its nature has a collective and even cosmic character. By adjusting the frequency of the grey matter, through drugs or other means of consciousness alteration, Huxley’s expanded Mind at Large becomes available, and, as Luke says, “is also able to access the entirety of information available in the universe, even forwards and backwards in time.”

As students of esoterica, Dennis and Terence would also have been familiar with earlier hermetic notions of supernormal memory and cosmic knowledge, especially as articulated in Frances Yates’ influential 1966 histories of Renaissance hermeticism and artificial memory. They also could easily have been exposed to the Key of Solomon, a text that circulated in modern occult circles and mostly likely composed during the Italian Renaissance. In the text, the magus greets and speaks with an angel in a dream: “And when I comprehended the speech with was made unto me, I understood that in me was the knowledge of all creatures, both things which are in the heavens and things which are beneath the heavens, and I saw that all the writings and wisdom of this present age were vain and futile.”

As I have earlier argued in *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, this hermetic notion of an expanded god-like mind is not only easy to blend with postwar cybernetic notions of a “cosmic

http://www.sacred-texts.com/grim/kos/kos04.htm
database,” but in some sense are unconsciously booted up by the secular discourse of digital intelligence.  

As Guattari reminds us, “techno-logical machines of information and communication operate at the heart of human subjectivity, not only within its memory and intelligence, but within its sensibility, affects and unconscious fantasms.”

On the one hand, new technologies become available as metaphorical supports for the ancient dreams, and possibly experiences, of radically expanded cognition, especially those dreams that include more or less concrete worldly knowledge amidst its storehouse of wisdom. Yet the new technological frameworks of electronic and digital mediation also shift the dynamics of the gnostic vision, placing it onto a more materialist and “profane” footing, one that also lends an element of absurdity to what might otherwise be familiar “transcendent” claims of cosmic mastery over space and time. At one point, for example, the bedazzled Dennis announced that he had discovered that he could cause any telephone to ring, including any phone in the past. To demonstrate, he called their mother sometime in the fall of 1953. As Terence reports, he caught her in the act of listening to Dizzy Dean call a World Series game.

For constructionists, the presence of all these machines, weird fictions, personal memories, and pop paranormal texts obviously implies that, in their psychedelicized state, the brothers McKenna were simply running on a mix of previously existing codes and protocols. As the older Dennis wrote, “We were following a script, but no longer a script we’d written.”

Cultural programs mished and mashed in their very intelligent and devilishly associative minds were executing in the free-wheeling perceptual maelstrom occasioned by extreme psychedelic

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342. Guattari, 4.
arousal in an environment of socially isolated exotica. Other reflections from Terence on the “mechanics” of his experience support this view. “Lines from half-forgotten movies and snippets of old science fiction, once consumed like popcorn, reappeared in collages of half-understood associations. Punch lines from old jokes and vaguely remembered dreams spiraled in a slow galaxy of interleaved memories and anticipations.”

However, Terence offers a radical interpretation of the presence of these scripts, one that, rather than explaining away the enigmatic patterns swirling around them through the mundane origins of their elements, once again raises questions of anomalous agency and control. “The overwhelming impression was that something possibly from outer space or from another dimension was contacting us. It was doing so through the peculiar means of using every thought in our heads to lead us into telepathically induced scenarios of extravagant imaginings, or deep theoretical understandings, or in-depth scannings of strange times, places, and worlds.”

This is certainly the sort of rationalizing logic that encourages some scholars to reach for their razors. At the same time, there is an ingenuity here worth lingering over. Terence acknowledges the existence and influence of material cultural scripts, fragments of images, concepts, and narratives absorbed through a particular historical moment. In this sense, he is a constructionist. What lends an otherworldly character to their appearance in cognition is both the singular arrangements of these materials—scenarios, understandings, scannings—and the impression that an outside, supernormal agency was performing these collages and constructions.

344. McKenna, True Hallucinations, 134-5.
345. It should be emphasized that, rhetorically speaking, a kind of nonhuman agency of a sort is also required and invoked in conventional sociological or psychological explanations of specific acts of extraordinary cognition, in that the appearance of specific repressed or cultural scripts is chalked up to the (usually rather vaguely stated) quasi-agencies on the order of the “unconscious” or “social forces.”
While this perspective might be understood through an optic drawn from the history of esotericism, an illuminating literary parallel of McKenna’s preternatural constructionism can be drawn from the thought of the poet Jack Spicer, one of the more experimental voices in the so-called San Francisco Renaissance of the fifties and sixties. Rejecting the Beat emphasis on drugs and Zen, Spicer nonetheless conceived his poetic practice along the visionary and loosely gnostic lines of a “dictation” he received from what he would call “the Outside.” Displacing the hoary tropes of Romantic genius, Spicer left the Outside radically underdetermined, emphasizing its alien or impersonal character. As an analogy for this process, Spicer sometimes invoked Cocteau’s use of the radio as a medium between realms in the film *Orphee*, but Spicer’s most striking figure for the process of poetic dictation was the pop science-fiction image of “Martians.” In a celebrated talk he gave in Vancouver, Spicer insisted that, while the poet needed to actively and athletically empty him or herself or personality and desires in order to avoid interfering with the “invading” poem, there was a limit to this ascetic process, since the Outside—which was not, Spicer insisted, itself linguistic—still needed to use your language and your memories. He compared the process to a Martian showing up and attempting to communicate a message with children’s blocks in English: A, B, C, D. In other words, language was just part of the “furniture in the room” that the Martians rearrange, the material of the host that the “parasite” poem usurps.

However, though Spicer effected a decided and even prophetic turn away from the numinous constructs of poetic “inspiration” to the materiality of language, the ontological status of Spicer’s Outside remains crucially open, a zone of discovery and practice that is never reduced to language as such. Spicer opined that the Martians—which he insisted were just a

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metaphor—didn’t necessarily care a whit for the poet, and “may be just as dumb in its own way as you are. The Logos, in this deflating view, became the “Lowghost,” a contingent assemblage art of phonemes and syllables, puns and what Ginsberg earlier called “images juxtaposed.”

For all their relative skepticism and rejection of hippy-dippy foolishness, Terence and Dennis were not made of such stern stuff. Even before the Experiment, their messianic turn of mind increasingly idealized the Teacher who seemed to be playfully leading them on. Even as many of their wildest expectations were disappointed in the wake of the Experiment, they continued to cut the Other a great deal of slack. On the one hand, Terence could not confirm any of the answers he got from Dennis, and Vanessa, the “resident skeptic,” was unimpressed with his answers to her mathematical queries. On the other, the brothers still felt that the Stone had truly manifested, not in matter before them as they had expected, but in their minds. Soon the entity within Dennis became an ongoing presence in Terence’s mind as well. They had planted their flags, in other words, in the murkiest of soils: a voice in their heads.

Exactly how this McKenna database differed from the mushroom teacher they had already encountered, or that stayed with Terence off and on in trips for years to come, is unclear, and it probably makes sense not to split hairs here. The phenomenological situation is that even before the Experiment, Terence was already having fleeting impressions of conversing with a seemingly nonhuman, apparently higher intelligence in his head, which if anything only intensified its messianic garrulousness following the Experiment. However, Terence’s conviction in the global reality of their breakthrough and the redemptive significance of his internal dialogue coincided, not coincidentally, with a serious degradation in both the supernormal datastream and the social communications that held them together as a group.
Soon Dennis was no longer able to follow the customary rules of discourse. He blurted out unrelated material in the midst of other’s speech, spoke to himself incessantly, and often did not respond when directly addressed. Meanwhile, Ev, Dave and Vanessa heard no teacher in their heads, and the latter two in particular came to suspect that Dennis had gone temporarily mad and that Terence was being absorbed into a maelstrom of transference. This was the “second phase” of the Experiment, according to Terence, a time of “confusion for all.” More pointedly, it was a time when the presence of psychopathology, like the mercurial flicker of the Other, could no longer be denied.

**Latour’s Razor**

The elephant in the jungle of La Chorrera is psycho-pathology. Reading through all the phantasmagoria and synchronicities, the drugs and the rants, many would be satisfied with Wouter Hanegraaff’s parsimonious characterization of the Experiment’s results as “no more than a temporary state of psychotic hallucination.” The question of psychosis is not just a question we bring after the fact, but a possibility that was stitched into the core narrative of the McKennas from the get-go. Even before the Experiment was performed, Terence was already wondering whether his brother was “going bananas.” Soon both Vanessa and Dave answered this question in the affirmative, demanding that Dennis—and by extension Terence—get help, and eventually arranging for an airplane to fly the whole crew out of the remote village.

In every account that the McKennas made of the voyage, separately and together, both brothers regularly introduce questions if not convictions about certain delusional or pathological aspects of their experiences, including *folie a deux*, messianic inflation, suggestion, and other
modern psychiatric categories. At one point in *True Hallucinations*, the older, narrating Terence simply declares that his younger 1971 self had simply become “the victim of a cognitive hallucination.”

At the same time, both men, in different ways and to very different degrees, use their later texts to keep open the possibility that, well, *something* happened, even if the exact nature of that somethinghood remains out of reach, or intentionally left undefined. Such strategies of ontological ambivalence remain a tried and true method for moderns wrestling with extraordinary experience. Yet in their later reflections, when the craziness of youth could easily be put behind them, both brothers instead continued to lean on stronger possibilities.

As we will discuss in the next section, Terence crystalized the temporal resonances he experienced in the wake of the Experiment into the formalized Timewave theory he began propagating a few years later. And despite his empirical training and professional status as a scientist, the older Dennis also kept the door open on some of his baroque theories of resonant pharmacological action. In his 1988 foreword to a German edition of *Invisible Landscape*, he points out a number of dangling threads that might still be sewn up by science, some of which are further developed in a speculative science-fiction mode in *The Brotherhood of the Screaming Abyss* (2001: *A Space Odyssey* is mentioned.) But even here, Dennis does not attempt to authenticate his continued interest in the events of La Chorrera with scientific speculation alone. Personally and gruffly aware of the limits of scientific knowledge production, he maintains a more broadly open-minded if somewhat shifty lack of resolution about the cause and meaning of it all. He refuses to close off the call of the event; the buzz keeps resounding.

347. Hanegraaff, “‘And End History”, 302.
This is not good enough for some readers. In a review of *Brotherhood* published on his blog, Wouter Hanegraaff seems actively disappointed, if not annoyed, by “Dennis's inability or unwillingness, even decades afterwards, to draw the obvious conclusion that what happened to them at La Chorrera may subjectively have been very impressive…but can quite easily be explained as a monumental psychedelic delusion supported by wild theories.” Hanegraaff’s position here is easy to understand; if anything, it is strictly conventional. It must be said, however, that his use of “delusion” here recalls a discursive strategy that also characterizes the magisterial history of ideas he tells in his book *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (2012). Here Hanegraaff shows that, for centuries, the established institutions of modern knowledge production have used “esotericism” as a site of exclusion, a “wastebasket term” capacious enough to accept a dizzying range of discourses, concepts, and practices whose very rejection from modern academic institutions helps establish the latter’s rationalist authority.

Similarly, “delusion,” along with “schizophrenia” and “psychosis,” has long served as wastebasket terms wherein representatives of rationalism might consign any number of neuro-divergent behaviors, extraordinary experiences, eccentric cognitions, and singular if wayward perceptions. Given the profound moral issues raised by theorists critically investigating the history of psychiatric discourse, to say nothing of the contentious debates over the nature and definition of consciousness that scientific naturalists continue to pursue among themselves, it seems we should be wary of resting too comfortably on the orthodox realism that undergirds terms like delusion and hallucination. Faced with the sort of existential and cosmic rupture the McKennas confronted, the older Dennis’ bemused open mind still seems appropriate, at least to this reader. Hanegraaff, however, offers only a tone of impatience and scolding. “I see no good
reason to make such a big deal of it all, but Dennis seems determined not to apply Occam’s
Razor.”

Ah, the famous razor. Few implements in the history of thought have the exacting profile
of this noble instrument of rationalist reduction. But how does Occam’s Razor really operate?
What does it feel like in your hand, and what does it make you want to do with it? In his An
Inquiry into the Modes of Existence, Bruno Latour offers his own vision of the razor, no longer
the single blade of single vision but “a little case made of precious wood like those once used by
surgeons, in which a great many tools adapted to all the delicate operations of reason lie nestled
in green felt compartments.” These many tools are necessary because Latour does not believe
in a single path of optimum reduction, but instead directs his inquiry toward a manifold: not the
emergent layers of a single objective reality bubbling up from the laws of physics, but the
irreducible ontological pluralism of the existence we find ourselves negotiating every day and
every dream-racked night. Carrying forward James’ project of radical empiricism, Latour wants
to articulate and account for a far more multidimensional experience of reality than is available
through the Great Divide between nature and culture. This is still a work of reason, but it is a
capacious and situational reason beyond the limits of the rational. Rather than razor the world
into human subjects and scientific objects, therefore, Latour seeks to tease out, not a single
framework for reality, but a host of ontological modes that, rather than restrict true existence to
the products of scientific research, allow for “more diversity in the beings admitted to
existence.”

349. Wouter Hanegraaff, “Grand Theories, Feeble Foundations”;
http://wouterjhanegraaff.blogspot.com/2013/03/grand-theories-weak-foundations.html
351. Ibid, 21.
In his inquiry, Latour develops a taxonomy of these modes by establishing what he calls “new felicity conditions” that authorize and establish different relations between language and existence. The templates he devises—which he insists are not a finalized system but a work in progress, which in form and content alike are open to collective revision—add ontological heft to entities associated with specifically human practices like writing fiction and legal codes, while also rejecting or disentangling previously axiomatic categories like “Nature” and “Matter.” The apparently smooth and even common-sensical referent of the latter, for example, disguises what Latour holds is the confusing (and sometimes disingenuous) amalgam of two very different modes of existence. On the one hand, “matter” includes “beings of reproduction,” like worms and mountains, who struggle to perpetuate themselves through their incessant and always hazardous self-replication, a space-time repetition performed invariably with a difference but usually only a slight one. On the other hand, “matter” in our current sense also involves abstract “beings of representation” whose referential chains, which link them snugly to entities encountered in other modes, are generated and sustained through scientific discourse and practice. By blending these very different modes into one apparently simple category, moderns—and especially positivists and naturalists—in essence load the ontological dice, establishing what Latour elsewhere calls the “sovereign right of anyone wearing a lab coat to disqualify all other access routes” to truth.352

Lab coat or no, one thing most moderns would agree on is that a voice in your head is not the most reliable access route to truth, especially one you have come to attribute to a disincarnate or extraterrestrial intelligence. Though the contemporary “hearing voices” movement is now troubling the dogmatic psychiatric association of internal voices and mental illness, the

352. Ibid, 173. Needless to say, Latour’s argument is considerably more careful and painstaking than I have captured here. For more, see 69-95.
phenomenon is so tightly linked to psychopathology that it is easy to forget just how long and how persistently such incorporeal voices have animated human experience, whether in poetry, religion, or the occasional quotidian experience of a surprisingly large number of individuals. The apparent obviousness of its pathological association is, like the concept “esotericism,” another strategy of exclusion and disavowal. As Terence McKenna noted in the early nineties, “Science has handled this problem [of discarnate intelligences] by creating a tiny broom closet within its vast mansion of concerns called ‘schizophrenia,’ deeming it a matter for psychologists, not the most honored members of the legions of the house of science.”

For McKenna, this broom closet move, whereby heard voices are ontologically dissolved into neural misfires or autonomous fragments of the unconscious, seems plausible to people in direct proportion to their lack of firsthand experience of the phenomena in question. For McKenna, there are two other distinct possibilities for understanding “disincarnate intelligences and nonhuman entities.” The second is the crypto-zoological possibility that these entities exist conventionally but are incredibly elusive, like the giant squid and, just possibly, the yeti. The third option, which McKenna clearly favors along with the “shamans, ecstatics, and so-called sensitive types” who often prefer it, is the ontological one. Here these entities carry on an existence that stands apart from conventional “beings of reproduction” but remains, at least in some sense, independent of their being perceived by human beings.

Before turning to one ontological template that Latour offers for such beings, we need to underscore the depth and extent of such daimonic and disincarnate intelligences within the metaphysics and mythology of the West. As the older Dennis wrote, though he and his brother

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may have been delusional, “we shared that delusion with a long line of spiritual masters.”

Invoking this immense history of arcana here is not an attempt to sneak in some sort of comparativist evidence for their “actual” existence; after all, the very persistence of such encounters might equally serve as the opening move in a naturalist deconstruction of the brain’s hardwired cognitive fabrications. Instead, the point is to bring onto the stage precisely the sorts of historical echoes and mythic analogues that might both authorize and retrospectively ground a contemporary psychedelic experience of hearing voices.

In this light, the voice in Terence’s head is not simply the S-F overtone of a feverish dialogue between two wild and interwoven thinkers, but a cybernetic rewriting of the older Neoplatonic legacy of the daimon. Socrates, of course, claimed that a daimonion (“little daimon”) had accompanied him since childhood, a “sort of voice” that he followed unquestioningly and who largely restricted itself to telling the philosopher not to do something he was planning to do, rather than egging him on to do something else. Rounding out this vision, the Symposium explains the cosmological role of the daemons, who operate as independent intelligences mediating between humans and ultimate deity. These intelligences are responsible for oracles and instructive dreams, and the humans who are skilled in communicating with them therefore become “daemonic men.”

Plato’s concept proved of great importance to Renaissance humanists like Marcilio Ficino, who blended the nested cosmic spheres of Plato’s daimons with the hierarchies of Angels described by Dionysius the Areopagite. For Ficino, daimons proper were elemental intelligences

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354. McKenna, Brotherhood, 132.
355. Plato, Apology, 31d. In accounts of Socrates’ daimon offered by his students, the daimonion suggests things to do as well as not to do, and also offers commentary on other people’s decisions, advice these people were invariably pleased with. See Xenophan Memorabilia I.I. 2-4.
who inhabited the sublunary spheres and operated between humans and both planetary astrological spirits and angelic intelligences. In order to establish oracular lines of communication with these beings, hermeticists like Ficino often employed the arcana of correspondences: multimodal associations of scents, metals, starcharts, and images that would serve to call the appropriate daimon for healing or knowledge. These transversal networks followed the logic that Foucault identified, in his discussion of the Renaissance episteme, as *resemblance*, an umbrella term that included such familiar rhetorical features to our discussion as analogy and the resonating vibrations of sympathy.\(^{357}\)

By reframing and extending existing traditions of magic along Neoplatonic lines, Ficino helped insure that theurgic ritual and what we might call “psychological” congress with daemons become a signal leitmotif of a variety of modern esoteric currents. Though Ficino’s Neoplatonic model largely leaves the problem of bad or lying daimons to the side, such concerns nonetheless informed daemonic magic in both the medieval and early modern periods, when the contact with supernormal or preternatural intelligences was often coupled, sometimes quite anxiously, with strategies for assessing the possible diabolic origins of the entity. A famous example here were the angelic conversations staged by the English Renaissance magus and mathematician John Dee and his scryer, the alchemist and rogue Edward Kelley. Though seeking knowledge in a highly devout manner, Dee and Kelley both were keen to test their conversation partners for any infernal tendencies, showing that even in the heart of esotericist currents, a kind of skepticism—or at least wariness—was not uncommon.

Dee was an important and charismatic figure for Terence, one of a number of figures in esoteric history that he invoked as part of his ongoing interpretation of the La Chorrera

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357. Though historians of the Renaissance resist the dominance that Foucault accords the logic of sympathy, his characterization works wonderfully for the specifically hermetic and esoteric current that concerns us here. See
experiences. One reason for this special attention, I suspect, was McKenna’s attraction to Dee’s polyvalent historical and intellectual status—altogether routine for the Renaissance—as both a scientist and a mage, a mathematician and a sorcerer. This is important because, however shaky his own devotion to scientific method, neither the young Terence of La Chorrera or the older Terence of the rave scene was seeking to reject modernity outright in the name of ancient jungle wisdom or theological faith or a perfected state of consciousness, transpersonal or otherwise. Instead, he wanted establish, discover, or imagine a parallel or “archaic” modernity that somehow combined a freethinking temperament with visionary experiences robust enough to stage an encounter with preternatural intelligences.

This may also be why, of all the historical encounters with disincarnate beings that Terence could have discussed, the one he turned to most frequently concerned Descartes. In McKenna’s telling, the young Descartes had a dream in which he encountered an Angel who told him that “The conquest of nature is to be achieved through measure and number.” McKenna regularly quoted that line, and sometimes claimed that it came from Descartes’ own hand. But while Descartes’ philosophical and rationalist vocation was certainly informed by a series of three extraordinary dreams he had enjoyed as a young man in Ulm in 1619, we do not have Descartes’ direct account. And the one we do possess features neither an angel nor even a rough equivalent of that statement, which McKenna rightly dubs the “battle cry” of the science to come.

358. Terence McKenna often told this story. See *Trialogues at the Edge of the West*, 95; as well as the workshop recording *In Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge* (Sounds True, 1992).
While McKenna’s take on the vision could be said to summarize one of the central meanings Descartes took from his dreams, we are left with the question of why McKenna returned so regularly to a story that he seems to have half-fabricated. One thing is clear: McKenna was not party to the New Age rejection of the scientific method, or the seventies gesture towards a “new paradigm” that might “unify” science and mystery and finally put down the influence of Descartes, whose “dualism” so often comes in for attack in New Age movement texts. Instead, McKenna wanted to locate and confound the origins of the scientific break itself, and he did so partly by imaginatively fleshing out the origins of Descartes’ geometrical establishment of the modern subject in an encounter with a transmundane Other who provided a paradoxically rationalist injunction.

Flickering Beings

Looming over the simultaneous clash and superposition of science and numinous encounter at La Chorrera was the spirit of Carl Jung, whose own thoughts on daimons and disincarnate intelligences deeply influenced the mindframes and methods of the two brothers. While Freud had acknowledged the independence of some unconscious forces, and even the perverse drive of specific neurotic complexes, Jung insisted not only on the autonomy of many elements in the psyche, but in their availability for personification as daimons, archetypal figures, and the spirits of dreams. As William Rowlandson explain, Jung made a strong distinction between the daimon in the singular and the plural daimons or demons. In his autobiography, Jung writes of the “Daimon” as the libido force that drives an individual life, a

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force that can appear as a God image or another archetypal entity but that ultimately announces the unconscious itself. “We know that something unknown, alien, does come our way, just as we know that we do not ourselves make a dream or an inspiration, but that it somehow arises of its own accord.”

However, Jung distinguishes between this alien Daimon and the multiple “daimons” that he associates with specific psychological complexes that have escaped control of the ego. As an example, Jung points to the multiple personalities that some hysterics display, often with creative flair and great coordination. But he also warns that these split-off figures can also lead to the agonies of schizophrenia, wherein “the complexes have become disconnected and autonomous fragments” that often “assume banal, grotesque, or highly exaggerated names and characters.”

In all these instances, however, the autonomy of such figures is in essence the autonomy of the unconscious itself, and thus bounded by the same ontological shell as the mind that inhabits the all-too-human side of the modern Great Divide. And this is precisely the perspective that the older Dennis opts for when he explains the experiences of La Chorrera as the result of “metabolic processes that caused a part of our brains to be experienced not as part of the self, but as the ‘other’—a separate, intelligent entity.”

Of course, in private, Jung leaned much further toward’s Terence’s view on these phenomena: that they are somehow independent of human perception and consciousness. As Gary Lachman argues persuasively in Jung the Mystic, Jung’s professional self-presentation as a scientist in good standing belied the thoughts, feelings, and associations stirred up by the range

362. One thinks in particular of the remarkable medium “Hélène Smith” studied by Theodore Flournoy in From India to the Planet Mars (1900), a text that was, along with William James’ Varieties of Religious Experience, a crucial influence on the young Jung.
364. McKenna, Brotherhood, 248.
of extraordinary experiences that marked his personal life and motivated his long-standing interests in religious and paranormal phenomena. This nightside of Jung—which over time have helped dethrone him from his perch of academic respectability—had plenty of room for daimons with fattened-up ontologies. One early example comes from Liber Novus, which was written during Jung’s own overwhelming “confrontation with the unconscious” in the nineteen-twenties. Jung records one conversation with Elijah and Salome, two autonomous figures that consistently came to him in dreams and visions. Jung tells them directly that they are psychic symbols of “the most extreme contradiction,” but like those ornery characters we sometimes meet in dreams, Elijah and Salome are having none of it. “We are not symbols,” Elijah replies, “We are real.”

Decades later, in his UFO book, Jung replays this tension in a more public light. Jung focuses nearly all of his study on the more interior or nebulous psychodynamic terrain of the collective unconscious, a conceptual space that allowed him to address the full range of religious, mythological and imaginal phenomena without having to go to ontological bat. In the final chapter, however, he turns his attention to anomalous radar readings. This indicates that, though he saw the saucers as visionary mandalas emerging from the collective unconscious, he also suspected that they may also possess a material or at least electromagnetic signature, perhaps in accordance with his curious theory of the “psychoid”—the same concept that folds into the mind-matter Mobius strip of synchronicity.

Jung’s somewhat cramped and sometimes contradictory attempt to balance the objective and subjective views of daimonic agents provokes an interesting footnote in the UFO volume. Here he complains about naturalists attacking him for his metaphysics, and theologians attacking him for his naturalism. “I am an empiricist,” he declares, “who keeps within the boundaries set

for him by the theory of knowledge.” As Rowlandson points out, this response only begs further questions, like what the “theory of knowledge” is. It does however establish two points.

One is that Jung’s entire career can be characterized as an intense and partly submerged agon between objective and subjective views of the daimonic agencies and other anomalous phenomena that overwhelmed him during the Liber Novus years. The other point to note is how an expansive empiricism—particularly, one suspects, William James’ radical empiricism, another important influence on Jung—shifts attention towards phenomena whose sheer dynamic presence is itself capable of suspending the resolution between skepticism and superstition. So while we might join the chorus in castigating Jung for his lack of scientific rigor, or his desire to have his cake and secretly eat it too, we also need to offer a more complex account of this fundamental ambivalence—an ambivalence that, incidentally, helps explain the similar oscillation between skepticism and experiential conviction that runs through the reporting of both McKennas.

Ambivalence, however, is not just a suspension, but an active and dynamic organizing figure. Like Philip K. Dick, Jung was a dichotomous thinker who populated his sometimes twisty texts with all manner of contraries, polarities, and paradoxes. “The conflict between the opposites can strain our psyche to the breaking point, if we take them seriously, or if they take us seriously,” he noted in his autobiography. But the intellect itself held no relief. “The tertium non datur of logic proves its worth: no solution can be seen.” In other words, Jung did not expect logical or dialectical solutions to the problem of (daimonic) existence. Instead, he held out hope that by living and even intensifying the contradictions, the antinomy might be resolved and integrated through the symbolic operation of the coincidentia oppositorum. “If all goes well, the solution, seemingly of its own accord, appears out of nature. Then and then only is it convincing.

It is felt as ‘grace.’”\(^{367}\) However adequate we might judge Jung’s thinking here, we need to see it as more than a dissimulating faux-positivist “cover” for his occultism.

Similarly, while Dennis and especially Terence can be accused of inconsistency and a refusal to get down to brass tacks, their own invocation of contrary possibilities can be seen as gesturing towards a similar sort of impossible integration. Perhaps the challenge here, though, is not to get too caught up with dichotomies in the first place. Latour founds his ontological project on dodging the Great Divide between nature and culture, and remapping those relationships according to a variety of different templates that multiply modes of existence rather than dividing them into yet another binary set of terms. There are a number of ontological templates that Latour offers that might help understand the mysterious Other the McKennas encountered, as well as the larger class of daimonic intelligences that haunt high weirdness. The most relevant category here is what Latour describes as “beings of metamorphosis,” a category—[MET] in his argot—that he bases in significant part on the “invisible beings” associated, most visibly, with the healing rituals of traditional and indigenous communities. He describes these scenes and practices as “ethnopsychiatry,” a category that should certainly include most shamanism.

To establish the ontology of these beings, however, Latour insists on rejecting the boundary fetish of Jung and so many doctors of the psyche, with their strict ascription of invisible entities to interiority, to the unconscious, the neurons, “the twists and turns of the self.” Whether psychoanalytic or cognitivist, the strictly psychological focus on interiority prevents us from recognizing the complex agency of the psychogenic networks—texts, practices, drugs, devices, weather—that help engender subjectivity, that constitute interiority, as it were, from the outside. And there’s that word again: the outside. Whether its Lovecraft’s Beyond, or the desert surrounding Diaspar in *The City and the Stars*, or the media technologies that shape cognition in

\(^{367}\) Jung, *Memories*, 335.
its essential operations, the Other and the Outside meet within the network topology of an alterity that at once eludes and constitutes the subject.

The other problem Latour has with psychology is that it obscures and distorts what one might call the particular (and peculiar) ontological “style” of the beings of metamorphosis. Indeed, Latour calls these beings “invisible” not to contrast them with a separate world of visibility from which they are excluded, but rather to precisely underscore the absence of the sort of sustained continuity we associate with more familiar objects in our world, like tables or chairs. These beings do not persist, but they do appear and disappear—not unlike, he says, the special effects in horror movies. This flicker at the edge of existence, uncanny and potentially ominous, may tempt us to call these beings “occult.” But Latour strongly insists that their ambiguous invisibility is not irrational, mysterious, or supernatural. Without “nature,” after all, there is no supernature. And the rhetorical invocation of Mystery and other hidden powers, he writes, is simply a rationalization provoked by the loss of the proper “interpretive key” to understand the beings in question.

For Latour, the flickering ontology of the beings of metamorphosis derives from their precise mode of articulation or what we might call “presencing.” This mode runs on a logic of alterity, one that Latour locates in the common human experience of being taken over or “targeted by” an emotion. However, Latour wants to stress the positive and productive “healing” dimension of this temporary encounter with otherness as such. However traumatic, this crisis or fit can pass into the recognition that the affects we believed were targeting us actually allow us to live, and this perception takes the form of a kind of ensouled alterity. As such “we take them for
others because they take themselves and they take us for others, thereby giving us the means to become other, to deviate from our trajectories, to innovate, to create.”

This capacity for transformation—which explains the role of invisible beings in therapeutic healing—extends beyond human subjectivity. The beings of metamorphosis [MET] also cross or disrupt the “beings of reproduction” [REP] described above, those entities like bacteria and mountains that seek an iterative continuity of being with as few alterations as possible. In contrast to these more visible beings, beings of metamorphosis seek continuity precisely through alterity and transformation, a form of persistence “that is obtained by leaps, by passes, by hiatuses through a dizzying discontinuity.” As such, to insist that such invisible beings are (more or less pathological) products of interiority alone—whether nervous system, DNA, or the unconscious—is to deny the exteriority that precisely announces their radically dynamic alterity. In this network perspective, such beings “are no longer representations, imaginings, phantasms projected from the inside toward the outside; they unquestionably come from elsewhere, they impose themselves.”

Though certainly provisional, if not elliptical, Latour’s account of the beings of metamorphosis comes in handy when facing the sort of extraordinary entities that so regularly crop up in experiential accounts of shamanistic, esoteric and possibly some psychedelic practices. His template, however, is in no ways perfect. For one thing, Latour makes a strong and problematic distinction between the beings of metamorphosis [MET] and the “beings of religion” [REL]. The former, again, are affective spirits invoked through rituals—and Latour insists that ritual is necessary to reach them—who are capable of transforming interiority as they transversally cross us according to their dynamic of constant change. In contrast, the beings of

369. Ibid, 196. The shorthand is Latour’s.
religion are principally associated with language, and particularly the capacity to call the subject, by name, as a person.371 “Whereas the first metamorphoses are not aimed at us, even though they arouse and transport us if we don’t manage to avoid feeling targeted, the second ones gather us up and straighten us up by addressing us unmistakably.”372 If [MET] are the animal allies of the shaman, [REL] are the angels of the Western theological imagination, except that Latour’s messengers do not carry knowledge or information but rather operational “messages with no content but transformation of persons.”

Latour’s Catholicism has played an important role in his thought, and certainly arrives here at this juncture between [MET] from [REL]. Rather than place these differently oriented others on a spectrum of continuity, Latour’s insistence on the sharp cleavage between them reduces rather than multiplying the entities that call for ontological pasture. That said, though Latour’s account is certainly marked with Christian exceptionalism, he does not revert to anything like theological absolutes in his antifoundationalist account of [REL]. The Logos that is carried by his beings of religion “cannot rely on any substance to ensure continuity in being.” Therefore the Logos must be constantly, hermeneutically renewed, in a process that the logophilic (and once Catholic) Terence would no doubt cheer.

But there’s the rub that puts the lie to Latour’s division between [MET] and [REL]: the voice in Terence’s head, like the babbling elves of DMT space, are beings of language. In his Esalen trialogue, Terence argued that “All of these disincarnate entities would be but dancing hallucinations before us if not for their ability to address us in languages that we can understand.”373 In order to address the sorts of entities that haunt high weirdness, whether as

370. Ibid, 200-201.
aliens or preternatural intelligences or the phantasmic calling cards of certain molecules, the 
affective otherness of [MET] needs to cross-breed with [REL]’s logos of knowledge and address.

This assemblage, however, also needs to take in a few twists and turns from yet another of 
Latour’s templates: the “beings of fiction” we will turn to in the next chapter. For now we should 
accept—provisionally, of course—that the entities whose forms flicker through the labyrinths of 
high weirdness show the shifting signs alike of tricksters, aliens, angels. And like the elves and 
gnomes that so amused Terence, they may be here “to remind us that, in the matter of 
understanding the self, we have yet to leave the playpen in the nursery of ontology.”

The Tale of Two Books

In the years following the Experiment, Terence and Dennis returned to the United States 
to pursue their own courses of research and exploration both within and outside university.

Living in Berkeley, Terence became obsessed with the I Ching and began constructing a formal 
model of time and history out of the resonant reverberations of his La Chorrera experiences. His 
mathematical and intensely apocalyptic speculations were so peculiar—and so feverishly if not 
 messianically pursued—that he alienated some of his more skeptical friends in the university 
town, where he eventually settled after clearing up his legal troubles and briefly returning to La 
Chorrera with Ev. In Boulder, Dennis embarked on a study of chemistry and botany that would, 
inevitably, compromise (though by no means eradicate) his convictions in the integrity of their 
vegetable gnosis—much of which, it bears repeating, he was unable to recall. Terence too would 
eventually wind up with a Bachelor of Science degree in Ecology and Conservation, but 
intellectually and culturally the brothers began moving along different paths.

Nonetheless, their mind-meld re-crystallized into two very different books they co-wrote and published in the mid seventies. *The Invisible Landscape: Mind, Hallucinogens, and the I Ching* (1975), stands as a paragon of high-octane psychedelic speculation, a simultaneously dry and delirious assemblage of anthropology, psychopharmacology, metaphysics and fringe science. *Psilocybin: Magic Mushroom Grower’s Guide* (1976), which appeared pseudonymously under the names O.T. Oss and O. N. Oeric, transformed the culture of hallucinogenic mushroom use in the United States and elsewhere by providing the method for a relatively simple process of cultivating *Psilocybe cubensis*. For the remainder of this chapter, I would like to look at these two books in turn, approaching them less as texts in themselves than as devices that allowed the brothers to continue to work out, work through, and constellate their extraordinary experiences.

Once again, the processes of ascription and attribution—whereby anomalous events become first isolated and then woven into narratives and conceptual models that give them rhyme and reason—is deeply related to the practice of inscription, to the acts of writing and publishing that simultaneously condense and extend the concrete determinations that transform “ineffable” experience into personal and cultural stories and structures.

Though *The Invisible Landscape* was not popular when it appeared, it eventually became a sought-after collector’s item, particularly among readers of drug literature, countercultural esoterica, and the “freak” canon of conceptually “far out” texts. Grateful Dead guitarist Jerry Garcia, a more than adequate representative of such Fortean consumers of the weird, declared the text “one of the most mind-boggling books I’ve ever read.” In addition to offering the first published narrative of the Experiment, the book explored psychedelic psychopharmacology, holography, the I Ching, and Whitehead’s process philosophy, as well as presenting surreal but
highly technical and often abstruse accounts of the production of the Stone and Terence’s concept of the Timewave.

Here I would like to look briefly at two aspects of the book: its initial engagement with the concept of shamanism, and its formulation of the Timewave, without doubt the most important and influential conceptual device in the book. (And I mean device: a visionary mechanism, an oracular algorithm of resonant time.) Though Terence’s mathematical extraction of a recursive and self-similar time function from the mechanics of the I Ching is, to be sure, a somewhat recondite matter, it nonetheless would become highly influential in the popular millennial counterculture of the nineties and 2000s because of the goal post the Timewave erected on a now world-famous date: December 21, 2012, the end of the Mayan long-count calendar. In both cases, I am less interested in the conceptual details, however fascinating, than I am in tracing how these discussions responded to and helped to conceptually “fix”—and therefore retrospectively construct—the reverberations of extraordinary experience.

What is perhaps most remarkable about the McKennas’ discussion of shamanism is that, in sharp contrast to the magical authority granted the shaman in more recent Western psychedelic discourse, the figure of the shaman does not function for the brothers as an pre-modern ground of authenticity, tradition, and earth wisdom. This is not to say that the McKennas are not appropriating some of the exotic powers of the figure, which itself is a somewhat hazy anthropological construct that became problematic, one might say, the minute it left its originally Siberian locus to encompass consciousness-altering ritualists in Africa or Europe or the New World. Rather that a holder of the ancient balance, the shaman became, for the McKennas, a figure of modernity—not the benighted one-dimensional modernity of mid-century man, to be

sure, but a possible (trans)modernity capable of integrating and navigating non-rational experience without retreating into myth.

Clearly drawing from Eliade, the McKennas describe the contemporary subject as “anguished by the imminence of death, yet trapped in profane, historical time and thus able to regard death only as nothingness.” And it is from the edge of this abyss, shorn of the “saving presence of a sacred, transcendent mode of being,” that such individuals “can perceive a useful role for a modern shamanism.” Even as the McKennas look to Eliade’s portrait of these “technicians of the sacred” to provide meaning for moderns, they also diametrically inverted Eliade’s own dismissal of drug-using shamans as degenerate representatives of the tradition. Though the McKennas acknowledge the productive role of trance techniques like drumming and isolation, they insist that shamanism without the “folk science” of psychedelic alkaloids “becomes ritual alone, and its effectiveness suffers accordingly.” In terms of the anthropology of indigenous societies, this psychoactive materialism betrays scant regard for the power of performance and the variability of altered states production in different cultural milieus. However, it is precisely the fixed action potentials of neuropharmacological compounds that made their non-mythological construction of a modern shamanism possible. “Because of the biophysical roles these compounds play at a molecular level, they are the operational and physical keys allowing access to the powers claimed by the shaman.”

In opening their wild book with a discussion of shamanism, the McKennas were also interested, perhaps more pressingly, in creatively dodging the most obvious rejoinder to the Experiment: that the two young men had, at least temporarily, lost their marbles. As such, the figure of the shaman also becomes a way to both address and outflank the diagnosis of

376. McKenna and McKenna, *The Invisible Landscape*, 16.
schizophrenia. Given that many colonialist accounts of shamans and medicine men had featured discussions of mental disorders (along with legerdemain), the recuperation of the shaman gave the McKennas a way to recuperate temporary insanity itself. In Julian Silverman’s 1967 article “Shamans and Acute Schizophrenia,” a central source for the brothers, Silverman makes a distinction between schizophrenia as an organic disease and a more situational and episodic phenomena he calls “reactive schizophrenia.”

This category is in turn further divided between “essential schizophrenia”—in which “the profoundest of emotional upheavals and…religious and magical ideation unfold under conditions of marked environmental detachment”—and “paranoid schizophrenia,” in which the spread of such magical connections is recognized as the work of an outside agency, and is therefore tied directly to the environment rather than the self. With these clarifications in mind, Silverman outlines a multi-phase model of pathological process that, to a certain degree, characterizes both schizophrenics and shamans—who, it is important to recall, often do not choose or inherit their roles but are given them based on relatively unusual and sometimes asocial psychological features they exhibit.

Clearly drawing from the hero’s journey structure found in Joseph Campbell and Mircea Eliade, Silberman describes the earlier stages of this process as a self-rending descent into chaos that manifests as the “fusing of higher and lower referential process” and includes automatisms, archaic ideation, and transpersonal forces. This descent is then followed, hopefully, by a “cognitive reorganization.” It is at this point, however, that cultural conditions force the shaman and the schizophrenic to take different paths, since the latter’s society has no use or sympathy with the creative possibilities of reactive schizophrenia. “The essential difference between the

378. Ibid, 14.
two lies in the degree of cultural acceptance of the individual’s psychological resolution of a life crisis.”

Silverman was still at the National Institute of Health when he published his article, but he soon found himself working at the Esalen Institute. Here he played a central role in one of the Institute’s central psychological agendas, which was to recode insanity as an essentially episodic process of psychic reorganization that roughly followed the same death-and-rebirth model found, it was claimed, in both strong psychedelic experience and many esoteric initiations. Working with Esalen co-founder Richard Price, who struggled with mental instability throughout his life, Silverman helped construct radical methods of treating schizophrenia at the Agnews State Hospital in California in 1968. While Silverman’s work should be seen as part of the wider anti-psychiatric psychology of the day, the creative recuperation of schizophrenia—a highly polyvalent term I will thankfully leave unexamined and uncontextualized here—can be traced once again to Carl Jung.

In his autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, which appeared in 1961, Jung described the “confrontation with the unconscious” he experienced as a young man just after his break with Freud, a deep dive into psycho-pathology that, as noted above, essentially laid the groundwork for all his later work as a psychologist, theorist, and a modern mystagogue whose personal plunge into the collective unconscious authorized his healing work returning balance to modern souls. The British analyst D.W. Winnicott unambiguously characterized Jung’s crisis as a successful encounter with a schizophrenic process, a position that was later radicalized in the

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sixties and seventies by the American Jungian John Weir Perry. Perry held that analysis itself was a guided psychotic process, and that psychosis in general should be seen as part of an organic dynamic of healing rather than an illness or aberration.

These and other sixties critiques of conventional psycho-pathology, particularly those mounted by R.D. Laing, helped set the stage for young men like the McKennas to plunge into the nightside of reason, a mass experimentation occasioned in part by a distrust of modernity that was not dissimilar to Jung’s. In contrast to the normalizing logic of orthodox Freudianism, Jung’s creative engagement with the roiling maelstrom of the underworld within suggested that even the most challenging and seemingly insane elements of psychedelic experience could be framed within a narrative of personal growth and integration, if not of spiritual encounter and transcendence.

The difference the McKennas establish between the shaman and the schizophrenic recalls the famous distinction Jung made between James Joyce’s experiments in recombinant language and his schizophrenic daughter Lucia’s invention of portmanteau words and other word salads. They “were like two people going to the bottom of a river, one falling and the other diving.”

For the McKennas, the difference was similarly about conscious intention and an operational savoir-faire—in other words, the values of technique. On the one hand, the shaman “manipulates” the maelstrom “for culturally valid reasons and with techniques of proven efficacy.” On the other, “The schizophrenic is an unwilling victim, a traveler through what to him is a terrifying landscape.” As part of the framework that I am calling scientific romance, the

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McKenna’s “sought to carry ourselves, as modern humans, into the same numinous landscape and to offer a report of interest to empirical investigators.”

The empiricism, here again, is radical and realist: there exists a realm outside of the individual mind, an “invisible landscape” to which both shamans and modern psychedelic practitioners have access. And that realm can be encountered, observed, and, in some empirical sense, described. As such, the McKennas were not just replicating some psychopharmaceutical folk science of shamanism. By presenting their “report,” they were also participating in the establishment of the very social context (“empirical investigators” of the psychedelic domains in the seventies of “altered states”) that, as they had learned from Silberman and anthropologists like S.F. Nadel, made all the difference between the social construction of healing and the social construction of madness. Only this time, the positive context would not found itself on myth but along more-or-less modern and freethinking lines.

That said, the difference between shamans and madmen was not solely a matter of social reception. It also involved refining the dangerous art of traversing the invisible landscape, a sometimes chaotic realm of automatisms, archaic forces, and metamorphically altered belief structures. We have already cited the McKennas’ image of this art in the introduction:

The shaman's psychic life is not unlike the unnaturally dexterous dances he performs at the height of his ecstasy; it is a constant balancing act, as though he were a psychic tightrope walker on the razor's edge between the external world and the bizarre, magical, often terrifying world within.

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382. McKenna and McKenna, *Invisible*, 98.
383. Ibid, 25.
As mentioned earlier, this image recalls a more recent use of the acrobat or tight-rope walker by Peter Sloterdijk. For Sloterdijk, the tight-rope walker or acrobat represents one of the most fitting figures for humanity’s active, anthropotechnical response to the “vertical tension” of existence. Again, this tension tugs us above the habitual fog of human life, an existential vector that has frequently been recoded into the works of transcendence. However, while religious practices respond to this vertical tension, so do philosophy, art, and even sports. For example, Sloterdijk traces the emergence of Greek philosophy itself to the pre-Socratic equation of wakefulness and thinking, an equation that leads to a vigorous (and sometimes vertiginous) practice of “waking thought” that he characterizes ingeniously as “an acrobatics of sleeplessness.”

There is a certain weirdness faced by Sloterdijk’s existential acrobats as well. Even as she resists the gravity of slumber, habit, and common realism, the acrobat must embrace a “primal surrealism”—a surrealism that characterizes both the bizarre extravagance of so many religious practices and the wayward poetics of so many post-religious avenues toward more-or-less aesthetic self-making. With both Nietzsche’s Zarathustra and Foucault in mind, Sloterdijk characterizes the modern acrobat as a spiritual athlete capable of dexterously navigating the void by committing herself to those training regimens that allow humans to participate in their own singular subjectivation without the need for any metaphysical sky-hooks. From this perspective, psychedelic explorations on the scale of the Experiment have as much to do with extreme sports as they do with religious mysticism. In contrast to the “acrobatics of

384. Sloterdijk, 171.
385. As Daniel Dennett memorably calls them.
386. Here we should also recall the acrobatics and other playful improbabilities sometimes associated with the entities of tryptamine space, whether Terence’s DMT machine elves or the “impish” mushrooms spirits that writer and poet Henry Munn described as “embodiments of merriment, tumbling figments of the spontaneous, performing incredible acrobatic feats.” See Munn, “The Mushrooms of Language,” in Harner, Michael J., *Hallucinogens and Shamanism.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 110.
sleeplessness” in early Greece, however, modern psychedelic shamans might be said to practice an acrobatics of *delire*.

There is still more for us in this image. For if modern psychedelic neo-shamans are a pack of acrobats or tight-rope walkers, what, then, are the forces balanced in the act? And what is the nature of the (almost inevitable) fall? What the McKennas describe as the “razor’s edge” between external reality and the uncorked unconscious can also be seen as a sort of *tertium non datur* between skepticism and credulity, a middle path that, as in Keats’ famed definition of negative capability, allows one to remain “in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” The rope, here, is something like radical empiricism, a phenomenological vector of ontological tensions from which one might diverge or fall in any number of ways.

One is a descent into psychosis, understood here as a non-episodic rupture with social reality of the sort that seemed to have swallowed Dennis up in the two weeks following the Experiment. A less drastic slip, we might say, would be a fall into the sort of manic inflation that some of Terence’s friends suspected him of succumbing to in his obsessive theorizing in the months following his first trip to La Chorrera. But perhaps the trickiest tumble is into belief, understood not as the sorts of tacit concepts and dispositions that inform all our actions but as well-articulated organizations of concepts and convictions that crystalize into congealed frameworks or *idées fixes* that fundamentally constrain if not collapse the open-ended stance required for radical empiricism. Such beliefs, whether individually or socially based, often play a strong role in both the ascription of extraordinary experience and the attribution of such experiences to explicitly religious or occult entities or forces. But these beliefs can also take less

387. Indeed, it is inflation rather than psychosis that may be the most seductive pathology for psychedelic athletes. See McKenna, *Brotherhood*, 302-04.
supernatural forms, especially when they arise in the sorts of wild interzones between natural science and paranormal consciousness plied by the McKenna brothers in *Invisible Landscape*. At the extreme, such forms may take on the strange fringe-science systems found in some “crank” literature.

**Time Waves For No One**

Terence’s Timewave is by far the most influential concept in *The Invisible Landscape*, and one that takes up roughly the second half of the book. Briefly described, the Timewave is a mathematical object that Terence managed to extract—and-or construct—from the I Ching, one of the towering texts in the freak canon. The oracle consists of sixty-four hexagrams, each of which is made up of a unique stack of solid and broken lines that individually represent a snapshot of the constantly fluctuating cosmic forces of yin and yang. By using chance operations—most simply, a series of coin tosses—specific lines and hexagrams are generated, and these numbers and figures in turn refer to archaic core texts and “Ten Wings” of later commentaries.

But Terence did something else. By multiplying the number of hexagrams by the number of lines in each hexagram, Terence came up with a number—384—that is nearly equivalent to the number of days—383.89—in a thirteen-moon calendrical period. This suggestive similarity—to my knowledge, unremarked as far as I know by scholars of the I Ching—encouraged Terence to look for even deeper patterns of time that might be discovered by multiplying and permuting this and other numerical structures found in the oracle. By further multiplying 384 by 16, for example, Terence “discovered” a cycle of time—67.29 years—that
would become instrumental in his later assignation of the notorious date of 2012. Another numerical curiosity in the I Ching that caught Terence’s fancy was a particular series of the sixty-four hexagrams known as the King Wen sequence, a series that does not follow an obviously quantitative logic. By counting the number of lines that change between each hexagram in the sequence, and then variously mapping the resulting values, Terence graphically constructed a peculiar mathematical object: the Timewave.

All this might seem like a strangely quantitative attitude towards an ancient oracle book heavy on nature symbolism and obscure pronouncements like “Oppression at the hands of the man with the purple knee bands.” That said, as a venerable matrix of archaic images, cosmic correspondences, and numerical relationships, the I Ching almost demands such arcane and esoteric systemic elaboration, and Terence was hardly the only person, nor even the first Westerner, to start playing with the possibilities.388

At the very least, his respect for the technical savvy of the codifiers of the I Ching—or at least the King Wen sequence—reflects the high regard in which the text was held by many Westerners in the postwar period. Beats and seekers and hippies—including Philip K. Dick—were all taken with the oracle, particularly in the Wilhelm/Baynes Bollingen edition, first published in two volumes in 1950 and later in one, yellow-cloth volume in 1967, which was almost certainly the version the McKennas brought with them to Columbia. This Bollingen edition featured an introduction by Carl Jung, in which Jung linked the oracular logic of the hexagrams, not to the “magic spells” of archaic wizards, but to a sophisticated qualitative model of time. “Whoever invented the I Ching was convinced that the hexagram worked out in a certain

388. For example of Westerners investigating the I Ching as a mathematical structure, see Charles Ponce, The Nature of the I Ching (New York: Award Books, 1970); Martin Maria Schönberger, The I Ching and the Genetic Code: the Hidden Key to Life (New York: ASI Publishers, 1979), originally published as Verborgener Schlüssel zum
moment coincided with the latter in quality no less than in time.” More than the hours of the
clock or the divisions of the calendar, the hexagram thrown at a given instant was “the exponent
of the moment in which it was cast.” Attempting to explain this possibility in terms that both
paralleled and outflanked scientific causality, Jung invoked his recently-minted idea of
synchronicity, the “acausal connecting principle” that he believed tied together the psychology of
meaningful coincidence to the new probabilistic and statistical model of reality emanating from
quantum physics.

Terence too understood the I Ching as containing a qualitative and quantitative model of
time, but his understanding was, like the theory of the Stone, rooted in the phenomenon of
resonance. One afternoon during his days of sleepless cogitation that followed the Experiment,
Terence inscribed an ampersand in the dirt, noting that the figurative loop of the logogram
seemed to be a “natural symbol for a four-dimensional universe somehow bound into a 3-D
matrix.” The apocalyptic implications for the figure, a “basic unit of time” that he began to call
“the eschaton,” turned on its capacities for generating reverberant interference patterns. “The
combination and resonance among the set of eschatons in the universe determined which of the
possible worlds allowed by physics would actually undergo the formality of occurring.” Here, in
the phrase “formality of occurring,” we can hear the echoes of Whitehead’s notion of
concrescence, the processual emergence of an actual entity from a variety of virtual possibilities.
However, the ampersand also set up the apocalyptic possibility of a conclusion of the sequence:

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Leben (Munchen: O.W. Barth Berlag) in 1973; and Lama Govinda, The Inner Structure of the I Ching, the Book of
2015).
the end of days became that moment when “all the eschatons would resonate together as a unity and thereby create an ontological transformation of reality.”

In Columbia, as Dennis gradually returned to consensus reality, Terence became increasingly obsessed with “resonances, recurrences, and the idea that events were interference patterns caused by other events temporally and causally distant.” Though Terence does not stress the mathematical connections between the sixty-four hexagrams and the sixty-four possible arrangements of DNA’s base pairs—which had already been noticed by some Western students of the *I Ching*—it seems that the contemplation of this connection did lead to his mathematical elaboration of the King Wen sequence. But if the Timewave models something that varies over time, what is that feature? Riffing more on Whitehead, who developed a process metaphysics for describing the emergence of new entities into actual temporal existence, Terence decided that this feature was *novelty*.

The Timewave was a map of the variable degree of historical transformation over time, as well as a formal characterization of the apocalyptic finale when novelty would go asymptotic. The intensity of this point—which bears comparison to the more contemporary discourse of the Singularity—is, again, partly a product of resonance. In Terence’s conception, the Timewave featured self-similarity across scale, so that the various cycles of time, from the cosmic to the momentary, reflected the same jagged shape. (With good enough reason, Terence re-dubbed this self-similarity “fractal” for the 1994 version of the *Invisible Landscape*.) By combining this fractal structure with the notion of a hard end-point, Terence found himself with a device capable

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391. Ibid, 126.
392. Terence was not the first to use temporality to connect the *I Ching* with Whitehead’s metaphysics. See Lik Kuen Tong’s 1974 article “The Concept of Time in Whitehead and the I Ching,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, vol.1 issue 4, 373-93.
of both drawing transtemporal correspondences between different cycles and formally characterizing the culmination of the wave as a kairos point of ultimate novelty.

Even without invoking mathematical problems with the derivation of the Timewave first raised by Mathew Watkins, there are many problems and peculiarities with Terence’s bid for an objective “theory” of historical novelty. In his 2012 account, Dennis himself harshly critiques the Timewave he had tacitly signed off on in 1975. The central problem that Dennis notes is the extreme difficulty in quantifying novelty; without such a measure, the Timewave can never be a falsifiable scientific theory. “It is a speculation, an interesting idea, a hallucination, a fantasy— but not a theory.” The arbitrariness in Terence’s understanding of novelty became abundantly visible when he attempted the operation necessary for the Timewave to have predictive value: the selection of strict correspondences between the peaks and troughs of the wave object and actual dates in history—and, in particular, the date of the final spike in novelty.

The establishment of this date—bolstered by one rather synchronistic reverberation—kickstarted the 2012 phenomenon. Reflecting his tautological sense that the acceleration of technological and historical forces in recent history indicates the final stage of the “ingression of novelty,” Terence elected to set August 6, 1945—the date that the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima—as a point of maximum novelty. Adding on the 67.29 year cycle he had discovered, he came up with a final end date in November, 2012. After the publication of the first edition of the *Invisible Landscape*, Terence discovered that the final date of the long count of the Mayan calendar landed on winter solstice of 2012. So he bumped his kairos moment back a few weeks.


When *The Invisible Landscape* was republished in 1993, the Timewave chapters were revised to reflect support for the theory provided by both the Mayan calendar synchronicity and the “time maps” generated by the Timewave Zero software coded by programmer Peter Meyer. (Interestingly, it was the open source code for the program that first revealed some of the mathematical problems with the theory.) In any case, Terence’s polished up “novelty theory” was well-placed to influence the growing millennialism of the psychedelic revival then unfolding through the electronic dance music, neo-tribal, and emerging research chemical underground.

Throughout his curious career, Terence continued to present the Timewave as a theory largely supported by current events, including the acceleration of technological developments and the systemic shifts in the modern subject’s processing of time and duration. As such, and leaving aside its mathematical claims, it is not hard to consider the Timewave as an oracular or poetic mirror of postmodern time. But for Terence it was more than this, and we therefore need to recognize the rhetorical and psychological role the mathematical theory played within Terence’s ongoing scientific romance. As Hanegraaff argues, the Timewave can easily be seen as “resulting from a stubborn refusal to dismiss the La Chorrera revelation as no more than a temporary state of psychotic hallucination.” In other words, poetry alone would leave Terence holding the psychopathological bag; ironically, this most enchanting of story-tellers needed to construct and offer something more than a story.

Hanegraaff also underscores the specifically religious vision of redemptive radicalism that feeds the Timewave with a sense of both global crisis and the wish to find meaning in time. He points to one particular statement in *The Invisible Landscape* that both summarizes the messianic hopes of the young men, and reminds us that their exotic psychedelic plunge was, in their eyes anyway, an extension rather than a retrenchment of their hopes for global change. “We
believe that by using such ideas as a compass for the collectivity, we may find our way back to a new model in time to reverse the progressively worldwide alienation that is fast turning into an ecocidal planetary crisis,” they write. “A model of time must give hope and overcome entropy in its formal composition. In other words, it must mathematically secure the *reasonableness* of hope.”\(^{396}\) The further irony, of course, is that the messianic literalism of the Timewave as presented precisely cancels out this reasonableness, at least for many readers.

There was another spur for the Timewave, however, one that makes itself known through one of the occasional footnotes in *True Hallucinations*. While narrating his discovery of the apocalyptic eschaton figure in the days after the Experiment, Terence adds an extra-diagnostic note that his thoughts at the time were later formalized in *Invisible Landscape*, and continued to be refined afterwards. However, it is clear from the note that Terence did not take credit for the concepts. “It took years of reading and self-education to keep track of the things that the internal voice was saying,” he writes, acknowledging the construction that necessarily comes after the visionary fact. Terence then admits to the “presence and persistence” of the voice over the years, indicating that the daimon stuck around, at least during subsequent psilocybin trips. But in La Chorrera, the voice possessed a particularly “holistic, systems-oriented approach to things,” a powerful and technical vision of the nested integrity of the universe that reminded the young Terence that “the ideas I was producing were coming fully organized from somewhere else.” As such, “I was nothing more than a message decipherer, hard-pressed to keep up with a difficult incoming code.”\(^{397}\)

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395. Hanegraaff, “‘And To the Stars”, 301-2.
397. McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 134. Hanegraaff suggests that, for these reasons, McKenna’s mushroom Other should be placed in the contemporary context of channeling, a term that is particularly appropriate here, given the systematic and abstract nature of the code demanding to be deciphered.
McKenna’s language here reminds us that, as readers, we find ourselves at the end of a chain of decipherments that originates in the Beyond. The Timewave represents the translation of daimonic voice to concepts, the concepts to the page, and the page before our now rather bemused brains. But one thing is most certainly lost in translation: the uncanny presence—there is no better word—of the voice as an intimate internal other whose eruption as an enunciation communicates more cosmos-rattling information than whatever flowcharts, alchemical protocols, and time diagrams it downloads. Terence was self-critical enough to recognize that the voice as such could not be expected to hold any authority or explanatory value—after laying out Dennis’ pharmacological speculations at the end of Invisible Landscape, the brothers declaim that “it is upon this theory, and not as reporters of paranormal events, that we wish to be judged.”

But the sheer tenacity with which Terence clung to his theory in the face of its considerable problems indicates more, I believe, then simply a refusal to write the whole thing off as jungle loony tunes. This persistence also speaks to the weird circuit of reciprocity and respect booted up by the existential encounter itself. If the conditions of this encounter remind us of more explicitly spiritualist channeling, so should Terence’s sense of obligation recall the dynamic negotiations of the pact, whether seen through an occult or shamanic lens. But in his texts, Terence could not bring this voice forward as itself. And so the theory—rickety, but formalizable in marks and algorithms—had to serve as its avatar, a seal of trust in the Outside.

Guides

For all the dry discursive armature of The Invisible Landscaepe, the wild voice of the Other was not to be contained, as it soon inscribed itself in the very interesting handbook that the

398. McKenna, Invisible Landscape, 102.
brothers next turned their attention to. As a handbook, *Psilocybin: Magic Mushroom Grower’s Guide* may well have proved as influential as Terence’s elliptical seeding of the 2012 phenomenon. After his second visit to Columbia, Terence returned with spore-prints of Stropharia cubensis in hand, and eventually the brothers set themselves the tricky task of figuring out how to reliably cultivate the shrooms. As Terence tells the story, his own manic attempts to grow the mushroom in a shed in Berkeley took place during a period of intense personal turmoil, which led him at one point to abandon his attempts to grow the mushrooms on rye in canning jars. Returning one day from a desultory walk, he decided to clean out the shed, only to discover a thriving crop of shrooms. He weeps with joy. “The elf legions of hyperspace had ridden to my rescue,” he writes with typical humor, though there is no mistaking the more serious tone that follows it: “I knew that the compact was still unbroken.”

Sadly, like many stories of scientific and technical discovery, and like many of Terence’s tales, this story is too good to be true. In *Brotherhood*, Dennis sets the record straight: he made the breakthrough in Fort Collins, and through less exalted means. Working with a fellow student, he cultivated the mycelium in a tissue culture lab at school, but couldn’t get it to fruit until he came across an article in the journal *Mycologia* that discussed using canning jars and rye. *Et voila!* Though few close listeners of Terence would be surprised to learn that he could be, as Dennis gently puts it, an “unreliable narrator,” the gap between the lightning-bolt drama of his discovery and the more mundane laboratory procedures that Dennis employed not only underscores Terence’s need for scientific romance, but reminds us that rivalry as much as visionary consonance defined the brothers’ relationship.

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That said, Dennis also saw their breakthrough as a vindication of the promises of the Voice—a “validation of the gnosis that had been given us.”

400 The much-vaunted “technology” promised by the Teacher was, in his view, nothing less than the simple methodology that they shortly made available through their pseudonymous text. Published by the independent Berkeley publisher And/Or Press, which also put out books on Gurdjieff, laughing gas, and nude Tai chi, *Psilocybin* was not the first printed guide to psychedelic mushroom growth—an inferior method, designed to produce psilocybin for extraction rather than fruiting bodies, was available in *The Psychedelic Guide to Preparation of the Eucharist*, first published in 1968. But the McKennas’ book was the most successful in its day, and therefore earns its place as a significant step in the global symbiosis of psilocybin and the human nervous system. And the pseudonymous nature of the volume also allowed Terence, in his originally anonymous foreword, to channel the mystery of the voice with all its esoteric and cosmic overtones. “The mushroom speaks,” he tells the reader before handing the fungus the microphone.

“I am old, older than thought in your species, which is itself fifty times older than your history,” it begins. “Though I have been on earth for ages I am from the stars.” In two long, dramatic paragraphs, the voice goes on to provide some facts about mushrooms, before describing the galactic network it maintains through “hyperlight communication” with spore colonies on distant worlds. Then the Voice makes a startling offer of an alliance or pact: it will provide the plans to build “hyperlight-drive ships” in exchange “for a free ticket to new worlds around suns less forsaken and nearer galaxy center.”

Though this *Starmaker*-worthy monologue seems to leave rational persuasion behind, its epic vision is still tightly tied to technical knowledge—not the promised S-F blueprints for hyperdrive, but the very real and reasonably effective protocols and procedures that make up the

400. McKenna, *Brotherhood*, 328.
bulk of the Grower’s Guide. It is as if the practical methodology of grow-room technique allows all the esoteric and fantastic desire that secretly fuels the sometimes pedantic speculations in Invisible Landscape to be distilled into one pure dose of high weirdness.

Three features of the mushroom’s speech are worth pointing out here, signs that indicate the near presence of the larger seventies zeitgeist we are tracking throughout this book. One is the emphasis on networks, a term that is old-hat in mycology but that would, in the seventies, take on an increasingly significant technological and social meaning. Here that pregnant rhizomatic form is poetically indicated by the fantastic concept that earthly mycelial networks of psilocybe, which “may have far more connections than the number in a human brain,” are hosting a galactic hypermind.

The second feature is the extraterrestrial rhetoric of outer space itself: though the brothers could have easily wrapped their underground methodology in a Jungian-indigenous package of ancient earth mysteries, the McKennas instead look into the cosmos for both origins and future fulfillment—a gnostic S-F trope that at once authenticates a profound sense of cultural alienation and imagines a coming cosmic community, a “galactic mainstream of the higher civilizations.”

Finally, the mushroom speaks of the “baroque evolutionary possibilities” of symbiosis, a biological concept that, in the mid seventies, had hardly achieved the posthuman panache it possesses today, when so many of the networks we cross-breed with are technological. In the mushroom’s concluding words, we can recognize how richly the logic of species symbiosis resonates with the premodern exchanges staged through the daimonic pact or shamanic alliance. “A mycelial network has no organs to move the world, no hands; but higher animals with manipulative abilities can become partners with the star knowledge within me and if they act in good faith, return both themselves and their humble mushroom teacher to the million worlds to
which all citizens of our starswarm are heir. Nothing is mentioned of the results of acting without good faith, but Terence was still clearly willing to make the pact, an alliance with the nonhuman that he honored here, through the writing of a voice in the head, an inscription of the inside other.

CHAPTER FOUR. HAIL ERIS!:
ROBERT ANTON WILSON’S SKEPTICAL ILLUMINATIONS

In 1975, the paperback outfit Dell published the *Illuminatus!* trilogy, a bloated pinnacle of high weirdness written by two former editors at *Playboy* named Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson. Though intended to appear as a long single volume, which is the form in which it is mostly read today, *Illuminatus!* was initially broken up by Dell into three more manageable paperbacks: *The Eye in the Pyramid*, *The Golden Apple*, and *Leviathan*. The trilogy was marketed as science fiction, and the fantastic cover art, by Carlos Victor Ochagavia, featured dolphins, yellow submarines, half-nude hippies, and a preternatural one-eyed being looming over a central pyramid (in the third volume, this being resembles an octopus). Perfectly keyed to a countercultural readership both confused and transformed by sex, drugs, and the occult revival, the novels exploited the lore of conspiracy theory and secret societies in order to juxtapose political and esoteric themes with a satiric, experimental, and willfully low-brow sensibility.

In addition to the peculiar literary charisma of the novels—a sort of pulp postmodernism riddled with samples and loopy *mise-en-abimes*—Shea and Wilson’s books were also notable for broadcasting the existence of Discordianism, an actually existing parody religion whose metaphysical pranks and anarchist media tactics both anticipated and influenced the freethinking
mysticism associated with the psychedelic underground and the fringes of the cultic milieu. As we will see, Discordianism not only definitively introduced the problem of fiction into religion, but attempts to affirm, with humor, precisely the confusion, chaos, and epistemological instability most religious formations are designed to combat or constrain.

The *Illuminatus*! trilogy (henceforth, simply *Illuminatus!* ) also helped definitively establish the writing career of Robert Anton Wilson, one of the most intriguing and important esoteric thinkers and writers to emerge from the American counterculture. Like *Illuminatus!*, Wilson’s later novels continued to compound fiction with history, satire with esotericism, while his witty, iconoclastic, and digressive nonfiction texts forged an innovative vision of hedonic and skeptical neopragmatism from a wide range of discourses, including existentialism, phenomenology, general semantics, psychology, sociology, parapsychology, and quantum physics.

Born to a working-class family in Brooklyn in 1932, Wilson was too old to be counted a member of the youth culture, nor does his work carry all the entailments one might expect from a countercultural intellectual writing about politics, philosophy, and the occult during those heady days. Though he marched on the Pentagon in 1967 and fought in the Chicago riots in 1968, he was in no way a man of the Left, describing himself in 1973 as “a spokesman for an extreme right-wing libertarianism that prides itself on being more radical than left-wing anarchism.” In other words, Wilson placed the freedom of the individual above the anarcho-syndicalism of some revolutionaries on the Left.

Part of Wilson’s radicalism—which had long before left Ayn Rand in the dust—involved his study and personal exploration of what one might call, in light of Foucault, the “limit
experiences” of the counterculture. He experimented with psychedelics, “tantric” sexuality, occult rituals, New Thought techniques, and altered states of consciousness; his interests in parapsychology and “quantum weirdness” also made him a fellow traveler of the New Age sensibility he sometimes liked to mock. That said, Wilson for the most part retained a skeptical, freethinking, and satirical temperament and had little truck with prophetic claims, esoteric schools, or the manipulative charisma of gurus. In this he extends, in non-collectivist mode, the historical current articulated earlier by the “head Boo Hoo” Art Kleps, who contrasted the incoming eastern tradition of authoritarian spirituality with a “western history of visionary and mystical experience coupled with the vigorous advocacy of human liberty and political radicalism of every kind.”

Though he eventually earned a degree in psychology, Wilson remained an independent author and freelance writer for most of his life. His blue-collar beginnings, his journalistic disposition towards entertaining (and sometimes hasty) writing, and the wayward bouts of poverty he experienced raising a family as an underground intellectual helped inform the down-to-earth character of both his writing and his unusually empathic libertarian politics. And though Wilson’s writings have not received the scholarly recognition they warrant, their mischievous and mind-expanding ethos strongly marked a number of cultural conversations that coursed through or emerged from the counterculture, including chaos magic, transhumanism, and the “New Edge” cyberculture of the nineties.

More important for our purposes, however, is Wilson’s 1977 book Cosmic Trigger: Final Secret of the Illuminati, his personal account of a long bout of synchronicities, paranoia, and

403. Kleps, 22.
speculative excess he experienced in the early and mid-seventies, when the political and cosmic conspiracies mobilized in his satiric fictions, along with the more outlandish possibilities suggested in his speculative essays, bled into the folds and passageways of his life and mind. During these years, when he was exploring psychedelics and sexual magic along with positive thinking exercises, Wilson entered what he called “Chapel Perilous.” From July 1973 until October 1974, by his reckoning, Wilson came to inhabit a “reality tunnel” in which an extraterrestrial intelligence from the star system Sirius was sending him telepathic messages. With acrobatic acumen, Wilson managed to slip out of this particular tunnel, and \textit{Cosmic Trigger} can therefore be read productively as both a record of and creative response to the sorts of profoundly destabilizing extraordinary experiences that shuttle high weirdness from a genre of cultural production to an ontological slipstream alive with alien others.

Wilson’s experiences were extraordinary, but in order to appreciate them, we will need to spend some time up front with his writing and his thoughts. Given Wilson’s unusually generous acknowledgement of the people and ideas that influenced him, \textit{Cosmic Trigger} and its sequels enable to retrace the scripts whose sometimes striking recombination shaped his experience. Even more importantly, however, we can grapple with the “meta-programming” that illuminated the scripting process itself, and that encouraged Wilson and his pals to construct, experiment, and radically contest various reality tunnels through the bootstrapping possibilities of “as if” self-programming. Ironically, however, none of Wilson’s considerable range of influences can match the highly infectious and sometimes puerile scripting environment he and Robert Shea crafted in \textit{Illuminatus}!
Plot, Counterplot

With *Illuminatus!*, Shea and Wilson spliced together a roving, baggy, brilliant and sometimes tedious text that, though it has never gone out of print, hovers in its own peculiar limbo of literary and cultural memory. Written roughly between 1969 and 1971, and only mildly revised before final publication in 1975, it is an unquestionably ground-breaking novel that sustains deep formal and thematic comparisons to a number of roughly contemporaneous postmodern classics like Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Philip K. Dick’s *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1975), and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973). Like Reed, Shea and Wilson channel powerful political desires into a satirical collage of esoteric conspiracy theories, while playing with the paranoia, fugue states, and druggy dialogue of Dick. The connections with *Gravity’s Rainbow*—which was resonant enough to warrant a few allusions in the final 1975 text—are particularly tight.

Thematically, *Illuminatus!* engages paranoia, political conspiracy, drugs, sexual hi-jinks, Nazis, mystical illumination, the second law of thermodynamics, anarchist pranks, weird science, occult arcana, goofy pop music, and rumors of apocalypse. Characters appear and disappear, occasionally change identity mid-paragraph, and possess silly names like Markoff Chaney, Tarantella Serpentine, and the Dealy Lama. Beneath their encyclopedic range of references and genres, both novels also seek to draw the reader to question the link between the rational and the real, and to do so in part by playing with paranoia, conspiracy, and occulture. Listen to Pynchon critic George Levine, writing in 1976 about the capacity that Pynchon’s novels have to disorient the reader. “Invariably, as the surreal takes on the immediacy of experience, they make us feel
the inadequacy of conventional modes of making sense—of analysis, causal explanation, logic.”

Pynchon’s language, he tells us, is “cruelly anchored in the banalities of the colloquial, the obscene, the trivial, the familiar,” even as it “miraculously spins from these things into high scientific and historical speculation, into melodrama, romance, and apocalyptic intensity.”

Replace “romance” with “happy rutting,” and Levine could almost have been talking about *Illuminatus!*

That said, *Illuminatus!* assiduously resists canonization as a literary work, even as a PKD-like outlier, a condition that I suspect is exceptionally unlikely to change. There are reasons to pause before a text described by Greil Marcus as “the longest shaggy dog joke in literary history.” One of these challenges is the novel’s peculiar and somewhat off-putting blend of pulp moves and ironic, avant-garde affectation. On the one hand, the novel’s prose, dialogue, and story lines draw all-too-intimately from popular forms like weird fiction, right-wing pamphlets, hippie porn, and the druggy slapstick of underground comics. On the other hand, the novel is self-consciously experimental, with abrupt temporal transitions and shifts of voice, Joycean word jazz, copious meta-fictional asides, dada-esque interjections, and an endless tango of historical fact and fiction.

As a novel—rather than a guerrilla work of esotericism, or anarchism, or psychoactive metaphysics—Wilson and Shea’s experiments and popular pleasures do not exactly cohere. Despite many ludic and luminescent passages, and a particularly visionary deployment of the irreverent satire that marks so much seventies fiction, their digressive, uncontrolled and sometimes slapdash prose often feels more like churn than craft. “It’s a dreadfully long monster of a book” one literary critic in *Illuminatus!* complains, in an obvious meta-fictional comment on

a text he goes on to call a “fairy tale for paranoids.” Without Reed’s anger or Dick’s pathos or Pynchon’s alchemy, the mix of high-brow and low-rent never quite provides enough combustion to lift their experiment from the margins, at least for most readers. It seeks but only occasionally finds that point where “all categories collapsed, including the all-important distinction…between science fiction and serious literature.”

At the same time, that very marginality helps make the trilogy a masterpiece of high weirdness, particularly in the way that it sidesteps or warps pure fictionality. *Illuminatus!* is not just a novel but also, without doubt, a guerrilla work of esotericism, anarchism, and psychoactive metaphysics. Its very proximity to pulp genres, crank literature, libertarian zines, and the raunchy fringes of the freak scene also lend the text a vivid subcultural and extra-literary density that is fascinating and pleasurable in itself. Even more unusual is how the text, for all its randy satire, both proposes and enacts a sacred irony succinctly expressed by Philip K. Dick in his novel *Valis*, written later in the same decade: “The symbols of the divine show up in our world initially at the trash stratum.”

This ironic and playful spirit of gnostic juxtaposition also helps stage the novel’s “second order” intervention in the lore of conspiracy theory, or what the scholar Asbjorn Dyrendal calls “conspiracy culture.” To clarify his term, Dyrendal makes a distinction between narrow conspiracy *theory*—in which specific agents are exposed and identified with unwavering conviction—and a broader, more “postmodern” conspiracy culture that is characterized by uncertainty and a peculiar sense of enjoyment that navigates “between ‘passive’ entertainment

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and active play and/or serious regard, between mocking and belief."**406** It is into this latter zone of conspiracy culture that Illuminatus! initiates the reader.

The origins of the novel underscore the importance of marginal non-fiction discourses to the novel’s ultimate crazy quilt of views and voices. When Wilson and Shea both worked for Hugh Heffner, one of their tasks was to edit and write replies to the Playboy Forum. Not to be confused with the sex advice column Playboy Advisor, the Forum was introduced in the magazine in 1963 with the express purpose of creating public discussion around “the Playboy philosophy,” which amounted to Heffner’s strongly held positions on life, sex, politics, and the pursuit of happiness. Heffner’s hedonistic Epicurianism made him a vocal if self-interested advocate for strong civil liberties (including abortion rights), and the Forum consequently attracted a wide variety of political players, including libertarian and right-wing voices who sometimes tied the encroachment of civil liberties to larger political conspiracies. At times the two editors received mail from cranks, wing-nuts, and paranoids, many of whom were plying the dark waters churned up by the JFK assassination, ground zero for postwar conspiracy theory. As a lark, the two men started bouncing around conspiratorial scenarios of their own, including one in which all the various plots sent into Playboy were simultaneously true.**407**

Transforming the gag into a novel also afforded them the opportunity to participate in the political and ontological hijinks associated with the Discordian Society, a fringe group of anarchist satirists whose playful DIY religion Wilson had discovered after making contact with Kerry Thornley, a libertarian zine editor then in the West Coast. Thornley had co-founded the Society with Greg Hill in the late fifties, when, according to Discordian materials, the two young

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**407.** Tom Jackson cites Wilson’s discussion of the origins of the novel at http://www.rawillumination.net/2014/02/illuminatus-online-reading-group-week.html
men—humanists and enthusiasts for Mad magazine and Southern California’s fringe religions—experienced a vision of a talking monkey in a late-night bowling alley in Downey, California.  

This radical spiritual vision did not become scripture until 1965, when the first edition of the Principia Discordia was published in five copies. Almost entirely the work of Hill, aka Malaclypse the Younger, the first edition rather methodically lays out the Discordian doctrine and (dis)organizational structure—the law of fives, the lore of the goddess Eris and her golden apple, the variously named Discordian splinter groups—that would later appear so provocatively in Illuminatus!

By the time that the fourth edition appeared in 1970, the Principia, now subtitled How I Found Goddess And What I Did To Her When I Found Her, had ballooned into a marvelous assemblage of cartoons, slogans, rubber stamp impressions, fake certificates, and org charts enlivened with chaos myths, mystic paradoxes, antinomian Zen and metaphysical one-liners like “No two equals are the same” and “King Kong died for your sins.” The new aesthetics reflected Hill’s transformation of the Society from a private project of religious invention into an intensely collaborative artistic-metaphysical experiment that Hill called The Paratheo-Anametamystikhood of Eris Esoteric (pronounced “pooey”).

Discordians were invited to elect themselves popes and to participate in the creation of new editions of the PD through the method of “process collage,” or what the scholar Danielle Kirby calls “occultural bricolage.” The fourth edition, for example, included material provided by Thornley (aka Omar Ravenhurst), Robert Anton Wilson, Camden Benares, Thomas the Gnostic, and a number of popes and odd-balls, many of whom were already enthusiastic

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408. Downey is the same municipality that gave the world Taco Bell.

participants in the exchange of zines through informal mail networks. The Discordian Society had thus become what one might call an “open source” artistic-esoteric current, a non-zero-sum game of remix metaphysics that invited anyone who tuned in to play. The fourth edition even replaced the usual copyright statements with language that parodied both property and the satanic mass: “(K) ALL RIGHTS REVERSED - Reprint what you like.” Astoundingly, the PD managed to anticipate three features of what we could perhaps still call “net culture” today: open source content, collaborative multimedia, and, especially, the productive power of self-consciously deployed religious fictions that derive their charisma from a precise confusion of faith and fabulation.

**Illuminate Us!**

Other than the bullhorn provided by writing bestselling paperbacks, what Shea and especially Wilson introduced to the Discordian Society were the wild and ominous visions bubbling out of American conspiracy culture. In particular, the *Playboy* editors were drawn to one particular *bête noir* of fringe history that some of the Forum contributors excoriated, the same group now help responsible for the insidious messages in some hip-hop and pop videos: the Bavarian Illuminati.

Conventional European historians will acknowledge, without controversy, that the Illuminati was founded in 1776 by the ex-Jesuit Adam Weishaupt as a freethinking secret order within German Freemasonry. The group was banned by the Bavarian government in 1785 but was subsequently identified by a few reactionary writers as the shadowy puppet-masters behind the French Revolution. In the middle of the twentieth century, when a variety of mechanisms for
global governance had been installed, Illuminati talk was revived by right-wing groups like the John Birch Society, a rabid anti-communist organization that fomented fears of a totalitarian international conspiracy of bankers and statesmen who wanted to install what soon became known as the New World Order.410

The Illuminati also make a notable appearance in Richard Hofstadter’s seminal essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” first presented the month of the Kennedy assassination and published a year later. Hofstadter reminded Americans that the early decades of the republic were aflame with rumors that the Illuminati were threatening to seize the government, concerns that led to the founding of the Anti-Masonic Party in 1828. By connecting these historical fears and fancies with the clinical language of paranoia, Hofstadter also permanently linked the emerging discourse of “conspiracy theory” with the fantastic plots of psychopathology.

Given the widespread use of the term today, we have become all too familiar with the notion that conspiracy theory is a mode of discourse that focuses with a sort of feverish pedantry on secret orders of political and sometimes metaphysical power, and whose articulation is almost inherently fanciful, illogical, paranoid, and/or historically inaccurate. The roots of the term, however, are highly specific. As the political scientist Lance deHaven-Smith explains, the term “conspiracy theory” did not become culturally current until 1964, when it was used by both intelligence agencies and media organizations as a basket term to categorize JFK assassination scenarios that did not support the “lone gunman” theory adopted by the Warren Commission.411 As such, “conspiracy theory” became an instrument of elite discourse that deflected attention

410. For a good overview of the development of the Illuminati concept, see Michael Barkun, A Culture of Conspiracy Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003). 45-64.
from its own operations by conflating what deHaven-Smith holds are two very different sorts of counter-normative discourses.

On the one hand, you have rational but nonconformist political and historical accounts that seek to articulate and expose hidden networks of political and economic actors working behind the scenes to achieve concrete goals. On the other hand, you have ungrounded if not paranoid fabulations whose capacious imaginings and inherently flawed logic produce narratives that are more or less akin to mythology, delusion, and urban folklore, and can therefore be ignored. The latter, irrational sense of “conspiracy theory” is in large part derived from Karl Popper, who argued in the 1945 text *Open Society* that authoritarian political movements, on both the left and the right, foment “conspiracy theories of society” that really represent a “secularization of religious superstition.” Now that we have abandoned the gods, Popper theorized, that ontological absence is filled by “powerful men or groups…whose wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from.” Popper’s examples include both the “capitalist class” and the Elders of Zion, whose unquestionably hoaxed *Protocols* remain a bestseller among the conspiratorial right.412

For deHaven-Smith, then, “conspiracy theory” is a term whose political power derives from disguising the difference that founds it, a difference that therefore oscillates between secular history and covert or overt religious myth. (This sort of oscillation, moreover, is the very substance of the weird.) Given the pervasiveness of actual political and corporate conspiracies in contemporary times, deHaven-Smith holds that nonconformist political critics need to rigorously separate rational accounts of conspiracies from fantasies, so as to judge the former with the historical logic capable of revealing public truth.

Illuminatus!, which pits the hydra-headed Illuminati against the equally multifarious anarchist Discordians, is founded on the opposite premise: that the distinction between the legitimate political discourse of conspiracy and the fantastic fabulations of the paranoid, superstitious, or occult mind is not only ultimately impossible to locate, but is itself a pure form of ideology. Moreover, as Dyrendal explains, there are significant formal and thematic points of connection between the discourses of esotericism and conspiracy. Beside the use often made of symbolic correspondences and other forms of associational thinking, both discourses emphasize hidden orders of power, “secret chiefs,” counter-normative histories, and the notion of a singular “diamantine self” capable of waking up to the deeper reality of things.

Conspiracy theorists, however, often invert the narratives of esotericism, which offer initiates entrance to these secret currents of hidden knowledge. Instead, the knowledge offered by conspiracy writers is a strangely doubled gnosis. On the one hand, it frees the individual from the malevolent historical, ideological, and psychic spells cast by the manipulators. On the other hand, it does so by initiating the individual into an “elite” current of conspiratorial knowledge that is also rejected by the majority of people in the society. In this way, the same notion of rejected knowledge that establishes the category of esotericism according to von Stuckrad and Hanegraaff not only helps illuminate the dynamics of conspiracy theory, but explains the inevitable commingling of these two forms of knowledge. While secret political and corporate conspiracies exist in a conventional historical sense and can be exposed as such, the labyrinth that researchers enter to ferret out such conspiracies inevitably includes slippery slopes that spill into esoteric modes of thinking, though these are often laminated with secular forms like mind

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control, “twilight language,” and alien pacts. The formula, at least in its postwar context, is simple but weird: JFK → UFO. Start with the one, the other may well swallow you up.

Plunging into this multifarious zone of uncertainty, Shea and Wilson stir up a myriad of plots and factions by forging surreal and satirical links between actual historical actors, existing conspiratorial scenarios, drug culture paranoia, and occult secrets. In contrast to Pynchon’s proverbial paranoids, *Illuminatus!* familiarizes (infects?) the reader with a meta-fictional web of arguments and assertions that hews much closer to already existing occult and political conspiracy discourses. What results is a disorienting epistemological dance between fact and fiction, prank and allegory, an instability that in turn generates an expansive rhizomatic network of correspondences whose mounting resonances threaten to overwhelm skepticism with synchronicity.

Early in the novel, in one of their many self-referential moves, the authors model the seductive effects of exposure to conspiracy material. Detectives Saul Goodman and Barney Muldoon investigate the bombing of the offices of *Confrontation*, a lefty magazine whose editor, Joe Malik, has also disappeared. Uncovering a stack of memos from one of the magazine’s reporters, Goodman (and the reader) begins piecing together elements of the Illuminati narrative. These memos combine actual conspiracy literature—like Bircher pamphlets on the Council of Foreign Relations and Akron Daurel’s *A History of Secret Societies* (1961)—with hoax sources that Shea and Wilson had themselves pseudonymously planted in the Playboy Forum and the rock magazine *Teenset* (more on these pranks in a moment).

Goodman also reads about Adam Weishaupt and his curious connections to George Washington, both of whom, it seemed, were enthusiastic growers of hemp. To this welter of material, Goodman applies what other detectives refer to as his “intuition,” which is defined on
page 23 of the Dell single-volume edition as “a way of thinking beyond and between the facts, a way of sensing wholes, of seeing that there must be a relationship between fact number one and fact number two even if no such relationship is visible yet.”

This is resonant thinking, a reminder that such associational pathways, though characteristic of the endless interconnections of both occultists and the clinical paranoid, are also intimately bound up with the operations of reason instantiated by the genre figure of the detective. Later, Goodman revisits the memos “using the conservative and logical side of his personality, rigidly holding back the intuitive functions.”

This process of “expansion-and-contraction,” which recalls the dialectic between resonance and reason in Veit Erlmann’s account of modernity, is offered almost as a training exercise for the reader only just girding her loins for seven hundred more exposition-stuffed pages. In Goodman’s case, the exercise in uncanny criticism leads to the conclusion that the clues before him are, like the book we hold, indeterminate networks of fact and fiction.

Of course, these memos are only the opening move in the endless and contradictory proliferation of Illuminati plots and Discordian counter-plots that Illuminatus! teasingly and only partly unpacks. The profligacy of these scenarios and expositions, and the authors’ willingness to put compelling historical and political sense in the mouths of all manner of characters, makes the ideological and occult networks of Illuminatus! all but impossible to diagram. This political and metaphysical confusion is, of course, part of the point: not only does it draw the probing reader into a state of ideological and historical uncertainty, but it reflects the fact that even the most sober investigators of secret societies and esoteric undercurrents must enter a psychologically trying and intellectually taxing labyrinth of myth, rumor, and ambiguity.

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414. Shea and Wilson, 23.
415. Ibid, 50.
Even the notion of “Illuminism” that gives the historical Illuminati its name possesses a curious polyvalence, at once suggesting the Enlightenment of the Age of Reason and the sorts of gnostic revelations described in, say, the medieval Islamic Neoplatonic philosophy of Illuminationism. As Christopher McIntosh explains in his (sober) history of Rosicrucian movements in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the European tradition of “Illuminism” is generally associated with theosophical and occult formulations of higher-degree Freemasonry, much of which was anti-Aufklärung, mystical and traditionalist. But the Bavarian Illuminati was formed around Weishaupt’s radical and freethinking conviction that “through education, the progress of science, the pursuit of reason and the rejection of superstition and obscurantism, it would be possible to erect a truly free, happy, and egalitarian society.”\textsuperscript{416} The important symbolic role played by electricity at this same time—of which Benjamin Franklin’s famous kite flight is only the most celebrated scenario—points to this strange symbolic overcoding, where the potential “illumination” of the soul or inner spirit is redoubled onto the physical manipulation of a largely unseen reality.\textsuperscript{417}

Marking this oscillation between secular rationalism and gnostic experience, one character in the novel describes the Illuminati as what happens “when the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century collided with German mysticism.”\textsuperscript{418} On the one hand, the Illuminati that Goodman starts tracking resemble the freethinking tradition-smashing philosophes of progress and scientific exploit. In keeping with many modern conspiracy theories, some of the Confrontation memos describe a shadowy cabal of transnational elites who maintain global power through Machiavellian manipulation, who mastermind and infiltrate all manner of political and ideological movements, and who deploy hidden technologies of control and

\textsuperscript{416} McIntosh, \textit{The Rose Cross and the Age of Reason}, 103.
\textsuperscript{417} For more on the dialectic of the electro-magnetic imaginary, see Davis, \textit{Techgnosis}, 39-75.
obfuscation in order to disguise the emerging New World Order that they almost entirely control behind the scenes.

At the same, however, the memos also begin to warp into more occult if not mythological dimensions. One memo tracks Weishaupt’s Order back to the medieval hash-smoking Ishmaelian sect the Order of the Assassins, whose leader, Hasan i Sabah, provided the ominous anarchist clarion call that William S. Burroughs launched into the counterculture (and the text of *Illuminatus!*): “Nothing is true, everything is permitted.”

Applying his expansion-and-contraction method to this more esoteric material, Goodman derives a first shot at his own pet theory:

The theory, in essence, was that the Illuminati recruited people through various “fronts,” turned them on to some sort of *illuminizing* experience through marijuana (or some special extract of marijuana) and converted them into fanatics willing to use any means necessary to “illuminize” the rest of the world. Their aim, obviously, is nothing less than the total transformation of humanity itself, along the lines suggested by the film *2001*, or by Nietzsche’s concept of the Superman. In the course of this conspiracy the Illuminati…were systematically assassinating every popular political figure who might interfere with their program.

What is important to note here is that, from the get-go, the Illuminati, who are revealed to be the dark plotters behind the assassinations that so devastated America in the sixties, are also tightly linked to the sorts of extraordinary experiences associated with the counterculture’s use of drugs and mysticism (and, predictably, sex as well). The novel’s black hats are not reactionaries, royalists, Straussian statists, or law-and-order cops—many of whom are actually portrayed by

418. Shea and Wilson, 199.
419. The phrase actually originates with Nietzsche in the third essay of *On The Genealogy of Morals*. 
the authors in a reasonably positive, almost Phildickean light. Like the anarchist Discordians that make up their supposed foes, the Illuminati are composed of what the novel characterizes as \textit{homo neophilus}—neophiles who shun traditionalism and exuberantly intensify the deterritorializing energies associated with modernity. The end result of their science, then, is not simply control but a sort of diabolical transhumanism.

Later, much later, we learn that four of the five Illuminati Primi are in a German rock band named the American Medical Association, whose headlining appearance at a huge free festival in Ingolstadt, Bavaria, forms one of the climaxes of the novel. The ultimate goal of the AMA is to “immanentize the eschaton,” a phrase popularized by William F. Buckley and drawn from the conservative historian Eric Voegelin. In \textit{The New Science of Politics} from 1952, Voegelin warned against what he identified as a totalitarian utopian drive to forcibly realize the eschaton—the Christian millennial kingdom—on earth. Voegelin placed the origin of this heretical usurpation of God’s plan with the medieval mystic Joachim of Fiore, whose revolutionary “age of the spirit” he then traced to Marxism and other modern utopian movements that he helped no-one by labeling “gnostic.”\footnote{421. The historian Norman Cohn shored up this thesis in his influential text \textit{The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).}

Like the term “Illuminism” discussed above, the notion of immanentizing the eschaton fuses and confuses secular and mystical registers, only now on a massive if not quite totalitarian scale. The phrase simultaneously speaks to something desirable and terribly destructive in modernity, that zone where immanence is not circumscribed by natural law or rationality but manifests as a dynamic plenum that overturns the abstract hierarchies, which are also traditional foundations, of transcendence. Despite the mystical anarchism that motivates the white hats in

\footnote{420. Shea and Wilson, 51.}
Illuminatus!, such immanence is profoundly ambivalent, especially when it is collectivized. In Leviathan, the final volume of the book, such immanence takes a turn towards B-movie horror, when we learn that the AMA plan to achieve their operation and become immortal by harvesting the life-energy of the Ingolstadt festival fans after slaughtering them with battalions of, yes, Nazi zombies hibernating at the bottom of a nearby lake. Here, and not for the last time in our study, political forces sometimes must take the form of supernatural pulp.

Hodge-Podge

In the pulp cosmos of Illuminatus!, the Illuminati and their evil plans are not the only game in town. Their nefarious hijinks are continually thwarted by the Discordians, aka the Legion of Dynamic Discord, who are actually only one faction of a broad anti-Illuminati underground that includes the Erisian Liberation Front, the Eristics, and the JAMs, or Justified Ancients of MuMu. Despite the injunction that “We Discordians must stick apart,” something does unite these groups beyond their resistance to their shared foe: an irreverent worship of chaos as both a metaphysical principal and a literal goddess. This deity is Eris, the Greek goddess of discord whose powers and appearance are elaborated in the Discordian materials that predate Illuminatus!, and that we will discuss more in the following section.

As Goodman explains to his partner, Eris is best known for her role in starting the Trojan war. Snubbed by the Olympians, who did not invite her to a wedding, Eris tosses a golden apple into the gathering, inscribed with the phrase Kallisti, which means “for the prettiest one.” The goddesses immediately began vying for the prize until Zeus commands poor Paris to make the call; in choosing Aphrodite, the goddess rewards Paris with the opportunity to kidnap Helen,
thereby triggering the Trojan War. Here, in a lesson not lost on Shea and Wilson, an object of desire (the apple) combines with the ambiguities of written reference in order to sow dissension among competing elites. As we will see in the next section, Eris became a fit symbol for the sort of symbolic monkey-wrenching tactics preferred by the “real” Discordians and other media pranksters of the sixties—one thinks of the famous ruckus Abbie Hoffman stirred up when he and his cronies tossed fistfuls of dollar bills into the pits of Wall Street in 1967.

Though a goddess of dissension and discord, Eris also rests on more positive foundations, foundations that suggest both a metaphysical origin to anarchism and a spiritual or mystic ontology of chaos. The Babylonian origin story of the JAMs, one of the Discordian factions, is a case in point. The story appears, we are told by the hippie occultist Simon Moon, in Von Junzt’s *Unausprechlichen Kulten*, an invented title sometimes mentioned in *Weird Tales* stories and one of Illuminatus!’s many metafictional forays into Lovecraftiania. The JAMs got their start at the time of the composition of the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish*, which directly influenced the opening lines of Genesis. The Babylonian myth begins with the chaos that pre-exists the formation of the heaven and earth, a chaos inhabited by the primeval deities Apsu, the god of fresh water and fertility, and Tiamat, dragon goddess of the sea and chaos. Against the wishes of Apsu and their vizier Mummu, Tiamet gives birth to a host of younger gods, who eventually rise and defeat the old ones. Marduk himself slays Tiamat, forming the heavens and earth from her divided body. He then founds and rules Babylon, one of the earliest city-states to appear on our planet, a rulership that is maintained, Moon says, through monopolies, land

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422. The fictional tome first appears in two Robert E. Howard “Cthulhu mythos” tales from 1931, “The Children of the Night” and “The Black Stone”, and only later included by Lovecraft in a number of stories.
ownership, and usury. “It was the beginning of what we laughingly call civilization, which has always rested on rent and interest,” explains Moon. “The old Babylonian con.”

In the name of the old monster chaos, the Justified Ancients of Mummu rose up as the “first anarchist group” to pit themselves against the new monstrosity of the Babylonian state, which was of course an early Illuminati plot. In their calls to return to a natural order, we are told, the JAMs resembles the Taoists in China and the Cynics in Greece. Eventually the group joins the Illuminati as a separate unit within the order until they get booted out by Cecil Rhodes, an event mockingly memorialized in the pro-Illuminati tune by the Detroit rock band MC5 that forms the corny punch-line of this shaggy joke: “Kick Out the Jams.”

More substantial is the link that the history of the JAMs makes between religion and the state, and the even more crucial tie between anarchism and a magical metaphysics of chaos. The Babylonian state dominates people through economic mechanisms, but also through the beliefs, gods, and laws that naturalize an apparatus of domination. The state crafts discursive and conceptual abstractions that, like “God” and “debt,” begin to seem more real than the embodied, empirical self. Resistance to the state is therefore, in part, an antinomian act of consciousness, as well as an abrogation of “God” and “law.”

But for metaphysical radicals like Wilson and Shea, law does not only consist of the ideological ghosts that disguise and organize social domination. Within the immensity of cosmic history, even the laws of physics can only be called habits, or, as the philosopher Quentin Meillassoux insists, contingencies. As Meillassoux muses, “eternal chaos is capable, without

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423. Shea and Wilson, 127.
425. This is why the anthropologist David Graeber begins his book Debt: the First Five Thousand Years with personal anecdotes about the moral and almost metaphysical reality that the abstract concept of “debt” holds in many minds. See Graeber, David., Debt: The First 5,000 Years (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Melville House, 2011), chapter one.
reason, of the emergence and the abolition of the world, of destroying the laws present in nature so as to bring others into being.  

The Discordians offer a positive metaphysical account of such chaos, the very confusion that the Babylonian state pretends to have vanquished in its rise to (simulated) glory.

Adapting a term drawn from Peter Lamborn Wilson under his nome de plume Hakim Bey, we will call this current *ontological anarchism*. This vision, at once political, mythological and metaphysical, recognizes aboriginal chaos as a bounteous and spontaneous giver of life that precedes all law, rather than a cosmic mess that needs to be mastered and organized. Chaos, in this sense, is not simply disorder. The *Principia Discordia* instead suggests that both order and disorder are illusions, mental constructs that disguise the more enigmatic reality of chaos. In one of the appendices of *Illuminatus!*, Wilson and Shea explain that human society begins in a state of chaos, an anarchic social order they characterize in the postwar language of first-order cybernetics. “There is no stasis,” Wilson and Shea write. “The balance is always shifting and homeostatic, in the manner of the ideal ‘self-organizing system’ of General Systems Theory or Cybernetics.”

Wilson and Shea’s vision of generative chaos echoes the New Age embrace of systems theory that would emerge in the seventies. Though taking many forms, seventies systems theory is often offered as an alternative to the Cartesian command-and-control metaphysics of the West, which installs human individuals—themselves split between a controlling consciousness and a

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controlled body—as manipulators of a passive material world. The vision of generative chaos, on the contrary, reminds us of the libertarian economist Friedrich Hayek’s influential notion of “spontaneous order,” which has become, at least for many anarcho-capitalists, a more technically sophisticated formulation of Adam Smith’s invisible hand.

The anarchist gambit of the Discordians is that one can align with and activate such generative chaos through the imaginative amplification of desire and the satori-like rupture of ideological specters and other abstractions—a stance that moves politics into the field of magic. As Christian Greer explains, “by shifting the ontological foundations of anarchism to an esoteric reading of Chaos,…liberation could no longer be conceived of in terms of material gains won from the oppressor class, but in the freedom to (re)create reality.”

Because ontological anarchism posits an aboriginal source of spontaneous and multitudinous variation that prevails over all instances of law, it requires a revelation of or initiation into the essentially magical nature of reality. As Greer puts it, “the widening of perception necessary for harmonizing with Chaos will inherently lead the individual to understand the ways in which consciousness and the will represent real forces and how the products of the imagination can be made tangible when one understand how they function.” As such, what in Illuminatus! can look like mere drop-out escapism—or merely nihilistic satire—should also be seen as a dangerously playful ontological politics that refuses a purely materialist or economic index of liberation. In this sense at least, Shea and Wilson are party to Raul Vaneigem, who wrote in 1967 that “Daydreaming subverts the world.”

428. Shea and Wilson, 747.
430. Ibid, 180.
In both *Illuminatus!* and the Discordian materials that precede it, this chaos current takes both theistic and impersonal metaphysical forms. These more specific forms also help establish the cultural context of this parody religion. Theistically, the deity is the already mentioned Eris, Goddess of Chaos, Discord and Confusion, who first comes to Malaclypse the Younger and Omar Ravenhurst in a dream vision following the encounter with the monkey in a bowling alley. To the young men, Eris proclaims

I am chaos. I am the substance from which your artists and scientists build rhythms. I am the spirit with which your children and clowns laugh in happy anarchy. I am alive, and I tell you that you are free.\(^{432}\)

Even if we believe—for good reason—that both men were concocting this dream, the generous, hieratic language here suggests a numinous poetic vision only lightly dusted with irony. In other words, for all the laffs and yucks that surround her, Eris appears as a deity worthy of praise, if not worship.

It is also crucial to note that Eris is a *goddess*; though feminism was by no means a dominant discourse in either the various *Principia Discordia* or the gleefully raunchy *Illuminatus!*; the early Discordians recognized that a critique of Babylon was inextricable from a critique of patriarchy. As such, the Discordian Society should be classed as an “authentic” Goddess revival religion, one that draws from the same sorts of cultural impulses that informed the rise of Wicca and other neo-Pagan paths in the postwar period. In fact, neo-Pagan historian Margot Adler traces the first use of the term “Pagan” to describe the new religious current to Discordian co-founder Kerry Thornley. In an article written about Kerista, a polyamorous

commune he joined in 1966, Thornley argues that religions that want to be credible in an age of science should look, not to monotheist traditions, but to the “far more constructively functional religions of old.” Like these “so-called pagan religions,” Kerista was a “life-affirming” path whose “fount of being is the religious experience”—an “ecstasy” we should interpret both sexually and pharmacologically as well as metaphysically. While Discordianism represents a more tricksy path, whose core gnosis is more paradoxical than sexy, it shares with Kerista a life-affirming erotics of ecstasy.

The impersonal current of chaos found in the Principia Discordia and Illuminatus! finds its richest expression in the concept of Tao, understood through a selective reading of—and riffing on—the I Ching, the early Chinese philosophers Lao-tse and Zhuangzi, and the earthy puzzles of Zen. In the Principia Discordia (first edition) the sacred Tao becomes the “Sacred Chao,” with the famous “yin-yang” (t’ai chi) symbol of Taoist polarity morphing into the almighty “hodge-podge.” Illuminatus! attributes to Chuang Chu (Zhuangzi) the notion that “there is no governor anywhere,” a non-controversial translation from the inner chapters of the Zhuangzi. The charismatic Discordian honcho Hagbard Celine, who pilots a yellow submarine beneath the waves, explains along these lines that “we have acted chiefly by not-acting, by what the Taoists call wu-wei.”

Though Wilson, Shea, and the Discordians were not the first to link anarchism to Taoist literature—Kropotkin already makes the connection in a 1910 entry to the Encyclopedia Britannica—this association underscores the men’s ontological affirmation of the self-

433. Cited in Adler, Drawing down the Moon, 294.
http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/kropotkin/britanniaanarchy.html
organizing potentials of the cosmos. In addition, it acknowledges Discordianism’s participation in the “Asian turn” that marked so much Beat and hippie thought and praxis. For the sociologist Carole Cusack, this connection to American Zen is key to understanding the Discordian current, which draws directly from “the Zen understanding of enlightenment or *satori* as a moment of total awareness, and the Zen assertion that there is nothing to say, that intellectual efforts must give way to ‘non-symbolic actions and words.”\(^\text{437}\) Equally important, however, is the element of absurdism and profane illumination in some Zen stories, such as Yun-men’s well-known declaration that the Buddha “is a dried shit-stick.”\(^\text{438}\) Through their American interpretation of Zen, Discordians emphasized illumination as an event that, whether through juxtaposition or paradox, goes against the grain, at once a realization of *coincidentia oppositorum* and the enjoyment, or sufferance, of a painful punch line.

**Fnord**

Both the theistic and impersonal sides of Discordianism’s chaos ontology help clarify the crucial role that extraordinary experiences—whether understood as satori, gnosis, or “mindfucks”—play in the intertwined narratives of *Illuminatus!* These experiences are often erotic and ecstatic, fueled by a hedonistic drive to reach beyond the bounded limits of quotidian consciousness. Yet for all their countercultural ecstasies, Wilson and Shea are also concerned with well-established esoteric interpretations of initiation rites in fraternal orders like Freemasonry or the Order Templi Orientis, in which a sacred drama (or psychodrama) strikes spiritual resonances within the aspirant.

\(^{437}\) Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 27. The quotation itself is from Alan Watts.  
\(^{438}\) *Mumonkan*, case 21.
Here one thinks, for example, of George Dorn, a staff writer for *Confrontation* who is sprung out of Texas jail in Mad Dog Texas by a crew of Discordians and brought onto Celine’s submarine. After much discourse, he is initiated into the Legion of Dynamic Discord with a stoned sex magical ritual that he initially mocks as an “Elks Club ceremony.” It begins with his making love with the beautiful Stella Maris and culminates with him on top of a pyramid, thrusting through the glory hole of a giant golden apple made of steel and inscribed with *Kallisti.* As the orgasm of his invisible partner echoes within the apple, the sound seems to contain “all the agony, spasm, itch, twitch, moon madness, horror, and ecstasy of life from the ocean’s birth to now.” When Dorn finally orgasms, a hanged man drops down toward him from a trapdoor in the ceiling, ejaculating one last time in a scene that, as Celine later notes, is drawn equally from William S. Burroughs and the Marquis de Sade. What disturbs Dorn most is the face of the hanged man, which he recognizes as his own at the very moment that the projected illusion disappears. “Thou art that,” laughs Celine when Dorn complains about the ceremony’s sadistic pornography. “Death is the price of orgasm.”

Extraordinary experience in *Illuminatus!* is rarely simply erotic and ecstatic; as an existential event, it also unfolds into a delirious and sometimes terrifying intensification of cognitive dissonance that heightens paradox and destroys self-knowledge and certainty. “Illumination is on the other side of absolute terror,” Dr. Ignotius tells Joe Malik early on. “And the only terror that is truly absolute is the horror of realizing that you can’t believe anything you’ve ever been told.” *Illuminatus!* does not hold out the hope, dear to the heart of much of the New Age and other forms of “self spirituality,” that individual mystical experience provides

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439. Shea and Wilson, 211.
440. Ibid, 278.
a solid metaphysical or psychological ground. After all, the Illuminati also have their forms of extraordinary experience; it is not for nothing that both sides refer to “illumination.”

Revelation in *Illuminatus!* is principally a *centrifugal* force, which removes the perceiver from known frames of reference and plunges her into a vertiginous limit experience whose existential force—and potential for humor and eros—we mar by assimilating too quickly to the register of the “postmodern.” As an ambivalently chaotic reformulation of “classic” religious experience, the anarchist illuminations in *Illuminatus!* threaten to unleash precisely those problems that conservative upholders of religious tradition often identify with wayward mystics. Seers lose the plot, they become paranoid, they go crazy, they start seeing things, they inspire violence. Early in the novel, Saul Goodman and his partner visits Father James Augustine Muldoon, a conservative Catholic theologian who gives them a decent potted historical account of “gnosis”—which he defines as the “direct experience of God”—among the Cainites, the Manichaens, and modern Satanists. “Rationalists are always attacking dogma for causing fanaticism, but the worst fanatics start from gnosis,” he says.⁴⁴¹

Muldoon is no fool, nor is he represented as one, a fact that only further destabilizes the political and metaphysical template of the novel. His conviction that gnostic experience is a tool of the devil is given an even more totalizing and paranoid twist later in the novel by a psychic named Mama Sutra, who, like many walk-on characters in the novel, tells a story that echoes but reframes the Big Picture readers are inevitably trying to piece together. Mama Sutra’s bleak vision is that all the religious leaders of the world are members of the Cult of the Yellow Sign, an ancient sect that hoaxes and ensorcells the rest of us on behalf of Lovecraftian entities known as

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⁴⁴¹ Ibid, 170.
the lloigor.⁴⁴² One vector of this insidious consciousness control is through religious experience. “All such experiences come from the lloigor, to enslave us,” she tells a detective. “Revelations, visions, trances, miracles, all of it is a trap.” The only force that works for the liberation of humanity is, for Mama Sutra, the Illuminati, whose pursuit of reason and science is the only path that can resist the lloigor. The Illuminati, she says, “are those who have seen the light of reason—which is quite distinct from the stupefying and mind-destroying light in which the lloigor sometimes appear to overwhelm and mystify their servants in the Cult of the Yellow Sign.”⁴⁴³ Again, by providing an authoritative narrative that resonates with the others in the novel, but twists it in an unsuspected direction, accounts like Mama Sutra’s work to further disorient the reader, and to pull the rug out from under any easy “radical” notions of gnostic liberation.

At the same time, the novel directs the critical capacities of gnosis towards a less fantastic but no less paranoid target than the lloigor. Here what becomes illuminated is the dreadful and disguised apparatus of social and ideological control, which is figured in the novel largely as Illuminati plots. This sort of insight is associated with the ability to “see the fnords,” a direct revelatory perception of the usually invisible mechanisms of control that speak to what one ancient Gnostic-Sethian text called “the reality of the archons.” “Fnords” are trigger words planted by the Illuminati in ordinary media like television and newspapers in order to control unenlightened humans, and they operate through exploiting two moments of previous conditioning. The first conditioned response to seeing the fnords produces anxiety, while the second moment blanks out this seeing, leaving us “to feel a general low-grade emergency

⁴⁴² The Cult of the Yellow Sign is drawn from Robert Chambers, a writer of supernatural horror who influenced Lovecraft. Chamber’s 1895 short story collection The King in Yellow features an ominous book of the same name that, like the Necronomicon, appears in a number of the tales; the Yellow Sign is an eerie glyph that opens the minds of its possessors to control by baleful beings.
without knowing why.” (Advertisements never feature fnords, thereby encouraging a consumer society.) “Seeing the fnords” thus amounts to what one might call a gnostic (or paranoid) media critique that, following the esoteric dialectic of conspiracy theory, simultaneously exposes a hidden order of control while initiating the seer into an elect of ostracized knowers. The fnords point to that threshold where the arts of persuasion and even propaganda, which are still addressed to a conscious knowing subject, cross over into a technical order of subliminal instrumental control—control that is to some degree returned to those who can see the fnords and learn not to react.

While concerns with propagandist manipulation, social conditioning, and “brainwashing” became a pervasive feature of the postwar world, the early seventies proved a particularly ripe environment for such fears and concerns, both in the avant-garde and popular culture. A number of essays written by William S. Burroughs in the period elaborated his theories of control, which were influenced in part by his ten-year immersion in Scientology. Particularly important to Burroughs was the concept of the “reactive mind,” which he defines as an “ancient instrument of control” that responds to commands designed “to stultify and limit the potential for action.” In “Playback from Eden to Watergate,” Burroughs linked this concept to his theory of language as a virus, positing “a very small unit of word and image” that can be “biologically activated” as part of a “control system.” In the popular domain, one need only point to the bestselling 1973 text *Subliminal Seduction*, in which Wilson Bryan Key claimed that the media universe was saturated with what he called “embeds”—words, images, and symbols, usually focussed on sexuality, that

443. Shea and Wilson, 526-27.
444. Ibid, 439.
were ever-so-faintly layered into both audio and visual advertisements. Though some of Key’s examples were convincing, his vision was so totalizing and pervasive that it should be counted as conspiracy theory. Nonetheless, the resulting outcry led to an official Federal Communications Commission statement in 1974 condemning the practice.

This discussion reminds us of Timothy Melley’s important argument that modern conspiracy theory hinges on the experience of “agency panic,” as the individual’s enjoyment of autonomy gives way to a fearful suspicion that actions and beliefs are being controlled by external forces. Melley argues that conspiracy theory, defined as “the apprehension of conspiracy by those not involved in it,” therefore begins with “an attempt to defend the integrity of the self against the social order.” This defense, which attempts to protect and preserve autonomy, also depends on a specific—and arguably perverse— attribution of agency to the social order. In other words, the causality of what sociologists call “structural forces” are recognized but combined—with older notions “of a malevolent, centralized, and intentional program of mass control.”

As such, conspiracy theory is a crude form of ideology critique that projects agency onto the same sort of institutional and discursive power formations analyzed by social scientists and Foucauldian historians. While acknowledging that something like this “paranoid style” has existed for centuries, Melley also argues, rightly to my mind, that it undergoes a significant shift in the postwar era. The shift, crucially, is towards something like semiotic power, where “the real threat is not so much a specific agent or group as a system of communications, an organized array of ideas, discourses, and techniques.”  

448. Ibid, 5.
449. Ibid, 2.
at the core of the imagined spider-web, the action takes place within the universe of mediation, where the apparatus of control operates on the threshold between the pop culture arts of persuasion and the dark science of conditioning and other subliminal techniques.

Melley’s analysis helps us understand two aspects of the absurd and sometimes paranoid gnosis offered in *Illuminatus!* On the one hand, the postwar shift to the system of communication as the site of control opens up the possibility of a reverse action within the same space, a mode of resistance that does not depend on the paranoid defense of individual autonomy and its boundary conditions, but rather through the destabilization of the very system of communication through tactics of chaos and confusion.

Again, Burroughs is central here. The famous system of the cut-up explored by Burroughs, Bryon Gysin, and their crony film-maker Anthony Balch, as well as the spliced tape recorder tactics outlined in Burroughs’ early seventies essays on the control society, suggest the possibility of interrupting or “jamming” the signals of culture and the structures of social control through strategies of nonsense, noise, and juxtaposition that themselves derive from earlier moments of the avant-garde. While these strategies can be seen simply as a media praxis of pranks and *detournement*, they are, for Burroughs, also an eminently esoteric form of occult resistance: a magical practice of desire and *delire* that eludes and resists the dominant sorcery of the state and social control.450

*Illuminatus!* must also be seen as operating within this current. The book is, first of all, saturated with media, with newspaper clippings and book citations and TV broadcasts and advanced screen technologies and computers programmed to throw the *I Ching*. This material at once models a system of communication, at least as it took historical form in the late sixties and

early seventies, and detunes that systemicity through a variety of means: humor, frank sexuality, paradox, nonsense, and the serpentine intertwining of fact and rant, fiction and metafiction. Its characters practice scores of media pranks—a few of which, as we will see, took place in the real world. Despite its pulp readability, *Illuminatus!* is also infused with the logic of Burroughs’ cut-up, particularly in its abrupt transitions, promiscuous (and not always acknowledged) appropriations, and relentless juxtapositions of materials and perspectives, philosophy and sex. And beneath or alongside its zany goofs, all its psychedelic shuck and jive, the book establishes a similar aim: to expose and undercut the specters—ideological, psychological, linguistic—that constrain and shape our experience of reality, even if that means initiating the reader into an abyss of freedom that is at once erotic, absurd, and terrifying.

While we could certainly argue that this abyss is “postmodern,” it also arguably re-situates a much older logic of illumination and mystical deconstruction. Here, for example, is a nineteenth-century Freemason’s account of the logic of initiatory ascent: “he is learning only to unlearn; he makes, and he treads on the ruins of his former belief: slowly, painfully, dizzily, he mounts each successive degree of initiation..and—as if to mock the hope of all return—at each stride he hears the step on which he last trod crumble and crash into the measureless abyss that rolls below him.”

*Illuminatus!* wants to effect a similarly mocking, and similarly esoteric, deconstruction of beliefs. Only now the steps are no longer slow, linear, and hierarchically organized. Instead, like the freak-out dances of the Sunset Strip, they are quick-cut, horizontally networked, and transcendentally erotic: an ontological anarchism indistinguishable from what, in the following section, we must call a *mindfuck*.

Though *Illuminatus!* was not published until 1975, the bulk of the text was concluded in Chicago in 1971. That was the year that Robert Anton Wilson quit his job at *Playboy* and made his way to San Miguel de Allende in Mexico, where he lived for a spell before moving to the Bay Area, where the bulk of the incidents related in *Cosmic Trigger* take place. After quitting the magazine, Wilson stuck to freelance writing for the rest of his life; as a family man from humble origins, this meant that poverty, welfare, and pulp modes of over-production and market pandering were sometimes part of the mix.

In 1973, in response to the growing market for countercultural pornography, a paperback outfit published Wilson’s *The Sex Magicians*, whose goofy romps drew more from *Playboy*’s happy hedonism than the depraved scenarios featured in many underground comix of the day. Re-mixing a number of characters and themes from *Illuminatus!*, *The Sex Magicians* also offers a clear portrait of Wilson’s evolving ideas about sexual ritual and altered states of consciousness, notions that we will deal with in the following sections. Wilson also wrote two hard-cover nonfiction books for Playboy Press during this period, *Sex and Drugs: A Journey Beyond Limits* (1973) and *The Book of the Breast* (1974). Both of these books were later republished under different titles that in turn reflect Wilson’s increasingly direct engagement with the occultural marketplace in the late seventies and eighties: *Sex, Drugs & Magick* and *Ishtar Rising*, respectively.

Appearing two years after the successful debut of the *Illuminatus!* trilogy on a mainstream paperback press, 1977’s *Cosmic Trigger: Final Secret of the Illuminati* (1977) marked a significant departure for Wilson. Though the book’s title was obviously designed to
exploit the popularity of the trilogy, the book also represents a turn in Wilson’s career toward countercultural publishing and the strange and satirical writing it could allow. Berkeley’s And/Or Press was essentially an underground publisher, one that had only recently released the McKennas’ pseudonymous handbook of magic mushroom cultivation. After *Cosmic Trigger*, all of Wilson’s nonfiction would be published through such independent publishers, especially New Falcon Press, a vital provider of radical occulture founded by Alan R. Miller, a clinical psychologist and Thelemite who published under the name Christopher Hyatt. In the seventies, the audience for psychedelia and occultural fair was sizable enough to sustain a fringe career. And since the “public space” for these relatively marginal communities was in many ways sustained through books and periodicals, Wilson was able to craft himself a persona of lasting influence on the underground: avuncular cult intellectual providing canny crazy wisdom to an audience of “skeptical seekers” drawn to conspiracy theories and occult possibilities.

*Cosmic Trigger* was both the first and most definite act of Wilson’s self-personification as a hands-on occult philosopher. The book is a combination of autobiography and philosophical essay that, in addition to telling a hair-raising tale of synchronicities and ominous hermetic illuminations, presents a quintessential download from the conceptual universe he would continue to tap, often with a good deal of redundancy, for the rest of his life. “This time the mask comes off,” writes his admirer, the journalist of the weird Richard Metzger. “In this book, Wilson came clean, in the most intellectually honest way anyone ever has, on the subject of ‘What happens when you start fooling around with occult things? What happens when you do psychedelic drugs and try to contact higher dimensional entities through ritual magick?’”

These are highly weird questions, of course, and we will have to build a scaffold of understanding before hazarding answers of a sort in a later section. Here I first want to offer up a
slice of Wilson’s conceptual universe, before we turn to some of the crucial encounters that shaped Wilson’s philosophical and political thought in the fifties and sixties. This brief intellectual biography, some of which is drawn from *Cosmic Trigger*, will help illuminate the origins of Wilson’s ontological anarchism and his uniquely “weird” take on extraordinary experience. At the same time, it will also provide an etiology for a visionary countercultural radicalism that differs in some significant ways from the canonical stories associated with Beats, hippies, and the New Left.

Wilson’s writing is too discursive and inexact to count as “philosophy.” As an independent polymath and working writer with a popular audience, he did not overly fret about technical discourse, and for all his erudition, he could be sloppy with references and historical facts. He often relied on (and reused) conceptual snapshots to stand-in for complex problems. For better or worse, this telescoping allowed him to range farther than most critical thinkers, something that becomes particularly apparent, even uncomfortable, in his discourse on overdetermined topics like quantum theory and parapsychology. However, Wilson’s looseness was part of his philosophical style, a style that, like Nietzsche’s, was inextricable from his own metaphysical sensibility. The dry humor, rapid-fire cultural allusions, and garrulous argumentation of *Illuminatus!* as well as the novel’s relentless frog-leaps between different discourses and points of view, also informs Wilson’s “serious” (if always chatty) investigations of epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophical anthropology.

At the same time, though paradox and evasion perform central roles in his thought and writing, Wilson held little truck with the nihilism of the avant-garde or the obscurantism of the mystic. He was no Romantic: he loved empiricism and the skeptical edge of science, and knew enough about political history to understand how easily and cruelly it could be rewritten through

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myth (including the myth of “history”). In technical terms, we might say that Wilson put forward a skeptical empiricism that framed both ontological and epistemological questions in pragmatic, pluralist, and radically constructionist terms. Riffing loosely on Heisenberg’s Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics, Wilson sometimes characterized his view of reality as a “neurological model agnosticism.” In the preface to the 1986 edition of *Cosmic Trigger*, Wilson explains:

> the only ‘realities’ (plural) that we actually experience and can talk meaningfully about are perceived realities—realities involving ourselves as editors—and they are all relative to the observer, fluctuating, evolving, capable of being magnified and enriched, moving from low resolution to hi-fi, and do not fit together like the pieces of a jig-saw into one single Reality with a capital R.  

Here we can identify a few key elements. One is a fallibilist sort of “meta-programming” that keeps moving forward by remaining open to personal experience, including extraordinary and paranormal experience. This empiricism, riding the line between inner and outer worlds, then becomes an operational vehicle of insight, revision, invention, and play. Another element is Wilson’s profound pluralism, one that takes it as given that the social and psychological fields are made up of multiplicities of what he famously calls “reality tunnels”. Finally, Wilson puts the nervous system in the driver’s seat, setting up a radical constructionism that brings a cybernetic language of information processing and feedback to the necessarily hand’s-on task of programming—“editing”—one’s realities through the experimental adaptation of different models and practices.

Though in some ways echoing emerging New Age discourses, Wilson’s theory is bound up with a praxis that is both libertarian and, in an ethical, almost utilitarian sense, hedonistic. So on the one hand, Wilson called for a “guerrilla ontology” that critiqued, rejected, and made fun of the normative discourses or reality tunnels that dominate and constrict modern society, cultural behavior, and individual psychology. On the flip side, he trumpeted the creative, expansive, and ultimately mystical possibilities of self-reflexive reality-construction and the openness to a universe whose chaotic potentials, paranormal and otherwise, are not compassed by the normally rote human mind. What results from all this is an observer-driven perspectivism whose vertiginous relativism Wilson felt no compulsion to paper over with moral or ontological guarantees. As such, Wilson’s thought can also be considered as part of the general “postmodern” turn that took place across diverse fields of thought in the seventies, as well as a more constructivist and self-reflexive articulation of the “epistemological individualism” of the New Age movement that his work both paralleled and mocked.455

Null-A

One of the charming things about Wilson as a thinker is his balance of singular independence with an enthusiastic willingness to offer credit to the texts and thinkers that shaped him over time. Wilson knew how much his worldview resulted from such encounters, which is why cognitive autobiography is such an important strain in *Cosmic Trigger*. There he tells us

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454. Wilson credits the phrase to Leary. For one of his exercises, Wilson suggested subscribing to magazines with radically different political perspectives for a few months at a time as a way to test the malleable boundaries of one’s own reality tunnel.

455. For an important account of “epistemological individualism” in the New Age, and its relationship to both modernist and postmodern paradigms, see Christopher Partridge, “Truth, Authority and Epistemological Relativism in New Age Thought”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14, no. 1 (January 1999), 77-95.
that, after abandoning Catholicism as a teenager, he became a committed philosophical materialist, dabbling in Marxism while studying engineering and mathematics at New York University. In his twenties, he treated his sometimes intense anxiety with various courses of psychotherapy, including work with a Reichean. He also restlessly explored the full range of fifties fads and philosophies: existentialism, Objectivism, general semantics, phenomenology, quantum mechanics, Buddhism. Everything influenced him, but maybe not as much as the cannabis he also tells us he started smoking during the decade. He married the poet and feminist Arlen Riley in 1958, embarking on a happy marriage that lasted until Arlen’s death in 1999. Around the same time he started writing for The Realist, a New York rag devoted to “freethought criticism and satire” edited by Paul Krassner, who would later become both a Merry Prankster and a Yippie.

Though mostly political, the Realist articles also give us insight into Wilson’s evolving metaphysical ideas. His 1959 article “The Semantics of God” attacked the language of theism and suggested a more impersonal semantics in its place—an “it” rather than a “he.” Following the lead of Alan Watts, a crucial influence on Wilson throughout his life, he sought an empirical metaphysics that aligned with both Eastern mysticism and the process orientation of Western science, which Wilson understood through Whitehead, Bohr, and cybernetic thinkers. But the experiential key for us here lies in his response to an unhappy theist who commented on the piece in the letters column of the following issue. Here Wilson describes himself as, “strangely enough,” religious, at least in an aesthetic or “mystical” sense. “But my religion begins and ends
with a deeply felt, and oddly joyous, experience of what Joyce named, in *Ulysses*, ‘the apathy of the stars.’”

The article also casts light on one of Wilson’s most important influences in the fifties: Alfred Korzybski. Indeed, in *The Realist* response, Wilson offers Korzybski’s Institute for General Semantics for his institutional affiliation. Like William Burroughs, L. Ron Hubbard, and many science-fiction writers, Wilson was deeply swayed by Korzybski’s argument that human beings possess a powerful and deeply unfortunate tendency to tightly identify language and other abstract codes with the domains revealed through sensory experience. Korzybski’s famous slogan, “the map is not the territory,” directly critiques this habit of overwriting experience with reified abstractions and forgetting the difference. The identification of map and territory—or what *Illuminatus!* calls the “logogram” and the “biogram”— allows semantics to shape people’s experience, inviting all manner of symbolic and ideological control over the body and behavior. As such, political liberation requires a shift in our relationship to language and expression, one that takes form precisely through the recovery of the experiential and perceiving body and what Korzybski’s general semantics called the “consciousness of abstraction.”

However, though Wilson aimed to root his thought and politics in what we might call a deterritorialized and erotic body, he did not simply reject or even steadfastly critique the striating claims of maps and abstractions. Instead, as a constructivist thinker, Wilson came to freely embrace and deploy the maps and models he thought were liberating or entertaining or empirically sound without worrying about how they all fit together. As a practice of perception tuned to the dangerous but necessary dynamics of abstraction, general semantics would give Wilson permission to suspend the authority of any single map. As such, thinking for Wilson

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became a movement between scientific psychology and esoteric cosmologies, logical positivism and positive thinking, all the while remaining tuned to the phenomenological stream at his fingertips. Korzybsky’s critique of Aristotelian logic also inspired Wilson’s later advocacy of a “maybe logic” that would resist or outflank the tendency of modern thinkers, and especially scientists, to promiscuously force the axioms of identity and non-contradiction onto the dynamic and multi-dimensional world we actually inhabit, a world in which objects and the environment to which they are inextricably bound change every moment.457

Wilson had other reasons to reject the classical “laws of thought” beyond their mismatch to a world of dynamic ambiguity and the weirdness of quantum mechanics. “A is not A,” Hagbard Celine explains in Illuminatus!, referring to Aristotle’s axiom of identity. “Once you accept A is A, you’re hooked. Literally hooked, addicted to the System.” Here Celine understands the law of identity as part of a system of capture and restraint, an enslavement to rules that any ontological anarchist should reject. But at the very same time, Celine—and Wilson behind him—is also outflanking rival political claimants to radical liberty. After all, “A is A” is also a rallying cry of the Objectivists, those sometimes cult-like followers of the philosophical system developed by Ayn Rand in the forties and fifties as a foundation for her radical call for selfish individualism and lassez-faire capitalism. Rand believed that objective existence took primacy over consciousness, which was nonetheless able to rationally overleap the epistemological chasms described by philosophical skeptics and to recognize reality through empirical perception and the laws of logic.

http://www.ep.tc/realist/08/index.html
457. In the 1980s, Wilson constructed an alternative system of logical values, but though he did not have the capacity or likely the interest in developing it formally, it is worth recognizing that scores of significantly more hard-headed thinkers, including the founders of intuitionism in mathematicians and philosophers like Gotthard Günther and Stéphane Lupasco, have developed transclassical logics that also attempt to step beyond, or around, Aristotle.
In *Illuminatus!*, whose maybe logic makes hash of such views, Wilson and Shea specifically satirize Rand and her book *Atlas Shrugged* through the anti-communist crusader Atlanta Hope and her novel *Telemachus Sneeze*. They also attack Rand’s theories of property (and those of her “followers(!)”) in an appendix to the novel devoted to Proudhon. Indeed, one of the tertiary pleasures of *Illuminatus!* is that it provides a rival contender to Rand’s rather dreadful doorstep for the distinction of being the greatest American libertarian novel.

Wilson’s metaphysics is inextricable from his politics, but it is not easy to locate either on the usual maps. In a *Realist* column from 1960, Wilson responds to the question of his political affiliation with evasion, admitting his support of only two political theories: “Don’t be a victim” (Rimbaud) and “Avoid the authorities” (Lao-tse, by way of Kerouac). More substantively, Wilson’s political writing for Krassner’s journal combined a lacerating critique of power and economic domination with an intense if non-dogmatic pacifism. Culturally, this was wrapped up in a hip and hedonistic rejection of an American culture that tattooed its lies and repressions directly onto people’s nervous systems.

As a more or less historical materialist, Wilson was sympathetic to Marx and the plights of “wage-slavery,” but his distrust of government brought him increasingly in line with Proudhon and nineteenth-century American radicals like Josiah Warren, Lysander Spooner and Benjamin Tucker. These classic anarchist thinkers offered principled attacks on the illegitimacy and necessary violence of the state and, though critical of the capitalist system and what Tucker called “misusury,” rejected the collective or state ownership called for by communist socialism. (Obviously the exact positions of these thinkers are more complex). Warren’s defense of what he called the “sovereignty of the individual” not only aligned with Wilson’s nonconformist rejection

of politics as a system of social control, but also resonated with his Reichean insistence that a healthier and more sensible world would emerge when individuals would break through their armor of programmed symbolic abstractions and return to their senses.

One nineteenth-century debate that proved key to Wilson’s thought was the conflict around natural law, the notion that human rights and privileges could be derived through rational insight into the given nature of human beings. Jefferson enshrined natural law in his famous preamble to the Declaration of Independence, and early American anarchists believed that the concept provided all the basis necessary to found their radical individualism. But in the 1880s, Benjamin Tucker rejected the very idea of natural law after encountering the proto-Nietzschean subjectivism of the German “egoist” Max Stirner, whom he had translated in his periodical Liberty. For Stirner, the very concept of natural or property rights, along with abstractions like “society” and essences like God, were metaphysical illusions—“spooks” that any properly self-serving egoist would banish from her mind as she stepped into the dangerous and vertiginous breach that constituted the core of reality: the “creative nothing” that lies at the heart of the individual psyche.459

With this ontological turn away from natural law, Stirner initiates what John Carroll identifies as an “anarcho-psychological critique” of both power and the apparatus of ideology, an anti-authoritarian current that would play a crucial if under appreciated role in modern psychology, right-wing anarchism, and bohemian culture. And one of the results of this critique was the principled evasion of politics, at least as it is normally—ie, collectively—conceived, an avoidance waged both through personal psychological liberation and insurrectionary acts of language. Like Nietzsche, Stirner can read like a selfish monster from some angles. But Wilson’s

embrace of the anarcho-psychological critique was rather charmingly combined with a convivial, collaborative, and even family-oriented sensibility, one that was arguably as rooted in his temperament as his philosophy (if there is ultimately any difference).

In the early sixties, for example, Wilson moved with his wife and daughters to the School of Living in Brookville, Ohio, a back-to-the-land intentional community run by Mildred Loomis along decentralized and proto-hippie lines influenced by Josiah Warren. Here Wilson edited the community’s journal *Balanced Living*, which he renamed *A Way Out*, and stuffed with characteristic obsessions like Reich, sexual liberty, and modernist poetry (Wilson knew his Pound). As libertarian historian Brian Doherty points out, the older anarchist legacy that shaped Wilson’s thought set his life’s work apart from many of the hard-edged “radicals for capitalism” that Doherty chronicles.460 “He loved liberty but held fast to Tuckerite ideas that modern corporate capitalism and banking just wasn’t any kind of liberty he valued.”461

Indeed, Wilson often mocked the modern libertarian obsession with Austrian economics and the evils of the welfare state, arguments he believed barely concealed a basic hostility towards the poor. Instead, Wilson’s central anarchist practice lay in the phenomenological recognition and expiation of the spooks in the mind that constrain and shape our experience of reality. The pursuit of liberty therefore meant an integrated life of critique and experimentation, a mobile practice of constructive freethinking and hedonic exploration of body, mind, and personal experience. The sovereign in Wilson’s anarchism was not the selfish “I” of the Objectivists, a rationalist monad in a laissez-faire utopia that depended utterly on fixed ideas of natural law. The singularity that Wilson tried to embrace was, instead, the aboriginal precursor of conceptual and

460. Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger*, 43.
linguistic identity, that kernel, at once abyssal and down to earth, that is discovered within the experiential flux of life: sex, children, marriage, work, humor, poetry.

Wilson soon added psychedelics to the list. After reading a review of Huxley’s *Doors of Perception* in *The National Review*, Wilson scored some peyote from a jazz musician and eventually got his hands on LSD. That Wilson would have read a positive article about psychedelics in America’s leading right wing organ, a watering hole of anti-Communism and conservative Christian intellectuals, should not be a surprise. As Marcus Boon reminds us, from the nineteen-thirties to the nineteen-sixties, and setting aside psychotherapeutic researchers, the bulk of the interest in psychedelic compounds was found in conservative and right-wing circles, of whom Albert Hoffman’s great friend Ernst Jünger is only the most storied example.462

In 1964, as a journalist for *The Realist*, Wilson traveled to Millbrook, New York, to meet Timothy Leary, who would become a life-long friend and collaborator. Wilson owes much of his skeptical and experimental mysticism to Leary, whose own radical empiricism enabled him to embrace ecstatic, transcendental states while remaining largely rooted in social science and a somewhat withering take on human personality. In the popular mind, Leary’s naturalist orientation is somewhat obscured by the mystic turn that the “acid prophet” took in the sixties following his ejection from Harvard, when he adopted a guru persona and produced popular writings that remixed Eastern wisdom texts.

To understand Leary’s influence on Wilson, it might be helpful to provide a contrasting snapshot of Leary’s thought midway through this transition, one handily provided by a talk he

462. See Boon, 258-259. Among a few American libertarians, many of whom were put off by the conservative rhetoric of God and country, psychedelics fed into a “spiritual but not religious” yearning for expanded consciousness. As Doherty narrates, one of the most important currents of libertarian thought in the late nineteen-fifties, the Foundation for Economic Education, became psychedelicized through the ministrations of Gerald Heard, Aldous Huxley’s friend and fellow SoCal mystic traveler. See Eckard V. Toy, “The Conservative Connection: the Chairman of the Board took LSD before Timothy Leary,” *American Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (fall 1980), pp. 65-77.
delivered to the International Congress of Applied Psychology in August 1961. Like other psychologists of the era, Leary saw social life as a kind of “game,” by which he meant, not an opportunity for free play, but a rule-based set of learned sequences and culture behaviors with established roles, semantic operators, and associated values. “All behavior involves learned games” he insisted, noting that the institutions and social regulatory functions he referred to as “power” are generally not interested in individuals recognizing these games. But in his 1961 talk, Leary also pushed the concept of game far beyond ordinary social interactions: the “subject-object game” structured ordinary perception and science alike, while the “most treacherous and tragic game of all” was the ego game. Defining the “mystic” as the one who “sees clearly the game structure of behavior,” Leary outlined a pragmatic and liberationist program of “applied mysticism,” one that suggested that “great trauma” can “shatter[ ] the gamesmanship out of you” and thereby free you up to choose better games.

Leary provided Wilson with a social-psychological model of gnosis, conceived as a negative rupture of predetermined scripts and socially sanctioned roles. At the same time, Leary was also developing his notion of “hedonic engineering,” an active and technical pursuit of happiness and pleasure whose notion of hedonism very much included the higher raptures associated with psychedelic mysticism. Later, Wilson would come to believe that “mystical” states of unification and other visionary experiences—including encounters with seemingly preternatural intelligences—were more-or-less programmable forms of ecstasy that derive from the constructivist potentials of the nervous system. This is the reason that Leary placed DNA in the divine driver seat rather than God: not so much to exploit the religious overtones that DNA’s “code of life” struck in the mid-century mind, but more substantially to embed mystical ecstasy

in evolutionary scripts that by their nature remained open to design and future transformation.

Leary’s use of religious or esoteric discourse emerged directly from his earlier institutional practice as a secular social psychologist with a strong commitment to Darwin and to emerging models of socio-biology. Unlike Jung, and despite his mystical moments in the sixties, Leary never sought to sneak traditionalist religious or absolutist esoteric currents through the backdoor of psychological science. As Wilson himself perceptively noted, Leary’s first book, 1957’s The Interpersonal Diagnosis of Personality, followed Skinner in rejecting the "poetry" of Freud and Jung. At the same time, Leary also took a step beyond Skinner’s mechanistic "Newtonian physics" by embracing a relativistic notion of social interaction that characterized “differing reality-coordinates experienced by different bodies as they exchanged signals in space-time.”465 As a social critic in the mid sixties, Wilson found this “this Einsteinian and anarchistic variation on Skinner’s 1984-ish Behavior Mod” both exciting and hopeful.466

Moving to Chicago to edit for Playboy, Wilson continued to read and sometimes write for the growing numbers of periodicals and zines devoted to libertarian thought, pacifism, and the New Left. These informal networks, in many ways modeled on the S-F fanzine world, eventually led him to Kerry Thornley. Thornley was then the editor of the Innovator, a libertarian zine from Southern California that included lively discussions of science fiction, private fire departments, and the possibility of establishing libertarian countries on floating platforms at sea.467 Having recently shifted from Objectivism to right-wing anarchism, Thornley was one of many sixties libertarians who rejected American conservatives for a tentative alliance

464. Ibid, 53.
465. Wilson, Cosmic Trigger, 37
466. Ibid, 40.
467. Later, as the Innovator’s founder grew increasingly convinced that freedom could only be had by withdrawing from society and the state, the zine would help birth modern survivalism, a weird right-wing parallel of the Whole Earth Catalog’s similarly-timed turn towards rural self-sufficiency.
with New Left activists, particularly regarding the war in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{468} Around this time, Thornley had also joined the free-love community Kerista in Southern California and had started taking acid. There are different versions of how Thornley met Wilson, who was mapping a similar path in Chicago, where he wrote for pacifist zines and participated in the antiwar movement. In the more Pynchonesque version, Thornley submitted an \textit{Innovator} article about non-governmental postal systems into the Forum, which regularly featured gripes about mail tampering by the postal service. In any case, Thornley turned Wilson on to the great game of Discordianism, and a few years later, gave Wilson the opportunity to make his first move.

\textbf{Operation Mindfuck}

There are a number of rather Discordian peculiarities about Thornley’s fascinating and ultimately rather sad life, which has received fit treatment at the hands of biographer Adam Gorightly.\textsuperscript{469} After palling around with fellow Erisian Greg Hill in Orange County, Thornley entered the Marine Corps in 1959, where he served alongside none other than Lee Harvey Oswald. Thornley was fascinated by the \textit{Pravda}-reading Oswald, whom he characterized as “the outfit eight ball,” and began to write a novel based on the soldier’s life a few years \textit{before} the assassination of John F. Kennedy. In 1961, Thornley moved with Hill to New Orleans, where Oswald moved briefly in 1963, a circumstance that later took on some importance.

In 1964, while living in Arlington and developing Discordian lore with Hill through the mail, Thornley testified before the Warren Commission about his friendship with Oswald. In 1966, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, the subject of Oliver Stone’s film \textit{JFK}, began

\footnotetext{468} This story is well-told by Doherty, 336-387.
to suspect that the many holes in the so-called lone gunman theory fomented by the Warren Commission were portals into a wide and nefarious conspiracy directed by elements of the CIA. Garrison’s zealous investigation, which even many anti-Warren Commission historians consider reckless, focussed on a network of New Orleans characters that eventually included Thornley. Given the loose physical resemblance between the two men, Garrison’s office came to suspect that the Discordian Society was a CIA front, and that Thornley was a “Second Oswald” who impersonated the real Lee around town in order to generate the impression of an unstable and suspicious character. In 1968, Garrison indicted Thornley. 470

It was time for what Thornley and Wilson came to call Operation Mindfuck. Thornley discovered that one of Garrison’s aides, Allan Chapman, believed that the JFK assassination had been masterminded by the Bavarian Illuminati, the same group that obsessed so many right-wing Playboy Forum contributors. Working with Wilson and Shea, Thornley decided to prank Chapman by planting articles in actual publications that connected the Illuminati to the wave of political assassinations of the decade and other more fantastic forms of malfeasance. The main prank took the form of a letter to the Playboy Forum in April of 1969, though similar stories appeared in a Chicago anarchist periodical and Teenset, a popular music magazine. The author of the Teenset article—none other than “Simon Moon”—asserted that the motto of Adam Weishaupt’s original order was Ewige Blumenkraft—“Flower Power Forever”—an assertion that can still be found on sincere Illuminati conspiracy websites today.

470. One of the additional “synchronicities” mentioned by Wilson and others regarding this series of events is the assertion that the first edition of the Principia Discordia was clandestinely reproduced on a mimeograph machine located in Garrison’s offices. This is not the case. That said, it appears that some early Discordian materials were copied in the office by friends of Thornley and Hill who worked there. For an explanation, see Adam Gorightly’s youtube lecture: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUqVrH4luXc; accessed June 2015.
The *Playboy* letter also mentioned an Illuminati group in Berkeley, which was an actually existing outfit run by Discordians, including Louise Lacey, the most prominent female Erisian activist. As part of the Operation, Thornley also invented a Do-It-Yourself-Conspiracy Kit, which included stationary with Bavarian Illuminati and other bizarre letterheads that Thornley, Wilson and others would use for over-the-top letters to the John Birch Society and other prankable individuals and organizations. Much of this material made its way into *Illuminatus!*, where the *Teenset* and Playboy Forum pranks are included as part of the *Confrontation* memos that turn Goodman on to the conspiracy. All of which reminds us that *Illuminatus!* itself is part of Operation Mindfuck, a massive pop culture mushroom emerging from this intertextual mycelial network of collaborative hoaxing. The authors themselves admit as much in the important Appendix Lamed, the “Tactics of Magick,” which proclaims that *Illuminatus!* is an initiation into Discordian thinking that “has programmed the reader in ways that he or she will not understand for a period of months (or perhaps years).”

Here is it crucial to emphasize that, while Operation Mindfuck took place in multiple arenas, one of those dimensions was deeply political, at least in a special sense of the term developed by the social historian Julie Stephens. In her book *Anti-Disciplinary Protest*, Stephens argues that the dominant view of sixties activism, as well as the usual distinction made between the New Left and the hippies, ignores the crucial presence of what she calls “anti-disciplinary politics.” Fomenting a style of protest that rejected hierarchy and leadership, the anti-disciplinarians offered an often psychedelic politics of satire, ambiguity, and play that was “distinguished from the New Left by its ridiculing of political commitment, sacrifice, seriousness

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471. Shea and Wilson, 774.
and coherence.”\(^{472}\) Such protestors included the Diggers, the Yippies (including Wilson’s editor Paul Krassner), and the folks Jerry Rubin dubbed “Marxist acidheads.”\(^{473}\)

Classic anti-disciplinary protest spectacles included the attempted levitation of the Pentagon (which Wilson attended), the Yippie campaign to elect a pig for president, and Abbie Hoffman’s release of cash at the New York Stock Exchange. Stephens acutely rejects the usual historical vision of these events as mere psychedelic froth atop a serious core of organized and ideological movement politics. Though Stephens herself ignores the (admittedly somewhat marginal) influence of anarchism on anti-disciplinary protest, the Discordians can certainly be recognized in her portrait of

a countercultural sixties which was highly self-conscious and media-wise, full of self-parodic gestures, drawing extensively on motifs from popular culture for its language of protest and distinguished by its spectacular refusals of so-called Enlightenment rationality, none perhaps more enduring than the conviction that reality amounted to nothing more and nothing less than a series of mediated images.\(^{474}\)

The only non-Discordian note here is this final ontology of images. As noted in earlier chapters, McLuhan’s foregrounding of mediation had a pervasive influence on the sixties, both in mainstream media circles and the bohemian fringe, and in some popular forms it contributed to a sort of hyper-mediated nihilism where the only game in town was, as Ken Kesey said, to “get them into your movie before they get you into theirs.” For Stephens, this sort of media politics directly links anti-disciplinary protest to the subsequent emergence of postmodernism and its supposed vitiation of the realist politics of solidarity into self-conscious mediation and

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\(^{473}\) Ibid, 3.
ironic bricolage. There is much to Stephens’ argument, but I don’t believe that the Discordians and the other metaphysical radicals of the day were simply handing reality over to media technique. The levitation of the Pentagon was not just theater; for some participants at least, it was also ritual, however carnivalesque. For at least some anti-disciplinarians, the rejection of rationalism or the secular materialism of the left did not signal nihilism but rather the rejection of the nihilism perceived within secular rationality.

This classic Frankfurt School attack on instrumental reason and the barbarism of the Enlightenment—eluded to but not developed by Stephens—was read by many young people as an invitation to place their bets on a different ontology entirely. Wilson and Shea capture this sentiment in the extended scene set at the Chicago Democratic Convention in the first novel of the trilogy, where the secular and rather Wilsonish character Joe Malik—“ex-Trotskyist, ex-engineering student, ex-liberal, ex-Catholic”—overcomes his skepticism and embraces the esoteric radicalism represented by Simon Moon. “He was game—for astrology, for I Ching, for LSD, for demons, for whatever Simon had to offer as an alternative to the world of sane and rational men who were sanely and rationally plotting their course toward what could only be the annihilation of the planet.” Though Stephens is right that paradox and incoherence were specifically political tactics, her focus on the mediated aesthetics of the playful misses the ontological and esoteric sources that some activists could glimpse through their satiric epiphanies.

All of which demands that we round up this section with a consideration of the classic sixties term *mindfuck*, whose polyvalence is neatly captured in the OED definition: “A disturbing or revelatory experience, esp. one which is drug-induced or is caused by deliberate psychological

474. Ibid, 22.
manipulation.” In the sixties, variations of the term might describe a piece of guerrilla theater, a bizarre synchronicity, a Lovecraft story read while stoned, or the psychological sabotage wrought by a self-styled guru, sexual predator, or bad-vibes flatmate. For the Discordians, mindfuck was a crucial term of art, at once a practice and an experience that juxtaposed pleasure and deception, absurdity and illumination, politics and chaos.

On the one hand, Operation Mindfuck was an anti-disciplinary weapon against the foolish or the powerful, a form of symbolic detournement that incarnates what Mark Dery would later define as “culture jamming.” Considered as a specifically political tactic, the mindfuck found support in von Neumann and Morgenstern’s game theory, which suggested to the Discordians that the only strategy an opponent cannot predict is a random strategy. This is the “random factor” embodied by the surly Illuminatus! character Markoff Chaney, a gruff midget who directs Dada-esque pranks against various authorities, and whose Pynchonesque name refers to the Markov Chain, a mathematical way of modeling stochastic processes whose behavior is not based on the long-term memory of the system but only on its current state. This debt to game theory and probability is not accidental (or random); though Wilson mocked philosophical rationalism, his understanding and appreciation for engineering, physics, and cybernetics always fed into his anti-authoritarian ontology.

At the same time, the Discordian mindfuck was not just a prank directed outwards, but a type of personal experience that, following the model of orgasm or the psychedelic “grok,” abruptly catalyzed a different order of reality and possibility. Gorightly defines this sort of

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476. Shea and Wilson, 114-115.
mindfuck as “sowing the seeds of chaos as a means of achieving a higher state of awareness.” In this light, the Discordian prank was an instrument of expanded consciousness, the sometimes stinging stick wielded by American Zen scalawags who wanted to expose what Simon Moon called the “thermoplastic” nature of reality. As such, mindfucks were not just produced; they were also received from the world outside. When Lousie Lacey lent the first Carlos Castaneda book to Thornley, he responded that “Don Juan was quite a head fucker—just what I needed: one more good lay.” Thornley then passed the book on to Hill and Wilson, knowing that they too would enjoy Castaneda’s metaphysical romp—a mindfuck that takes on even more Discordian overtones in light of the later scholarly consensus that Castaneda’s books were essentially hoaxes. So too did Discordian pranks suggest that a “separate reality” lay just next door, a plane of ontological anarchy whose existence depended at least in part on the intertextual collaborative game of fabricating it in the first place. As such, the mindfuck was not just an epiphany, but an invitation. One discrete example that Gorightly cites are the business cards that Hill printed up, with the slogan “There is no enemy anywhere” on one side, and “There is no friend anywhere” on the other. Like a stage magician’s tricks, this simple device of cognitive dissonance was inextricable from social performance—as well as the tentative possibility of friendship.

Without question, the mindfuck is an ambivalent and even dangerous amplification of the ambiguities already carried by the term *fuck*, which takes in pleasure, transgression, anger, degradation, and manipulation. This danger is particularly apparent in the era of the term’s emergence, when psychoactive drugs and social instability lent themselves to all manner of suggestions, coercion, and fabulous deceptions. The destructive deployment of hard-edged psychological games became a central feature of the discourse surrounding new religious

movements in the late sixties and early seventies, especially those that emerged from or took advantage of the psychological stresses of encounter groups or the malleability of consciousness afforded by psychedelics.

In 1972, *Rolling Stone* journalist David Felton captured this discourse in his book *Mindfuckers*, which excoriated the rise of “acid fascism” among bad-news “cult” leaders like Charles Manson, Mel Lyman, and Victor Baranco of the Lafayette Morehouse sex commune in California. All of these leaders, according to Felton, did not just rule over their followers, but violated them through a kind of psychological (and sometimes literal) rape. Indeed, the perceived excesses of many new religious movements at the time had a lot to do with what the philosopher of mind Colin McGinn argues is the dominant contemporary sense of the term mindfuck: the manipulative use of dishonest means to mess with people’s psyches in an aggressive, even violent fashion. In his curious little 2008 book *Mindfucking*, McGinn focuses his moral critique on the element of dishonesty in the practice. Comparing mindfucking to bullshit and lies, McGinn argues that mindfucking is, in addition to these, “an illegitimate exercise of power” that aims to enforce emotional as well as cognitive effects.\(^{481}\) Strangely, though McGinn acknowledges that mindfucking can lead to pleasure or even insight, he does not develop this dimension philosophically, which hamstrings his critique and makes it ill-suited to understand Operation Mindfuck or *Illuminatus!*. That said, McGinn’s critique does demand that we place the the Discordian mindfuck against the backdrop of paranoia. As one of the more disturbing psychological effects exploited by the mindfucker, paranoia is a unique mental orientation that combines intense emotional states with significant and often highly articulated shifts in cognition. Paranoia, of course, has

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served as a major topos throughout twentieth-century culture, a nexus point of psychopathology and cultural narrative, of phantasms and reason run amok. But in the American counterculture of the sixties and early seventies, paranoia struck particularly deep.

The traumatic effects of the JFK assassination, combined with the widespread dissatisfaction with the Warren Commission and their fishy lone-gunman theory, drew many young people into an alienated and conspiratorial mindset that was only amplified by later assassinations and the massive and insidious counter-intelligence operations aimed at the protest movement. The discursive links between conspiracy and paranoia had, again, been forged in Hofstader’s famous 1964 essay, and though Hofstader insisted his use of the clinical term was metaphoric, the sixties was not an era to recognize the crisp distinction between metaphor and the real. Part of the function of the FBI’s widespread Cointelpro program, which loosed a myriad of snitches and agent provocateurs into student groups and cells of radical activists, was to destroy social cohesion by sowing suspicion and paranoia.

Wilson, who actively participated in the anti-war movement in late sixties Chicago, wrote that “In any given week I would be warned perhaps three times that somebody I trusted was really a government agent, and, of course, somebody who was accused one day might very well be around to accuse somebody else the next day.” Such suspicions were of course intensified by the widespread use of drugs like cannabis, amphetamine and LSD, all of which can amplify paranoia, intensify the perception of meaningful coincidences, and breed what psychiatrists call “delusions of reference.” As noted, these resonating and synchronistic networks of signs and events not only become the cognitive platform for baroque political conspiracies,

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but help fuel the elaboration of more cosmic plots whose mythological power are in many ways indistinguishable from the productions of the religious imagination.

Operation Mindfuck toyed with paranoia by parodying conspiracy culture in a manner designed to exploit other people’s susceptibility to believe in conspiracy. Paranoia was, in other words, a kind of sand trap in a game that required constant cognitive movement and the courage to embrace profound instability. In McGinn’s terms, this makes it unethical, if not dangerous. Such a critique was also levied against Wilson directly by the science fiction writer Thomas Disch, who saw his ironic promulgation of conspiracy and esoterica to gullible and possibly paranoid readers just another example of the “right to lie” enshrined in American popular culture.483

However, the Discordian game can also be understood as an inoculation against paranoia, which could be seen as an almost inevitable byproduct of both psychedelic exploration and the critical analysis of power in the sixties and seventies, which from the JFK shenanigans to Cointelpro to Watergate took the explicit form of conspiracy. Discordian consciousness can therefore be seen as another kind of high-wire act, one where paranoia provides part of the tension of the line while also threatening to destroy the acrobat if she loses the balance of her maybe logic.

This ironic tension lies at the heart of *Illuminatus!* On the one hand, the book’s relentless series of plots and counter-plots, rumors and delirious switcheroos document the oppressive atmosphere of conspiracy—psychic or otherwise—that shadowed the sixties promise of transformative epiphany, and that definitively eclipsed that promise in the early seventies. At the same time, *Illuminatus!* grabs the bull by the horns by embracing the possibility of paranoia as a

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form of enjoyment, a kind of freak jouissance that subverts the heaviness of conspiratorial conviction through the play of uncertainty. The gags and slapstick of the book can thus be read not only as an expression of satire and strategic nonsense, but as an apotropaic, even magical antidote to the gravity of the situation. In this light, the irrationality of anti-disciplinary politics can also be seen as an antidote to paranoia, an absurdist evasion of the sorts of causal chains that, however accurate their initial basis, so often imprisoned activists and psychonauts alike in mind-forged manacles of suspicion and distrust. Writing about the atmosphere of suspicion stirred up by all the snitches in the antiwar movement, Wilson gives voice to this logic by claiming that “I enjoyed it all rather than being terrified only because I basically agree with Helen Keller that ‘Life is either a great adventure or it is nothing.’” 484 Wilson’s dash may have comes naturally to him, but it is perhaps more fruitful to understand this Discordian attitude as a practice of high weirdness—and, as we will see, a rather fragile one at that.

Religio Discordia

For scholars of religion, who like most academics love to wrangle with categories and terminology, the Discordian Society offers some particularly entertaining volleyballs to toss back and forth. The first question is whether it counts as a “real” religion at all. What to do with a fiercely individualistic game of misdirection and nonsense that admits to its artificial origins, seemingly takes nothing seriously, and rejects most institutional markers of religion? Understandably, some scholars had decided to avoid the religion tag altogether. Hugh Urban emphasizes Discordianism’s connections to postmodern philosophy, while Christopher Partridge assimilates the Erisian sensibility into the current of “esoterrorism” articulated in the eighties by

484. Wilson, foreword, 8.
the Temple of Psychick Youth founder Genesis P. Orridge, for whom “the cut-up and the cultivation of occult culture are central to the subversion of social control.”

At the same time, Discordianism has also been recognized as a progenitor of “hyper-real religion,” which largely focuses on Internet-driven niche scenes that fuse pop culture and patterns of religion. Unfortunately, Adam Possamai’s characterization of hyper-real religion as a “simulacrum of religion” that draws from “commodified popular culture” fails to account for Discordianism’s sideways critique of the spectacle and its attendant resistance to commodification. Others have approached the question from a more functional angle, analyzing how Discordianism fits into the lives of individuals; however as Carol Cusack notes in her book *Invented Religion*, the Erisian sensibility is so iconoclastic and recombinant that agnostics and atheists have embraced it alongside seekers, mystics, and Pagans. Cusack’s emphasis on the invented nature of the religion—by which she means its explicit celebration of its own character as a fictional construction—is an important step forward, but does not help clarify the difference between exclusively satirical “religions”—like the contemporary Church of the Spaghetti Monster, which is an atheist project designed solely to mock theism—and religious approaches that heavily rely on satire to achieve effects that exceed or even subvert mere parody.

The tricky question of sincerity is not really helpful either, though here we can certainly find a good deal of evidence that at some level the architects of Discordianism took their material “seriously.” For example, Hill’s hopes for Discordianism are made abundantly clear in a 1969

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486. For general overview of the discourse, see Adam Possamai, ed, *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religion*, (Leiden, ND: Brill, 2012). Note, however, that the relationships to commodification and consumerism in the *Principia Discordia* is worlds away from those found in, say, Jedism or Matrix spirituality.
487. For more on the Spaghetti Monster, see Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 134-140.
letter he wrote to the Reverend Kirby Hensley, an illiterate pastor from Modesto, California who founded the Universal Life Church in 1958. Hensley offered ordinations through the mail, no questions asked, a process that brought upon him accusations of fraud and apostasy but that also enabled millions of Americans in the sixties and beyond to legally perform marriages and other services (the tax exemptions some hoped for did not work out as well). The ULC has no doctrine, and accepts all faiths. Hill thought Hensley was “an authentic living Erisian Avatar (Class 1-A)” and encouraged Discordians to become legal ministers through the Church if they so choose, since POEE refused to deal with the state. In a fannish letter to Hensley, Hill explained that

We say that we worship the Goddess Eris…We then organize into a super confusing funny crazy church that a) points out how silly organized churches are and b) just “happens” to have a lot of good religious philosophy in it. The result is both entertaining and instructive, and we are proud of it and plan to promote our message as much as we can.488

Unsurprisingly, Discordianism is also constructed in such a way that even the “evidence” of sincerity is no evidence. As Hill wrote in a personal note to the first edition of the PD, the question of whether its authors “really believe” its contents is rejected as incoherent.

“Discordianism absolutely destroys the distinction between ‘being serious’ and ‘not being serious.’”489 Though we may raise our eyebrows at this “absolutely,” it remains the case that Discordianism cannot simply be classed as an example of what Danielle Kirby calls “religions or

488. Gorightly, Historia Discordia, 121.
489. Ibid, 76
spiritualities masquerading as a joke rather than the other way around.”  Such a definition remains too dependent on an ontology of true depths and surface feints, where what is called for is something closer to the sagacious superficiality Nietzsche celebrated in his claim that everything profound loves masks.

Kirby is right that there is something profound, sincere, and authentically religious in Discordianism, admitting the tricksyness of all these terms. But the joke on the surface is more than a mask—or rather, it is a profound mask, a mask whose unmasking reveals only the oscillation between religious philosophy and satire. Perhaps the journalist and witch Margot Adler had it right back in the seventies, when she classed Discordianism as a “religion of paradox and play” in her great 1979 history of American Paganism, Drawing Down the Moon. Adler’s account also has the benefit of nesting Discordianism—at least from the mid-sixties forward—within the larger social context of emerging Paganism, which underwent a period of great creative ferment and expansive self-definition in the sixties and seventies, especially in California, where many Discordians spent serious time. We have already noted Adler’s recognition of Thornley as the originator of the contemporary use of the term “pagan,” and later we will see how Robert Anton Wilson became involved with Pagan occultists and “bootstrap witches” in the Bay Area. Here however, I want to focus on Adler’s (rather Pagan) emphasis on practice rather than position, and particularly on the practice of paradox.

We have already seen a few examples of these paradoxes: the “no friend”/“no enemy” business card, the absolute coincidence of being serious and not being serious. These are both examples of the coincidentia oppositorum, the coincidence of opposites that features so heavily in traditional mystical discourse. The concept, for example, plays a central role for the fifteenth-century mystic Nicolas of Cusa, for whom God is beyond opposites and contradictions, and can

therefore be said to be the site of their coincidence, a coincidence that, Cusa is keen to point out, should not be confused with identity. The *Principia Discordia* presents many similar paradoxes, a number of which feature a coincidence or superimposition of contraries or contradictions. For example, “Starbuck’s Pebbles” features five pebbles arrayed like this:

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STARBUCK'S PEBBLES
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“Do these 5 pebble really form a pentagon?” asks the *PD*. Those who favor the “Aneristic Illusion”—that the apparent order truly exists—will say yes, while those who favor the opposite Eristic Illusion—that such apparent order does not in fact exist—will say no. But there is another level as well (one with multiple esoteric overtones): “Criss-cross them and it is a star.” In any case, “An Illuminated Mind can see all of these, yet he does not insist that any one is really true, or that none at all is true.” Instead, the Illuminated Mind recognizes the truth of a constructivism that combines Kant with Nietzsche: “The real reality is there, but everything you KNOW about ‘it’ is in your mind and yours to do with as you like.” Rather than make an
argument, this whole exercise instead enjoins a practice and a possible state of expanded
consciousness. In other words, paradox too is a mode of anthropotechnics.

To help understand the role that paradox plays in Discordianism, it may be helpful to
invoke a distinction made by the philosopher of religion Matthew Bagger. Bagger’s book The
Uses of Paradox attempts to analyze, on naturalistic and functionalist grounds, the immense
appeal that paradox has held for mystics and religious thinkers throughout the ages. Baggert
isolates two dominant modes of what one might call “paradoxical practice”: the ascetic and the
mystical. Using Leon Festinger’s famous notion of cognitive dissonance, Bagger argues that
some religious practitioners use paradoxes to perform a cognitive analog of the sort of self-
abnegating ascetic ordeals typified by fasting. “In the same way that some ascetics resist the
motivation to avoid or reduce hunger…, some ascetics resist the motivation to avoid or reduce
cognitive dissonance and, in fact, cultivate dissonance and seek to increase its magnitude.”
Bagger gives the example of Zen monks, especially in the Rinzai tradition, who in the course of
their koan study cultivate a ferocious “Great Doubt”; a modern exemplar for him is Kierkegaard,
who, we are led to understand, deployed paradox to effect what the Danish philosopher himself
called the “crucifixion of the understanding.”

In contrast to such ascetics, however, mystics like Cusa celebrate the paradox as a benign
revelatory gateway into what Bagger calls “paranormal cognitive states”, which seem to resolve
the delicious tensions that in some sense produce them in the first place. For Cusa, such states
were associated with a unity that could only be grasped through “learned ignorance,” a
paradoxical state that “resolves contradictions without violating the integrity of the contrary

University Press, 2007), 18.
elements and without diminishing the reality or the force of their contradiction.” This sort of active polarity also recalls the enantiodromia of Jung, but in either its ascetic or mystic approaches, the intense engagement with paradox can certainly trigger an altered state, something that some might call “Illuminated Mind.”

As a somewhat cramped reductionist, however, Bagger wants to suggest that such mystic resolutions are simply a cognitive set-up lying poised within the philosophical and discursive framework of the mystic’s given tradition. In an appropriately recursive phrase, Bagger writes that “mysticism exploits the awe produced by paradox to render compelling the ontological doctrine that produces paradox.” Bagger, of course, means this to be an ontologically deflationary move, one that takes the wind from the sails of Zen monks and Christian mystics alike. But his naturalistic approach could just as easily be read as the pro-active description of a successful bootstrap operation, which is the mode of producing paradox closest to Discordian sources.

The sort of social science approach adopted by Bagger is also helpful for understanding the relations between Discordianism and anarchic counterculture. Applying Mary Douglas’ work on the functional role that categorical anomalies serve in different societies, Bagger argues that an individual or culture’s attitude toward paradox “functions to exemplify or intimate the dangers or rewards of boundary crossing.” Cognitive asceticism emerges when outsiders are viewed as threatening to group identity; Kierkegaard, a group of one, crucified himself on paradox in order to protect the internal life of faith against bourgeois Christianity and a corrosive “present age.” Cusa’s mysticism, on the other hand, derives from his integrative affirmation of

494. Bagger, 92.
495. Ibid, 46.
the unity and harmony of a Church strong enough to include a degree of contradiction. Early in his career, Cusa was also an advocate of a movement that attempted to integrate schismatic tendencies within the church, and later served in the controversial cause of union with the Eastern church. For Bagger, Cusa’s view that the mind can transcend the limits of reason reflects his efforts to bring outsiders across the external boundary of the Church’s communion. 496

What is interesting about Bagger’s distinction between ascetic and mystic modes of paradox, as well as their different social conditions, is that both apply equally to Discordianism. On the one hand, Discordianism is ascetic in that it strips away conventional wisdom and tests itself on its capacity to endure contradiction and the suspension of the clear distinction between irony and sincerity, fiction and truth. The Principia Discordia does not, for example, announce that “there are no absolute truths,” a metaphysical principle that, of course, destroys itself on the shoals of self-contradiction. Instead, by sustaining a tone of mockery and silliness, the texts enact this ironic truth rather than merely state it, and thereby continue to resist reification and the comforts of ontological essences. Following Bagger, all of this can be seen as a mechanism of defining and establishing a boundary between the hip and the square, between the in-joke and the war machine of rationality.

But at the same time, the humor and tone of the PD is largely playful and joyous, which marks a more “mystical” orientation to paradox that sees contradiction and confusion as expressions of an erotic cosmos of Whitmanesque proportions, and thereby able to contain contradictions. This bonhomie, at least as a performance, expresses the Discordian desire to transgress boundaries, a desire reflected in both their incestuous interpersonal exchanges and in

496. Some delightful if anecdotal support for this argument is provided by the fact that Cusa wrote that he received his great “celestial gift” of learned ignorance, an ineffable experience through which he was led to “embrace incomprehensibles incomprehensibly,” when he was on a boat sailing from Greece to Italy with a party of representatives of the Eastern church.
the larger erotic, psychedelic, and magical counterculture of which they were a part, all of which derived enormous energy from the relentless crossing of boundaries.

In her analysis of Discordianism, Cusack rightly describes it as a “religion of liberation.” As mentioned earlier, Cusack underscores the links to American Zen, which already by the late fifties, at least in its “Beat” forms, had reached a high degree of sometimes joking informality. But what she seems most interested in is the role of fiction in the Erisian stream. Bringing Discordianism into dialogue with other modern invented religions like the Church of All Worlds and the Church of the Subgenius (the latter with direct ties to Discordianism), Cusack argues that, like new religions in general, what is important about these groups is not so much their claims about reality as the stories they tell about reality. What makes invented religions stand out is that, employing varying degrees of irony, those spiritualities loudly announce their own status as fictions—as constructive and intentional acts of the imagination—rather than new revelations or transformations of authentic traditions. By hanging the appeal of these invented creeds on narrative needs, Cusack can invoke both sociological and cognitivist accounts to support her claim that invented religions are at least functionally equivalent to well-established institutional religions. “In cognitivist terms, there is no reason to prefer a factual to a fictional story in a religious context.”

But while Cusack definitely “groks” Discordianism—to use a science fiction term popular in the Church of All Worlds—her emphasis on the role of narrative distorts Discordianism’s aggressively parodic and self-deconstructing performance of its own sacred talk, particularly in the Principia. As Christian Greer argues, Cusack’s emphasis on “fictionality” reflects today’s critical needs more than it illuminates Discordianism, whose tango with fabulation rested on, if one can say it, a more foundational antifoundationalism. In Greer’s words...
now, “the scholarly preoccupation with the integration of fiction into the Discordian mythos fails to appreciate how Discordians, as well as other ontological anarchists, treat all ideas as socially constructed ‘convenient fictions’ that are equally true, false, and meaningless.”⁴⁹⁸ While the foundational fourth edition of the *PD* includes a number of myths, for example, these stories are also consistently undermined, mocked, and punctured. Eris is a Goddess, but she is also the object of schoolboy humor. Rather than fulfill what Cusack calls our “evolutionary biological bias towards…a certain kind of explanatory narrative,” Discordianism—especially in *Illuminatus!*—seeks rather to expose this bias and to rupture those explanatory narratives that obscure the nonlinear and paradoxical “guerrilla enlightenment” of chaos.⁴⁹⁹ What Discordianism values is the satori, not the story.

That said, fictions, and especially the strange and hazardous loops that stitch together fictions and the real, are of central concern to *Illuminatus!* Even more importantly, these loops are, like paradox, a form of praxis that use the dynamic irritation between fact and fiction to deform consciousness and culture. For Wilson, this praxis took on a more explicitly occult character in the early seventies, when Wilson’s increasingly esoteric investigations in reality tunneling set up the nexus of self-confirming fabulations that invaded his life during the years described in *Cosmic Trigger*. One feature of these investigations was his participation, along with Arlen, in Northern California’s pagan demimonde, where the two socialized with members of the Ordo Templi Orientis and joined two small witchcraft groups, the Stone Moon coven and the Moebius Circle.⁵⁰⁰

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⁴⁹⁷. Cusack, 22.
⁴⁹⁹. Cusack, 52.
Both of these small groups were spin-offs of the New Reformed Orthodox Order of the Golden Dawn, a vital Northern California tradition whose followers described themselves in one 1972 publication as “an assemblage of natural anarchists, bootstrap witches and alienated intelligentsia.” The phrase “bootstrap witches” here referred to the fact that, unlike the Gardnerian and related Wiccan traditions that were imported from the United Kingdom, the group openly acknowledged that their practice began, not with an authentic transmission or hidden ancestral tradition, but rather with art, fiction and play. The origins of the order lay in a class taught at San Francisco State by the poet and film-maker James Broughton, whose assignment to create a ritual inspired Aidan Kelly, Glenn Turner, and others to begin a collective process of creative invention. Sampling different literary and mythological traditions, and pulling themselves up by their own “bootstraps,” the crew transformed themselves in short order into a living occult current whose practitioners took the results of their magical performances seriously as well as playfully. After one particularly powerful early ritual, Kelly realized “that the Craft could be a religion for us skeptical middle-class intellectuals.” And it could do so, he saw, for three reasons: it did not require anyone to violate their intellectual integrity; it “operated nonintelligently”; and it could alter people’s state of consciousness.

Wilson’s participation in NROOGD spin-off groups reflected an important shift in his ontological anarchism that seemed to begin in the very early seventies, following his move from Chicago. Riding the waves of the occult revival, Wilson increasingly came to play with Discordian paradox—including the coincidence of fiction and reality—in a more than intellectual or literary manner, and to exploit the tension of such contradictions into an occult

501. Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 162
502. Kelly, a PhD, would also go on to produce scholarly research that effectively destroyed Gardner’s claim that his texts were products of a living but hidden witchcraft tradition. Kelly’s social history of the NROOGD is contained in Aidan Kelly, *Hippie Commie Beatnik Witches* (Tacoma, WA: Hierophant Wordsmith Press, 2011).
engine for his increasingly intense and vivid hands-on experiments in epistemology and ontology. It is these practices that stage the ontological funhouse of *Cosmic Trigger*. In the following section, however, we need to pull back and first understand how Wilson tugs on the boundaries of fiction, reality, and the occult in his writing, and particularly how *Illuminatus!* weaves in the literary legacy of H.P. Lovecraft, whose infectious tales of extraterrestrial pseudo-gods, forbidden grimoires, and cosmic “outsideness” have come to define the very substance of the weird as genre. More importantly, however, Lovecraft’s invented mythology is also one of the more significant sites in twentieth-century literature where the ontological warp introduced by “as if” fictional entities becomes part of the fictional universe itself, as imagined entities take on a second-order or bootstrapped life of their own in a manner that, like the events in *Cosmic Trigger*, is simultaneously disturbing and absurd.

**Eldritch Palmer…**

Though he hasn’t been recognized as such, Robert Anton Wilson stands as one of the more perspicacious and inventive writers to critically engage the matter of Lovecraft in the sixties and early seventies, when Lovecraft criticism was in its infancy. Admittedly, Wilson mostly corralled his critical appreciation for Lovecraft in works of fiction, and patchwork fictions at that, in which the genre of horror only plays a minor role. In fact, Wilson claims that he never considered Lovecraft’s writings “horror fiction” because “they never scared me; I regarded them as a special kind of prose-poetry that lifts the reader into a perspective far, far beyond human prejudice, a perspective in which Earth and its denizens are very unimportant,

virtually accidental parts of the cosmic drama.” That said, when Wilson personifies cosmic and inhuman forces in *Illuminatus!* or 1973’s *The Sex Magicians*, he turns as often as not to the horrible monsters like Yog-Sothoth that Lovecraft invented as part of the artificial mythology of cosmic outsiders sometimes called the “Cthulhu mythos.”

Wilson did so partly to continue the intertextual game started by Lovecraft and his *Weird Tales* cronies, in which a shared network of references to gods and grimoires subtly thickened the ontology of the tales. Wilson wanted to exploit the very same quality of quasi-reality constructed through these referential strategies to amplify the occult and sometimes foreboding political possibilities he was sketching with Shea. Indeed, Wilson was not just a good reader of Lovecraft, but an insightful student of the whole tradition of weird and gothic fiction that Lovecraft helped focus and cohere in his own 1927 critical account of the supernatural tale. In fact, though *Illuminatus!* is usually classed (poorly) as “science fiction,” it is better seen as a conspiratorial reformulation of the *weird tale*, a pulp form that derives some of its peculiar frisson by, as we will see, making the reader ever so slightly paranoid. Secret societies are, in the light of *Illuminatus!*., *weird* societies. In *Illuminatus!* we are even told that Bavarian Illuminati head Adam Weishaupt performed rites so bizarre that the resulting “psychic vibrations” had bounced off every sensitive mind in Europe, generating such literary productions as Lewis’s *The Monk*, Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Mrs. Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and DeSade’s *One Hundred Twenty Days of Sodom*.

But it is Lovecraft that deserves pride of place here. Blending elements of classic fantasy, pulp horror, and the emerging logic of science fiction, the central bulk of Lovecraft’s tales are characterized by a fascination with the dialectics of madness and knowledge; a pantheon of bizarre extraterrestrial pseudo-gods who are essentially inimical to human life; and an anxious

concern with human degeneration and the corrosive call of the primitive. In Lovecraft’s mature work, magic, whether learned or atavistic, unleashes prehistoric and cosmic powers rather than supernatural hierarchies of angels or devils. Lovecraft first makes this move in his 1928 story “The Call of Cthulhu,” wherein he reframes the archaic gods worshipped by voodoo initiates and remote “Eskimo wizards” as extraterrestrial or inter-dimensional beings. Paralleling Theosophy’s mythological histories of earth, and later entering popular culture as Erich von Daniken’s “ancient astronaut” theory, Lovecraft’s science-fictional ancient history suggested that the savage mysteries that animate the most primitive human cults encode actual truths about the cosmos, including dimensions of reality—like Einsteinean space-time and the non-Euclidean geometry used to describe it—that early twentieth century astrophysics was only beginning to understand.

In contrast to the supernaturalism of ghost stories or the gothic tales he began his fiction career with, the metaphysical background of Lovecraft’s mature horror is thus a kind of science fiction whose “cosmic indifferentism” reflects the atheistic materialism that Lovecraft professed at great and sometimes hectoring length in his letters and popular press articles. But even as Lovecraft embraced the disillusioning powers of science, he also pessimistically anticipated science’s ultimate evisceration of human cultural norms. His weird tales were imaginative diversions from this nihilism, but the amorality of their cosmic monsters reflected it as well, as did the qualified realism that Lovecraft brought to his greatest works.

Lovecraft was no Romantic, in other words, and the dialectic that his work and thought stage between realism and metaphysical wonder helps explain why he was so important to Wilson, the McKennas, Philip K. Dick, and other voyagers into psychedelia and high weirdness. One of the best ways into this dialectic is through the literary historian Michael Saler’s key
notion of “disenchanted enchantment.” In his book *As If*, Saler describes how Anglo-American readers and writers in the late nineteenth century began turning to works of fiction that combined the pleasures of the marvelous, already found in the Aesthetic and decadent writers of the time, with the rhetoric of reason and objectivity that such writers rejected. H. Rider Haggard’s enormously popular *She*, which came equipped with maps, chronologies, and doctored photographs, is the classic example of how writers were learning to combine imaginary exotica with the armature of reason (a process that, as we will see in the next section, also characterizes important aspects of the modern occult revival).

According to Saler, this self-reflexive form of enchantment “delights without deluding,” as readers come to enjoy their fictions “as if” they were real, but only in so far as this conditional state is bounded by what Saler calls the “ironic imagination.” Confident with the apotropaic powers of such ironic distance, adults could “reside safely within carefully mapped geographies of the imagination without compromising their reason—going native, as it were—because the necessary distinction between fantasy and reality was securely reinforced through the distancing power of irony.”

Another ways of approaching this is that the texts of “disenchanted enchantment” reframe the imagination as a pleasure, at once a wonder and an entertainment, but without relying on the metaphysical substance the animates the central current of Romanticism. In contrast to the latter’s hieratic and earnest sensibility, Saler’s “as if” texts instead emphasize “the provisional, the contingent, and the artificial.” One of the more remarkable statements of disenchanted enchantment found in Saler’s book comes from a celebrated 1930 letter by Lovecraft to his friend, the California weird fiction writer Clark Ashton Smith:

[I get a] big kick . . . from taking reality just as it is—accepting all the limitations of the most orthodox science—and then permitting my symbolizing faculty to build outward from the existing facts; rearing a structure of indefinite promise and possibility . . . But the whole secret of the kick is that I know damn well it isn’t so. I’m probably trying to have my cake and eat it at the same time—to get the intoxication of a sense of cosmic contact and significance as the theists do, and yet to avoid the ignorant ostrich-act whereby they cripple their vision and secure the desiderate results.507

Note that here the ironic imagination takes its pleasures, its intoxication, in part through an proximity to religion. In the classic terms of the history of religion, we might say that the ironic imagination enjoys the sacred but only at the cost of its profanation. Cosmic promise and possibility are, in the end, nothing but a tease that produces an ultimately demotic pleasure, a big kick, a cheap thrill—and a sober and rational morning-after. Indeed, it is no accident that Lovecraft uses the term “intoxication,” since from one angle, nothing ironizes the metaphysical imagination of the Romantics or the religious so much as appreciating how much mere pharmacology mimics or models such sublimities. Intoxication, in its response to Sloterdijk’s vertical tension, also builds outward.

For Walter Benjamin, the energies released from such profane illuminations contained the seeds of real historical possibility; for a lot of heads and freaks in the counterculture, profane illuminations were also big kicks. As such, it is not surprising to find an important vein of disenchanted enchantment within the occultural milieu of the sixties and the seventies. Both the authors and many of the fans of Illuminatus! wanted to have their conspiratorial cake and eat it

506. Ibid, 33.
too. Some readers of Von Daniken took it all seriously, but many others read his books as they would read Lovecraft—for an imaginative or rhetorical rush made more delicious or perverse by its proximity to a “structure of indefinite promise” in part provided by the author’s own (perhaps dissimulated) stance of sincerity. Whatever “secrets” are revealed through such esoteric reading are, in this modern context, inextricably bound up with the other secret Lovecraft mentions: the secret that the reader knows damn well it isn’t true, a secret that itself must itself be temporarily secreted for kicks to be had.

This is why Lovecraft, when discussing the methodology he brought to bear on his fiction, often invoked the language of the hoax. In the same letter to Smith above, in which he described his attitude as that of the “hoax-weaver,” Lovecraft described his method: “One part of my mind tries to concoct something realistic and coherent enough to fool the rest of my mind & make me swallow the marvel.”

Lovecraft developed this dialectical hoaxing, which served as an important literary model for Wilson, through a variety of tactics. One was the language of realism Lovecraft developed in his mature writing, which restrains the feverish tropes of macabre for a more transparent language that, while not without its purple blooms, often lies closer to reportage and nonfiction essay. More notably, Lovecraft’s fictions developed a collective “virtual” consistency through a webwork of invented place-names, creatures, and book titles that would recur across many stories, although some of these appearances are themselves notably inconsistent.

But even more importantly was that Lovecraft turned this world-building into a shared collective practice. Lovecraft encouraged his fellow *Weird Tales* writers to drop the names of his grimoires and beasties into their fictions, something Lovecraft himself also did when he

508. Ibid.
edited and ghostwrote stories for clients. “I think it is rather good fun to have this artificial mythology given an air of verisimilitude by wide citation,” he noted in one letter.\textsuperscript{509} Lovecraft would also return the favor, as writers like Robert E. Howard and Clark Ashton Smith made their own contributions that what later writers called the “Cthulhu Mythos” but that Lovecraft referred to more lightly as his “cycle of synthetic folklore” (SL 5.16) or simply “Yog-Sothery.”\textsuperscript{510} Like the transformation of the Discordian Society into the collaborate game of POEE, Yog-Sothery was a collective insider game of invention and self-reference that played with the form of the literary hoax.

One important example of Lovecraft’s interweaving of social and invented worlds is his 1936 tale “The Haunter of the Dark,” the last independent story he wrote. The hero of the tale is a young writer of fantastic fiction named Robert Blake, who is a stand-in for Robert Bloch, a young \textit{Weird Tales} contributor who had placed a Lovecraft-like figure in a story published the previous year. In “Haunter,” we read of Blake’s exploration of an abandoned Providence Free-Will church once occupied by the Church of Starry Wisdom, who used a Shining Trapezohedron to communicate with extraterrestrial beings, one of whom, we are led to infer, spells the end of poor Blake. In his first visit to the Church, Blake discovers a copy of Lovecraft’s most famous invented book, Abdul Alhazred’s dread \textit{Necronomicon}, along with an encrypted record book and other hoary tomes, including texts—like von Junzt’s \textit{Unaussprechlichen Kulten}—that were invented by his pals (in this case, \textit{Conan} creator Robert E. Howard). Blake later figures out that the record book is written in Aklo, an obscure language first mentioned in an 1899 story by the British supernatural horror writer Arthur Machen. In other words, in this and other stories,

\textsuperscript{509} Ibid, 166.
\textsuperscript{510} Following Lovecraft’s death, August Derleth, who founded Arkham Horror largely to publish the work of his friend and mentor, coined the term “Cthulhu Mythos” to describe this shared fictional universe, which Derleth and
Lovecraft casts his referential back in time, taking in early writers of supernatural horror and thereby charging the genre itself with an intertextual “virtual” reality, a sort of secret tradition constructed backwards through time.

Perhaps the most surprising title included in the list of Blake’s finds is the *Book of Dzyan*, which is an actual book—sort of. One of the most influential texts of Theosophy, Madame Blavatsky’s monumental *The Secret Doctrine*, is an elaborate commentary on the *Book of Dzyan*, whose stanzas she claimed to have stumbled across while studying in Tibet. Though some passages may have been cribbed from the Rig Veda, the book is largely believed by scholars to be the product of Blavatsky’s considerable imagination. That said, it is a different kind of invented book than the *Necronomicon*, not simply because we are given a good deal of its contents, but because the speech act that frames it does not depend on fictionality. Indeed, like so many important esoteric texts, the *Book* stands somewhere between (or beyond) the polarities of fact and fiction, and derives its authority from neither. As Dan Clore notes, Aleister Crowley recognized this paradox in his review of another fabricated Blavatsky text, *The Voice of the Silence*, which he determined to be “better than ‘genuine,’” being, like *The Chymical Marriage of Christian Rosencreutz*, the forgery of a great adept.511

Crowley’s reference here is to one of the early Rosicrucian texts whose appearance in the seventeenth century inspired the creation of actual Rosicrucian orders, but which was admitted by its author to be a *ludibrium*, or “trivial game.” Similarly, the *Book Dzyan* can be seen as a *ludibrium*, or, perhaps, a Tibetan terma text—in other words, a text that derives its authority from both the visionary imagination and its framing within a spiritual discourse or tradition. And others in the Circle continued to elaborate and extend, often by forcing the Lovecraft Circle’s enigmatic cluster of possibilities into a polished and, in Derleth’s case, explicitly moralistic system.
like *The Chymical Marriage, The Secret Doctrine* proved enormously influential. Blavatsky’s text, and particularly its antediluvian history of the earth’s fabulous races and civilizations, provided the basic motifs and themse for copious New Age cosmologies and UFO revelations (including von Daniken’s astronaut archaeology). Moreover, Blavatsky’s wild and rather science-fictional lore, with its tales of Atlantean sex magicians, giant Lemurian apes, and liberating rebel angels, also influenced both weird fiction writers and the tangled Atlantean backstory of *Illuminatus!*

In other words, the Lovecraftian line between the substance of fictions and the forgeries of adepts had already grown rather hazy by the time Wilson, along with Shea, started to play the game. Adding a cosmic dimension to conspiracy culture, the two authors cast the extraterrestrial entities of the Cthulhu mythos—which they call the *lloigor*, a term not used by Lovecraft himself but invented by two of his followers—as the ancient inhuman intelligences that guide and interact with the Illuminati. As such, Shea and Wilson round out or even counter the political networks of conspiracy theory with a fictional if conspiratorial “game” of Yog-Soth ery, a now thoroughly collective body of metafictional lore they also intelligently extend. For most of the novel, Yog-Sothoth is imprisoned in a Pentagon-shaped building, but late in the text he temporarily takes over the body of one of the Illuminati leaders and speaks words not leavened, for once in the novel, with humor. “The voice was like crude petroleum seeping through gravel, and, like petroleum, it was a fossil thing, the voice of a creature that had arisen on the planet when the South Pole was in the Sahara and the great cephalopods were the highest form of

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life.” The simile here is rich and timely, both for the seventies and today: modern petroleum-based civilization is in essence a Lovecraftian pact with the dead monsters of the past.

For the most part, the authors make their Lovecraftian moves in the more metafictional mode of the ironic imagination. In a few flashback sequences, we meet Lovecraft himself in the nineteen-twenties, and the episodes suitably mix fact and fiction. This Lovecraft is a strict materialist, but he is being threatened by mysterious cultists who object to him revealing their secrets—secrets that the author claims he simply cribbed from books written by “mental cases” and stored in the library of Miskatonic University, a faux institution that itself appears as part of the Cthulhu Mythos. “Remember what happened to Ambrose Bierce,” threatens one anonymous letter, referring to the mysterious 1913 disappearance of the California fabulist Ambrose Bierce, who also invented terms—like Carcosa and Hali—that were reused by the fantasist Robert Chambers, who was, as noted, an important influence on Lovecraft. Another one of the cultists warns Lovecraft that the powerful occult societies of the day have for the most part left him alone because the readership of pulp magazines is so small, but that this situation is not likely to last once the genres of fantasy and science-fiction themselves finally take off.

…and his Holy Hoax

Along with thickening the implications of the Cthulhu Mythos lore, Wilson and Shea also put their own kind of pressure on Lovecraft’s famous claim that the weird tale should be crafted

512. Shea and Wilson, 648.
513. For a theoretically sophisticated contemporary spin on petroleum necromancy, see Negarestani, Reza, Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials (Melbourne: Re.press, 2008).
514. Including H.P. Lovecraft as a character or direct reference within Cthulhu Mythos stories is a time-honored tradition. See “Lovecraft as a Character in Lovecraftian Fiction”, in Robert M. Price, H.P. Lovecraft and the Cthulhu Mythos, (Mercer Island, WA: Starmount Press, 1990), 32-36.
with “the care and verisimilitude of an actual hoax.” For this statement is more curious than it at first appears. As Clore explains, hoaxes cannot be presented as hoaxes and remain hoaxes. But neither can fictions be presented as hoaxes and remain mere fictions. Instead, the rhetoric of objectivity that provides fictions with such verisimilitude creates, instead, the impression of a deeper veil, a second-order or “inverse” hoax, that masks truth as fiction. “The usual hoax: fiction presented as fact,” says Illuminatus!, which derives far more power from the opposite conspiratorial possibility: “fact presented as fiction.” The pretense of such a presentation must at once be veiled and clever enough to stir deep reason, so that a “structure of indefinite promise and possibility” looms between and the lines and stories. Here is where so many of the later Cthulhu Mythos writers, notably August Derleth, go wrong: they define and systematize the mythology, whereas it is precisely the contradictions and enigmas of the Lovecraft Circle’s referential game that keeps the structure indefinite, but still shaped as structure, and therefore still “building outward” rather than simply evocative or poetic.

An even more infernal elicitation of pattern recognition undergirds the dialectics of knowledge and insanity that characterize so many Lovecraft stories, and that also serve to draw the reader into the plot. As readers, we follow bookish and blinkered protagonists as they piece together alien and bizarre implications from quotidian fragments of evidence and experience, usually drawn from texts and dreams. As they proceed, they form incomplete patterns of possibility whose more ominous import we readers invariably recognize before the doomed characters do. David E. Schultz explains the resulting reader response: “The reader of Lovecraft’s stories realizes that horror lies beneath the revelation. But as one closes the pages of the story just read, one realizes that a greater horror has not been stated…In our enlightenment,

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we have been drawn into and forced to become part of the horror and we are helpless to
retreat.”

At times in his letters, Lovecraft claimed that he was “of course” not interested in
actually fooling his readers with his invented mythology, but critics rightly contest this claim. To use the term anachronistically, Lovecraft was something of a mindfucker.

Perhaps the greatest irony of Lovecraft’s Yog-Sothery was how a game of hoaxing and esoteric referentiality designed by an arch skeptic came to be appropriated by practicing occultists in the latter third of the twentieth century. The first signs of the emergence of Lovecraftian ritual magic occurred while Shea and Wilson were first writing *Illuminatus!* and can be traced to the British magician Kenneth Grant. One of the most controversial figures to emerge from the Thelemic magical current begun by Aleister Crowley, Grant was the renegade head of the New Isis Lodge and the Typhonian Ordo Templi Orientis. Writing for *Man, Myth and Magic* in 1970, and two years later in his 1972 book *The Magical Revival*, Grant argued that Lovecraft was linked to actual traditions of ancient and contemporary magic through, of all things, his sleeping mind. In actuality, Lovecraft was an extraordinary dreamer, whose unusually vivid, often nightmarish, and intensely detailed dreamlife directly influenced his fiction (the name *Necronomicon*, for example, came from a dream). For Grant, Lovecraft’s dreams were esoterically objective; as such, *The Necronomicon* is a “real” book tucked away in the Dreamlands that Lovecraft’s waking mind was too hidebound and timid to accept.

Continuing to play the cross-referential game, Grant was particularly keen on lining up curious similarities between names, like Yog-Sothoth and Crowley’s Sut-Thoth. The year 1972 also saw the publication of Anton LaVey’s *The Satanic Rituals*, a companion text to the Church

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of Satan leader’s popular *The Satanic Bible*. The book includes two Lovecraftian rites written by LaVey’s deputy Michael Aquino, the “Ceremony of the Angles” and “The Call to Cthulhu.” In his introduction, Aquino legitimizes the occult appropriation of Lovecraft along much less supernaturalist lines than Grant, emphasizing instead Lovecraft’s amoral philosophy and the subjective, archetypal, and possibly prophetic power of fantasy. This argument accorded with the language of “psychodrama” that LaVey himself offered as a non-supernatural explanation for the transformative power of blasphemous ritual. Within the Church of Satan, LaVey also founded an informal “Order of the Trapezoid” whose name was inspired in part by the “shining trapezohedron” in “The Haunter of the Dark.”

These and other Lovecraftian currents within magic may stray into realms at once silly and overly serious, but as Tim Moroney put it, in appropriating the skeptic’s work, “they have committed no category error.”518 In other words, the legitimacy of the occult appropriation of Lovecraft can be said to lie in the intertextual and metafictional dynamics of the texts themselves. The central Lovecraftian theme that critic Donald Burleson identifies as “oneiric objectivism”—that the dreamworld is real—becomes the central vehicle for occultist legitimization; from this perspective, occultists impose a second-order level of objectivity onto the textual circuit that Lovecraft himself established between his actual dreams and his (meta)fictional worlds. Lovecraft himself noted this very logic in a letter pointed out by Robert M. Price: “Who can disprove any…concoction [of the imagination], or say that it is not ‘esoterically true’ even if its creator did think he invented it in jest or fiction?”519

517. See Clore, op cit.
However, what is more interesting for our purposes than oneiric objectivism is the LaVeyan line that requires no essentialist substantiation for the game beyond the psychodynamics of the play itself. From this perspective, Lovecraftian occultists are simply culture makers who have accepted the invitation to enter and extend the intertextual network of the Mythos and its flirtation with another order of veiling and representing reality. In the occultist version of the game, however, players place their bets on the element of verisimilitude within the framework of the “hoax.” Within the circle of the ritual, or the referential network of texts, a different mode of ontology is allowed to take shape, one that “has a life of its own.”

But what exactly is this life of fictions? Playfully making a move himself, Michael Saler notes that, in his brief “History of the Necronomicon,” Lovecraft tells us that the dreaded tome was a translation of an earlier Arabic text called Al Azif. While noting that Lovecraft derived the Arabic title from Samuel Henley’s notes to William Beckford’s weird masterpiece Vathek, Saler jokes that he might also have been alluding to Hans Vaihinger’s text The Philosophy of “As If,” first translated into English in 1924. A post-Kantian philosopher, Vaihinger argued that a great many concepts in science and rationalist philosophy—the atom, say, or the infinitesimal, or even Kant’s Ding-an-such—are simply fictions that we treat “as if” they were true in order for us to get on with our practical business in the world of sensation and movement. Vaihinger was no irrationalist; as a pragmatist he rejected the great doubts of philosophical skepticism, and maintained that there was a crucial difference between such useful fictions and true hypotheses in that the latter can be rigorously tested experimentally. However, Vaihinger’s notion of fiction as a “a more conscious, more practical and more fruitful error” has applications beyond the philosophy of science, particularly in psychology and literature, where it helped concretize
Nietzsche’s idea of necessary fictions. Vaihinger also introduced the important idea that “as if” fictions, like unproven hypotheses, create an irritable tension in the mind, a disturbance that naturally seeks the equilibrium of settled reality provided by the interconnection of facts. When this “as if” tension collapses, in a mind or a society, fictions become dogmas, as if becomes because. Much of Wilson’s thought and attitude toward the occult real also approached conceptual models as “as if” fictions running on a “maybe logic” that must ultimately judged by their pragmatic or experiential effects.

All this still begs the ontological question, which is precisely the question raised by Lovecraftian occults, who “raise the stakes,” as it were, on the quasi-reality of fictions. Said another way, Lovecraftian magic—which is only one example of the active role that fictions play in various invented religions, including Discordianism and various Pagan constructions—adds another twist to Saler’s “disenchanted enchantment,” a twist that suspends, in practice, the difference between the two. For Saler, disenchanted enchantment is an attitude modern readers learn to bring to their fictions so that they can enjoy the fantastic satisfactions of the imagination while refusing the credulity associated with religion and superstition.

But what happens when this same attitude of disenchanted enchantment is brought to bear on religious or esoteric practice itself? As we will see in the next section, a version of such “disenchanted enchantment” has been a feature of modern occult practice since at least since the era of Aleister Crowley and the Order of the Golden Dawn. This current of skeptical magical pragmatism, with its multiplication of “as if” fictions that gain ontological density, characterizes the “bootstrap magic” of figures like Wilson, NROOGD, and Lovecraftian sorcerers. In contrast to Saler, we might call this practice enchanted disenchantment. Put into practice, in other words,

a de-ontological and constructivist attitude paradoxically “boots up” room for new kinds of entities to arise, beings that demand what Bruno Latour calls their own sort of ontological pasture.

Here we should recall Latour’s notion of instauration, by which he means the act whereby a constructionist process exceeds the deflationary limitations of “mere” social constructionism to produce something that can now makes its own claims on us. “The act of instauration has to provide the opportunity to encounter beings capable of worrying you,” he writes. These are “beings whose ontological status is still open but that are nevertheless capable of making you do something, of unsettling you, insisting, obliging you to speak well of them…”

Crucially, Latour introduces his notion of instauration with the example of fictions. When Balzac writes that he has been “carried away by his characters,” Latour thinks we need to pause and seriously consider the status of this enigmatic work of fabulation, through which one’s actions make “others” get moving. When an author’s characters take on a life of their own, we have the doubling that Latour calls faire faire: “but now the arrow can go in either direction: from the constructor to the constructed or vice versa, from the product to the producer, from the creation to the creator.” Latour insists that this oscillation is part of the phenomena itself, even if authors like Balzac are misspeaking, or succumbing to Romantic cliché. But despite, something escapes, and flickers beyond the circle of the subject it nonetheless depends upon. This is the flickering expression of what Guattari calls those “incorporeal domains of entities we detect at the same time that we produce them, and which appear to have been always there, from the moment we engender them.” 521

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521. Guattari, 17.

For Nietzsche’s concepts, see Beyond Good and Evil, 4.
Latour further develops his notion when he comes to analyze the particular ontological mode he calls beings of fiction. Latour wants to remind us that, though the world is saturated with fictions, our usual modern story divests them of any ontological claims. However, this ignores what Latour calls the *exteriority* among beings of fiction, or what Lovecraft readers might call *outsideness*. However enigmatic the causal act of instauration or bootstrapping is, it remains for Latour a two-way street. Such beings arrive in the imagination, or even further, offer us an imagination we would not have without them. As listeners we not only receive Bach’s music but also the capacity to appreciate Bach’s music itself; we are subject to fictions in that we win our subjectivity from them.\(^{522}\)

However, even as these beings of fiction impose themselves on creators as well as fans, they remain delicate constructions, “composites,” as Deleuze and Guattari would say, that depend on our own practice and attention. “They have this peculiarity, then: their objectivity depends on their being reprised, taken up again by subjectivities that would not exist themselves if these beings had not given them to us.”\(^{523}\) Appropriately, Latour acknowledges just how peculiar this line of thinking is. “It’s weird, yes,” he writes, using *bizarre* in French, but this weirdness lies “in the art and manner of what exists.” To the objection that all this weirdness simply proves that we only “imagine” these beings, Latour asks us instead to reframe the act of imagining as a relational ontology. It is simply part of the nature of fictional beings—Castaneda’s Don Juan, Madame Bovary, Conan the Barbarian—that they need us to keep them going even though we cannot invent them. “We are part of their trajectory, but their continuous creation is distributed all along their path of life, so much so that we can never really tell whether

\(^{522}\) Latour, 241.

\(^{523}\) Latour, 242.
it is the artist or the audience that is creating the work. In other words, they too make
networks.”

Needless to say, Latour’s weird ideas are particularly appropriate to the matter of
Lovecraft’s artificial mythology. Instauration, however ill-formed a term, helps us understand
both the constructive contributions of fans and readers, and the networks that form both the
content and the context of the game of Yog-Sothery. But Latour’s notions are also extremely
helpful in lending substance to the bootstrap witchery of NROOGD, the Discordians, and left-
hand occultists working in a Lovecraftian vein. Like fictions, religion is constructed, but it is no
*mere* construction. The “as if” is a springboard for real encounter. As Jose Ferrer notes in his call
for a participatory approach to the understanding and practice of religion, “Spiritual knowing is
not a mental representation of pregiven, independent spiritual objects, but an *enaction*, the
‘bringing forth’ of a world or domain of distinctions cocreated by the different elements involved
in the participatory event.” These “different elements” are material as well as psychological,
and form what Latour would call the network. As such, than religious experience is, to some
degree, inextricable from Latour’s beings of fiction. Indeed, one of the reasons that Lovecraftian
magic has come to play such an important role in the development of “hyper-real” religion today
is precisely because the beasties are so nasty that their capacity to unsettle us is simply easier to
notice.

As the witches in NROOGD discovered, however, bountiful and kind entities also play
this game, and as Wilson came to find, so too do cosmic tricksters. For though the Cthulhu
mythos itself was not central to Wilson’s imaginal encounters in the seventies, the Lovecraftian

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525. Ferrer bases his claim on enactionist modes of cognition developed by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and
Eleanor Rosch. These in turn draw heavily from the autopoetic systems theory described in an earlier chapter. See
game of intertextual invocation that he played in *Illuminatus!* remained a crucial model for understanding the role that fictions—and their weird ontological dynamics—play in occult explorations and the extraordinary experiences that emerge from them. The important lesson is that ontology is variegated, situational, emergent, and relational. As Hagbard Celine explains in *Illuminatus!*, “When you’re dealing with these forces or powers in a philosophic and scientific way, contemplating them from an armchair, [the] rationalistic approach is useful. It is quite profitable then to regard the gods and goddesses and demons as projections of the human mind or as unconscious aspects of ourselves. But every truth is a truth only for one place and one time, and that’s a truth, as I said, for the armchair. When you’re actually dealing with these figures, the only safe, pragmatic, and operational approach is to treat them as having a being, a will, and a purpose entirely apart from the humans who evoke them. If the Sorcerer’s Apprentice had understood that, he wouldn’t have gotten into so much trouble.”

But though Wilson presumably understood this lesson, having allowed Celine to speak these words through his hand, he still found himself in some interesting forms of trouble.

### The Method of Science

Aleister Crowley casts such an enormous shadow over contemporary occulture that it is easy to forget that even in the late sixties, when the notorious writer appeared among the gallery of heroes and rogues that decorated the cover of *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, Crowley was a relatively unknown quantity. In 1967, the year the Beatles record was released, the vast majority of Crowley’s books were out of print, and his fraternal order, the Ordo Templi

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Orientis, was in dusty disarray. Robert Anton Wilson did not start reading Crowley until 1970 or 1971, when he got turned on to the writer by none other than Alan Watts.\(^{527}\)

Wilson’s timing was perfect, since the early seventies proved to be the Great Beast’s big come-back. In 1970, major fanboy Jimmy Page bought Crowley’s Boleskine House, while David Bowie sang of “Crowley’s uniform of imagery” and California experimental cineaste Kenneth Anger completed filming his visionary Thelemite film *Lucifer Rising*. Publishers like Samuel Weiser, Lancer, and the Sangreal Foundation flooded the market with Crowleyania, including the first edition of Crowley’s remarkable Thoth Tarot deck, designed with Lady Frieda Harris. And in California, Grady McMurtry spearheaded the revival of the O.T.O., registering the association as a legal entity in 1971.

Bob Wilson was entertained by Crowley’s outrageous character, and he thoroughly enjoyed the impish spirit of wordplay and misdirection that Crowley brought to many of his texts, and especially the crafty *Book of Lies* (1912/13), which Weiser had reissued in 1970. In that sense, it is unsurprising that some of the Crowleyania that appears in the novels *Illuminatus!* and *The Sex Magicians* is also interwoven with Lovecraftian lore, as Wilson merrily assimilates the already tricksy Crowley to the para-fictional conspiratorial game described above.\(^{528}\) Though Wilson did not love Crowley’s politics, which he discounted as “a blend of Nietzschean Supermanism and anarcho-fascist Darwinism,” there are important resonances between both

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526. Shea and Wilson, 599-600.
528. Feverish speculative links between Crowley and Lovecraft were also being forged in the early seventies by Kenneth Grant, who may have influenced Wilson’s literary play in *The Magical Revival* (1972), a text Wilson discusses in *Cosmic Trigger*. Because *Illuminatus!* was mostly written between 1969-1971, but not published until 1975, it is difficult to pin down the chronology of its elements and their lines of influence. However, Grant would not have been able to pull off the impish economy of the *Illuminatus!* equation: “Abdul Alhazred = A.: A.: ??!”
men’s notions of freedom.\textsuperscript{529} When the priest of the black mass early in \textit{Illuminatus!} intones the famous motto of Crowley’s Thelema—“Do what though wilt shall be the whole of the law”—the command sounds, at least in the libertarian context of that book, more like Max Stirner than Hassan I-Sabbah. Elsewhere in the novel, Shea and Wilson also include Crowley’s brief and militantly libertarian “Liber OZ,” an enumeration of Thelemic prerogatives that begins with the Feuerbachian declaration that “there is no god but man.”

Perhaps what most intrigued Wilson about the Great Beast, however, was his “methodology.” In \textit{Cosmic Trigger}, where Wilson describes his intellectual encounter with Crowley, he describes the Crowleyian system as an unprecedented synthesis of three elements: 1) an illuminist thread of Western occultism that utilizes “dangerous ‘physiological experiments’” involving drugs and sexual ritual; 2) Eastern yoga, and 3) “modern scientific method,” which for Wilson included “total skepticism about all results obtained, the keeping of careful objective records of each ‘experiment,’ and detached philosophical analysis after each stage of increased awareness.”\textsuperscript{530}

Here I want to look a little more closely at this third plank, which helps set up Wilson’s own pragmatic reframing of extraordinary visionary experience. Crowley was no hater of the concept of science. He described his esoteric system as “Scientific Illuminism,” while the motto of the A.'.A.' was “The Method of Science, the Aim of Religion.” As Olav Hammer argues, such invocations of “science” were also a standard practice for esotericists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his book \textit{Claiming Knowledge}, Hammer offers an extensive critique of this esoteric “parasitism” on scientific discourse, particularly as practiced by the

\textsuperscript{529} Wilson, \textit{Cosmic Trigger}, 71.
\textsuperscript{530} Ibid, 70.
Theosophists. Most esotericists of the day, he writes, understood “science” to mean “the body of statements, the terminology and/or the technical applications of science.” But this notion of science ignores what Hammer and many others argue is the most essential characteristic of scientific practice: its method of inquiry. This method does not consist in a body of knowledge but rather an intersubjective and repeatable process designed, at least in part, to expose and correct all manner of errors. Although studies of science in the wake of Thomas Kuhn have significantly qualified Hammer’s idealized Popperian view of scientific progress (especially in regard to the concrete practice of falsification), the scientific method nonetheless remains open, self-correcting, and ultimately provisional. And it is this method, Hammer states, that one “rarely if ever finds in Esoteric movement texts.”

Unfortunately, Hammer does not look closely at Crowley, whose interest in the “method of science” seems to offer a crucial and terribly influential counter-example. On the surface, of course, Crowley’s A.:A.: motto may not seem terribly far from William Q. Judge’s roughly contemporaneous claim that Theosophy was a “scientific religion and a religious science.” But there is an important difference between these assertions. Unlike Judge, Crowley took the stance that it was possible to base an experiential spiritual school on “practice and methods” rather then theory or belief. This pragmatic methodology was, he claimed, sufficient to achieve Illumination, or “Spiritual Experience.” At the same time, of course, Crowley’s protocols do not resemble normative conceptions of scientific method, since any “results” imply an ineradicable

531. Hammer, 204.
533. Hammer, 204.
534. Cited in Hammer, 222.
subjectivity that severely hamstrings conventional interpretations of repeatability and falsification.

As Marco Pasi argues, Crowley’s method of science reflected a Jamesian pragmatism that Crowley had imbibed, like so many, from *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* which appeared in 1902. Pasi also cautions that Crowley was quite willing to leaven his pragmatic empiricism with supernatural or even messianic convictions, especially after he received the *Book of the Law,* began fashioning himself as a prophet, and plunged deeper into sexual magic.

That said, Crowley was capable of waxing quite skeptically about the ontological status of magical phenomena. The most deflated views of occult experience were expressed early in his magical career, especially in the “Initiated Interpretation of Ceremonial Magic” that served as the introduction to the version of the *Goetia* he published in 1904. Here the demonic spirits conjured in the Triangle of Art are considered to be nothing more than “portions of the human brain,” different from ordinary sensory neural events only in that they are willed by the magician and “caused” by the operations of ceremonial magic. As such, Crowley’s focus on “practice and methods,” as well as his sometimes reductionist language, represent one of the earliest and most pivotal articulations of the sort of “skeptical Theurgy” that Wilson himself would carry forward.

Egil Asprem identifies three central elements of Crowley’s method that in many ways support Wilson’s notions from *Cosmic Trigger.* Crowley demanded “the careful use of a magical record to stress the externalization of personal experience which makes inter-subjectivity possible.” In addition, he conceived of “rituals as scientific experiments, with the idea of testing

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obtained results through inter-subjectively verifiable methods.”\textsuperscript{537} However one might judge the rigor of this method, Asprem argues conclusively that we should recognize his empirical pragmatism as sincere and based on his own philosophical and esoteric influences. These influences include Crowley’s early exposure to Theravada Buddhism, whose dry and disenchancing operations of self-analysis were typically interpreted in his era as signs of a “rational religion.” But the origins of Crowley’s “Scientific Illuminism” lie equally in the practical and psychological orientation of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the ground-breaking British occult society where the young Crowley cut his magical teeth.

On the one hand, the Golden Dawn’s interest in initiatory rituals, ancient gods, and recondite angelic tongues certainly reflects a Romantic and traditionalist reaction to the positivist intellectual orientation of industrialist fin-de-siècle Britain. On the other hand, the Order’s pursuit of the mysteries was, as Alex Owen insists, “entirely regulated by reason.”\textsuperscript{538} Rejecting the passive reception of exterior occult forces typified by the Spiritualist seance, the Golden Dawn magicians stressed the control of the mind and the active cultivation of will even as they explored the intuitive, hallucinatory, or twilight dimensions of human consciousness (or, as some were learning to call it, the subconscious). If they were not practicing the same kind of disenchanted enchantment that Saler describes emerging in literature at the time, it was something close, perhaps more of an enchanted disenchantment. In one crucial passage, Owen clarifies the Golden Dawn’s precise partnership of intuition and reason:

If we assume the mythopoetic capabilities of the hidden regions of the mind, then advanced occult practice can be understood as an extraordinary and controlled

\textsuperscript{537} Egil Asprem, “Magic Naturalized? Negotiating Science and Occult Experience in Aleister Crowley’s Scientific Illuminism,” \textit{Aries} 8 (2008), 151.
performance of the conscious “I” in a mythos of mutual unconscious creation. By this reckoning, it is the crucial alignment of rational consciousness with the apparently irrational world of the myth-creating unconscious that produces the powerful experience of the occult “real.”

While such experiences served in part to confirm the reality of occult theories, a certain instrumental skepticism—a key element of science—played an important role in the alignment that Owen describes. One of the strongest examples that Owen gives is from—surprise, surprise—Aleister Crowley, who cautions astral travelers about the need to distinguish between “authentic astral phenomena and figments of personal imagination.” Leaving aside the ontological problems raised by this distinction, what is important to note here are the terms that Crowley uses to make it: “We must not assert the ‘reality’ or ‘objectivity’ of an Astral being on no better evidence than the subjective sensation of its independent existence. We must insist on proof.” As Asprem points out, Crowley’s assessments not only invoke scientific values of objectivity and demonstration, but they occur after the fact, breaking down the immediacy of the raw visionary material into a data set for later analysis. In this way, and in the name of a skeptical pragmatism that was nonetheless open to preternatural possibility, Crowley attempted to undermine the “subjective sensation” of experiential authenticity that underlies so many esoteric claims. This move displaces the immediacy of extraordinary experience into an temporal protocol involving future critical assessment, and it would prove influential for later psychonauts, who themselves also wanted to have their cake and eat it too.

539. Ibid, 182.
541. While the tradition of testing and identifying spirits is fundamental to the rites of exorcism and medieval and Renaissance ceremonial magic, Crowley is not demanding proof of divine origin but of independent origin. For a
Tantric Thelema

Less than a decade into Crowley’s countercultural revival, Wilson’s fiction and essays helped propagate a particular version of the Beast, one that was ironic, hedonic and pragmatist rather than prophetic—a metaphysical libertarian or ontological anarchist. In *Cosmic Trigger* and later writings, Wilson was particularly fond of citing the following passage in “Liber O vel Manus et Sagittae,” an instruction manual for the A.:A.: that, again, seems to both prophesy and shape Wilson’s own model agnosticism:

> In this book it is spoken of the Sephiroth, and the Paths, of Spirits and Conjurations; of Gods, Spheres, Planes, and many other things which may or may not exist. It is immaterial whether they exist or not. By doing certain things certain results follow; students are most earnestly warned against attributing reality or philosophical validity to any of them.⁵⁴²

To speak anachronistically, here Crowley specifically calls for a very Wilsonian resistance against reifying abstractions, suggesting in its place a sort of empirical negative capability that holds reality claims lightly. At the same time, Crowley also gestures a certain kind of self-conscious constructionism, whereby practice correlates with extraordinary phenomena without providing them a metaphysical foundation. This is why I am not sure we can fully accept Owen’s claim that the modern occult self “did not recognize the relativism of its own self-reflexivity.” Or rather, even if such relativism remained only vestigial in Crowley—though his intense irony

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would suggest otherwise, at least at points—it was brought forth fully by Wilson, who tried to suspend ontological claims while pursuing novel intensities and the creative possibility of things, and entities, that flicker on the border between existence and symbolic activity.

Both men embraced the self-authenticating power of spiritual experience—as Crowley wrote in a founding statement of the A.’A.‘. “There is only one Rock which Skepticism cannot shake; the Rock of Experience.” At the same time, both Crowley and Wilson were committed—inconsistently, and in very different ways—to the analysis and further staging of these individual “facts” of esoteric experience in a critical process of assemblage that unfolded over time. Using John Lilly’s language, one Illuminatus! appendix defines “the magician” as a “self-programmer.” Comparing the practices of invocation and evocation to auto-suggestion and hypnosis, the appendix author (principally if not solely Wilson) further clarifies that the self-programming magician “edits or orchestrates sensed reality like an artist.” Elsewhere in the same appendix we find another assertion that simultaneously celebrates and undermines the autonomy of the liberal subject as both a subject and object of reality programming: “There is no essential difference between magick, Behavior Therapy, advertising, and Christian Science. All of them can be condensed into Abra-Melin’s simple ‘Invoke often.’” Here, the distinctions between religion and secular psychology break down into a technical approach to ontological fabrication that similarly (and more deviously) erodes the difference between self-transformation and the manipulation of others.

Wilson’s encounter with Crowley’s writing was crucial to his development of an esoteric libertarianism. Indeed, if there is a discrete trigger for the events described in Cosmic Trigger, it could be said to be Wilson’s discovery of Crowley’s 1912 (or 1913) text The Book of Lies. Here Crowley, writing at the height of his considerable powers, offers a brilliant and occasionally
puerile series of short, cryptic, and clever verses shot through with kabbalistic symbolism, numerology, and sexual double-entendre; Weiser’s 1972 edition, presumably Wilson’s source, also included commentary later provided by Crowley himself. Wilson, applying a cognitive connection-machine already tuned to a delirious excess by writing *Illumintus!*, came to suspect that the sexual mysticism evidently encoded in the *Book of Lies* was the core “Tantric” secret encrypted within the rites of Freemasonry and the Illuminist tradition. He was particularly intrigued by chapter 69, whose number and title, “How to Succeed and How to Suck Eggs,” gives the reader a sense of Crowley’s punning mix of esotericism and sex manual, as does the verse enjoining the aspirants to exchange “the Double Gift of Tongues.”

Without going into much *kama sutra* detail, Wilson gives his nuts-and-bolts description of this carnal gnosis in *Cosmic Trigger*: “The idea behind Tantric sacramental sex (or sex-magick, as it is also called) is that postponing normal orgasm by various postures, meditations, incantations, and especially prayers, enables one to produce eventually a new kind of orgasm—the polyphase orgasm, Leary has called it.” Wilson in turn links the resulting “neurological explosion” to then-popular Hindu notions about the ascent of kundalini, which Wilson, like a good countercultural pragmatist, also explicitly ties to the action of psychoactive drugs. “The experience is much like nitrous oxide in that it seems to condense an LSD trip into a few minutes, and like prolonged hatha yoga in that it seems to produce a permanent change in neurophysiology.”

For a juicier account of such ecstasies, we might turn to Wilson’s early seventies fictions, though of course we cannot know how much these accounts articulate Wilson’s own experiences. *The Sex Magicians* is, as one might expect, saturated with occult eroticism:

543. Shea and Wilson, 769.
544. Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger*, 68.
pornographic Tarot cards, swingers practicing Pranayama at sex parties, and dumb, ill-informed quips about sex as a “voodoo possession ritual.” At one point, we have a weird tales flashback to a goddess-worshipping rite in old Atlantis, the Epiphany of Mum-Mum. Serviced by the high priests Lhuv-Kerapht and Klarkash-Ton, the nude priestess Salome evokes the sacred energy of T’angpoon in her loins. The crowd, having smoked “the magic herb, Ak-opoko-gol,” become increasingly frenzied as the tension of *coitus reservatus* mounts. In the end, the whole crowd becomes possessed by the T’angpoon, and begin babbling in tongues and beating their chests.

Though this ecstasy offers a parody of freak Dionysian primitivism, or one of Lovecraft’s archaic witch-cults, Wilson’s tone also grows strangely serious, almost technical. “There was not a single person in the church aware of the bodies and other so-called ‘tangible objects’ which compromise ordinary perception,” Wilson writes in a deeply lysergic mode. “Turned on to the subatomic Direct Perception which is the intercommunication of the universe itself, they saw and felt only the energetic level which is aware of its own immortality. People had come to the temple, but only gods were in attendance now.”545 In *Illuminatus!*, Stella Maris’s experience of female sexual bliss features a similar theurgic transformation. After weeks training in behavioral reconditioning, Pranayama, and occult ritual, all designed to allow her to channel the goddess Eris, Stella has an extraordinary experience in the midst of a chaotic rite: “…the White Light came as a series of orgasms and stars going nova, she half felt the body of light coming forth from the body of fire…” Her first words, though, express a curious deflation, one that underscores the psychedelic conundrum of the come-down and lends the whole scene a demotic believability. “Shit. Is it always going to be like that—a white epileptic spasm and a hole in time? Won’t I ever be able to remember it?”546

546. Shea and Wilson, 713.
When introducing the T’angpoon in *The Sex Magicians*, Wilson notes parenthetically that the energy is identical what “later civilizations were to call kundalini, mana, Animal Magnetism or just ‘the vibes.’” Once again, the discourse of religious comparativism serves not so much to essentialize archetypal meanings as to reframe the human body as a *prima materia* of energetic transformation. In *Cosmic Trigger*, Wilson links these embodied possibilities to Reich’s “orgone” and the “hedonic circuit” of the nervous system described by Leary, but he also regularly refers to this current as “Tantric.” In this, Wilson was offering his own take on the Orientalized (and sometimes psychedelicized) sexual mysticism that Vedantic scholar Georg Feuerstein would come to critique as “California Tantra.” And though Wilson’s personal reserve prevented him from going into much personal detail, he explored various “neuro-psychological experiments” involving “Tantric” sex, LSD, cannabis, and occult ritual.

In the hands of Wilson and others, California Tantra represents a quintessentially modern blend of Eastern tantra and Western sex, ripe with misprision, projection, experience, and desire. But its American origins lie as far back as the turn of the twentieth century, although California arguably remains its origin. Some Beats tuned into tantra in the fifties—the Gary Synder figure practices yab-yum in Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums* (1958)—and the current became an established aspect of sixties discourse through texts like Omar Garrison’s widely-read 1964 book *Tantra: the Yoga of Sex.* Representatives of Eastern Tantric traditions and Western scholars alike, then and now, have deplored this novel invention of the religious imagination, with

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549. For an excellent if ungenerous account of the development of Western Tantra, see Feuerstein, Georg, *Tantra: The Path of Ecstasy* (Boston: Shambhala, 1998), esp. 203-263.
Feuerstein insisting that California Tantrics make the fundamental error of confusing higher bliss with the physical orgasm.\(^5^5^0\)

However, as Jeffrey Kripal argues in *Esalen*, Western psychedelic mystics were not just projecting their own altered states onto the mythologies and esoteric systems of Asia, but were also accurately (if naively) recognizing Asia’s own “countercultures”—left-hand or “crazy wisdom” paths that would sprout new and peculiar blooms in sixties and seventies America, where they eclipsed an earlier generation’s obsession with the clean modernist lines of Vedanta.\(^5^5^1\) The “authenticity” of this “Tantric transmission,” as Kripal calls it, should not concern us here—what is important is how perceptions of and contacts with Asian Tantric traditions allowed Western discourses and practices to shape and transform the psycho-physiological platform of extraordinary experience. Through renegades like Reich, an important influence on Esalen and Wilson alike, psychoanalysis itself began to morph into a neo-Tantric science focused on what Kripal calls “the enlightenment of the body.”

Hugh Urban also reminds us that today’s sexual Tantrics draw heavily from already existing currents of Western sexual magic, with Crowley himself playing a prime role in the fabrication of a yoga of erotic ecstasy and illumination. For Urban, one of the paradoxes of California Tantra is that it transforms the “dangerous power and secrecy” that surround traditional Asian Tantric practices into the “healthy pleasure and liberated openness” of the sexual revolution.\(^5^5^2\) Along those lines, we should meditate on the paradoxical title of a book like 1979’s *Sexual Secrets: The Alchemy of Ecstasy*, written by Western Tantric initiate Nik Douglas and Penny Slinger. These are not secrets requiring initiation or apprenticeship, but commodified

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550. Feuerstein, xvi.
“techniques” requiring purchase and practice in a marketplace of exotic gratification. As such, Urban considers California Tantra’s occult articulation of techniques of pleasure and ecstasy to be “the quintessential religion for consumerist capitalist society.” At the same time, however, this consumerist matrix, and its resistance, remains the context for innumerable extraordinary experiences that exceed the boundaries of commodity exchange.

On the one hand, Wilson’s own encounter with sexual magic is very much a part of this renegotiation, as can be seen in the hedonic instrumentalism that dominates his first nonfiction book, Sex & Drugs: A Journey Beyond Limits, which was published in 1973 through Playboy Press. Unlike Cosmic Trigger, this book was a strictly commercial affair—the paperback edition, with a blurb from no less than Alan Watts, features a kaleidoscopic image of a woman in ecstasy alongside an equally alluring question: “Are drugs the answer to better sex?” Wilson’s answer, intriguingly, has as much to do with esoteric ritual and occult experience as it does with erotic techniques or psychoactive substances. Again pushing a sort of hedonic comparativism, Wilson presents both Asian Tantric traditions and Western magic as collections of instrumental anthropotechnics that anticipate or even transcend the altered states available through psychoactive drugs. “There is no area of new perception and expanded awareness discoverable through peyote (or LSD or similar drugs) that cannot also be reached by techniques well known to Oriental yogis and Western occultists.”

Wilson does not slather these techniques with New Age spirituality or the groovy lingo of enlightenment, satori, or union with Godhead. Instead he uses Leary’s hedonic language of the nervous system, one that offers a more “scientific” and skeptical approach to the matter of extraordinary experience. As Wilson explains, when Leary, John Lilly, and others “saw gods and

553. Ibid, 207.
heavens and experienced ‘occult’ energies, they did not take these dramatic events at face value.” 555 Instead, they dug down to discover the truth of Lilly’s meta-programming mantra about beliefs becoming true within the province and limits of the mind.

Wilson characterized Lilly’s famous assertion as an “operational” statement: “a generalization useful to the troubleshooter dealing with actual events in the laboratory. (In this case, of course, the laboratory is the human head.)” 556 Even the rare and glorious experience of “unification”—the ecstatic collapse of subject and object described by heavy acid-heads and Eastern nondualist traditions alike—is here described in cybernetic terms rather than “spooky or metaphysical” ones. To explain this particular peak experience, Wilson brings up the example of the cybernetic psychiatrist Ross Ashby’s homeostat, one of the first devices designed to learn from and adapt to its surroundings. As Wilson explains (with Alan Watts in the background), the homeostat does not model the existence of an isolated animal, but rather an “animal-in-an-environment.” For Wilson, the experiences of fusion with God or the universe described by mystics and heads alike represents “precisely the shift of attention from the conscious ego to the previously unconscious organism-environment feedback network.” 557 Though cybernetics had been an important influence on Wilson since the fifties, he did follow some sixties and especially seventies intellectuals in attempting to mystify the idea of “systems” into a new ideology of holism and collective consciousness. Instead, he was interested in redescribing mystical experience without reducing it, finding in its ecstasies a cognitive truth about the co-created construction of self and world.

It is important to emphasize here how much Wilson’s secular approach to the ecstatic mysticism sidesteps the spiritualized notions of psychedelic ecstasy found within much

555. Ibid, 246.
556. Ibid, 57-58.
countercultural discourse. In fact, Wilson’s approach in many ways supports the conservative scholar R.C. Zaehner’s famous criticism of Aldous Huxley in his 1957 book *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane*. In this text, Zaehner argues that Huxley’s influential account of mescaline mysticism in *The Doors of Perception* represents an essentially naturalist phenomena unmarked by any sacred order of being. However, even as he distanced himself from more idealistic accounts of extraordinary experience, Wilson did more than simply graft an ecstatic instrumentalism to a consumer capitalism that, in the seventies, was heavily engaged in absorbing countercultural mores. Though Wilson accepted a liberatory model of sexuality inherited from Reich and easily aligned with the liberal subject, he also retained the sense of Tantra’s “dangerous power and secrecy” as he moved beyond the Playboy Press.

*Cosmic Trigger*, after all, is a rather cautionary tale, and moreover one that contains its own veiled secrets. Early in the volume, for example, Wilson offers a reasonably clear top-level description of the various “neuro-psychological experiments” that he undertook after cracking the carnal code of the *Book of Lies*. But then Wilson makes a surprising and uncharacteristic rhetorical move: he refuses to detail some practices “because they are too dangerous for ordinary or casual experimenters.” Without the proper physical and philosophical preparation, he warns, “magick investigation will merely blow your mind,” and possibly land you in a lunatic asylum. This is, of course, almost the opposite of the take-away from *Sex and Drugs*, which is that sex, drugs, and magic can, well, really blow your mind. What has changed? Why the note of caution here?

Certainly, Wilson’s elision has important rhetorical effects. For one thing, Wilson’s explicit invocation of what he refuses to say intensifies the desirability of these exotic and

558. Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger*, 72.
mysterious techniques, not unlike Lovecraft’s “forbidden” books and “unspeakable” dimensions. By staying mum, Wilson grants himself the authority of one who knows how to use such techniques, when to reveal them, and when to keep silent. But though *Cosmic Trigger* does in some ways serves as a platform for Wilson’s self-construction as a rascal guru—albeit a rather down-to-earth and garrulous sort—this sort of master discourse runs contrary to his demotic and Discordian sensibility. I think two conclusions are warranted.

One is that Wilson, though a hedonist and “enchanted disenchanter” of the sacred, was not a nihilist or a party animal. His quest was not simply for pleasure or even bliss, in other words, but also for the critical insights derived along with and through such profane illuminations. Alongside the earthly delights offered by California Tantrics, we must recognize with Kripal a current of Western sexual mysticism that, however psychological its vocabulary, simply has more at stake that healthy liberated kicks. In this Crowleyian current, pleasure is Promethean, an engine not for satisfaction alone but also insight and encounter, and therefore a “practice of truth” as well as intensity.

Here we might recall Foucault’s late discussion of the *ars erotica*, an art whose discourse he argues has long laid dormant in the modern West. In such a practice, which usually plays second fiddle to the psychological “science” of sexuality, “truth is extracted from pleasure itself, gathered as experience, analyzed according to its quality, followed along its reverberations in the body and the soul.” Like many traditional arts, this *ars* requires apprenticeship as well as deep discretion, as its “quintessential knowledge is transmitted by magisterial initiation, with the stamp of secrecy, to those who have shown themselves to be worthy of it.”559 Here Foucault is quite consciously describing a praxis of pleasure rather than the usual psychoanalytic science of

desire. Similarly, Wilson’s ontologically deflated but operational account of mystical experience offers a hedonic and psychedelic alternative to the endless drive of spiritual “seeking.”

The other reason for Wilson’s reticence is that he knows whereof he speaks. The years covered by Cosmic Trigger were peak years of the countercultural occult revival, a time of transition between the wreckage of sixties dreams and the emergence of a New Age ready to make its more overt compromises with consumerist self-realization. During this period, Wilson became deeply involved in the occult demimonde of the Bay Area, and his encounters with Thelemites, psychedelic magicians and bootstrap witch covens gave him plenty of first-hand experience of the traps on the path. More centrally, Cosmic Trigger narrates the years that Wilson found himself in what he calls “Chapel Perilous,” a sort of ontological weigh-station of high weirdness, replete with ominous paranormal events, overwhelming synchronicities, and personal tragedy. The cognitive and emotional pressures of Chapel Perilous are such, he says, that “you come out the other side either a stone paranoid or an agnostic; there is no third way.”

Though he clearly enjoyed some of the ride, and implies that such a crossroads might be inevitable along the occult Promethean path, Wilson nonetheless holds a great deal of respect for the traumatic potential of high weirdness. His own return to agnosticism—a stance that is as performed in and through this very text—was in no ways guaranteed. Indeed, not unlike Lilly’s biographies or Dick’s writings in the last years of his life, Cosmic Trigger is an attempt both to narratively expose the pathological dimensions of extraordinary experience and to rescue the author from the paranoid envelopment in mysteries whose enigmatic charisma is nonetheless sustained, and even broadcast, through the very act of writing.
Chapel Perilous

In *The Making of the Counterculture*, Theodor Roszak recognized that the counterculture’s seemingly “irrational” embrace of occultism and drugs represented more than simply escapism or hedonistic kicks. These practices and pleasures also emerged from a distrust and rejection of rationality itself, whose Enlightenment shine had become darkened through the soulless and violent instrumentalism of the military-industrial order and the “control society” refining its manipulative techniques through the space of the spectacle. In this light, Zen meditation, Dionysian partying, and high-dose psychedelia all reflected a revolutionary politics of the possible, whereby a more original, authentic, or simply liberating source might be discovered behind or beyond bankrupt rationality and the repressive behavioral norms disguised as ordinary “common sense.” This rejection of rationality helps explain why Camille Paglia describes the counterculture as a religious revival of Romanticism, where the search for what she calls “cosmic consciousness” mixed together radical politics with “ecstatic nature-worship and sex-charged self-transformation.”

Wilson’s psychonautical practice both parallels and checks this Romantic religiosity. On the one hand, it shares the exuberant embrace of transrational hedonistic practices presumed to shatter mainstream American norms “programmed” into the nervous system. At the same time, however, Wilson attempted to sustain an agnostic and even skeptical orientation towards his encounters with cosmic consciousness, a position that gives off little aroma of Romanticism in any but the most ironic sense. Plunging into the transrational intensities of extraordinary experience, he attempted to maintain, at least in the long run, an individualistic sense of critical

561. Paglia, op cit, 58.
agency associated with skeptical reason and located in the empirical body. However, in some important ways, Wilson remained party to the countercultural attack on rationality.

Alexander Bard and Jan Söderqvist have pointed to this critical difference between reason as an empirical activity and rationality as an abstract and totalizing system. “Reason is based on the body while rationality lacks a foundation outside its own tautological loops,” they declare. Here the empirical phenomenal unfolding of embodiment provides an perspectival organization to reason as well as a sense of agency. “Reason is represented by a highly real, active actor, while rationality is only represented by a highly illusory, passive observer.”

It is important to emphasize that this situational agent or actor is not the same thing as the rational liberal subject whose singular and autonomous self-presence sustains a capitalist political order dependent on the ideology of choice and calculated self-interest. Confronted with evidence of his own constructed character, this liberal subject is wont to experience “agency panic,” which as we have seen can grow into paranoid fears of hidden orders of coercion and mind control. Despite Wilson’s libertarian investment in autonomy, however, his writings and adventures reflect very little panic when agency is challenged, whether from the deconstructive labor of psychoanalysis, the critique of social and linguistic imprints, or the self-dissolving seas of high-dose LSD. In concert with some post-structuralist accounts of identity, many of which were also emerging in the seventies, Wilson was happy to accept a self that is internally divided, and whose independence is paradoxically dependent on an agonistic internal society of roles, scripts, and partial subjects. Notably, Wilson tells his story in Cosmic Trigger from the shifting perspective of these internal characters. At various points, we hear from the Shaman, the Poet,

the Oracle, the Struggling Writer, and the Skeptic—the only one, Wilson suggestively notes, “who usually possesses veto power over all the others.”563

Wilson’s psychonautical praxis, as described in *Cosmic Trigger*, radicalizes the difference between reason and rationality. Actively cultivating extraordinary experiences that by definition challenge the rational order of the world, Wilson nonetheless deploys reason to skeptically undermine ontological convictions and other over-beliefs arising from encounters with cosmic consciousness. An appendix to *Illuminatus!* gives us a portrait of this secular or critical gnosis. In a brief and concocted account, Wilson and Shea outline the Ishmaelian esoteric religious training that the legendary Hassan I Sabbah received before founding the Order of the Assassins. In the highest grade of this training, the seeker learns that even personal mystical encounters with the Absolute or God should be subjected “to the most merciless analysis and criticism.” A fully realized adept was therefore “one who had achieved supreme mystical awareness but refused to make even that into an idol; he was a total atheist-anarchist subject to no authority but his own independent mind.”564

Even as he resorted to many of the strategies of skepticism, Wilson also resisted the certainties that can and do arise for many skeptics following the reduction of experiential anomalies to manageable categories of knowledge based on psychology, sociology, or neuroscience. For Wilson, the independent mind of reason is checked by its own reflexive critique of certainty, as well as the cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility that enjoys ontological ambiguity and the marvels that result from an unleashed nervous system. We might think of this enjoyment as a sort of antifoundationalist but naturalist aesthetics of the sublime, or at least the weird, one whose blend of irony and wonder recalls John Keats’ famous account of negative

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563. Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger*, 3.
564. Shea and Wilson, 757.
capability. In a letter to his brother, Keats praises those who are “capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Keats criticizes Coleridge, who, he writes, lacked such capacity, and would refuse “a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery” if he could not crystalize such a glimpse into knowledge.

And yet it is precisely such isolated verisimilitudes—singular appearances of truth flickering from the heart of existential mystery—that beckoned Wilson. His practice is therefore another sort of high-wire act, one that maintains its precarious enjoyment of sublimity precisely by affirming the tension that results from the refusal to resolve the ultimate meaning of such experiences into orders of faith or knowledge. In this way, Wilson’s “anti-belief system” should be seen as an occult extension of the same ironic imagination described by Saler, which enabled readers to enjoy the fruits of enchantment without falling into the clutches of credulity. But as Saler points out, this stance is not a one-shot deal: “the double consciousness of the ironic imagination requires ongoing practice to maintain.”

Wilson provides relatively light details on his specific occult and sex magickal practices and experiences in *Cosmic Trigger*. Many of the protocols centered on Crowleyian magic, including rituals designed to establish contact with the Holy Guardian Angel, a daimonic guide that Crowley alternately described—to Wilson’s great delight—as a superhuman intelligence or a feature of the personal unconscious. For some trips, Wilson played a “hypno-tape with positive suggestions on it,” tapes that drew from mainline New Thought sources within the American

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565. Saler, 50.

In one LSD experiment, he spent the first few hours in the dark, lying on the bed with eyes closed, repeatedly listening to a tape of John Lilly’s “Beliefs Unlimited,” a meta-programming thought experiment Lilly included in *The Center of the Cyclone*. “Beliefs Unlimited” begins with Lilly’s famous claim that “what one believes to be true either is true or becomes true within certain limits, to be found experientially and experimentally”—and then proceeds to hammer away at the very concept of such limits. For Wilson, the tape proved to be valuable in breaking down “conditioned expectations about the boundary between the possible and the impossible,” even as it encouraged a gullible faith in the mind’s secret powers. At the same time, Wilson does not worry much of temporary states of gullibility. He reports that it is easy “to re-establish scientific skepticism” about such results once the experiment is over, though he also insists that “skepticism during the experiment prevents any interesting results.”567 Here we have a perfect expression of Saler’s disenchanted enchantment, though now deployed as a probe of experience rather than literary or media fictions.

However, in the second volume of *Cosmic Trigger*, Wilson offers another account of ritual experience that suggests a use of the ironic imagination *in situ*. In 1972, in a farmhouse in Mendocino, Wilson decided to preform Crowley’s Mass of the Phoenix, a solo ritual first described in *The Book of Lies*. After dropping 250 micrograms of LSD and putting on some Beethoven, Wilson performed the invocation. Soon he found himself surrounded by a ring of slavering dog-faced demons who stood out solidly against the room’s actual furniture.

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566. “In general, I am much happier than before starting these experiments.” See Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger, Volume II*, 55.
On one level, I was seriously frightened; but on another level, I felt confident of my hard-learned ability to navigate in the Infernal regions of psychedelic space—or in the qliphotic astral realm, or whatever you want to call this particularly unlovely reality-tunnel. I recalled something from H.P. Lovecraft: “Do not call up any that you cannot put down.” This was not helpful. But then I remembered from some book on shamanism: “If you feed Them, they will become Allies instead of Foes.”

While we of course cannot take this as an accurate account of Wilson’s real-time thought processes, we should nonetheless notice some characteristic features of Wilson’s anthropotechnics: the indeterminate flicker between different ontologies (psychedelic space vs. the qliphotic “astral realm” of modern esotericism; pulp fiction vs. anthropology), the recall and citation of texts, and the “hard-learned ability” that comes with practice. Armed with all this, and recalling the line from the book on shamanism, Wilson then directed his psychedelicized imagination to conjure up something tasty—shrimp cocktails, he decided—and proceeded to feed the demons. At this point the entities transformed into dwarf-sized replicas of the nuns he recalled from grammar school. Laughing, he then closed the circle, writing, in an echo of Crowley’s Goetic skepticism, that he was “totally convinced that all the ‘entities’ invoked in Magick are parts of our own minds.” But the evening was not yet through with him. Suddenly, his bed started shaking “like a scene from the Exorcist.” It was a mild earthquake. With a further dose of apotropaic irony, Wilson writes, “It would be best to not even think of it as a synchronicity.”

This last line is worth pondering in light of the long bout of high weirdness that first descended upon Wilson a few months after performing this ritual. A jaw-dropping series of

567. Wilson, Cosmic Trigger, 83.
568. Wilson, Cosmic Trigger II, 159.
meaningful coincidences sent Wilson headfirst into “the paradoxical paranoidal paranormal parameters of synchronicity.”

Linking between texts and dreams and waking encounters, these events unleashed an elaborate parade of “beings” into Wilson’s life, including Horus, ETs, the number 23, and the Dog Star Sirius. Wilson’s comment about the earthquake reminds us that he recognized the interpretive choices involved in the “perception” of a synchronicity, as well as the possible dangers of such hermeneutics. As such, it reminds us again of the role that reason and reframing played in some psychonautical operations. And yet, as Wilson would himself discover, the existential logic of synchronicity turns on the impossible necessity that announces its arrival as an unquestionable event. Or, in other words, the synchronistic event presents itself as already inextricable from narrative implications that provide a half-veiled but suggestive wink in the immanent guise of *a fait accompli*.

In simpler terms that draw from our earlier discussion of resonance, “synchronicity” might be said to refer to the striking experience or perception of a resonating correlation between causally unrelated and chance elements. However it arises, the operation of correlating these elements thickens them into almost oracular signs that demand to be read—or that, perhaps more accurately, read themselves as if already inscribed onto the fabric of existence. Such signs often take the form of discrete words, objects, actions or images that cross between different ontological domains, especially between the external object-world, the linguistic scene of dialogue, or the internal theater of thoughts, memories, and stories. In addition to the force of any particular correlations, these moments suggest a second-order network of meaningful “acausal connections” memorably described in the Alex Cox film *Repo Man* as “a lattice of coincidence that lays on top o’ everything.”

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569. Ibid, 160.
570. Shea and Wilson, 541.
It is the veiled suggestion of such a lattice that lends the particular correlation its eerie, weird, and absurd character, something that Freud also noted in his celebrated 1919 essay on psychopathology and the uncanny. Here he described the superstitious desire to recognize fate or a “secret meaning” in the uncanny recurrence of a certain number, which for Freud is 62, and for Wilson was 23. Significantly, Freud links this temptation to a new concept in his metapsychology: the unconscious compulsion to repeat, associated with the death drive that works against Eros. Rather than infusing the future with desire, the death drive stitched into our beings seeks extinction and stasis through repetition. As such, recurrent numbers seem uncanny to us because they remind us of this “daemonic” repetition within.

The concept of synchronicity itself was famously developed and named by Carl Jung and the physicist Wolfgang Pauli in the 1950s. Jung used the concept to explain both the oracular mechanism of the I Ching as well as Jung’s then-emerging belief in the enigmatic “psychoid” intertwining of the unconscious archetypes and physical matter. As a concept, and even a term, synchronicity inherits something from both Jung’s psychoanalytic esotericism and Pauli’s physics-inflected interest in paranormal phenomena. With its links to the oracular mechanisms of forced correlation, synchronicity keys into one of the most venerable human modes of pattern recognition, and refashions the esoteric logic of correspondences into a more transitive and open-ended series of signs, a series that founds comparison itself.

At the same time, synchronicity is a naturalistic concept, one that carries forward modernity’s disenchanted refashioning of meaningful coincidence into the plotted “chance encounters” of Victorian novels, or Horace Walpole’s concept of serendipity, those “fortunate happenstances” whose real effects are as strong in scientific history as anything. For Jung, synchronicity was an actual feature of reality. Along with many of his followers, especially
Maria Von Franz, Jung attempted to scientifically or formally establish the principle, though as Arthur Koestler points out, these efforts founder precisely in their inability to present an “acausal” principle in anything other than causal terms. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that, despite its linkages to the archaic logic of oracular semiosis, the concept of synchronicity embraced by Wilson represents a prime postwar example of how the quasi-scientific terminology of the paranormal reframes previously esoteric or occult phenomena, creating what Egil Asprem calls “a uniquely naturalistic mode of enchantment.”

Jung began noting the phenomenon as early as the 1920s. The most classic example occurred during an analytic session in which a female patient, who defended herself with a “highly polished Cartesian rationalism,” tells Jung about a dream in which she received a golden scarab jewel. At that moment, Jung hears an insect slamming against the outside of the nearby window-pane, and discovers a common rose-chafer beetle with a gold-green carapace. Jung then opens up the window and tells the patient, “Here is your scarab”—an action that, he claims, broke down her intellectual resistance to the analysis. Jung’s decision to put the coincidence into social play is crucial, one that recalls Stephen Paul Miller’s definition of “uncanny criticism” as a critical reading that is not driven by “cause and effect” but “by noting relationships between phenomena.” Rather than respect modernity’s Great Divide between nature and human culture, which would a priori reject any meaningful correlation between a narration and an entomological tropism, Jung acted instead as an uncanny critic. He pointed out two event-signs that resonated across and between different ontological domains, conjoined in that moment by a

transversal sounding. At the same time, Jung did so without implying or establishing a linear or causal relationship between these events or even defining the nature or “meaning” of the connection at all. Nonetheless, by merely pointing out the uncanny resonance, he produced effects in the analytic situation by introducing an extra dimension to the analysis, one that might be described as a kind of juxtaposition or superposition that simultaneously demands sense (the coincidence must be meaningful) and forecloses it (no reasonable cause of the meaningful coincidence is imaginable).

This dimension opens up the distinction between statistically anomalous events and meaningful statistically anomalous events, with only the latter generating or containing an overtone of personal significance that rides or parasites unlikely clusters of phenomena. Synchronicities, it might be said, forge signs and references out of events. At such moments, as Jeff Kripal explains, “space-time looks very much like a text and physical objects begin to function more like words or symbols than like the lifeless objects we assume them to be.” In other words, these object messages in turn remind us of the interlocking correspondences of reference and citation discovered through writing and research, with all its notorious serendipity. Indeed, Wilson uses “synchronicity” to refer both to startling experiential coincidences and surprising connections between texts and talk.

The link between coincidence, esoteric possibility, and the textual operations of reference is well-represented by a tale that Wilson includes in both Illuminatus! and Cosmic Trigger. In her book, This Timeless Moment, Laura Huxley, Aldous’s second wife, describes her attempt to

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573. This should remind us again of Erlmann’s distinction between reason and resonance. “While reason implies the disjunction of subject and object, resonance involves their conjunction,” writes Erlmann. “Where reason requires separation and autonomy, resonance entails adjacency, sympathy, and the collapse of the boundary between perceiver and perceived.” While this invocation of “sympathy” does strike the overtones on the old occult monochord of correspondences, Erlmann is equally adamant that resonance is stitched into modernity. Erlmann, 9-10.

574. Kripal, Esalen, 15.
contact the spirit of her deceased husband through the medium Keith Milton Rhinehart. The medium informed her that Aldous wanted to transmit “classical evidence of survival”—that is, a message that could not be explained “merely” as telepathy, as something Rinehart picked out of her mind (which is wild enough, admittedly).

Later that evening, Rhinehart produced the evidence: passing on a message supposedly from Aldous, he instructed Laura to go to another room in the house, a room the medium had visited only briefly in the company of others, and find a particular book by its location on the shelf. She was to look on a certain page and a certain line. The book she found in the spot was a Spanish anthology of literary criticism that Aldous may have glanced at before his death but that Laura had never seen. Translated, here is the sentence Laura found: “Aldous Huxley does not surprise us in this admirable communication in which paradox and erudition in the poetic sense and the sense of humor are interlaced in such an efficacious form.” When telling the story at the close of The Eye in the Pyramid, Wilson adds the fact that “the line was, of course, line 23.”

This story of course recalls familiar mentalist tricks, and it should also be noted that, though Rhinehardt did ask for line 23, the line only encompasses the very end of the sentence that Laura Huxley discovered. This still reminds us that the repetition of the number 23 throughout Illuminatus! and Cosmic Trigger is more than a pure, if uncanny recurrence. The number also ties into larger referential networks that involve the Discordian law of 5s, the 23rd chapter of The Book of Lies, the American slang term 23 Skidoo, and William S. Burroughs, who Wilson claims told him about the mysterious number in the first place. In other words, synchronicities seem intimately bound up with the peculiar slipperiness of inter-textual references and the endless labyrinths of cognitive correspondences, which alone were enough to

575. Shea and Wilson, 304.
drive Wilson to the threshold of Chapel Perilous. But what drove him inside, and what gives synchronicities their existential bite, is the capacity of their textual play to arrive with the force of an event, like a bell ringing in time.

**Dog Star Days**

During the summer of 1973, when Wilson received what he called the “Sirius transmissions,” he decided to redo one of his hypno-tape experiments. Instead of taking LSD, he would enter a “Tantric sex trance” with the help of his wife, charmingly referred to as “the Most Beautiful Woman in the Galaxy.” The following morning, on July 23, Wilson awoke from a dream and scribbled: “Sirius is important.” This dream fragment in turn spawned an associational network of paranormal experiences and textual discoveries that linked the dog star to ancient Egypt, the “dog days” of late summer, Crowley (by way of Kenneth Grant’s recently published books), and, eventually, Robert Temple’s *The Sirius Mystery*, a popular “ancient alien” book that appeared in 1976.

As the synchronistic text proliferated, it seemed to engender its own incorporeal author. Wilson’s Shaman came to believe that he was in communication with a “Higher Intelligence” that he saw or heard in dreams, intuitions, and waking visions. Such intermediary beings saturate modern occultism, of course, from the Enochian angels of John Dee through the Secret Chiefs of Theosophy and the ancient Atlanteans channeled by New Agers. Reinscribing the occult tension between esoteric and naturalistic explanations for extraordinary experience, not to mention the cultural continuity between angels and aliens, Wilson vacillated between identifying this

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Intelligence as Crowley’s Holy Guardian Angel or an extraterrestrial being using a cosmic “ESP channel” that Wilson had “tuned into” by metaprogramming his nervous system.577

He compares the entity to a being of light, and puts particular emphasis on its discourse, including melodious and edifying statements (“They live happiest who have forgiven most”), successful predictions (the arrival of a desperately needed check from a publisher), and a lot of “gibberish” about time, infinity, and the future. For those conversant with the discourses of Spiritualists and New Age prophets, this latter admission paradoxically strikes the bell of authenticity. As Wouter Hanegraaff remarked regarding Terence McKenna’s mushroom Voice, who was also obsessed with time, we seem to be in the presence of that poorly understood but sometimes unquestionably unfaked phenomenon of channeling.

Needless to say, the particular period of Wilson’s “Sirius Transmissions”—roughly July of 1973 through October 1974—did not occur in a social (or cosmic) vacuum. These were the dog days in many ways, the time of Watergate, recession, and energy crisis. These all-too-worldly concerns were mirrored by a good deal of cosmic activity as well. The space station Skylab was launched in May, 1973, while Pioneer 10 began transmitting images of Jupiter—the location of the “Star Gate” in Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey—in November of that year, the same month that Mariner 10 was launched toward Mercury. Late 1973 also saw the naked-eye appearance of the Comet Kohoutek, whose identification earlier that year had inspired quasi-apocalyptic speculations by the Children of God’s David Berg and other wild minds. That October, as the Yom Kippur War unfolded in the holy land, the United States also hosted an extraordinary wave of UFO sightings centered in Ohio. Closer to home, Wilson’s experiences

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were also paralleled by a bout of cosmic communications reported by his old friend Timothy Leary. Though the high weirdness of Leary’s life in the early seventies deserves a more extended investigation in this book, we will have to content ourselves here with a brief summary.

Following his Weather Underground-assisted escape from a low-security Californian prison in 1970, Timothy Leary lived on the lam in Africa, Europe and Asia, consorting with Black Panthers, *kosmiche* Krautrock musicians, and psychedelic high society. By early 1973, he had been recaptured and was back in prison. Facing decades of time, locked in solitary confinement alongside fellow Folsom inmate Charles Manson, Leary began writing a series of fascinating texts that his partner Joanna Harcourt-Smith independently published in the following months. *Neurologic* outlined a social-cybernetic and ultimately mystical model of the human nervous system, later to become the “eight-circuit model” that Robert Anton Wilson helped propagate in *Cosmic Trigger* and later texts. Leary described his new thinking as “PSY PHI,” for scientific philosophy. In the late summer, Leary and Harcourt-Smith published a more apocalyptic essay called *Starseed*, a Kahoutek-inspired text that speculates that “life is an interstellar communications network” and that the contact with extraterrestrial intelligence possibly signaled by the comet’s presence was most likely to occur through a properly tuned nervous system.

Finally, as if to prove the point, *Terra II...A Way Out* presents itself as a channeled text consisting of the “English translations” Leary made of telepathic transmissions from Higher Intelligences supposedly received by a fellow prisoner in the late summer. Published in 1974 following Leary’s transfer to Vacaville, *Terra II* proclaimed that the time for earthlings to mutate had arrived, and it outlined, in great science-fictional detail, the steps necessary for us to return to the stars that seeded us and to claim our groovy post-terrestrial existence.
Of course, assessing the earnestness of any of Leary’s statements is a fool’s game, and some have pointed to details about prison life included in the text as evidence that it was designed to seed and assist in another prison break. Nonetheless, these texts represent a decided shift in Leary’s outlook from the “soft, sweet custard mush” of Hindu spirituality, which he proffered in the sixties, and towards a more cosmic and furture-oriented transhumanism. Moreover, with its explicit mention of John Dee, *Terra II* also reflects Leary’s recent interest of occult practice, and hints as well at an obsession with Crowley that had begun a few years before in North Africa.\(^578\) In any case, Leary’s transhumanist turn proved particularly important to Wilson, whose own self narration in *Cosmic Trigger* is not always easy to disentangle from Leary’s considerable influence. Nonetheless, it bears mentioning that Wilson did not begin corresponding with Leary until the fall of 1973, a few months following the onset of their mutual impression of incoming cosmic communication.

Throughout July of 1973, Wilson attempted to maintain the tight-rope dance of “maybe logic” regarding the ontology of this Higher Intelligence, but he gradually lost the balance. Even enthusiastic and sympathetic readers of Wilson, when retracing his growing network of coincidences, can note many instances of flabby associational thinking that should not have gotten past the Skeptic, who Wilson admits was, at he time, “whacked out of his skull.” More critical readers, drawing from the considerable sociobiological literature on our hard-wired predisposition for superstitious or “magical” thinking, would find plenty of evidence for arbitrary pattern recognition, delusions of reference, and off-the-hook agency detection.\(^579\)

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For his part, Wilson—or rather, the fruitful alliance of the Shaman and Skeptic—seriously consider but then reject the possibility of madness, even as Wilson’s “neurometaprogrammer”—the Lillyian cognitive operator who sets the limits on belief—decides that a real contact with Higher Intelligence had begun. “Was this at last the illumination of the Illuminati—the experience of skepticism carried to the point where it abolishes itself and, since you can’t believe anything fully, you are as free of skepticism as of any other philosophy and finally open to thinking the unthinkable?” Wilson’s disenchanted enchantment had become re-enchanted. His apotropaic skepticism was outpaced by delire, as paranoid semiology and synchronistic resonance led him decisively away from “consensus reality,” that handy sociological term of art that itself became popular in the seventies.

In terms of social psychology, we might say that Wilson scripted his own extraordinary experience, but unlike the copious naive examples of such self-scripting we might find in the history of the New Age and popular occulture, Wilson ironically recognized the fictions and absurdities that infused and shaped the emerging “four-dimensional coincidence-hologram.” This should at once remind us of the strange ontology of fictions discussed above, whose modes of being remain distinct from material objects and dependent on our own interest in them, and yet are powerful enough to trouble us with their networked exteriority. And indeed, one way of characterizing the uncanny story of Cosmic Trigger is that the paratextual mindfucks of conspiracy and magic that Wilson helped unleash in Illuminatus! came home to roost.

This destabilizing nexus of authorship, trickery, and higher intelligence is gestured towards at the close of Illuminatus! Joe Malik, aboard Celine’s submarine and facing a giant sea monster, realizes that he is just a character in a book. Celine then admits to both the other

580. Wilson, Cosmic Trigger, 89.
characters and the reader that his computer FUCKUP actually wrote the novel, having been programmed to “correlat[e] all the data on this caper” and put it into the form of a fiction. At this moment, so reminiscent of the close of Philip K. Dick’s *A Maze of Death* (1970), the book’s authorial voice offers its own paranthetical note: “(So, at last, I learn my identity, in parentheses…).” This is a less surreal aside to the reader than it may appear, given that Celine’s admission in some sense describes Wilson and Shea’s own method of fictionally elaborating historical conspiracy theories.

But Celine is not through with the beings of fiction: “FUCKUP may be writing all this, in one sense, but in a higher sense there’s a being, or beings, outside our entire universe, writing this. Our universe is inside their book, whoever they are. They’re the Secret Chiefs.”582 Here the writing of paranormal (or paratextual) fictions stages the second-order recognition that higher intelligences are writing the book of the world, including those apparent fictions that swallow us up as fate. This recalls the stage of Realization that Jeffrey Kripal describes in *Mutants and Mystics*, which tracks the strange loops that tie together creative writing and the paranormal through twentieth century popular culture. “Through the uncanny practices of writing, reading, and artistic production,” individuals encounter paranormal events that “reveal a dimension of the world that works remarkably like a text or a story.” The realization that comes from this encounter is that we are being written: “we are caught in a story (or stories) that we did not write and that we may not even like.”583

For his part, Wilson was never altogether happy with the story that extraterrestrial adepts from Sirius were beaming him intelligent signals. He attributes his exit from that particular
reality tunnel to, of all things, a “Crowleymass” held in Berkeley in October 1974, celebrating
the 99th birthday of the beast. As described in Wilson’s text, many notables from California’s
occult scene were in attendance, including Grady McMurtry, Caliph of the re-established O.T.O,
and Dr. Jacques Vallee, astronomer, computer network researcher, and independent UFO
investigator. Vallee shared with Wilson his growing conviction that UFOs were not a “nuts and
bolts” or even extraterrestrial phenomenon, but only the latest bizarre formation of a long-
standing zone of terrestrial weirdness. Based in part on his own comparativist research into the
history of occultism and secret societies, Vallee argued that absurd encounters with preternatural
alien intelligences were perhaps better seen as part of a terrestrial “control system” designed to
tweak human culture and consciousness for purposes he did not claim to understand. Vallee’s
arguments, informed by deep research and a nimble mind, may have cracked Wilson’s ET
convictions, but it hardly returned him to a sober rationalism, since Vallee’s control system
theory still depends on the existence of a continuum of weirdness inhabited by ontological agents
lurking well beyond the reductive psychological discourse of projection, hallucination, and
fabricated memory.

In his various accounts of this peculiar period of his life, Wilson himself wavers on this
point. On the one hand, he writes that the “objective and documented evidence” gathered in
Cosmic Trigger is designed to show that “something is going on—something more physical and
palpable than hallucination.” On the one hand, his later writings tend to suggest a more
skeptical resolution. In the early nineties, he wrote that he escaped “Chapel Perilous” back in the
day through a pragmatic decision rather than through a specific lens of truth. “I…decided to
safeguard my sanity by choosing the subjective theory (It’s all in my head) and ruthlessly

584. Wilson, Cosmic Trigger, 11.
repressed any tendency to speculate further about possible objective theories (*There are superhuman forces at work here...*).”

Though we might doubt the simple voluntarism this account implies, Wilson’s psychonautical tactics do imply an instrumental capacity to pragmatically navigate diverging paradigms whose very articulation returns agency to the navigator. In his 1991 account, he admits that he took particular solace at the time in the popular seventies discourse of brain lateralization, from which he concluded that his experience amounted to “my over-developed left brain learning to receive signals from the usually ‘silent’ right brain.”\(^\text{585}^\) As we will see in the following chapter, Philip K. Dick would turn to this same model for very similar purposes. From the perspective of 1991, however, Wilson recognizes the deep insufficiency of this model—an admission that underscores both his acceptance of the error-correction involved in scientific falsification and of the pragmatic value and even necessity of fungible models.

Ontologically, Wilson’s tricksy vacillation allows him to play both ends against the middle while having his cake and eating it too—a characteristic that, depending on one’s temperament, might appear as alternately charming or sloppy. What makes it important, however, is that it represents a novel and, within occult circles, influential example of how naturalistic and reductive explanations about extraordinary experience “re-enter” the meaningful negotiation and production of such experiences. If we understand both the nineteenth-century occult revival and the New Age of the seventies as products of an ongoing negotiation between older esoteric currents and disenchanted modernity, than Wilson represents a striking example of a “second order” disenchantment that uses the very force of ironic imagination as a psychonautical tool. In the jargon of anthropology, he confounds the distinction between etic and

\(^{585}\text{Wilson, Cosmic Trigger, Volume II, 56-57.}\)
emic discourse—that is, the difference between discourse used by people studying a cultural phenomenon and those in the scene itself.

On the one hand, Wilson was a critical and generally skeptical thinker who embraced many reductive socio-cognitive accounts of “religious” phenomenology, whether these derive from linguistics, sociology, neuroscience, or other secular discourses often devoted to smoking out “religion” from one of its last redoubts: personal experience. At the same time, Wilson’s project—which in many ways begins with *Cosmic Trigger*, and carried forward in texts like *Prometheus Rising* (1983) and *Quantum Psychology* (1990)—is not concerned with deflationary explanations or naturalism per se. Inspired by parapsychology, Leary’s 8-circuit model, and the possible entanglement of consciousness with quantum effects, Wilson hewed to an optimistic and ultimately transhumanist account of the brain and nervous system that significantly exceeded the boundaries of conventional neuroscience or our era’s militant “skepticism.”

In this, Wilson can be seen as an outlier of the New Age, whose platitudes he often mocked but whose concerns he overlapped. For one thing, Wilson needs to be considered in light of quantum weirdness. Along with a number of pioneering New Age thinkers in the 1970s, Wilson believed that quantum mechanics offers fundamental insight into the peculiar imbrication of consciousness and physical reality, notions he derived not simply from pop science texts but from ongoing relationships with the wilder Bay Area physicists chronicled in the physicist David Kaiser’s great seventies history *How the Hippies Saved Physics*. (One of the members of this Fundamental Fysiks Group, Saul-Paul Sirag, provides the afterword for *Cosmic Trigger*.)

Unlike most New Age physics promoters, however, Wilson was not parasitizing the authority of science or stumping for the “Eastern Wisdom”-inflected holism argued for in books like Fritjof Capra’s 1975 *The Tao of Physics*. Instead, Wilson turned to physics to argue that
reality was weirder than we generally suppose, that the weirdness involved consciousness, and that it placed paradoxical limitations on our own capacity to know even as it authorized far-out speculations. In this, as in other ways, Wilson’s philosophical effort may be understood as a skeptical, socio-cognitive corrective to the essential New Age gambit that we “create our own reality.” In other words, for all his neurological constructionism and libertarian love of autonomy, Wilson always recognized the capacity of reality to surprise, confuse, and wound well beyond the individual will.

Indeed, *Cosmic Trigger* concludes with an all-too-actual tragedy: the murder of Wilson’s daughter Luna. Wilson’s decision to conclude his text with this story simultaneously indicates his resistance to cheap New Age idealism and his conviction that writing itself is a working through, a rendering and extension of the connections—the “network”—that sustain. The book’s final synchronicity begins with a telegram of condolences to Wilson from Leary: “YOU ARE SURROUNDED BY A NETWORK OF LOVE AND GRATITUDE.” Flipping through Luna’s notebook shortly thereafter, Wilson discovers a poem she wrote called “The Network.”

In Kripal’s terms, Wilson passed from the stage of Realization—in which the paranormal is recognized as a force of inscription—to the stage of Authorization, in which we in turn author that inscription. “If Realization involves the act of reading the paranormal writing us, Authorization involves the act of writing the paranormal writing us.” For Wilson, this authorization ultimately manifests as a radical transhumanist constructionism that necessitates the creative and courageous deployments of “technologies of the self.” For though Wilson’s rather anarchistic protocols of truth, rule, and relation do not resemble the more sober procedures that Foucault associates with Stoic or Christian anthropotechnics—Wilson’s skepticism, in fact, brings him more closely to classic Pyrronism—his procedures were far more than techniques of
pleasure or even intensity. They were also games of truth that played with the very distinction between truth and false, fiction and phenomena. Weaving a spiral dance of “maybe logic” between materialism and mysticism, Wilson helped articulate and model a “double game” of skeptical esotericism as an “as if” anthropotechnics capable of extending thought through the very limit experiences that confront and confound it as radical non-thought. And why play such a double game? In his introduction to the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault speaks for his curiosity in these matters, which doubles for Wilson as well: “There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.”

CHAPTER FIVE. VALIS CALLING:

PHILIP K. DICK’S TRASH TRANSMISSION

Since the death of Philip K. Dick in 1982, the literary and popular appeal of the Californian science fiction writer has grown exponentially. Indeed, it is now fair to say that Dick has posthumously achieved the dream that remained unfulfilled in his life: to step beyond the ghetto of genre fiction into the ranks of the most important American novelists of the postwar period. Dick’s funny, absurd, nightmarish and self-consciously quotidian fictions—sometimes hastily written, and sometimes crushingly bleak—have now spawned a dozen or so films, a vibrant critical discourse, and a global cult following not unmarked with the cryptic mania conjured, in the history of religions anyway, by the term *cult*.

This fascination does not entirely rest with his work, though, since the writer’s complex personality and colorful biography—or psycho-biography—also mark and magnetize his oeuvre in intimate and peculiar ways. It is no accident that the paperback covers of many of his novels, especially those republished in the eighties and nineties, weave in images of Dick’s bearded, avuncular, and bemused visage. Popular accounts of his work routinely trot out his political paranoia, his LSD use and amphetamine abuse, and his scandalous number of increasingly younger wives. But his greatest scandal is arguably a sacred one: the series of extraordinary
visionary experiences he underwent that began in 1974, experiences he often described as “religious” or “mystical” and that, for the observer, lend themselves equally to the languages of revelation, psychosis, and speculative fiction.

Both Dick’s visionary experiences and his written accounts of those experiences were strikingly varied, a complexity that derives in part from the fact that the distinction between those two rather handy categories is, in Dick’s case, rather difficult to maintain. In some accounts, Dick’s language resembles that of a classic mystic, as he describes how, in a dark time of his life, a benign transcendent power “intervened to restore my mind and heal my body and give me a sense of the beauty, the joy, the sanity of the world.”588 This intervening force took many forms, some considerably less benign: an alien satellite; the Gnostic-Jewish wisdom figure Sophia; Russian psychotronic devices; aliens (“ETIs”); and the cosmic matrix he sometimes called VALIS, for Vast Active Living Intelligence System. He also felt that a secondary entity had possessed him, an entity he identified variously with California’s controversial Episcopal Bishop Jim Pike (who died in 1969); the prophet Elijah; a form of plasmatic information called Firebright; and a second-century Christian named Thomas. Dick received what he believed were prophetic transmissions in dreams, witnessed eight nighttime hours of rapid-fire “colored graphics” that resembled Kandinsky and Klee, and, on more than one occasion, saw the lineaments of ancient Rome pop through the ticky-tacky landscape of Orange County in a cinematic act of temporal “superimposition.”

The overriding message of all of this seemed to be that, at the very least, our world—or rather Dick’s early seventies California world—was a colossal illusion. He came to believe, at least some of the time, that he was still living in apostolic times, that the intervening centuries of

history were a manufactured fabulation, and that he and everybody else were trapped in a frozen block of causal determinism and political oppression he called the Black Iron Prison, whose paradigm was Rome but whose contemporary expression was the Nixon administration. Amidst all this phenomenological exotica, Dick also heard voices issue from unplugged radios, became convinced of a Communist plot to control or even kill him, and, while listening to the Beatles song “Strawberry Fields Forever,” saw a miraculous blast of pink light that informed him that his son Christopher was suffering from a potentially fatal inguinal hernia.

Dick’s visionary run of pathos, trauma, radiance, esoterica, and paranoia stands as one of the towering peaks of high weirdness in the countercultural seventies. Dick’s bizarre experiences—which persisted steadily for a few years, and then appeared off and on until he died—also challenge our categories of understanding. Even the question of how to conveniently refer to this series in some short-hand manner is a conundrum, since most such terms—revelations, religious experiences, anomalies, hallucinations, symptoms—already carry their own ontology with them, pre-determining the meaning and etiology of the events in question. Luckily, Dick did us the great service of referring to the experiences as “2/3/74”—a neutral term that, first and foremost, establishes the series as space-time events that fundamentally eluded Dick’s obsessive attempts to categorize or craft into an overarching meaning.

It is precisely for this reason that Dick’s biographer Lawrence Sutin declared indeterminacy to be the essential message of 2/3/74. This deep semantic instability also lent Dick’s experiences a boundless speculative potential, as well as a traumatic irony that sets them apart from more stabilized examples of revelation or visionary experience, in which the intensity of the experience authenticates a relatively fixed message. Dick never knew what hit him, and the restless hermeneutical derive this indeterminacy provoked infused nearly all the writing Dick
produced before his death in 1982. These texts include *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), the VALIS trilogy (*VALIS* (1981), *The Divine Invasion* (1981), *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (1982)), a number of short stories and essays, the posthumously published novel *Radio Free Albemuth*, and—most unusually—the Exegesis, an enormous speculative diary the author kept until his death, and that ultimately comprised over 8000 mostly hand-written pages.\(^{589}\)

The fact that 2/3/74 is so deeply embedded in Dick’s late works means that literary critics have been, with some important exceptions, the only scholars so far to wrestle with the religious and phenomenological problems raised by the VALIS events.\(^{590}\) For Dick’s earliest critics, who were writing in the seventies and eighties and often deeply indebted to historical materialism, Dick’s later “theological” works were considered significantly inferior to his best sixties novels; with the release of *VALIS*, Eric Rabkin worried explicitly that Dick had simply gone insane.\(^{591}\) As Umberto Rossi explains in his essential study of Dick’s fiction, the second wave of Dick criticism—beginning in the early 1990s—was saturated with postmodern concerns, and Dick’s engagement with simulation, androids, and cybernetics were privileged over the humanist,

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\(^{589}\) There have been two published versions of the Exegesis: a selection of undated fragments by Lawrence Sutin—*In Pursuit of Valis: Selections from the Exegesis* (Novato, CA: Underwood-Miller, 1991)—and a more substantial abridgment published in 2012: Philip K. Dick, *The Exegesis of Philip K Dick*, edited by Pamela Jackson and Jonathan Lethem (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012). For clarity’s sake, I will refer to the text that Dick wrote as the Exegesis, while I will refer to the HMH edition as the *Exegesis*.


ethical, and mystical strains of his work. Today, Dick’s work continues to inspire scholars working with broadly posthumanist concerns, though his subtler critics more productively locate him at the crossroads between modernism and postmodernism, humanism and posthumanism. At the same time, and to some degree in concert with the general “religious turn” in critical studies over the last few decades, there has been a rich recuperation and engagement with Dick’s theological and metaphysical texts, including some from posthumanist angles. That said, Dick’s life and fiction have rarely been treated as a chapter in the history of religions, with its tool kit of relevant methodologies.

In addressing his late works, Dick’s literary critics often feel the need to clearly establish that they are addressing his fiction and not the author’s psychology or the biographical reality of his unusual experiences. I want to establish the same boundary from the other side. While I will be alluding to and sometimes analyzing Dick’s fiction, I will so only as it informs the question of how the man Philip K. Dick conceived, constructed, and reflected on the high weirdness that erupted into his life. More centrally, I am concerned with placing the enigma of 2/3/74 within the freaky Zeitgeist we have already established, an early seventies matrix that weaves together California counterculture, the occult revival, weird fiction, media systems, and the “spiritual but not religious” tensions between neuroscience, psychology, and mysticism.

Like Robert Anton Wilson, Terence McKenna, and other psychonauts of the era, including John Lilly and Timothy Leary, Dick navigated the oceans of extraordinary experience by threading his singular way between the Scylla of skeptical naturalism and the Charabdis of

594. These include an anthropological and cognitive understanding of altered states of consciousness; the historical study of gnosia and esotericism as modern cultural currents; the hermeneutic investigation of religious reading; and the history of countercultural spirituality in postwar America.
religious faith. Like these men, he also availed himself to the postwar nonconformist’s intellectual bag of tricks: existentialism, psychoanalysis, experimental psychology, and comparative religion. And finally, he worked out the consequences of his experiences in reflexive and abidingly interesting texts, novels and essays that themselves helped constitute the pulp canons of weirdo culture, even as they seeded that trash stratum with clandestine symbols of the divine.

On the other hand, there are two significant ways that Dick differs from our other avatars of high weirdness. One is that, though he tried LSD and other hallucinogens and was for good reasons considered a “druggy” writer, Dick did not associate much mystical significance to psychedelic drugs, and personally preferred all manner of amphetamines and attendant pharmaceuticals. In other words, while Dick’s life and texts are deeply embedded in the psychological and metaphysical conundrum of drugs, his story forces us to look outside the relatively neat metabolic arcs of an eight-hour acid trip or a fifteen-minute blast of DMT.

One danger in discussing the negotiation of extraordinary experience in the counterculture is that the taboo around psychedelic drugs can swamp other sources of extraordinary experience, including, in Dick’s case, all manner of unusual and occasionally psychotic symptoms. Moreover, Dick’s wariness about the mystical potential of psychedelics points to a deeper if subtler distinction from our other avatars, who were all in their own ways psychedelic Prometheans storming the gates of heaven. With a few important exceptions, Dick’s texts, both fiction and nonfiction, do not extol or romanticize techniques of ecstasy, and certainly not the countercultural rhetoric of chemical nirvana, which he dabbled with in the sixties but had come to vociferously reject by the time of 2/3/74.
As such, the experiences of high weirdness that defined the last eight years of his life were, in a formal sense, not consciously intended but passively undergone. While Dick was certainly looking for a miracle of sorts, the events were not experienced or narrated as intentional acts, almost as if they escaped design by design. In VALIS, this crucial distinction is underscored: “A theophany consists of self-disclosure by the divine. It does not consist of something the percipient does; it consists of something the divine—the God or gods, the high power—does.”

This distinction leads to our second major difference. While all of our avatars brush up against “religion,” Dick both desired and directly grappled with the possibilities of faith and redemption. In terms of extraordinary experience, this meant that aspects of 2/3/74 and their narration lend themselves to more traditionally mystical and theological discourse. So while Dick should be read, with qualifications, as a countercultural intellectual seeker, dabbling in psychedelics and aspects of the occult revival, we also need to take seriously—though by no means exclusively—his regular self-description as a Christian and an Episcopalian. Like Walter Percy or Flannery O’Conner, Dick drew something both formative and fundamental from Christianity—from Acts, from Paul, from metanoia and the Holy Spirit.

This doesn’t mean that Dick wasn’t also a “syncretistic thinker,” as Umberto Rossi dubs him, someone who naturally fell into a mode of religious comparativism that actively engaged Taoism, Vedanta, hermeticism, Kabbalah, idealist philosophy, Plato and the pre-Socratics, Greek polytheism, alchemy, Jung, the I Ching, and a number of proto-New Age texts of the seventies. Moreover, Dick’s Christianity cannot be disentangled from his Gnosticism. Though some contemporary scholars of early Christianity argue that the descriptor Gnosticism is too

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596. McKenna’s apocalypticism, of course, is deeply dependent on Christian eschatology; however, unlike Dick, neither Jesus Christ nor questions of sin, Satan, or salvation play a role in McKenna’s revelations.
vague and polemical to be of use in the study of religion, Dick took this difference very seriously, and wrestles with both “Christian” and “Gnostic” identities throughout the Exegesis. So while he remains very much an esoteric thinker in both style and substance, his esotericism is more thoroughly metaphysical and theological. Which in some ways just makes it all even weirder.

**West Marin Blues**

In a late essay on the late Dick, the critic Darko Suvin—the Marxist doyen of science fiction studies—addressed what he considered the strengths and weaknesses of Dick’s post-2/3/74 fiction. While finding much to disappoint in Dick’s apparent religious turn, Suvin praised what he saw as Dick’s unwavering argument with the world, a struggle that refused to countenance the suffering of “Joe Everyman” or to cease the search for this-worldly salvation amidst his ontological questions. In this, Suvin saw Dick as a “quintessential countercultural figure” of the California of the fifties and sixties, one who declared “NO in thunder and if need be galactic godheads.”

Writing in 1988, the critic Carl Freedman also continued to see Dick as a writer of the sixties, arguing that the defining characteristics of Dick’s worlds—commodities and conspiracies—were intrinsic to the socio-cultural period, which he stretches to the downbeat early seventies of Watergate. Both critics therefore locate 2/3/74 and the texts that follow within a diminished phase of Dick’s career, as a kind of hazy mystical supplement to Dick’s period of primary political vibrancy. As such, Dick’s career could be said to function as an allegory or synecdoche for the fate of the freaks in the seventies, when the counterculture lost its

radical way into something like “religion.” After all, Dick was hardly immune to the undertow of the times, and in the seventies was forced, like so many, to both continue his “mental fight” with reality and to shift away from identification with the counterculture. And in one crucial aspect of his life, a domain that must be addressed in any discussion of 2/3/74, this stereotypical arc proves true. And that domain is drugs.

In this section, I want to present a highly condensed psycho-biographical account of Dick’s life in the sixties, concentrating on those aspects of his life that most directly set up the phantasmagoria of 2/3/74: drugs, hallucinations, and religion. In 1960, in his early thirties, Dick was living in Point Reyes in west Marin County, a bucolic rural area where he had moved with his first wife Kleo once they decided to leave Berkeley after years of poverty, progressive cultural life, and occasional visits from the FBI. Dick then met and married Anne Rubenstein, and moved in with her family. By this point, Dick was an inveterate and knowledgeable pillhead who took the amphetamine Semoxydrine twice a day, along with the antiarrhythmic drug quinidine and a raft of prescription meds for any number of ailments. “Adults are sick all the time,” he told Anne.600 When they met, Dick still identified as a “Berkeley beatnik,” combining voracious intellectual interests with the sartorial style and attitude of a member of the “working proletariat.”601 He wasn’t exactly a hipster—he claimed to hate the Alan Watts lectures broadcast on KPFA—but he was a liberal-left Berkeleyite. In terms of religion, Dick, who was raised largely outside of a faith structure, still considered himself a freethinker and atheist.

That said, Dick had been writing and thinking about religious and mythic material almost from his start as a writer. One of his earliest manuscripts that survives is a partially completed novel called The Earthshaker, which his biographer Gregg Rickman dates to 1948 or 49. The

novel features two characters named John and Paul searching through a ruined world for the “JWH serpent”; according to the outline, in one chapter the protagonists pursue their quest “through Books. Faust. the gnosis. Cabala.” This somewhat precocious interest in esoterica may well be linked to some of the gay writers and poets who inhabited a rooming house where the teenage Dick lived for a few months in 1947 and 48. These writers included Robert Duncan, Philip Lamantia, and Jack Spicer, all future stars of the San Francisco Renaissance poetry scene. All of them were fascinated with the imbrication of modernist literature with mystical and surrealist practice. Duncan, who was raised by Bay Area Theosophists, used a Japanese-English dictionary as an oracle, while Spicer was already cultivating his practice of “out-of-space spectral dictation,” an alien poetics that conceived of the writer as a kind of Orphic radio set. The rooming house featured experiments with automatic writing and exquisite corpse narratives, along with some bohemian drug use.

Rickman believes that Spicer and Duncan profoundly influenced Dick in both his mystical and literary leanings, and speculates that he may have imbibed the Gnostic current in particular from Lamantia, who was delving into alchemy and hermeticism at the time. But Dick contributed to the scene as well. One time he returned home from the record store where he worked with a Wilcox-Gay Recordio—the first home recording machine. Poetic hijinks ensued, while the device helped hard-wire the conceptual circuit between recording technology and voices from the Outside, a motif shared by both Dick and Spicer.

Though Point Reyes was the sticks compared to Berkeley, there was an apocalyptic UFO cult there, which appears in Dick’s West Marin “mainstream” novel *Confessions of a Crap*.

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*Artist*, written in 1959 but not published until 1975. Dick shared a great deal with Anne intellectually; they talked Schopenhauer and game theory, existential psychology and Proust. Anne described “synchronistically” reading the *Tao Te Ching* along with a book on cybernetics that compared Taoism to the influential science of communication and control. And while Phil had been on the Jung tip since he was a young man, the couple followed up the Swiss wizard’s comparativist threads to bohemian seeker classics like *The Book of the Golden Flower*, Evans-Wentz’s *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and most likely his book on UFOs. But the most important text they discovered through Jung was the *I Ching*.

The Chinese oracle proved enormously important to Dick, providing him the prototype and real-life equivalent of the oracular books scattered throughout his fictions. Already a fixture among bohemian poets and the avant-garde by 1960, the *I Ching* uses chance operations (tossing coins or drawing stalks of yarrow) and a binary code to generate abstract figures linked to ancient poetic fragments and layers of dense commentary. Too often considered to be a “Taoist” text, which is how Emmanuel Carrère describes it in his otherwise inspiring chapter on the oracle in his Dick biography, the *I Ching* nonetheless presents itself as a book of wisdom as well as divinatory advice.

Dick explored the book with a Black friend from Berkeley named Maury Guy, who changed his name to Iskander once he got into a new religious movement called Subud. Guy reports that Dick was more interested in the book intellectually than spiritually. Nonetheless, Dick started to use it regularly, even dreaming one night of an old Chinese man that he later interpreted as a representative of the book. Anne wrote that “he thought the *I Ching* was

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alive,…and that the I Ching had sent the dream to him.” Here we find an earlier indication of a link that would become very important in 2/3/74: the link between dreams and books, and especially those lively dreams and books that shape the world through their recombinant power to provide enigmatic messages. In his bio, Rickman cannily if not entirely accurately called I Ching “the literary equivalent of voices in the head.”

Dick began to use the I Ching compulsively, like a machine. He also famously used it to navigate plot points in one of the most important books he wrote while living with Anne, The Man in the High Castle (1962), an alternative history novel that wonderfully combined science fiction elements (“What if the Axis powers won World War II?”) with Dick’s more literary concerns. In addition to cementing Dick’s technique of multifocal narrative, the novel’s mixture of Japanese aesthetic concepts, the I Ching, Wagner, and Jung also reflected the increasing comparativist reach of Dick’s thinking. The novel was a great success for the author. With a wife and family, a sports car and a growing number of readers, Dick found himself making the closest pass to a conventional mainstream life he would ever manage.

But things were not altogether stable. On Good Friday, in 1961, Phil was outside working in the garden when he suddenly came running in, telling Anne in terrified tones that he had seen a great streak of black sweeping across the sky. “For a moment there was utter nothingness dividing the sky in half.” The couple also began to fight dramatically; Phil would occasionally hit Anne, and more than a few plates were thrown. Anne was also shocked at Dick’s use of oriental mystics, it is not because of any nebulous views on spiritual existence; we started off solely on the fundamental concepts of the machine” (345).

Anne Dick, 66.

Rickman, High Castle, 377.

According to a 1974 interview, Dick claims to have thrown the coins himself at every point in the novel where his characters employ the oracle, and to have altered the plot accordingly—an important instance of esoteric practice informing his fiction. “Interview with Philip K. Dick,” Vertex, 1, no. 6 (1974); http://www.philipkdickfans.com/literary-criticism/frank-views-archive/vertex-interview-with-philip-k-dick/ (Accessed July 2015).
pills—Serpasil for heart murmur, Semosydrine for agoraphobia, Stelazine for anxiety, Preludin and other amphetamines to lift mood and to fuel an incredible run of mostly pretty incredible books.

The ferocity of Dick’s consumption of amphetamine before moving in with Anne is unclear. He had first been given aphedrine for asthma as a child, and had been getting Semoxydine scripts for mood regulation while living in Berkeley. By the early sixties, his consumption of amphetamines and other pharmaceutical pills was prodigious, a pattern that would last until he crashed and burned in the early seventies. It is important to emphasize the pragmatism of Dick’s use of speed. As the literature on drugs makes clear, speed is in many ways a proletarian drug of production, of intensifying and maximizing time, and it does so with measurable improvement to certain cognitive tasks, while also producing reliably devastating crashes.

Given the pittance paid for science fiction, speed helped Dick write nearly a dozen novels in the years 1963 and 1964. But more than that, speed shaped and supported the rapid-fire, immersive, and deeply personal way that Dick wrote his books. Though he researched and contemplated his novels in advance, the manuscripts themselves emerged with visionary intensity, their multiple threads, plot turns, and narrative foci fashioned on the fly. Indeed, before 1970, Dick didn’t even do multiple drafts. As Jonathan Lethem puts it, “Dick was a writer who in his process was impulsive, he was explosive, he was prolific and he was not utterly in control.” This lack of control explains the unevenness and awkward transitions found in much

608. Anne Dick, 67.
of his writing, but it also helps explain the uncanny and charismatic immediacy of his fictions and their deep imbrication with Dick’s emotional and psychic life. “I am merely an intermediary between my unconscious and my typewriter,” Dick once claimed, technologizing the mysterious dynamic of spontaneous invention known by most writers. Speed—both the substance, and the headlong flight through narrative time—removed resistance from this circuit, at once liberating and liquifying writing. As Marcus Boon notes in his study of literature and drugs, amphetamine-fueled writing rarely has spiritual content, but “Dick makes this absence the basis of his own intense desire for transcendence.”

Sometimes, though, transcendence is the last thing you need, even when ordinary life is going poorly. By the fall of 1963, Dick’s marriage had devolved along with the emotional stability of both parties; Dick even managed to have the psychiatrist he shared with his wife briefly commit Anne to a mental hospital. Sometime during the fall, perhaps following the assassination of JFK, Dick was walking to the isolated shack he rented as a writing office. He looked up at the sky and saw a face, a “vast visage of perfect evil” that had empty slots for eyes. “It was metal and cruel and, worst of all, it was God.” The face haunted him for days, possibly weeks. He told his shrink, and he told the Episcopal priest at St. Columba’s Church in nearby Inverness, who identified the figure as Satan and gave Dick holy unction.

Though the exact relationship between the vision and Dick’s turn to Christianity is murky—it some accounts it was the cause, in others he explained it as Anne’s last-ditch attempt to save the marriage—the family began attending St. Columbo’s by the end of the year, and were baptized in early 1964. Though Dick wouldn’t attend services for long, he more or less self-

identified as a Christian and Episcopalian for the rest of his life. In his catechism class, Dick became particularly fascinated with the Eucharist, which in the high church tradition represented by St. Columba’s remains haunted by the mysterious logic of transubstantiation found in the Catholic rite. According to Sutin, Dick’s fascination with the almost alchemical transformation of God into matter also led him to Jung’s “Transformation Symbols in the Mass,” where Dick may have encountered the explicitly Gnostic notions of the fallen and ignorant world-crafter for the first time.  

In a 1969 letter, Dick describes his 1963 vision as an “actual mystical experience” in which “I saw the face of evil.” In a foreword written a decade later, he back-peddles in a slight way that, paradoxically, speaks to the flickering substance of such spectral encounters: “I didn’t really see it, but the face was there.” In that afterword, written when he was already deep into the Exegesis, Dick himself was perfectly willing to reduce his mystical experience to the psychological causes of extended isolation and “sensory deprivation.” Though Dick had linked the vision to “certain chemicals” in the sixties, by 1979 Dick does not mention amphetamines, which in large quantities are perfectly capable of producing dark and paranoid hallucinations and other symptoms of psychosis.  

Switching to a more psychoanalytic register in the same afterword, Dick explains that, subsequent to his hallucinatory vision, he came across a war photograph in Life magazine that reminded him of the terrifying World War I gas-mask that his father—who would abandon the family when Dick was four—would sometimes don when Dick was a child. Yet even when Dick was willing to reduce the visionary mask to a screen memory of his own “atavistic” encounter with the absent and terrifying father, Dick allowed the

615. Sutin, 128.
archetypal hijacking of such ciphers by “transcendent and vast” forces. Regardless of origins and ontology, the imaginal encounter still had teeth. “Anyhow the visage could not be denied.”

Dick eventually translated this dark vision into the titular character of 1965’s nightmarish novel *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, whose “three stigmata” include artificial eyes, a metallic hand, and steel teeth that, for Marcus Boon anyway, suggest the motor-mouth jaws of speed freaks. The novel, written when Dick felt himself a born-again new man, is nonetheless full of dark and debased parodies of Christian communion, as the evil Eldritch wrests demiurgic control over the subjective realities of the poor folks who consume his new-fangled drug, Chew-Z. Instead of the *I Ching*, Dick fleshed out the novel’s metaphysics with another bohemian bestseller, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, along with his studies of the Eucharist and interest in popular reports about LSD. Dick was a huge H.P. Lovecraft fan, and the classic Lovecraftian adjective “eldritch” is unquestionably an allusion to the *Weird Tales* master, whom Dick admired in part for creating the sense that his outlandish stories were somehow true. Indeed, despite its mutant offworld trappings, *Three Stigmata* is as much an example of supernatural horror as of science fiction, and it leaves some readers with that special Lovecraftian suspicion that the very same evil that prevents Chew-Z users from ever coming off the drug also leaks into the readers of the novel.

In any case, *The Three Stigmata* was weird, and recognized as such by many budding freaks and heads, with their growing literary taste for pocket worlds and pulp metaphysics. Such readers were ready for novels that not only included drugs as major devices but formally and mischievously played with the malleability of reality and perception. With novels like *Now Wait for Last Year* and *Three Stigmata*, which one review dubbed a “Satanic bible,” Dick gained a reputation not only as a druggy author, but as the author of books that functioned as drugs.

As Carrère notes, “The adjective *Phildickean*—a term used to describe strange situations or a twisted yet accurate perspective on the world—was becoming a countercultural shibboleth, at least in some circles, as his reputation spread beyond the small world of science fiction devotees.”618 Indeed, one of the secret histories of the whose sixties era was the migration of bohemian DIY enthusiasts from the tiny world of S-F fanzines into rock fandom and other emerging countercultures of consciousness. Paul Williams, the most important of those sixties S-F geeks to shape rock sensibility (and later the executor of Dick’s estate), passed on a copy of *Three Stigmata* to Timothy Leary, who in turn gave it to John Lennon, who briefly considered turning it into a film. And in 1967, in the Introduction to his seminal *Dangerous Visions* anthology, Harlan Ellison notoriously claimed that Dick had written his contribution, as well as books like *Palmer Eldritch*, on LSD. At the time at least, this was a myth that Dick, having found a new identity in a counterculture that was not entirely his own, was happy to nurture himself.

**Fabulous Freak**

In 1964, Dick left Anne and Marin County and returned to Berkeley, where, as Emmanuel Carrère puts it, he “discovered to his absolute delight that he was completely in synch with the Zeitgeist.”619 Though Dick’s growing paranoia and agoraphobia kept him home, he cultivated a crew of long-haired, dope-smoking science fiction writers as pals and conversational sparring partners. It was also the year that LSD began seeping into Bay Area bohemia, well before Ken Kesey began throwing his famous Acid Tests. Dick’s pal and hipster mentor Ray

Nelson got his hands on some Sandoz capsules and Dick ate his first psychedelic. Rarely for the era, Dick experienced a terror trip that, significantly, found Dick transported to ancient Rome. Lanced with a spear, quavering before an angry God, Dick was reduced to barking prayers in Latin, a language he had not studied since the forties but that saturated the classic Western church music he loved. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Dick never cared much for LSD, though he took it a few more times and—common accounts to the contrary—sometimes enjoyed himself.

Dick hated to be alone, and he relentlessly and gushily pursued women. Through Maren Hackett, an old Marin County friend who attended St. Columba’s, Dick met Nancy Hackett, her daughter, a young dark-haired girl that he successfully wooed and who soon became his fourth wife. In 1965, they moved back across the Bay to San Rafael. Maren was also the lover of a man who exercised a decisive spiritual influence on Dick: James Pike, the hard-drinking and highly progressive Episcopal Bishop of northern California whose radical views on the trinity and the virgin Mary repeatedly sparked formal heresy procedures from the Church.

Pike and Dick, both motor-mouthed book-mad conversationalists, hit it off, and their wide-ranging discussions—which surely touched on the Dead Sea Scrolls, and, most likely, John Allegro’s theories of the mushroom trance at the basis of Christianity—encouraged the heterodox bent in Dick’s theological thought. Following the suicide of his son in 1966, Pike began attending Spiritualist seances, occasionally with a skeptical Dick and Nancy in tow; later, he formally renounced his office and formed the ambiguously named Foundation for Religious Transition. In 1969, Pike died rather foolishly in the wadis near the Dead Sea hunting for the

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619. Carrère, 120.
620. In a 1967 letter, he describes splitting a 150 microgram tab with Nancy. “I saw all manner of joyous coloration, especially pinks and reds, very luminous and exciting, and I had several great insights about myself…Frankly, I’d like to get hold of some more; it was an altogether pleasant trip…” Dick, Selected Letters 1938-1971, 192.
(possibly fungal) origins of Christianity. Joan Didion compared him to the Great Gatsby, a man lost in the loosening afforded by the possibilities of endless Californian reinvention.

Pike would later become the model for Timothy Archer in Dick’s last published book, which allowed Dick to portray the human cost of the sort of madcap religious speculations favored by both the Bishop and himself. Dick also cites his conversations with Pike as an important influence on the theological system that Dick and his friend William Sarill devised—“based on the arbitrary postulate that God exists”—for his harrowing 1970 novel, *A Maze of Death*, a crucial unconscious staging ground for 2/3/74. The bulk of the story takes place on the planet Delmak-O, where, following the framework of Agatha Christie’s *And Then There Were None*, a crew of colonists get mysteriously picked off one by one. As the characters sink into their own subjective world-views, about the only thing the fractious crew can agree on is a cybernetic theology featuring four deities: the Mentufacturer (the demiurge), the Form-Destroyer (death, entropy), the Walker-on-Earth (an Elijah-like prophet), and the Intercessor (the Redeemer). The ontological coherence of their shared world begins to break down, and they begin to suspect they are actually amnesiac inmates of an insane asylum on earth. But the colonists still can't explain why each one of them is tattooed with the phrase “Persus 9.” To find out they ask the tench, an oracular creature that inhabits the planet, but instead of giving them his usual *I Ching*-like answers, the beast explodes in a mass of gelatin and computer circuitry, and Delmak-O itself is annihilated.

We then learn that Persus 9 is the name of a disabled spaceship circling a dead star, and it is within this bleak dihetic world where Dick scatters seeds for 2/3/74. To stave off despair, the captain-less crew had taken to programming their T.E.N.C.H. 889B computer to generate virtual

worlds they would then enter through “polyencephalic fusion.” The parameters for Delmak-O included the same arbitrary postulate that Dick claims he and Sarill used to create the theology in the first place: that God exists. As the crew prepare to enter another simulation, one character, Seth Morley, can’t take it anymore. He wanders off alone, and prepares to kill himself and the whole crew by venting all the oxygen. But his hand freezes on the release lock. “What he intended to do had made him frozen, as if time had stopped.” The causality here is confused—was it the act itself that prevented the act? But even that’s not as confusing as the appearance in the spaceship corridor of a hieratic figure who declares himself to be the Intercessor. “But we invented you!,” cries Morley. “We and T.E.N.C.H. 889B.” The Intercessor does not explain himself, and simply leads Morley “into the stars,” while the rest of the crew submit themselves to the death drive of pure repetition, finding themselves once again on Delmak-O.

Here an arbitrary fabulation, programmed to run on the inside of a fictional world, achieves an invasive exteriority. The ontological Mobius strip that results recalls Ian Watson’s comment that “one rule of Dick’s false realities is the paradox that once in, there’s no way out, yet for this very reason transcendence of a sort can be achieved.”622 But what sort of transcendence is this? Dick’s and Morley’s constructed metafictional redeemer hardly represents a traditional mode of salvation, but nor is it simple human wish fulfillment. Within the novel, the Intercessor is not solely a human (or humanist) construction: this almost literal deus ex machina is the hybrid production of the human imagination and the T.E.N.C.H. 889B.

As Bruno Latour suggested in his expanded notion of the word construction, “every use of the word…opens up an enigma as to the author of the construction: when someone acts,

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others get moving, pass into action.” Creation is always mediated and collaborative, but this reality in turn obscures seemingly easy questions about origins and authorship, even to the point of realizing an uncanny encounter, with Balzac being carried away by his characters, or a marionette controlling the hand that operates it. For Dick, this enigma of the tench is, appropriately, doubled. Not only does the tench operate both inside and outside the fabricated world, as both beast and device, but it figures two different but deeply related writing machines. One is the computer as a sort of cybernetic inscription machine capable of simulating existence (significantly, when the tench explodes, it first splits into two and four pieces, as if following a binary sequence). The other machine is what Dick himself later called in the Exegesis his own “wordsmith unconscious,” a site not only of archaic Jungian archetypes but the recombinant smithery of language continuously forging new scraps (and scripts) beneath the surface of consciousness.

In terms of his productive output, Dick kept up nearly the same pace in the late sixties as he had earlier in the decade. But his focus shifted. As Patricia Warrick points out, during the second half of the sixties, Dick turns from “political fiction exploring capitalist-fascist-bureaucratic structures to epistemological and ontological questions”—in other words, from outer to inner space. Along with their somewhat diminished quality, these novels also arguably show increasing signs of exhaustion, despair, and what Dick himself recognized as psychological disfunction. Indeed, Dick sometimes named the Jung-soaked The Galactic Pot-Healer (1969) his one unquestionably psychotic work. It is hard not to agree with Lawrence Sutin, who wrote that in these years, “Phil longed for a revelation.”

623. Latour, 158.
625. Sutin, 155.
had killed herself in 1967, and a year later, after moving into the predominantly Black neighborhood of Santa Venetia, Dick was audited by the IRS. This was stressful not only due to his ongoing money woes and failure to pay back taxes, but to his fears that the audit was motivated by his decision to sign a “Writers and Editors War Tax Protest” petition sponsored earlier that year by the leftist magazine *Ramparts*.

Dick’s intensified consumption of amphetamines, tranquilizers, and other drugs was also a constant source of tension with Nancy. Though he mostly sourced his pills through a rotating cast of doctors and pharmacies, he sometimes bought street speed, and in 1969, he wound up in the hospital with acute pancreatitis and kidney failure after scoring a bad batch. Whatever else drugs did for him—a matter we will touch on in the next section—their constant modulations hardly stabilized the cognitive and affective roller-coaster he rode. But psychoactive chemicals had become so integral to Dick’s life and psyche that he had became a kind of pharmaceutical cyborg.

Dick had also come to place his own extreme psychological symptoms on a continuum with drug experiences, especially psychedelics. In the summer of 1967, Dick underwent a dramatic “psychotic episode” that lasted eight hours, an event he compared in a subsequent letter to the “severe distortions in perception” associated with LSD. As in the classic Romantic drug writing of De Quincey and Baudelaire, Dick’s brief break was, according to a letter written at the time, both terrifying and sublime. He had “bees in head,” saw his new baby daughter transform into a disgusting pulpy vegetable, and became convinced that an “alien outside force was controlling my mind and directing me to commit suicide.” And yet there was joy and energy too, as he happily performed household tasks and ate a dish of ice cream that “became a transcendental experience.”
Drawing from Jung and the popular theories of John Weir Perry mentioned in an earlier section, Dick tried to frame his rather nasty experience as a “redemptive psychosis” that overwhelmed his stultified and neurotic ego with the enlivening forces of the unconscious. As such, he concludes that his episode was very much like LSD, with the “same possibilities for insight and growth.” Here LSD, which was first studied as a psychotomimetic, provides in turn a new narrative for psychosis itself, one that Dick in turn amplifies at the end of his letter through the bardo lore of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Such links were *au current* of course, and even a little dated by 1969. But what’s important here is how Dick intertwines visionary experience and psychosis through a comparative act of religious reading rooted in the episodic metabolism of a trip. In other words, both psychoactive substances and psychotic symptoms similarly warped Dick’s experiences into phenomenological material out of which he read and wrote his way towards both healing and hell.

**Flow My Tears**

In May 1970, Dick’s hopes for an overwhelming and redemptive experience were revitalized by a powerful mescaline trip in which he felt “an overpowering love of other people.” This love trip, whose transformative force he mentions in numerous letters, was well-timed. Dick’s marriage to Nancy was falling apart, and she was having an affair with a nearby neighbor, a Black fellow named Honor Jackson. After Nancy left Dick in September, taking their daughter Isa with her, Dick wrote a rare letter to his ex-wife Anne. He does not mention the mescaline trip here (Anne was not a drug user), but does write as if his blast of

627. Ibid, 295.
beatific empathy had become a more sustained state. “It is all new to me, this divine love;” he writes in the present tense. “It fills me up and I hate no one, even Mr. Jackson, Nancy’s paramour.” In addition, Dick claims that his behavior has changed. “I like to hug people and be hugged them all the time, now…My shell is broken…For the first time I’m really alive.”

Crucially, Dick ties this conversion topos to the breakthrough in his fiction represented by Flow My Tears the Policeman Said, a novel that was started and largely completed in 1970. The book is a darkly prescient fable on false memories and the paranoid horrors of a total surveillance state, but for Dick and many readers, the familiar Phildickean bummer world is enlivened with an extended meditation on different kinds of love, particularly St. Paul’s notion of caritas. Dick tells Anne that his book sales had fallen off over the previous few years, a situation he attributed to the obsessive concern in his sixties novels with the unstable nature of reality. His editor, he says, wanted him he had to take a more positive stance; “I had to say what is real.”

Hence, Flow My Tears. Though readers of this sometimes nightmarish book should be forgiven for not seeing the “complete reversal” Dick claimed, Dick describes what he had written as a great “hymn of affirmation.” What is real, and what therefore grounds the fragile ontology of the universe, is love.

Following Nancy’s departure, Dick’s need for love and companionship led him to literally open the doors of his house to local young druggies riding the backwash of the counterculture. While maintaining his agoraphobic ways—the kids called him the Hermit—Dick played den mother to a rotating cast of dropouts, runaways, drifters, partiers, dealers, and addicts. Though now in his forties, Dick identified with many of these kids. “He felt he was on the right

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628. Ibid, 297.
629. Ibid, 281.
side of the barricades, a freak among other freaks, and it didn’t take that long for them to adopt this strange roly-poly guy, who was both sad and funny at the same time.”

When he had money, Dick was generous with it, and there were always drugs around—most notably, the jars of white crosses and other ups that he kept in the fridge next to his protein-fortified milkshakes. Continuously smitten, Dick hit on many of the young women, some of whom were from the same high school then attended by his former step-daughters with Anne. But Dick’s invariably painful and unrealistic love affairs were secondary to his desire to create and enjoy what Dick himself called a “family.” It was his own informal crash-pad version of the many underground tribes that emerged in the era, an emergence that can be tracked in part to the playful intimacy and loopy conversations facilitated through the collective effervescence of drugs. Needless to say, such families were frequently dysfunctional—with the terrifying example of Manson’s devilish “family” now hovering in the smoggy California ether. Paul Williams, visiting the house, called it a “weird scene” in which Dick played a “kind of guru role.” But as Sutin persuasively argues, Dick was far too needy and broken himself to incarnate the charismatic authoritarian.

Dick hardly wrote anything from late 1970 through 1972, though he was absorbing material he would deploy with great humor and feeling in *A Scanner Darkly* (1977). Begun in 1973, that book’s portrait of low-rent California drug culture reflects both the cracked bonhomie and the mental, emotional and physical degradation of Dick’s Santa Venetia years. But though he wasn’t producing, Dick did keep taking drugs; when he was briefly hospitalized at the Stanford University psych ward in May of 1971, the doctor cataloged his intake at a thousand Benzedrine tablets a week, along with forty mgs of the tranquilizer Stelazine a day.

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630. Carrère, 175.
631. Sutin, 177.
Unsurprisingly, Dick’s bouts of paranoia, tolerated and sometimes intensified by his household, had grown ferocious, and he increasingly expected a hit on his house. In November, we might say that Dick got his wish when he came home to discover doors broken, windows smashed, and his stereo and many possessions gone. Most ominous was the damage to the massive fire-proof file cabinet that contained Dick’s manuscripts, business documents, pulp SF magazines, and rare LPs, all of which were now missing. Though the details are typically murky, Dick always claimed that explosives had been used to open the cabinet. The burglary was officially investigated but never solved, which for Dick was a sort of gift in itself, since it left him with a traumatic enigma that simultaneously confirmed his paranoia and inspired a motherload of complicated and dramatic possibilities, creating a sort of speculative run-through for 2/3/74. Dick blamed the Black Panthers, military intelligence, the local cops, the FBI, drug-crazed rip-off artists, and right-wing groups; very occasionally he even speculated that he himself had been the perpetrator (a theme also suggested in *A Scanner Darkly*, where the undercover narc must surveil himself). In any case, the burglary left Dick a wreck. When he received an invitation to attend the Vancouver SF Con in February of 1972 as guest of honor, the agoraphobe, for once, accepted the invitation. Leaving his house to sink into foreclosure, Dick flew up to British Columbia with a battered suitcase, an old trenchcoat, and a Bible.

In Vancouver, Dick delivered a speech that addressed one of the key dialectics in his work, “The Android and the Human.” Dick began the talk by blurring the line between the two categories into a sort of posthumanist animism. As technologies and electronic systems grow more animated, he argued, they restore the anthropologically “primitive” sense that our environment is alive. At the same time, humans come to recognize how much we are and have been directed by “built-in tropisms,” a condition that for Dick raises the paranoid specter of
behavioral control. As is clear from his fiction, Dick frees his two categories from essentialism, such that people and machines are now both capable of behaving as either “androids” or “humans.” The android is both psychologically and socially determined: it is obedient from within and predictable from without. In an eerie presentiment of our current era of consumer surveillance and behavioral economics, Dick stresses predictability over direct control; “It is precisely when a given person’s response to any given situation can be predicted with scientific accuracy that the gates are open for the wholesale production of the android life form.”

As such, the contrasting survival of the “true, human individual” requires the unpredictability and even lawlessness of the the rebel, the joker, the thief. Dick’s famous rallying cry here, dismissed by a number of commentators as naive, is “Cheat, lie, evade, fake it, be elsewhere, forge documents, build improved electronic gadgets in your garage that'll outwit the gadgets used by the authorities.” With this countercultural rallying cry, Dick seems to be attempting to both integrate and sentimentally affirm the outlaw values of his now lost family of miscreants.

The mention of technologies in this call to arms is not incidental, given the central role that technological and media control plays in the sorts of authoritarian societies Dick observed in the Soviet bloc and had fabulated in Flow My Tears. However, despite their imbrication with the apparatus of power, technologies could never be totally controlled in Dick’s decidedly non-Luddite view. He praised the example of “phone freaks” like Captain Crunch, aka John Draper, who discovered that the 2600 Hz tone of a plastic toy whistle prize found in Cap’n Crunch cereal could be used to control AT&T trunk lines and therefore place free calls. Draper went on to build

632. Dick, Shifting, 191.
blue boxes, tone controllers that streamlined the unauthorized use and exploration of the phone system and inspired a whole miscreant subculture of phone phreaks (their preferred spelling) that included the young Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak. In other words, however naive Dick’s praise of outlaw youth culture might seem then and now, he had zeroed in on the old school ethos of the hacker, drawing from it not only a monkey-wrenching ethos but an almost Discordian ontology, one in which reality “is not so much something that you perceive, but something you make.”

In this way, Dick held out hope that the very disaffection of the post-hippie youth culture staged a politics of refusal and subversion, an early form of what we might call “culture jamming.” At the same, Dick also applied the same sort of “phreak” logic to the metaphysical and psychological plane. Here the System to be hacked was, significantly, the totalizing systems of the paranoid, whose refusal of randomness and unpredictability Dick linked the intellectual process of systematizing as such. “Maybe all systems—that is, any theoretical, verbal, symbolic, semantic, etc., formulation that attempts to act as an all-encompassing, all-explaining hypothesis of what the universe is about—are manifestations of paranoia.” As an “antidote” to such systematizing, Dick called for an injection of sudden surprises into life, a cultivation, as it were, of organic noise on the digital line. “We should be content with the mysterious, the meaningless, the contradictory, the hostile, and most of all the unexplainably warm and giving.”

Here Dick may be read as talking to himself, or at least the paranoid part of himself that was addicted to the explanatory system-building that dominated his ceaseless analysis of the break-in as it would later dominate the relentless and often conspiratorial hunts for meaning in the Exegesis. For Dick, the negative capability that allows us to stay content with the mysterious and meaningless was easier said then done. Certainly Dick wasn’t very content in Vancouver,

634. Dick, Shifting, 205.
635. Dick, Shifting, 208.
where his desperately needy infatuations and crazy mood swings put tremendous pressures on the people who put him up following the delivery of his speech. Psychosis, it seemed to some, was in the air. One unhappy host played Phil a copy of Marshall McLuhan’s LP *The Medium is the Message*, an audio collage inspired by the resonating global echo chamber that McLuhan dubbed “acoustic space.” When the recording began, Dick clapped his hands over his ears and screamed, “Turn it off! Turn it off! It sounds like the inside of my head when I go mad and have to go the hospital.”636 After leaving one host, Dick drifted through the city, increasingly isolated, and spent two weeks that neither his memory nor anyone else can account for, though he later told his fifth wife Tessa that he may spent some of it driving around limousines with men in black. Finally finding himself alone in a newly-rented apartment, Dick decided to kill himself. He swallowed 700 mg of potassium bromide before he reconsidered and called the suicide hotline whose number he had scrawled on a piece of cardboard.

At the end of his rope, and with few options, Dick entered a drug treatment center called X-Kalay, which mostly accepted heroin addicts. But though Dick was in another country, he still could not escape weird California, because X-Kalay was directly inspired by Synanon, the notorious tough-love drug rehab institution and alternative community founded in Santa Monica in the late fifties. By the early seventies, Synanon, perhaps stealing a page from the earlier transformation of Dianetics into the Church of Scientology, had mutated into the Church of Synanon, and had also become what many observers at the time considered an authoritarian cult.

As at Synanon, residents of X-Kalay played “the Game,” a no-holds-barred practice of “attack therapy” between and among residents and staff. Outside these sessions, residents were disciplined to adopt a bland and neutral demeanor that, from Dick’s perspective, disguised passive-aggressive feelings and led to paranoia. In a letter written that April, Dick perceptively

636. Anne Dick, 159.
noted that the ideology of such encounter groups was prefaced on the “metaphysical” assumption that there is “a ‘real’, hidden, authentic personality” that appears once all the false layers are violently unmasked. In contrast, Dick argued that a person’s authentic nature is constructed by, and only appears within, the shifting frameworks of interpersonal relationships. As such, the authentic personality that appears in the encounter session “is not revealed during the game; it is created during the game: the group manufactures it as they teach the person new, ‘productive’ habits and attitudes.” That was the problem that Dick saw with the method: the framework of relationships at X-Kalay were so hostile and impoverished that the newly adjusted personality was reduced to a “conditioned-reflex machine”—in other words, a paradoxically deprogrammed android. 637

X-Kalay still proved transformative for Dick. It not only furnished the author with material later used to great effect in *A Scanner Darkly*, but it helped him break his amphetamine habit. More significantly for his worldview, the experience also turned Dick against the romantic rhetoric of countercultural intoxication, “the rock, drug, hippy, kid, California culture I’ve got to cut loose from and let die and leave me.” 638 That said, Dick by no means went straight edge after leaving X-Kalay. His hypochondria did not abate, and he continued to enjoy snuff, alcohol, cannabis, and the occasional stimulant; he also experienced one of his most important 1975 visions after taking the long-acting psychedelic phenethylamine DOM, a compound invented by Alexander Shulgin and sold on the street as STP. 639 Nonetheless, Dick was riding the very same early-seventies cultural wave that the sociologist Steven Tipton chronicled in *Getting Saved from the Sixties*: a wave of personal and ideological change that, while retaining countercultural notions of transformation and transcendence, attempted to reconstruct a more grounded

behavioral center beyond the deterritorializing confusions of drugs. Though Dick had not had his revelation, he had taken one step towards being saved.

Dick’s return to California was motivated by an invitation from a professor of science fiction at Cal State Fullerton, who responded to one of Dick’s rather desperate letters with the news that some of his students were willing to put the author up until he got on his feet. But Dick returned to a very different California: Orange County, the most conservative county in coastal California, the home of Disneyland and an influential center for the countercultural Jesus Movement that Tipton in part chronicles.

Here, though, Dick found a kinder and gentler version of the youth community he had conjured in Santa Venetia. As Carrère has it, “Everyone was broke, but their poverty had nothing in common with the sordid, squalid impoverishment of his old doper friends. They lived the friendly, trusting bohemian life of students and aspiring artists who held part-time jobs to get by.” Grinding through his usual round of intense and sometimes pathetic infatuations, Dick eventually settled on another “dark-haired girl,” the young Tessa Busby. Though Dick was occasionally abusive with her, she would marry him and bear him his last child, Christopher. And while Dick missed Northern California and disliked the tacky communities surrounding Fullerton—“this is a brutal, plastic area”—he would spend the rest of his life in Orange County, whose strip malls and theme parks became for him, at least at times, a visionary landscape.

**Dia-Gnosis**

Despite Dick’s drug abuse, exaggerations, and endless fictionalizing, we can be confident about the objectively anomalous force of Dick’s visions for the simple reason that bizarre and

extraordinary experiences had been happening to him well before street drugs or metaphysics or pulp fiction entered the picture. In the neutral jargon of the contemporary neurodiversity movement, Dick was at no point neurotypical. From an early age, Dick’s nervous system regularly played host to a variety of debilitating and traumatic psychological symptoms: paralyzing anxiety, clinical depression, agoraphobia, paranoia, vertigo, and a globus hysteria that made it impossible for him to swallow food in public. Some peculiar early experiences directly foreshadowed the more mystical registers of 2/3/74, such as a couple “out of body experiences” and a voice in his head that helped him complete a high school physics exam. These experiences do not just remind us that Dick had an unusual brain as well as an unusual mind; they also remind us that some of his later philosophical and literary concerns were seeded by pathological symptoms that existentially undermined the ontological consistency of the everyday world. To Gregg Rickman, Dick described one particular kind of recurrent panic attack:

What happens is the category of space, the Kantian ordering ontological category of space collapses and space closes in around you like it’s suffocating you, you know? The walls seem to crush you and then all of a sudden the walls open out like a bellow and suddenly you have nothing to stand up against and support yourself and hold onto. It’s like it oscillates like it breathes, it’s incredible. There’s no name for that. It’s a combination of agoraphobia, which is fear of open spaces, and claustrophobia, fear of closed spaces. And I would oscillate between them.

The first of these attacks occurred three months into Dick’s first semester at high school, when Dick was probably not yet reading Kant. Dick’s language shows that he subsequently learned to address or frame these phobic crises in philosophical terms, perhaps as a way to make them

existentially meaningful. Such pathologized philosophy, here and throughout the Exegesis, must be seen in part as a metaphysical drive emerging directly out of a quite terrifying phenomenological encounter with unravelled cognition. There was nothing inherently “mystical” about these phobic experiences—“It’s hell” he told Rickman—and yet Dick would come to see them as, at least some of the time, spiritually illuminating. In a 1978 entry to the Exegesis, Dick wrote, for example, that he “first saw the illusory nature of space when I was in high school.”

We must step carefully here, because the language we use to categorize these experiences—rather than their etiology—stacks the deck in advance. We might dub Dick’s ontological vertigo as an early index of mystical predispositions, or, more conventionally, as recognizable signs of mental disorder. In his formidable text on Dick, which leans heavily on a psychoanalytic discourse of psychosis, Laurence Rickels sometimes offers a compromise label of “psychotic/mythic” experiences, which holds a certain appeal. With Dick I prefer visionary experiences, since the register visionary places the beat on the phenomenological unfolding of non-ordinary, affect-charged, immersive and often image-driven scenarios without necessarily sneaking in etiology through the backdoor. Drugs, psychosis, hypnagogia, esoteric ritual, mere (and sheer) sensation—all may occasion visionary experience. But most of all, the “visionary” is already a fundamental figure of both writers and writing, a Romantic and avant-garde secularization of prophetic modes that stretch at least back to the Jewish Bible. And with Dick, the imbrication of visionary experience and writing, as both processes and products, is key.

Here however I want to indulge a bit in the understandable impulse to attempt a diagnosis of Dick and his visionary experiences. Simply put, psycho-physiological conditions are the obvious first place to turn in confronting his myriad of symptoms. With Dick, however, nothing

641. Ibid, 129.
642. Ibid, 130.
is obvious, and certainly not the question of diagnoses, as much of the literary scholarship surrounding Dick makes evident. Given how intensely Dick’s fictions were shaped by his personal life—including his mental problems, his lifelong engagement with psychotherapy and diagnostic tests, and his voracious capacity for and knowledge of pharmaceutical drugs—it is very tempting for critics to read his work as what Damien Broderick calls a “coded case history.”

A number of critics, particularly Rickels, also interpret Dick in light of Daniel Paul Schreber, the subject of Freud’s most important essay on paranoia, and whose Memoirs of My Nervous Illness features sometimes startlingly resonances with the Exegesis. Others have focused on the trauma caused by the loss of Dick’s baby twin sister, a haunting absence, often named by Dick, that left the writer—in this view—saddled with guilt, irresolvable melancholy, and the compulsion to produce fictions featuring twins, fragmented subjectivity, and alternative worlds. Other diagnoses turn toward psycho-physiological explanations, especially regarding 2/3/74. Dick biographer Lawrence Sutin, Alice Flaherty, and others seem satisfied with Temporal Lobe Epilepsy, a condition that has been associated with intense religious ideation, time-slips, and the kind of graphomania required to bring something as monstrous as the Exegesis into the world. Perhaps the most notorious diagnosis, though, belongs to Dick biographer and critic Gregg Rickman, who argued strenuously that Dick’s dissociative tendencies not only were the result of child sexual abuse, but resulted in Dick having multiple personalities.

There is a rather PhilDickean trap in all of this, however. The trap does not consist in offering “reductive” psychophysiological explanations for his multidimensional experiences, nor

even in biologizing Dick’s texts in light of those conditions. Rather, the trap lies in ignoring the
intense reflexivity involved in the task of psychologizing Dick in the first place. As Luckhurst
points out, the various diagnoses offered by critics and shrinks just don’t add up, and they don’t
add up in part because both psychiatric discourse and its object (Dick, in this case) are moving
targets. As Luckhurst points out, “Dick’s thirty-year career was undertaken whilst psychiatric
discourse was undergoing almost continual revolution, not just in nomenclature or classification,
but also in foundational methodological terms.”

More importantly—and in another example of Latourian constructionism—these
categories and methodologies were themselves changing the subjects they were designed to
diagnose and treat. To make this crucial point, Luckhurst turns to Ian Hacking, who argues that
the construction of novel psychiatric categories “creates new ways for people to be.” Particular
diagnoses (and their attendant protocols) are operators in a network that interactively shapes the
people who fit into it. Hacking calls this process “dynamic nomimalism”—dynamic because
these categories are dialogic and inherently unstable, as is perhaps most visible today in the
rapidly shifting character, symptomology, and cultural reception of autism.

Hacking’s arguments apply to all subjects of psychiatric diagnoses, but they particularly
apply to Dick, who himself was intensely self-conscious about psychological discourse and
practice. Along with Luckhurst and Rickels, Chris Rudge draws our attention to Dick’s
“singularly prodigious interlocution with psychiatry.” Dick was not only treated by a wide
variety of psychotherapists from an early age, but was subjected to scores of profile tests and
prescribed a wide range of drugs that kept pace with the increasingly dominant role of

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645. Ibid, 19.
pharmaceuticals in psychiatry. All of these things fascinated Dick, and he studied them deeply. As Rickels points out in *I Think I Am Philip K. Dick*, the most psychoanalytically sophisticated study of Dick to date, Dick’s knowledge of psychiatry, especially in the fifties and sixties, was much more thorough and specialized than his knowledge of religion and philosophy, which leaned heavily on encyclopedias.

In both cases, however, Dick’s knowledge fueled a relentless production of personal hypotheses, such that, in Luckhurst’s words now, “his texts, both fictional and non-fictional, run constantly through a bewildering array of diagnostic labels for various symptomatic behaviors.” While Dick’s own multifarious symptoms elicited scores of outside diagnoses over the decades, nobody racked up as many as Dick himself did. As Rickels points out, Dick’s relentless practice of well-informed self-diagnosis gives his work a particularly affinity with both psychoanalytic texts and the curious genre of psychotic memoirs, of which Schreber’s justly remains the most celebrated. The sheer variety of Dick’s diagnoses however, rather than providing a basis for personal cure, wound up magnifying the cracks and conflicts in the field and the multiple models of human experience they presume. Here we will distinguish three, highly generalized orientations.

On the one hand, Dick needs to be seen as a cybernetic transformer of the current of depth psychology that begins decisively with Freud. For Rickels, Freud’s work on mourning and melancholy provides the key to unlock Dick’s abiding obsession with the dead and where and how, technologically and otherwise, they linger in our world. Such specters also stir up the

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question of religious experience, of course. Reading Dick with and through Freud, Schreber, and Walter Benjamin, Rickels discovers a shared concern with a modern process of secularization that retains religious frames of reference, but only as “abandoned ruins, lexicons still deposited in our range of reference, but deposits without redemption value.” Like Schreber, and despite his personal embrace of Christian salvation, Dick experienced this haunting and ruination from the psychological inside. “Dick’s footing with psychosis allowed him to immerse himself in the legacy of melancholia or narcissism, the deep end of mankind’s traditions/transmissions in all talk of life (and death).” But though Rickels admires Dick’s “revalorization of psychosis in terms of alternate present realities,” the ontological questions of extraordinary experience are, in his study, foreclosed.

Dick himself resisted the blanket Freudian reduction of uncanny or enchanted experience to endopsychic projection. Even before identifying himself as a religious person, Dick’s thinking and writing are more visibly indebted to Carl Jung, whom Dick started reading when he was a young man. As with Terence McKenna and many other Americans in the fifties, Dick discovered in Jung not only a storehouse of Eastern mysticism and Western esotericism but intellectual permission to widen the portals of the unconscious to include more alien or chthonic forces, thereby creating a secular bridge towards more numinous possibilities. The notion of the collective unconscious encouraged Dick to imagine forms of transpersonal cognition that flickered in his fiction and bloomed into the prophetic network metaphysics of the Exegesis.

Jung’s archetypal theory, which scholars now rightly see as a strain of modern esotericism in itself, also influenced Dick’s capacious attitude towards his own unconscious, and especially to his own dream life. However Jung may have explained their etiology, the

649. Rickels, 10.
650. Ibid, 58.
archetypes were also, for all pragmatic purposes, independent and exterior agents. Jung also offered dire warnings about their invasive power, of course, concerns that fleshed out Dick’s long-standing concerns—expressed in both his fiction and the Exegesis—with being consumed or dominated by daemonic outside agencies. As Samuel J. Umland puts it, in terms highly relevant to 2/3/74, “For Dick, the Dionysian loss of Self entails not simply a confusion in the subject as to his identity, but the experience of an infusion of a transmigrating or invading agent or agency that corresponds to what has been known since the Greeks as possession.”

In the fifties and early sixties, when Dick was refining his psychological knowledge, Jung’s influence was matched by a current of psychoanalytic thought that, while more obscure, may in many ways have made a more profound mark on his texts. The current is the existential psychology of Ludwig Bingswanger, which Dick encountered in Rollo May’s 1958 edited collection Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology. As a number of critics have noted, Dick drew his important concept of the “tomb world” from Binswanger’s study of the schizophrenic patient Ellen West, one of the principal studies Dick in which Binswanger demonstrated his concern to what Foucault called, in his early essay on the analyst, “the modalities of existence.” For Binswanger and his fellow existential psychologists, patients did not just live with their symptoms—they lived in a total world, a world of “existential structures” that lay, as it were, beyond the veil of their immediate symptoms or the symbols in their dreams. For Binswanger, psychosis was not an aberration so much as a new form of “being-in-the-world.” This notion of a pathological but very concrete, world-building gestalt deeply marked Dick’s construction of the various idios kosmoi in his works.

651. Perhaps the most satisfying investigation of the theme of consumption in Dick is Christopher Palmer, Philip K. Dick: Exhilaration and Terror of the Postmodern (Liverpool University Press, 2003) esp. 133-145.
652. Umland, 90.
653. Foucault and Binswanger, 33.
On a more personal level, Binswanger’s phenomenological debt to Heidegger confirmed in Dick a deep sobriety about death, personal authenticity, and what Heidegger famously called the “thrownness” of our being in the world. These attitudes later contributed to Dick’s incorporation of Hans Jonas’s influential interpretation of Gnostic existentialism, which guides some of the core themes in the Exegesis. Indeed, as with far more countercultural subjects than is usually acknowledged, Dick’s singular and often heretical religiosity can only be understood against the overwhelming background of mid-century existentialism, which in Dick’s case is noticeable in his harrowing appreciation for the alien facticity of things and the entropic shadows of human finitude.

At the same time, while Dick continued to draw from and interpret himself through the perspectives of depth psychology, he also kept pace with the growing reductionist orientation of psychiatry. In “The Android and the Human,” Dick announces, for example, that “Mental illness is a biochemical phenomenon,” one that “may have to do with faulty brain metabolism, the failure of certain brain catalysts such as serotonin and noradrenaline to act properly.” In light of the significance that Rickels finds in the work of mourning that dominates Dick’s psychological fictions, it is notable that in this speech Dick specifically addresses the shock of loss and grief as physiological triggers, shocking events that cause “an overproduction of noradrenaline flowing down generally unused neural pathways, overloading brain circuits and producing behavior that we call psychotic.”

In a sense, however, this model of causation recalls the predictable and determined logic that Dick associates with “the android.” Indeed, Dick’s very quest to reframe the dialectic between androids and humans derives in part from his reductive hunch that human beings “are becoming, and may to a great extent always have been, inanimate in the sense that we are led,
directed by built-in tropisms.”655 In terms that would make the hearts of both Richard Dawkins and Timothy Leary proud, Dick will declare, years later in the Exegesis, that human beings are just “DNA robots.”656 In a sense, the tension between humanism and posthumanism that critics find in Dick’s fiction reflects a similarly contradictory tension between depth psychology and physiological behaviorism, which over-writes the hermeneutical operations of psychoanalysis with technical models and chemical solutions.

Indeed, Dick’s sympathy for the “android” was not just theoretical. As a knowledgable and compulsive pillhead, Dick was perfectly at home in materialist psychiatry’s world of endless chemical modulation and the posthuman subject such modulation constructs. By the late sixties, Dick was taking pills to wake up, to go to sleep, to work, to shift moods, to relax, to focus, to experiment, to blaze. As Nancy put it, “Phil took Stelazine, muscle relaxants, stomach relaxants, Valium, tranquilizers, and stimulants. …He took seventy pills a day.”657 Though Dick no doubt gobbled pills for a variety of reasons, his pharmaceutical use certainly reflected his obsession with diagnostic frameworks and his hard-wired approach to his own extreme experiences.

Dick was not just taking drugs, he was hacking himself with drugs, a psychonaut not only in vision but in pharmaceutical geekery. As Carrère has it, “he preferred prescription drugs, admiring their precision and the relative predictability of their effects, and he enjoyed all the possible combinations they afforded the connoisseur.”658 This “neuro-hacking” attitude is very evident in his great 1968 story “The Electric Ant,” in which Garrison Poole, having discovered that he is an android or “electric ant,” begins to manually cut and splice the tapes that construct

655. Ibid, 187.
656. Dick, Exegesis, 576. In Folder 50 in the unpublished Exegesis, Dick also mentions “Leary’s robots.”
658. Carrère, 156.
his reality, achieving mystical as well as pathological results. Similarly, Pete Sands, the Christian
mystic in Deus Irae (1976), heretically seeks God through experimental drugs.

This discourse of technical auto-manipulation also reflects the peculiar twist that popular
psychology took in the early seventies, when social scientific language and psychophysical
models helped construct the new category of “altered states of consciousness,” a category that
itself had been forcibly opened up through the spread of LSD among users and researchers alike.
Dick was an enthusiastic reader of Psychology Today, which in the seventies was a sort of Time
magazine for the consciousness culture. One article in the April 1973 issue, which described the
treatment of schizophrenia with vitamins, almost certainly inspired Dick to start taking a mega-
vitamin formula that involved massive doses of niacin and vitamins C, and that Dick frequently
invoked to explain his initial 2/3/74 experiences.659

Dick in turn interpreted the action of this regimen through the discourse of brain
lateralization that also entered popular consciousness in the early seventies through the
psychologist Robert Ornstein’s bestselling work. As we have already seen with Robert Anton
Wilson, this discourse linked the “left brain” with language and reason and the non-dominant
“right brain” with intuition, imagery, and the creative unconscious. In one enthusiastic letter
from July, Dick connected the vitamin formula with the improved “neural firing in my right
hemisphere” that he first experienced in March. “I’ve had over four months of enormously
heightened neural efficiency and firing, producing a total change in personality and abilities and
habits,” he writes, though at the same time “my experiences involve the mystic and even the
sacred.”660 However we might fault Dick’s neurological enthusiasms here, the point is that Dick
paralleled his religious accounts with naturalistic models and an operationalist attitude.

659. Sutin, 212.
Navigating between the Scylla of depth psychology and the Charybdis of medical psychiatry, Dick increasingly found himself following a third way that, in the seventies anyway, split the difference between psychoanalysis and biology. The historian and psychotherapist Adam Crabtree calls this stream the “alternate-consciousness paradigm,” a current that Crabtree traces to an origin point long before psychology as such emerged as a human science, psychoanalytic or not. Beginning with the popular “magnetic” therapies of Anton Mesmer, and carrying forth through Spiritualism and the abiding strangeness of hypnotism, the nineteenth century was awash with unusual or altered states of consciousness whose explorations and explanations laid the groundwork for the development of the modern “unconscious.” As such, the alternate-consciousness paradigm itself mediates between occult and naturalistic explanations. The historian of religion Anne Taves explains that the institutional and discursive construction of “hypnotism” precisely involved peeling away the weirder dimensions of magnetized states in order to create an object that was more amenable to neurologists. As Taves explains, this operation left weird stuff like clairvoyance and “trance” floating free, leaving them to be taken up by the emerging world of “the occult.”

According to Taves, the alternate-consciousness paradigm reaches its American culmination with William James, and is then doubly repressed by both psychoanalysis and the new academic psychology, thereafter to meander through variously disreputable streams of New Thought, esotericism, and alternative healing modalities. The paradigm made a major come-back in the nineteen-sixties, however, and Dick himself contributed some canny thoughts on the matter in his 1964 essay “Drugs, Hallucinations, and the Quest for Reality.” In the essay, which

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662. Taves tells this story in *Fits, Trances & Visions*, op cit.
was clearly written in the shadow of his metallic face vision, Dick explores the nature of hallucination and their relationship to hypnotic suggestion.

Dick knows something of the history that Crabtree and Taves would later tell, and argues that, given the extraordinary feats performed by some hypnotized subjects, “there simply can be no psychogenic explanation as to such a phenomenon, unless we wish to posit yoga or Psionic or—let's face it—magical powers.”663 In the essay, Dick also reminds us that even psychoanalysis remains haunted by the apparent telepathic feats performed by mentally disturbed patients and reported by Jan Ehrenwald and other clinicians.664 Thinking comparatively, Dick argues that hallucinations, whether caused by hypnosis, psychosis, drugs, or even the mystical event of religious “conversion,” may represent realities the rest of us cannot perceive. As such, they should be considered to be quantitatively rather than qualitatively different than ordinary perception—paranormal intensities rather than thoroughly pathological symptoms.

The point is not to argue for or against Dick’s position, which recalls Huxley’s “reducing valve” theory of consciousness. Here I simply want to note that Dick was deeply conversant with the “altered states paradigm” and rightly saw it emerging on the horizon of historical possibility. “Entirely new terms such as ‘expanded consciousness’ are heard, terms indicating that research, especially with hallucinatory drugs, points to the probability, whether we like it or not, that, as in the case of Jan Ehrenwald's paranoids, the percept system of the organism is overperceiving… but the overperception emanates from outside the organism.”665

Dick also makes an important point in this essay about the coincidence of psychosis and the paranormal, a connection that helps us approach 2/3/74 with more subtlety. For the moment,

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663. Dick, Shifting, 170.
664. For a contemporary account of this marvelous current of weirdness inside the analytic chamber, see Mikita Brottman, Phantoms of the Clinic from Thought-Transference to Projective Identification (London: Karnac Books, 2011).
let’s accept the diagnosis—which Dick himself embraced on more than one occasion—that with 2/3/74, Dick had suffered what he himself called “total psychosis.” However, the pathological character of 2/3/74 does not automatically close the doors on the possibility that Dick encountered an ontological Beyond. Nor does the presence of pathology dissipate the irreducible otherness lurking in anomalies, whatever their purported origin.

As Jeff Kripal argues the point, “psychopathology and the paranormal go just fine together, as do mushrooms and religious revelation, or madness and holiness, or car wrecks and near-death experiences, or mystics and sexual trauma; once the ego is dissolved, however it is dissolved, the imaginal, the supernormal, and the spiritual can come rushing in.” I am not sure that the sixties language of “ego dissolution” is necessarily helpful here, when something more fractured is often involved, but the point is clear: just as traumas like accidents or the deaths of family members are anecdotally and statistically associated with paranormal phenomena, so might the eruption of pathological symptoms clear the space for divine invasions, or at least for a collapse of the binary distinction into what Dick impishly called his “supernatural psychotic experience.”

Even if we want to keep that transcendent door slammed shut, however, we should still be wary of the misdirection that lies within psychological diagnoses, at least when they come to Dick. The explanatory power of most psychological models not only requires a devalorization of experiential phenomena, but often ignores the fact that, one way or the other, these experiences demand a creative and constructive existential response. Here we should recall William James’ lasting argument about the distinction between origin and function in psychology. In other

666. Of course, Dick would also argue at times that 2-3-74 saved him from psychosis.
words, the *origin* of Dick’s shattering experiences is of secondary importance to the often ingenious strategies whereby Dick and his “wordsmith unconscious” put the pieces together into complex but functional worlds of meaning. I am not just saying that we should admire the lemon-aide Dick made from the psychological lemons that were his lot. Recalling our earlier discussion of Latour’s ontologically robust version of constructionism, I am saying that the texts that Dick used to clamber out of his own “tomb world” and towards philosophical vision possessed, in some enigmatic but more-than-metaphoric sense, a life of their own.

It is no accident therefore that Dick’s accounts of 2/3/74 read like episodes from Dick’s earlier novels, which abound with time-slips, schizophrenic visions, dualist metaphysics, conspiracies, and spookily animated everyday objects. But this resemblance derives from something deeper—and weirder—than his own imagination run riot. As we will see in a moment, the links between Dick’s experiences, his “exegesis” of those experiences, and his own fictions offer us a remarkable portrait of the “self-scripting” feedback loops that engender worlds as they circulate between the subject—conscious or otherwise—and cultural artifacts, very much the typewriter. This doesn’t at all mean that 2/3/74 was *merely* scripted, in the sense in which Steven Katz and other Kantian critics of “religious experience” insist. Instead, I would like to suggest that the “meta-programming” play of textuality is part of the fabric of Dick’s experiences themselves, just as his subsequent written work, and especially his Exegesis, bodies itself forth as a visionary and sometimes daemonic experience in its own right. All the words that Dick threw at 2/3/74 merely unrolled, through time, the impossible text that was always already inscribed within and as the raptures of 2/3/74, a palimpsest of writings marked up at once by the Logos, by Dick’s wordsmith unconscious, and, perhaps most of all, by that “goddam typewriter.”

In his novelistic account of Dick’s life, Emmanuel Carrère sees the author calming down both emotionally and spiritually in 1973. Gaining distance on his own compulsive speculations, Dick even talks about starting a group of recovered meaning-seekers along the lines of Alcoholics Anonymous. Though Dick continued to experience intense mood swings and paranoid episodes that year, his published letters basically support Carrère’s portrait. Besides science fiction, Dick writes about the energy crisis, the latest Kris Kristofferson record, and a lot about Watergate, which he and others saw as confirmation of some of his theories about the 1971 burglary. There is very little about metaphysics or God, even in his letters to Nancy, whom he had consistently hectored in the past about Christian virtue.

One visionary episode during this period, highlighted by Sutin in his biography, was a strange encounter with a personified Death that Dick describes in a letter to Patrice Duvic on February 14, 1973. Terribly sick with pneumonia, Dick encountered Death wearing a single-breasted “plastic” suit and sporting a “samplecase” the figure then opened to reveal some psychological tests. Death determines that Dick is insane and tries to lure him up a winding road towards a mental institution where, Death promises, he can finally relax. Only Tessa’s sudden appearance in the room breaks the spell, at which point Dick realizes that Death had been bullshitting him to make his own job easier.

Dick would repeat this story a number of times over the year, including an essentially similar account to Anne ten months later, in late December. But there is reason to distrust this rather Phildickean “experience,” or at least to recognize that what is cast as a fever vision is
perhaps better seen as the product of a feverish mode of writing experience—and experiencing
writing—in which stories are rehearsed and developed through ping-pong signifiers and multiple
drafts. Five days before writing to Duvic, Dick first mentioned the vision in another letter. He
prefaces this much briefer account by invoking Carlos Castaneda’s notion that Death is always
hovering on your left side, and that when you see him you should ask him a question. In the next
sentence, he mentions being terribly sick and seeing Death, who sports the single-breasted plastic
suit and a “briefcase.” Dick asks Death what the point of “this whole dreary procession” is, and
Death replies, “Look, I got my own troubles.” 669

Two days before typing up this delightful routine, however, Dick wrote to another
correspondent about another encounter he had while lying sick and “dying in bed.” This time,
however, the encounter was with Tessa’s cat Pinky, who jumped up on him after being smuggled
into the apartment in a “suitcase” of Tessa’s. Dick reports, “I assumed he was Death, having read
Carlos Castaneda, and when you see Death you are to ask him a question.” 670 So Dick then asks
the cat about the meaning of life.

In these early versions of the story, Castaneda helps stage Dick’s visionary encounter
with Death, though the then-popular author is erased in the story’s final form as Dick carries it
forward throughout 1973. In his letters, Dick first mentions Castaneda after reading a Sam Keen
interview with the author in the December 1972 issue of Psychology Today, an article that “made
a big impression on me.” 671 There Castaneda presents Don Juan’s teaching that, in Yaqui
sorcery, death is a physical presence hovering over your left shoulder. Castaneda says nothing
about asking Death a question, either here or in Journey to Ixtlan (1972), where that teaching
first appears (and which, for all we know, Dick may never have read). That said, Castaneda does

670. Ibid, 139.
describe Death as “an impartial judge who will speak truth to you and give you accurate
advice.” From all this we might tentatively conclude that Dick’s initial “encounter” is actually
with Castaneda’s neoshamanic personification of Death, an encounter that takes place in the
pages of a popular psychology magazine saturated with seventies consciousness culture. This
conceptual impression then collides with the Dick’s surprise, sick-bed interaction with Pinky,
recently emerged from a “suitcase.” This quotidian scene feverishly evolves into a Woody Allen-
worthy routine with a wise-guy grim reaper, now featuring a “briefcase.” By the time the full
vision is articulated, dense with Phildickean fictional elements like psychological tests and
plastic suits, the Castaneda trigger has been erased, tucked away in the “case” that this vision has
become.

Dick’s iterations of his Death vision encapsulate some of the problems that arise in our
attempts to reconstruct the visionary phenomena behind 2/3/74. Dick may certainly be accused
of making all this stuff up as he goes along, of fooling his correspondents, of goofing around. In
his own words, Dick was an ardent practitioner of “shuckin’ and jivin’,” a mode of conversation
that Tim Powers—a younger science fiction writer who Dick befriended in Southern California,
and who was often hoodwinked by these tall tales—somewhat generously defines as “telling the
other person whatever it might be most effective for that person to hear.” A less favorable
account is provided by Thomas Disch in his tart book on S-F, The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of,
where he explains Dick’s claims for 2/3/74 as symptoms of the grand American “right to lie,” a
national predilection for enthusiastic and guiltless mendacity that marks American religion as
much as American fiction.

671. Ibid, 131.
Perhaps the best term for Dick’s practice, however, is *bullshitting*. In his popular book on the subject, the philosopher Harry Frankfurt writes that, in contrast with lying, the “mode of creativity” associated with bullshitting is more art than craft, “more expansive and independent, with more spacious opportunities for improvisation, color, and imaginative play.” That’s why Frankfurt approves of the phrase *bullshit artist*, which also illuminates something essential about Dick’s styles of conversation and correspondence, not to mention the sort of narrative games Dick plays with his readers (and his characters). Trickster fiction writers like Dick are preeminent bullshit artists, as are proto-New Age metaphysical hoaxsters like Carlos Castaneda. Indeed, even in the private Exegesis, where Dick was presumably capturing his personal thoughts and opinions, the more fabulous networks of fictionalizing are never very far from the “theory,” as the Exegesis is stuffed with scores of plot outlines for both possible novels and the conspiracies that Dick believed surrounded him. A similar mix is found in his correspondence, where Dick exploited the iterative nature of writing letters to multiple correspondents in order to work out more-or-less well-crafted versions of 2/3/74 events, some of which he then placed in his later novels.

The error here, however, would be to relax into the conclusion that Dick was *simply* bullshitting. With Dick, nothing is simple, since Dick’s imbricated life and work and psyche impossibly complicate the conventional distinctions between fact and fiction, let alone between reading, writing, and experience itself. After all, Don Juan’s Death is not just any old concept or signifier. Castaneda’s neo-shamanic Death is a visionary fiction designed to functionally stage the reader’s metaphysically transformative encounter with her own mortal condition, an encounter that in itself is impossible to symbolize and for that reason always lurks over the

shoulder of our discourse. For Dick, sick to death in bed, Castaneda’s imaginative invitation mobilized this sort of encounter, however feline the initial trigger.

Who is to say, in other words, that in Dick’s mind this event did not, in the end and retrospectively, “take place”? After all, Dick was writing from his own altered consciousness, that strange hypnagogic liminal zone of fever and scrambled memory, where interactive fictions and tricksy signifiers have easy purchase on the mind. Taking this scene forward into the matter of 2/3/74, the hermeneutic task appears to be something more evocative than reductive detective work, something more like an archaeology of esoteric hieroglyphs and sometimes unconscious signifiers that float like specters through Dick’s discourse, and that, like those technological artifacts in “Android and the Human,” grow animated through the very course of analysis.

**Rending Accounts**

Dick’s earliest accounts of 2/3/74 are contained in letters he wrote over many months later that same year. These letters, most of which were included in the early folders of the Exegesis, suggest a long period of gestation during which Dick organized, selected and tentatively constructed various versions of the extraordinary events, which he would in turn revise in light of shifting interpretive needs, creative possibilities, and the perceived differences of individual readers. For example, the letters Dick writes to the graduate student Claudia Bush in the summer of 1974—a handful of the dozens of lengthly missives he wrote Bush over the years—are intense, goofy, and unreservedly weird. He describes getting messages from an ancient Cumaean sibyl, picking up words in ancient languages from dreams, and feeling like he is hosting a secondary personality, possibly a highly educated Greek-speaking scholar of the
third century, living in the Mediterranean. These letters are packed with gods and sacred texts, and he speaks intimately of Brahman, Ahura-Mazda, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

At the same time, Dick’s letter to the SF critic Peter Fitting on June 28 that summer—which became one of the first entries in the Exegesis—adopts a far more reserved and secular tone. He describes many of the core phenomena to Fitting: the hypnogogic slide show of modern abstract paintings; days filled with distinctly new thoughts and unusual personal behaviors; information pouring in from books in dreams, from animals, from space. However, while religious language is present in the letter, it is always corralled within Dick’s “objective” self-reporting of his impressions. In the place of supernatural explanations, Dick presents naturalistic (thought still weird) accounts like “tachyon” theory—picked up from Arthur Koestler—and the “disinhibition” of GABA fluid in his brain, caused, he suspects, by the orthomolecular megadoses of vitamin C mentioned above. Whatever we think of the science here, the point is that these explanations allow Dick to cordon off religious or supernatural language, with its aura of psychosis. “Without the tachyon theory,” he tells Fitting, “I would lack any kind of scientific formulation, and would have to declare that ‘God has shown me the sacred tablets in which the future is written’ and so forth.” While similar tensions between religious, paranormal, and more-or-less naturalistic explanations run throughout the Exegesis, the particular take he provides to Fitting cannot be separated from Fitting’s status as an important (and unquestionably materialist) critic of Dick’s work.

Readers of Dick’s letters are familiar with the sometimes shocking degree to which the author dons different masks for different correspondents, in tone as well as content, and often on the very same day. Sometimes, these variations appear to be manipulative attempts to elicit

675. See Dick, Exegesis, 6-10.
676. Dick, Exegesis, 8.
sympathy or respect, and other times just as more shuckin and jivin’. However, Dick also seems to have used his correspondence as a way to stabilize himself, to temporarily ground the constantly shifting frameworks of his own ongoing and unstable self-narration. This makes isolating something like a “standard account” of 2/3/74 events difficult enough, let alone establishing a relationship between that account and Dick’s experiences. 677

Alas, things become no clearer when we leave the letters aside and focus on the accounts of 2/3/74 that Dick included in the Exegesis and did not share with correspondents. During the summer of 1974, he began to type up undated personal philosophical pieces that he combined with the carbons for his early 2/3/74 letters, like the ones to Bush and Fitting. By 1975, he had largely ceased including letters into the emerging document, though his correspondence continues to be saturated with his religious and philosophical concerns. By 1976, in a sign of the increasingly personal and intrapsychic nature of his philosophical diary, Dick gave up his trusty typewriter and wrote his notes in ball-point pen, sometimes cranking out as much as 150 pages in a single night. Dick continued this prodigious output until his death in March of 1982, when he left behind over eight thousand pages of Exegesis.

Unfortunately, with some important exceptions—particularly Dick’s dreams and hypnogogic voices—this purely “Exegetical” Dick is less interested in narrating or even schematically rendering his experiences than in riffing off of them. Rather than rendering a full account, in other words, Dick is usually happy to refer to events in a personal short-hand—some of which remain hopelessly obscure—and then spring-board from these references into his evolving speculative matrix. For all these reasons, no “standard” narrative sequence of 2/3/74 and its attendant visions, voices, dreams and synchronicities can ever be reconstructed with

677. For the difficulties and possibilities of such interpretive labor see Mark Freeman, Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative (London: Routledge, 1993), esp.3-49.
much satisfaction, at least from these sources.\textsuperscript{678} Of course, given the sort of reconstruction work that all humans perform as part of their ongoing self-narration, this is arguably always the case. But in contrast to more definitive self-narrations, in which fabulation must be teased from authoritative renderings, Dick’s ceaseless interpretive assemblages throws the reader into ambiguity from the get-go. In other words, even on the surface level, the Exegesis underscores a core argument made by many scholars of religion addressing the problem of religious experience: interpretation cannot be separated from experience, nor can previously established scripts be unpeeled from phenomenological reporting.

There are, nonetheless, a number of relatively clear experiential topoi that Dick returns to frequently and more-or-less consistently throughout his letters, personal writings, and fiction. These provide the best access to the phenomenological “building blocks” of Dick’s extraordinary experiences, recognizing that the particular arrangement of these blocks is always already variable. Perhaps the most memorable of these primal scenes, and certainly one of the most significant, is the “fish sign” encounter, which took place in February, possibly on the twentieth, and that came to be seen as the trigger or initiating event of the entire series, whose central emergence Dick generally locates in March (or “3-74”). Dick returned to the fish sign throughout his later writings, including \textit{VALIS}, and it, along with the pink light, remains firmly wedded to popular accounts of 2/3/74.

Dick first told the tale in a letter to Ursula K. Le Guin on 23 September, five months after his initial mention of a recent “religious experience” in his correspondence. To Le Guin, Dick wrote that, after undergoing oral surgery to remove two impacted wisdom teeth, the Sodium

\textsuperscript{678} Perhaps the most extensive if naive attempt to organize a narrative of Dick’s 2/3/74 experiences is Anthony Peake’s \textit{A Life of Philip K Dick}; though it contains some new biographical material, the text has been criticized by Dick fans and scholars. See Anthony Peake, \textit{A Life of Philip K. Dick: The Man Who Remembered the Future}. (Arcturus publishing ltd, 2013).
Pentothal started wearing off. A call to a local pharmacy brought a delivery woman to the door bearing painkillers; she had “black, black hair and large eyes very lovely and intense.” In the letter, Dick admits to being mesmerized with this woman and trying to think of what to say to her; noticing her gold necklace, he asks her what it is, “just to find something to say to hold her there.” The woman points out that the “major figure” in the necklace was a fish, “a sign used by the early Christians.” In the Le Guin letter, nothing strange occurs until later, when the “dazzling shower of colored graphics” came over him at night. Dick had already offered extensive descriptions of this hypnagogic display of abstract images in earlier letters which did not mention the necklace. To Le Guin, Dick theorized that the “fish sign” was a trigger or “disinhibiting stimuli” that caused “a vast drop in GABA fluid in the brain,” releasing “major engramming” and initiating his ongoing relationship with what he here simply calls “the spirit.”

In her 2009 memoir, Dick’s wife Tessa confirms the essential outlines of the necklace story, though she quibbles with details. What really changed over time is the significance that Dick accorded the story. As late as March 1975, when he—unusually—takes the time to enumerate and date the major events of the previous spring, he doesn’t even mention the fish sign. In contrast, a similar list in the summer of 1978 includes the necklace. It is also in the late seventies that Dick starts to refer to “2-3-74” rather than his earlier location of his first experiences in March 1975 (“3-74”). In other words, it seems as if the intensity and condensed

680. For example, Tessa writes that Dick had had two abscessed molars removed, not wisdom teeth. Dick’s revision makes writerly sense, since the term “wisdom” foreshadows the Gnostic figure Sophia who would come to play such an important role in Dick’s speculations. See Tessa B. Dick, Philip K. Dick: Remembering Firebright (CreateSpace, 2009), 75-83.
681. Dick, Exegesis, 133; 345.
significance of the fish sign encounter was retrospectively re-inscribed with much greater depth as the years went along.

In his accounts, Dick drops his “low” motivation to chat up the attractive girl (a motive that was seconded by his wife Tessa), and intensifies both the visual and cognitive effects of the pendant and its identification. One example is his essay “How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later,” written for a speech in 1978 but never delivered. Here Dick describes a “shining” gold necklace with a “gleaming gold fish” that “hypnotized” him. Once the woman touches the “glimmering” fish and identifies it as a Christian sign, Dick describes his reaction with mystical and biblical language:

In that instant, as I stared at the gleaming fish sign and heard her words, I suddenly experienced what I later learned is called anamnesis—a Greek word meaning, literally, "loss of forgetfulness." I remembered who I was and where I was. In an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, it all came back to me. And not only could I remember it but I could see it. The girl was a secret Christian and so was I. We lived in fear of detection by the Romans. We had to communicate with cryptic signs…

But, of much more importance, I remembered Jesus, who had just recently been with us, and had gone temporarily away, and would very soon return. My emotion was one of joy. We were secretly preparing to welcome Him back. It would not be long.682

There are a number of things to note in this fascinating passage, whose immediacy—“in that instant”—is the paradoxical result of careful construction, as Dick compresses a looser, more associational engagement into what he sometimes called an augenblick. Alongside this immediacy, however, Dick reaches for mediating scripts. With “anamnesis,” Dick identifies his extraordinary experience of alternative identity using a piece of metaphysical jargon he only
learned after the fact, just as the astronaut Edgar Mitchell only later came to identify his own extraterrestrial epiphany in 1971 as _savikalpa samadhi_. However, this bit of apparatus arguably allows the motivating force of the encounter to transform and grow in articulation—as if Dick’s jogged memory needed to encounter further knowledge in order to return to the original site of recollection and re-member it (and himself).

Dick’s allusion to Paul’s words in Corinthians—the last trumpet will sound “in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor 15:52)—lends his experience an eschatological dimension. And yet the punctuated transformation of this revelatory instant is mingled, not with the direct experience of Christ’s return, but with the peculiar waiting associated with the time lodged between the resurrection and the _parousia_. As Giorgio Agamben explains in _The Time that Remains_, his illuminating treatment of Paul’s letters, _parousia_ does not mean “second coming,” as in a second historical event, but instead denotes _presence_. For Agamben, Paul uses this term to highlight the notion that messianic time is made of up two heterogenous times, the _chronos_ of everyday, represented time, like February 20, 1974, and the eruptive, immanent Now of _kairos_. “The Messiah has already arrived, the messianic event has already happened, but its presence contains within itself another time, which stretches its _parousia_, not in order to defer it, but, on the contrary, to make it graspable.”

Messianic time is out of joint; it is dislodged from chronological time but is not, yet, the end of time. Messianic time “is not another day, homogenous to others; rather, it is that innermost disjointedness within time through which one may—by a hairs-breadth—grasp time and accomplish it.”

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682. Dick, _Shifting_, 271.
684. Ibid, 72.
chronological time, but what Dick would call orthogonally, the way that iron Rome, with its secret Christian remnant, superimposes itself on Orange County. The cryptic fish sign, as it were, does not just awaken Dick; it dislodges him, both temporally and ontologically, producing what Dick sometimes called a “meta-abstraction.” This disturbance allowed Dick to grasp the fullness of presence only for so long, and to do so arguably through the very medium that displaces and defers by its very nature: writing.

Even as this 1978 account is full of literary echoes, Dick underscores the visuality of the scene. He describes the shimmering, gleaming, glittering fish, and announces that “not only could I remember [Rome] but I could see it.” Though Dick does not often stress this particular visual flashback—his main visions of Orange County as Rome come later in the spring—it is important that the early Christian underground hits him as a vision and not just as a memory. Even leaving aside the question of what it means to “see” Rome—a seeing that Dick acknowledges was very brief—Dick consistently emphasizes the golden light shining off the fish, an energetic sensation that is sometimes confused and conflated—occasionally by Dick himself—with the famous “pink light” (of which more in a moment).

Despite Dick’s emphasis on the phenomenology of the experience, however, the photon stream still serves as a literary trace or semantic trigger. Later, when Dick encounter the ideas of Jacob Boehme in the Exegesis—an encounter that helped inspire the increasingly dialectical dynamics of Dick’s text—Dick linked his visual encounter with the necklace to the sunlit reflection from a pewter dish that, according to tradition, occasioned the young cobbler’s first great mystical vision in 1600. In the fish sign’s glints and glitters, however, we should also sense the refraction of a visionary script much closer to home: one of the key moments in The Man in
*the High Castle*, when the character Tagomi briefly enters a parallel universe (ours, as it happens) while contemplating a piece of silver jewelry:

> in the sunlight, the silver triangle glittered. It reflected light. Fire, Mr. Tagomi thought. Not dank or dark object at all. Not heavy, weary, but pulsing with life…In his palm, the silver squiggle danced and blinded him; he squinted, seeing now only the play of fire…What is the space which this speaks of? Vertical ascent. To heaven. Of time? Into the light-world of the mutable. Yes, this thing has disgorged its spirit: light. And my attention is fixed; I can't look away. Spellbound by mesmerizing shimmering surface which I can no longer control.

A number of elements important to 2/3/74 are included here: the play of reflection, the “speaking” of transcendence, and the inability to control or refuse the experience. To his credit, Dick himself recognizes the connection between the fish sign and Tagomi’s epiphany in the late seventies, though, as is typical, the resonance underscored the prophetic nature of his fictions rather than the more deflationary picture of self-scripting.

The famous pink beam in turn is associated with a *second* fish fish sign: a small, rectangular silver-and-black bumper-sticker stuck on a west-facing window in Dick’s apartment. Tessa told Gregg Rickman that, after the delivery woman visited, the couple purchased a few of these fish stickers at a local Christian bookstore and put one on the window and one on their car. While the necklace seems to have been a relatively ornate, probably handmade item that only contained a fish as its “major figure,” this bumper-sticker is without question an early iteration of the minimalist Christian ΙΧΘΥΣ symbols now swimming their way

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685. Tessa Dick, 78-79.
across the rear ends of automobiles everywhere.\textsuperscript{686} Shortly after purchasing the sticker, it blazed in the sunlight, producing in Dick an experience of pink or “strawberry ice-cream” light. Later that summer, this same sticker fired the “pink beam of info-rich light” at Dick, supposedly informing him of his son Christopher’s life-threatening health condition.\textsuperscript{687}

In one of the final entries in the Exegesis, Dick returns to the multidimensional glimmerings of this shiny doubled fish sign. Uncharacteristically, he offers a sober and phenomenologically bare account that deflates as much as it magnifies the continued significance of these encounters.

2-74: light (sunlight reflected off the golden fish sign).
3-74: (Valis) light (“beam of pink light” is what I always say, but it was sunlight, as in 2-74, only this time it was the sticker of the fish sign in the living room window. The upsilon became a palm tree. The pink part was the phosphene after-image of the fish sticker.)
So fish sign both times: in 2-74 (the meta-abstraction); and 3-74, Valis, the info about Chrissy.
It’s Christ. In 2-74 there was no pink light as such. But sunlight. Fish sign and light. Like Boehme. And Mr. Tagomi.

Given its placement toward the close of the Exegesis, we cannot help but read this poetic condensation of Dick’s initial visionary experiences as a sort of green flash on the horizon just before the sun sinks down. Shorn of metaphysics, of the need for elaborate speculation, his words are reduced to the frog-plop haikus of barest memory, to “fish sign and light.” These phenomenological glints also return with an admission: Dick was not blasted with a sci-fi laser

\textsuperscript{686} We know that the bumper-sticker contained the Greek acrostic because Dick elsewhere describes the transformation of the Y into the palm tree of his “Palm Tree Garden” vision.
after all, but simply a sunbeam that left a pinkish phosphene glow in his eyes. And yet, the
referential force of the experiential text remains energized, even alive: a Greek letter grows into a
tree, while historical mystics and fictional characters reflect and refract one another through
Dick’s experience. It’s Christ, Dick decides, but there is also the sense that the medium is the
message. Since Dick got so much out of looking very closely at the ΙΧΘΥΣ, it behooves us to do
the same.

ΙΧΘΥΣ

What is the ιχθύς, and how and why does it come to manifest as a bumper-sticker in a
Christian bookstore in mid-seventies coastal California? In the ancient Mediterranean, the fish
became a popular symbol among Christians between the second and fourth centuries, after which
its use somewhat mysteriously disappeared. The glyph largely remained out of living use until it
was picked up again by the countercultural Jesus Movement in the late sixties and early
seventies.

Popularly known—significantly for us—as “Jesus freaks,” these followers of “the One
Way” emerged on the West Coast in the late sixties, hit the cover of Time magazine in 1971, and
by 1974, had waned in ferocity but consolidated in ways that would significantly influence
American evangelism for decades to come.688 In its early years, and in consort with the
counterculture it both paralleled and eluded, the movement used a variety of media to construct a

687. In one entry from 1978 (or later), Dick describes “the way it [VALIS] fired the pink beam of info-rich light
from the fish sign on the window at me.” Dick, Exegesis, 379.
688. For a thorough history of the Jesus movement, see Larry Eskridge, God’s Forever Family: The Jesus People
on later evangelical subjectivity, see T. M. Luhrmann, When God Talks Back: Understanding the American
radical, visionary, and collectivist alternative to mainline Christianity and the hedonistic spiritual confusions of the drug culture. These strategies not only included the selective appropriation of hippie fashions, but the whole-hearted embrace of pop media, like underground newspapers, t-shirts, LP album covers, posters, buttons, and, yes, bumper-stickers. Rather than reproduce mid-century Christian iconography, they invented new gestures—the “one way” raised forefinger—and revived ancient symbols, like the dove and the fish.

While these images made for groovy and more up-beat pop symbolism, Kevin John Smith also argues that these symbols remained radical, “the fish being reintroduced as a sign of the marginalization of the faithful in the catacombs, in defiance and rebellion against the pagan power of Rome.” Elsewhere Smith also links the symbol to “a sense of social rejection and resistance to materialism.” In other words, for the modern Jesus Movement, the fish sign was not just a kinder, gentler alternative to the cross, but also an intentional signifier of countercultural values associated with the early church and its covert resistance to pagan “Rome.”

Dick’s new home of Orange County was a hotbed of the Jesus Movement. Twenty miles from Dick’s apartment in Fullerton, Chuck Smith’s Calvary Chapel became the first and most important mainline congregation to recognize and incorporate the underground movement into a more accessible, popular, and institutional revival. (Calvary’s Maranatha! Music record label, founded in 1971, was an important purveyor of the sort of Christian folk-rock that would quickly (d)evolve into Contemporary Christian Music).

Dick was certainly aware of the Jesus Movement, and critical of it as well. When Nancy wrote him in early 1974 about possibly entering a Christian community house, he warned her

against the coercive tactics and physical force used at some “Jesus communes,” which he compared to X-Kalay. 690 Perhaps Dick’s biggest gripe with the movement was its excessive emotionality. “I cannot see the sacrifice of the mind in the name of religion, which is why the Jesus Freaks turn me off.” 691 At the same time, Dick was certainly perceived as following a parallel track; even his editor at Bantam, looking at a draft of VALIS in 1976, accused him of writing like a Jesus freak. 692

The comment is not misplaced. In his insightful monograph Pink Beams of Light from the God in the Gutter, Gabriel Mckee makes an extended case for Dick’s Christianity as against his supposed Gnosticism, arguing that “Much of what has been identified as gnostic in Dick’s work is just as easily—and often more convincingly—identifiable as Christian.” 693 Mckee insists that, despite his many heterodox views, Dick “truly believed in the salvific power of Christ,” and that the author treats Christianity in the Exegesis not as just another theory but as a working assumption. 694 I am not convinced that Dick’s texts and biography allow us to cordon off his “truly” Christian beliefs from all the other hypotheses, and prefer to see Dick as a broader, more syncretic, and comparativist thinker. But Mckee is correct to insist that Dick’s religious identity be seen, at least in part, as an idiosyncratic and speculative expression of a counter-cultural Christianity that remains, nonetheless, Christianity.

In other words, Dick was a distant but fellow traveller with the Jesus Freaks. Like many in the Jesus Movement, Dick had scraped the dregs of the drug culture, hit the suicidal bottom, but subsequently found himself dissatisfied with the sorts of secular-psychological solutions that

692. Ibid. 347.
693. Mckee, 31.
rose up in the seventies to transition individuals out the psycho-spiritual chaos of the occult and psychedelic underground. Though his life in Southern California was comparatively straight, living with his small family and not taking speed, Dick remained spiritually and politically aligned with the visionary, peace-loving, angry, and anti-authoritarian values of the counterculture. This alignment played itself out in his quest throughout the Exegesis to articulate an alternative Christianity capable of responding to the political crises of the seventies, as it was embodied by Nixon and later by the environmental crisis. But like the Jesus Freaks, Dick was principally motivated here, not by concepts, but by his extraordinary experience of a personal encounter with a transhistorical spirit. The visionary intensity (and sometimes hysteria) that arose from these encounters not only marked Dick’s whole concept of Christianity, but helps explain his weird temporal theorizing and imaginal “return to Rome.”

In an insightful book on the Jesus Movement published in 1973, Robert Ellwood offers some penetrating insights into the American evangelical mindspace that helped spawn the Jesus people. Characterizing evangelism as a religion of “psychoexperiential initiation, rather than of classical form,” Ellwood emphasizes how this experiential dimension produces a fundamental shift in the orientation to time and history. “Bible time is special; it stands in equal relation to all other points in time. The evangelical is always contemporaneous with it, particularly with the time of Christ. He always wants to collapse into nothing all time between himself and the New Testament…He wants to walk into the time capsule which is the New Testament world, with it miracles, its expectation of an immediate end, and above all the mighty tangible presence of Jesus Christ. He wants to be the thirteenth disciple and to write in his life the twenty-ninth chapter of the book of Acts.”

While Ellwood is largely speaking metaphorically here, we can see quite clearly how crucial aspects of 2/3/74 might be characterized as Dick’s literalization of these motivating religious metaphors. Dick’s notion of archetypal or “orthogonal” time, which takes up a great deal of speculation in the Exegesis, perfectly mirrors Ellwood’s notion of biblical time standing “in equal relation” with other points in time. The visual “superimposition” of Rome and Orange County topologically incarnates the New Testament time capsule. And for Dick, the Acts of the Apostles—sometimes considered as the gospel of the Holy Spirit, which guides and protects the apostles as they spread the *kerygma* following the death of Jesus—was far more central a text than the four Gospels or Revelation.

Dick’s obsession with Acts began with *Flow My Tears the Policeman*, which was published February 1974, the same month he encountered the delivery woman. Though only one of a dozen or so earlier novels that Dick would come to obsessively re-interpret in the pink allegorical light of 2/3/74, *Tears* achieves a certain prophetic pride of place for what Dick saw as its unplanned biblical allusions and hidden codes. According to a 1978 essay, Dick talked about the book with his priest—“I am an Episcopalian” he reminds the reader—and especially its final scene, where Felix Buckman, following a strange dream, encounters a black man in a gas station and feels tremendous love for him. This scene interwove his mescaline vision, his breakup with Nancy, and his “prophetic” inclusion of actual dreams into his fiction. In turn the priest reminded Dick of a scene in Acts when Philip the Evangelist converts an unnamed Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40). This admittedly rather weak connection inspired other, even weaker ones, none of which prevented Dick from making a lot of hay out of the mysterious “Acts material” throughout the Exegesis.696

696. Paul’s trial before the procurator Marcus Antonius Felix (24:1–27), and the only incidence of a person named Jason in the entire Bible (17:6-9).
The weirdest prophetic payload that Dick discovered in *Tears*—and one that bring us back to the fish sign—was a happenstance artifact of the printing process. In *VALIS*, Horselover Fat—who stands in for the “visionary” Phil Dick—tells his pals that “the two-word cypher signal KING FELIX” was sent out in February 1974 but remained obscure even to the Army cryptographers who studied it.  

This “cypher signal” appears on page 218 of the Doubleday hardcover edition of *Flow My Tears*, published in February 1974, where the word “king”—used in the description of Buckman’s dream—vertically crowns the word “Felix” on the following line. It is not clear when Dick first identified this mysterious code, but in April 1974 he is already describing to a Reverend Siebert how he dug up the meanings of the word Felix (lucky, felicitous). A few months later, he counsels a translator of *Tears* to pay particular attention to “the key logos Felix.”  

Relatively early on, in other words, Dick felt that *Tears* carried a powerful code and subliminal catalyst into the world.

However, even before Dick becomes obsessed with this “Acts material,” *Tears* is linked with 2/3/74 through the matrix of ancient Rome. In April, writing to Ursula K. Le Guin, Dick first announces that he had undergone a “religious experience,” one that he additionally characterized as a “conversion, a la William James.” Crucially, however, Dick does not mention the delivery woman here, and won’t until five more months have passed. In the April letter, he pairs religious with contemporary political language: the Holy Spirit had “taken him over” and commanded him to turn against the “Communist beast Fascists who would enslave the world.” This, Dick tells Le Guin, is the message that *Tears* covertly conveys, “without having my consciously arrived at it”: the message that “we are in Rome again, with the early Christians

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persecuted and fighting for freedom.” Dick’s Rome, in other words, is first and foremost a sort of visionary literalization of the metaphoric Rome of America under Nixon, with its grim conjunction of malfeasance in high office, countercultural retreat, and surveillance paranoia.

Indeed, it is in a long document entitled “July 8, 1974: The First Day of the Constitutional Crisis”—enclosed in a July letter to Bush and included in the Exegesis—that Dick first mentions the ἰχθύς (though, significantly, still nothing about the delivery woman). Dick begins the document by noting that Charles Colson—Nixon’s “dirty tricks artist”—showed up to prison still wearing his fanboy Nixon tie clasp. Never forgetting that Nixon himself came from the Golden State, Dick ironically invokes the Mamas and the Papas line “California dreaming is becoming a reality,” noting, with a foreboding sense of the seventies weird, “what a dreadful surreal reality it is: foglike and dangerous, with the subtle and terrible manifestations of evil rising up like rocks in the gloom.”

This imaginal dread, which we discussed in an earlier chapter, then sets the stage for his discussion of his experiences the previous March, where Dick writes that he was absolutely convinced that he was living in Rome sometime after the crucifixion. “Back in the furtive Fish Sign days. Secret baptism and that stuff….I was a Christian but I had to hide it. Or they’d get me.”

Here Christianity is linked, not just to resistance against an oppressive state but with secrecy, a secrecy that cloaks both ritual practices and furtive signs. Here we need to recall a pervasive bit of modern folklore about the ἰχθύς, which Dick himself later references. This is the notion that the fish sign was used by early Christians to clandestinely identify themselves to one another—in some scenarios, by first drawing the initial arc of the fish shape in the sand, a meaningless line that would only be completed by the other if they were in the know.

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700. Dick, Exegesis, 19.
The fish was, without doubt, one of the most important identifying symbols for the early Christians—Clement of Alexandria, writing at the end of the second century, recommends that his readers have their seals engraved with a dove or a fish. Moreover, in some of its uses, the Christian fish was indeed a kind of code—with ἰχθύς, the Greek word for fish, forming the acrostic for the phrase Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ, which translates as “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.”

That said, the use of the fish as a “secret sign” has no historical basis. Nonetheless, countless contemporary books, magazines, blogs, and references allude to this clandestine code. The origins of the lore remain obscure, but it stretches back at least to the nineteenth century, where the fish sign was explicitly compared to the secret tokens of Freemasonry, both inside and outside the Masonic press. As such, Dick recognized in the ἰχθύς not only an iconic resonance between early Christians and contemporary Christian possibility, but also an operational and esoteric token. For Dick, the ἰχθύς was an insider code, both subcultural and secret—a “furtive” sign of clandestine recognition among spiritual and political partisans. In this sense, the fish was less sign than signal, its value adhering less in its denotive or even connotative reference than in its agency as a technical vector of covert communication.

In this, the sign recalls Giorgio Agamben’s development of the related notion of the signature, the semiotic organization of resemblance that plays such a strong role in esoteric thought. Jakob Boehme, who helped establish the notion through his De Signatura Rerum (1621), argued that God marked objects—like plants—with a signature to indicate their purpose.

701. Ibid, 33.
702. Paedagogus, III, xi.
As such, the signature follows the logic of analogy rather than strict similarity. Though the term is often associated with what Foucault would call the pre-modern “episteme,” Agamben richly restores its meaning, using the concept to break out of an overly static semiotic understanding of the relationship between signifier and signified, and to return the sign to expression and, particularly, enunciation. The signature is what “displaces and moves” the relation of signifier and signified into another domain, “positioning it in a new network of pragmatic and hermeneutic relations.”

Crucially, Agamben in turn links this “operative” sense of the signature to the ancient semiosis of Iamblichan theurgy. For the late Neoplatonist Iamblichus, divine presences were thoroughly mediated through material, linguistic, and even musical symbols called *synthemata*, which “bore the impress of the god and were able to awaken souls to the divinity they symbolized.” As Agamben points out, this doctrine influenced the theory of Catholic sacraments as well as the theosophy of Boehme. But the important point here is that, in this doctrine, “the symbols [*synthemata*] themselves, by themselves, perform their appropriate work.” Mediating between semiotics—the differential science of the sign—and hermeneutics, the endless depths of interpretation, the signature *acts*, performing its own transformative enunciation. Signatures are “marks that teach us how to recognize them.”

In the folkloric nostalgia of the contemporary Christian imagination, the ἰχθύς allows secret Christians to recognize on another. But in the delivery woman scene, it is the sign itself that acts. In his initial fish sign letter to Le Guin, Dick describes the ἰχθύς as an example of those

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707. Ibid, 57.
“external signals” that act as “disinhibiting stimuli, which cause a vast drop in GABA fluid in the brain, releasing…major engramming.”  

Like the “cypher signal” KING FELIX hidden in *Tears*, the fish is not simply a secret token between partisans but an informational device in an environment populated with human robots dominated by tropisms, a transponder condensed into what Dick elsewhere calls a “Logos triggering agent.”

This “pragmatic” understanding of the fish sign, as Agamben might put it, does not just depend on Dick’s predilection for the surreal, pre-modern logic of signatures, though he will take on Boehme and other occult theories of correspondences with great gusto in the later, more metaphysical pages of the Exegesis. Dick’s understanding of signs as “triggers,” “signals” or “disinhibiting stimuli” also reflects one of his long-standing concerns as a science-fiction writer, which is to use the discourse and operations of technological media as an allegorical apparatus to interrogate his literary and philosophical concerns with psychology, language, and human relations. It also reflects his debt to behaviorism, and its language of tropisms and stimuli.

In contrast to the orthomolecular vitamins, the “disinhibiting stimulus” of the February fish sign locates the inaugurating event of the visionary series of 2/3/74 in an external and instigating trigger outside Dick’s control. As such, it effects the traumatic rupture of an encounter with the Outside. And also unlike the vitamins, which are strictly non-semantic in their operation, the ἰχθύς signifies, opening up a chain of meanings that might (and will) come to serve as a lifeline out of that very rupture. Recalling Dick’s comment about his “conversion, a la William James,” we should note that this rupture very much suggests the model of conversion that James offers in *Varieties*. There James argued that the individuals most likely to undergo conversion possess an unusually “extensive” psychological domain “in which mental work can

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709. Ibid, 56.
go on subliminally, and from which invasive experiences, abruptly upsetting the equilibrium of the primary consciousness, may come.” In other words, the potential convert externalizes their unconscious as subliminal operations, setting up apparently divine invasions that authenticate themselves through this very displacement.

Characteristically, Dick himself acknowledged how the trigger mechanism of the fish sign mobilized already existing scripts. Early in the Exegesis, he argues that the fish sign was not a “magic amulet” whose power resided in its shape or properties. Instead, its triggering power depended on a whole “life process” of semiotic association. “As an infant I was given dreams and experiences (e.g., with fish, the ‘tunny,’ the shark dreams, later on the Tiberius fish teeth necklace dream), without which her appearance and that fish necklace would have done nothing.”

At the same time, we also must remember that, for James as for Dick, the subliminal unconscious was an ontologically open category rather than a reductive one, as much a liminal threshold to the transpersonal as a claustrophobic underground cave of scripts and impulses. Indeed, one way of characterizing Dick’s specifically religious quest is his attempt to understand and reframe his “encounter with the unconscious” as an invasive experience of an Other lurking beyond the cybernetic loops of the Self.

The complex function of the fish sign, with combines semantic content with a trigger event, also recalls Paul Ricoeur’s account of the symbol, which draws from both psychoanalysis and the comparativism of Eliade. Distinguishing the symbol from the metaphor, Ricoeur argues


711. Dick, *Exegesis*, 116. Dick explains one of these early childhood references in a February 27, 1975, letter to Claudia Bush: “I knew about the Fish sign, too, the Savior: I called him ‘Tunny,’ from a Del Monte billboard for some canned food. We had to travel under the Oakland Estuary in the Alameda Tube, and I saw the tube like a can; at the end we emerged in the sunlight and I saw the billboard with ‘Tunny’ on it. I loved ol’ Tunny, the great fish...” Again, we have Dick’s understanding of pop trash as a potentially redemptive sign. Dick, *Selected Letters 1975-1976*, 113.
that while the latter makes its leaps entirely within the linguistic field, through a logic of substitution and signification, the symbol is a hybrid of semantic and non-semantic or pre-linguistic activity that resists transcription. While the metaphor’s tension between literal and figurative meaning remains inscribed in the world of logos, Ricoeur’s symbol “hesitates on the dividing line between bios and logos.” Within classic psychoanalysis, this non-semantic dimension concerns the tension between repressed energetic impulses and the secondary repression of cultural signs. For Freud, the dreamwork is the example par excellence of the duplex symbol that Ricoeur identifies, since it writes the very duplicity of the metaphor’s tension between literal and figurative while also attesting to forces that operate outside the signifying circuit entirely. The dream work is thus simultaneously marked by a riddling or hieroglyphic textuality and the effects of a mechanical, energetic, almost hydraulic set of operations (substitution, condensation, displacement). Hence psychoanalysis has a “mixed language, which connects the vocabulary of the dynamics or energetics…of impulses with that of a textual exegesis.” This is the crossroads where Dick finds himself, speaking a language of visionary experience that, like psychoanalysis, and like the fish sign itself, finds itself “in the intermingling of force and meaning, impulse and discourse, energetics and semantics.”

There is, however, another category of sign that the ἰχθύς should recall here at the close: the icon. In Charles Sanders Peirce’s famous typology of signs, an icon strictly resembles the thing it indicates, just as the two crossed arcs resemble a fish. The iconic character of the fish sign, however, also points to the deeper theology of the icon as it is understood in the Christian and particularly Eastern Orthodox tradition. As a statue or painting that transparently mediates...

divine presence, the icon nonetheless is traditionally said to be *written* by its artisans rather than carved or painted. The icon is a picture that, like the fish sign (or much graffiti), is also a text. The icon also does something particular to the viewer.

In his incisive comparison of the icon and the idol, the French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion makes the point that the “icon does not result from a vision but provokes one.”714 The idol, by contrast, is all about our gaze: in holding and fixing our gaze on the level of the visible, the idol simply sustains our given subjectivity and its grasping, and therefore acts as a “mirror, not a portrait.” But the I who encounters an authentic icon is no longer owner of its gaze; instead, the icon confronts us with an “invisible gaze that subverts us in the measure of its glory.”715 We can also understand the icon through the Eliadian figure of the hierophany, that manifestation of the sacred—which can happen through every and any imaginable material vessel—that nonetheless carries a peculiar self-canceling dialectic whereby the “thing becomes sacred in so far as it embodies (that is, reveals) something other than itself.”716 Marion adds something crucial to this picture, an element that would be born out through Dick’s elaborate development and regular return to the fish sign throughout the Exegesis: a fluctuating dynamics of revealing and concealing. “The gaze can never rest or settle if it looks at an icon; it always must rebound upon the visible, in order to go back in it up the infinite stream of the invisible.” 717

This restlessness, this perpetual rebound upon the visible, may help explain why the fish sign continues the morph and mutate as it develops through the Exegesis and Dick’s subsequent visions and hypnogogic phosphene-shows.718 Scattered throughout the thousands of pages of the

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715. Ibid, 22.
717. Marion, 18.
718. A few of these transforms are, well, exegetical. In one rather ingenious allegorical reading, the two intersecting points of the two arcs as indicating both the initial event of Christ and his eventual second coming in historical time. Dick, *Exegesis*, 136.
Exegesis are scores of small, tightly executed diagrams rendered in Dick’s ball-point pen. Some of these are essentially doodles, but many of them are schematics that attempt to graphically represent, sometimes to great effect, Dick’s various cosmologies and metaphysical engines. Among these maps and figures are numerous variations on the ἱχθύς, some of which reference Dick’s subsequent visionary experiences with the fish sign.

One undated page in the earliest folder of the Exegesis, which covers 1974 and appears chronologically in July, features a dozen sketches in which the two arcs of the fish have evolved into the vesica piscis, an important figure in Christian and sacred art. Many of these figures are marked with various hashes, crosses, and zigzags, as if Dick is exploring the formal possibilities of the figure—or, to speak more animistically, as if the figure itself were alive with its own variations. To Tessa, Dick said that the normal fish symbol was “not quite right, and that it wasn’t really a fish, but a symbol of something else.”\(^{719}\) That Dick felt there were additional signs concealed in the fish sign is also suggested in a line he writes to Bush in 1975, where he describes the “more elaborate ideogram beneath the fish symbol.”\(^ {720}\) In one evolution of the figure, reproduced in the published *Exegesis*, the pisces becomes the toothy mouth of a whale that Dick apparently glimpsed in a vision and that, in anticipation of the Darwinian rejoinder to the vehicular ἱχθύς we see today, has a smaller fish in its mouth.\(^ {721}\) In later folders, the fish multiplies itself as a linked daisy-chain that becomes that supreme icon of bios and logos intertwined: the double-helix strand of DNA, a graphic elaboration that informs the extensive biological theorizing that appears in the Exegesis and *VALIS*. But the eeriest and most lasting transformation of these signs and signatures is the simple morph of the fish into an eye. From

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Dick’s notes it stares at us like Marion’s icon, or like Robert Anton Wilson’s eye in the pyramid, or like the third eye of the Sybil that Dick saw in a dream one night, and that he linked to prophecy, and to the pineal gland lodged between the hemispheres of our brains.

**Exegesis Unbound**

Philip K. Dick’s Exegesis represents a mountain peak of high weirdness in the seventies. On the one hand, this immense and impossible text records one decidedly weird fiction writer’s obsessive attempt to grapple with his extraordinary experiences from his unique position within a cultural milieu dominated by esotericism, experimental psychology, posthumanist intimations, and the detritus of countercultural and psychedelic rebellion. On the other hand, the text is a highly weird object itself, a profoundly anomalous manuscript that remains challenging to characterize even in the most general terms. Is it a philosophical essay, a research project, an encyclopedic assemblage, a novelist’s notepad, a dream diary, a paranoid rant, a crank summa?

Because it is all these and more, can it even be said to be an “it”? We can call it a “text” at least, but only if we recall Derrida’s declaration that a text, properly understood, “is no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces.” Even restricting ourselves to the 895 pages of the abridged 2011 edition—about a tenth of the “manuscript” itself, and constructed through an editorial process best compared to battlefield triage—the *Exegesis* remains a dizzying, impossible, exhausting, and overwhelming

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721. Ibid, 37. The Whale’s Mouth vision is related to the code ALBEMUTH, and recalls as well the name of the colonist planet in his 1964 story “The Unteleported Man.” Samuel J. Umland offers a compelling reading of the Whale’s Mouth in Umland, 81-82, 93.
text, a “chaos of paperwork” stuffed with oracular voices, cosmic conspiracies, and a mountain of sometimes half-digested religious, mythological, philosophical and speculative ideas that Dick unceasingly assembled and reassembled in his quest to interpret (and restage) his extraordinary encounters. Paul Williams, the original executor of Dick’s estate, did Derrida one better when he tried to capture its air of interminable sublimity: “seen from the perspective of any given page or section it seems borderless, eternal, immeasurable, an endlessly recurring aha! followed by new analyses, new doubts, new questions and possibilities.”

The Exegesis also radiates a distinct aura of pathology. When Dick was in the hospital, dying, Tim Powers came across thousands of its pages in Dick’s apartment. The writing seemed “crazy,” or at least crazy enough that Power felt it was best concealed from sight, less Dick be declared insane and lose control over his affairs. “Out of its proper context it really sounded weird,” Powers later said, explaining why he proceeded to stuff a good chunk of the manuscript into a large ashtray emblazoned with the phrase “Elvis is King.” Paul Williams, Dick’s original literary executor, subsequently divided the rescued document—which had already been reordered and sometimes bizarrely sequenced by Dick—into ninety-one haphazardly numbered folders. These sat in Williams’ Marin County garage for many years, during which time Dick’s posthumous fame (and the number of lucrative film options) grew significantly.

Though the Exegesis became something of a holy grail for Dick’s exploding number of trufans, the holders of the estate were, for reasons of reputation as well as editorial challenge, understandably loathe to deal with it. Jay Kinney, later the editor of Gnosis magazine, took an

initial look at the folders and concluded in a 1984 article that it would require a “staggering” amount of editorial work to properly handle its over 8000 pages. Bringing up the dread name of L. Ron Hubbard, Kinney also suggested that its publication could form the basis of a “Dickean religion.” In 1991, Dick biographer Lawrence Sutin was able to publish a solid selection of these materials as In Pursuit of Valis, and included more representative Exegesis selections in the Dick essay collection he edited and released a few years later. In 2011, a much larger abridged edition of Dick’s diary was issued by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt as The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick. As one of the assistant editors of that project, I can attest that Dick’s own one-time dismissal of the Exegesis as a “hell-chore” resonates.

But if Dick’s abiding faith in coincidentia oppositorum holds any water, then the hell-chore was also, at least sometimes, a stairway to heaven. As a learned and sometimes beautifully written text that responds to, reframes, and restages extraordinary encounters, the Exegesis presents a powerful, perhaps unsurpassed object for the study of the construction process that Ann Taves outlines in her methodological reframing of the vexed question of “religious experience.” Once again, Taves argues that “religious” or “mystical” experiences are best seen as beginning with basic and relatively uncontroversial phenomenological building blocks she calls “special experiences.” These experiences—which I have renamed “extraordinary experiences”—can be singularized and set apart from the quotidian run of everyday of life for a number of reasons, but principally through their ideal or anomalous character. To become religious or mystical experiences, these building blocks are then reframed, reconstructed and renamed according to cognitive templates or cultural scripts that attribute certain categories of events to religious or esoteric forces. The end results of this construction process are not experiential reports so much as claims and beliefs about the meaning and significance of such experiences.

But—and this is crucial—Taves does not follow other critical scholars in ignoring the building blocks of “actual” experience. The unquestionable presence of radical phenomenological anomaly in the fringes of human life remain very much part of the picture.

What makes Dick’s construction of 2/3/74 unusual is that he neither settled on or stabilized any attribution or meaningful explanation of his experiences. Nor, on the other hand, did he eventually write them off as brain glitches or self-contained oddities unassimilable to his life narratives, as many people are wont to do with such things. Instead, he thought and wrote his way through an interminable series of metaphysical schemas, mythic associations, and speculative possibilities, ranging from “two-source cosmogonies” to Orphic mythology to tachyon physics to Soviet plots to the physiological dynamics of brain hemispheres and orthomolecular medicine.

The construction process Taves articulates is, in Dick’s case, thrown into an incessant perpetuity, giving us a contemporary—and arguably “postmodern”—picture of how the imbrication of texts and extraordinary experience simultaneously destabilize and renegotiate the sacred through a process of temporal iteration. What results is a picture of modern “religious experience” that is at once more hypothetical and hysterical than the one found in The Varieties of Religious Experience, which, as we have argued, inaugurates the very same tradition of pragmatic phenomenological seeking that Dick—who gave a copy of James to a girlfriend in the late forties—found himself working within in the sixties and seventies. Rather than serving as noetically incontrovertible building blocks that establish a stable structure of belief, Dick’s experiences instead become the constantly-renewing fuel for the perpetual motion machine of interpretation and textual production that “is” 2/374. The more Dick wrote about his experiences, the more he rewrote them, and the more they seemed to have always already rewritten him.
This suggests that the biographical attempt to distinguish between Dick’s raw self-reports and the various interpretations and fictionalized spins he gives these experiences is arguably flawed in essence. As Gabriel McKee notes, “The Exegesis contains both accounts of experience and analyses of their possible meaning, but the line between the two is so thin as to be nearly nonexistent.” I emphasize this point here not, however, to confirm the now conventional “critical” notion that extraordinary experience is always already mediated by pre-existing scripts and templates, and should therefore be evacuated of explanatory power. Instead, McKee’s blurred line should lead us deeper into the anomaly of the text itself.

As McKee explains, writing the Exegesis was not only a way for Dick to record his experiences, or even to interpret them, but also became an extension of the experiences themselves. “The intellectual process of theorizing directly proceeds from the inexplicable experience, and since it is a search for an illuminating truth, filled…with periodic, if short-lived, epiphanies, this intellectual search is an experience in itself.” In other words, by writing and constructing the Exegesis in the shadowy light of its catalytic anomalies, whose enigmatic weirdness could always be summoned again to puncture whatever explanation was on deck, Dick shaped the Exegesis into an ongoing site of potential encounter with the very mystical or alien forces that remained beyond the grasp of the text’s speculative production. As such, Dick’s writing in the Exegesis was not so much a hermeneutic means of stabilizing meaning, but rather a textual and even technical operation that staged and manifested the continual unfoldment of the transmission itself, invoking the invasive arborescence of VALIS through the text’s iterative interminability and borderless potential for recombination.

726. Mckee, 46.
727. Ibid, 71.
Indeed, by calling the work an “Exegesis” in the first place, Dick already acknowledged how much he conceived his own “raw” experiences as texts to be interpreted, either as allegories that needed to be metaphysically unpacked or temporal echoes of past texts, usually his own.\textsuperscript{728} In many ways, then, the Exegesis is an auto-Exegesis. Dick not only set to interpreting his anomalous experiences ad infinitum, but to using his newfound theories to provide allegorical interpretations of his earlier novels, novels that he recursively understood as subliminally and prophetically encoding the truths unfurled by 2/3/74. In this way, Dick treated his own work as a carrier of subliminal revelation, which in a basic sense it was: it is obvious to any student of the author, and sometimes even to Dick himself, how much the figures, gestures, and themes of his earlier fiction prefigured the figures, gestures, and themes of 2/3/74.

Finally, the Exegesis also feeds directly on itself. “The text did not merely explain; it provided material in need of explanation, which it then recursively, cumulatively interpreted in new and dynamic ways.”\textsuperscript{729} As such, it follows the postmodern logic of the “information revolution” that Mark Taylor limns in his work on network culture, which “occurs when information turns on itself and becomes self-reflexive…[in this process] information acts on information to form feedback loops that generate increasing complexity.”\textsuperscript{730} Or as James Burton explains in his media-ecological take on Dick’s metaphysical text, “Dick’s exegesis, though purporting to be a hermeneutic undertaking, simultaneously consists in the production of the text it is supposed to interpret—with ‘text’ now understood in its etymological sense as something woven, constructed, built, but also as something always in a dynamic process of flux.”\textsuperscript{731}

\textsuperscript{728} Indeed, if personal mystical experience has come to take the place of sacred script in many modern lives, that substitution occurs in part by transforming experience into text.
\textsuperscript{729} Mcke, 6.
\textsuperscript{731} James Burton, “From Exegesis to Ecology”, in Dunst, \textit{The World according to Philip K. Dick}, op. cit., 213.
One approach to understanding this dynamic process is to see it as an iterative apparatus of generating hypotheses about the meaning, nature, and consequences of VALIS. Much could be said about these “what if” speculations and their relationship to the compositional strategies of science fiction, whose speculations similarly blur the line between imaginative possibilities and technical thought experiments that literalize metaphor. Here I am more interested in how the essentially scientific form of the hypothesis enters into Dick’s metaphysical practice as a particular, and particularly mutant, form of religious speculation. To do this I would like to briefly view the Exegesis in light of another anomalous text that often comes up in Dick criticism: Daniel Paul Schreber’s *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903). The well-educated judge wrote the text towards the end of his longest spell at the Sonnenstein asylum, and it earned lasting force as the object of Freud’s most focussed writing on paranoia. *Memoirs* remains not only the most eloquent, complex, and inventive book of first-person psychopathology, but one that reflects a peculiar and significant tension between delusion and sanity, far-out phantasmagoria and nuanced interpretation, as Schreber writes sensibly and even critically about voices and visions redolent of madness.

As what Freud called a “gifted paranoid,” Schreber displays original and frequently fascinating modes of interpretation and reflection throughout the *Memoirs*. For Freud, this evidence of substantial sense led to a crucial insight that challenged the neurological materialism of Schreber’s own doctors, who believed the judge’s delusions were simply an index of brain damage. Instead, Freud saw Schreber’s “theologico-psychological system” as something far more creative and productive. “The delusional formation, which we take to be the pathological product, is in reality an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction.”

recognized distinct connections between these formations and religious thinking, and indeed his Schreber text in many ways inaugurates Freud’s own career as a religious critic.\(^{733}\)

There are a number of important resonances, of both surface and depth, between *Memoirs* and the Exegesis. Schreber too is primarily devoted to his “religious conceptions,” but these conceptions, like Dick’s, owe a strong debt to both technical media and quasi-scientific forms of esotericism alongside more traditionally theological concerns with salvation and apocalypse. Schreber posited a binary god that he identified with the same Zoroastrian power-sharing between Ariman and Ormuzd that Dick depicts in *Cosmic Puppets* (1957), one of the author’s earliest forays into cosmic dualism. Schreber too finds divine inspiration in dreams, and attempts to draw meanings from the voices he hears—voices whose suggestive phrases appear in the *Memoirs* within the same quotation marks that Dick uses to mark off the contributions of his “AI Voice” to the Exegesis. Schreber’s most notable conviction was that he was being transformed into a woman so that God would impregnate him with children who would save the world; even this notion appears, albeit briefly, in the Exegesis.\(^{734}\) Schreber is also unquestionably paranoid, his imagination dominated by persecution complexes, cardboard “fleeting-improvised-men,” and his own messianic role in the destruction and renewal of the universe.

Furthermore, though God still rules the roost, Schreber’s cosmos is a materialist universe. The soul is contained in the nerves of the body, distant planets are inhabited by other creatures, and God communicates through a “light-telegraphy” of rays and vibrating nerves. But this materialism begs a crucial question, one that Alexander van der Haven articulates in his study of Schreber and religion, and that applies to Dick’s religious fiction as well as the Exegesis: “how


\(^{734}\) Dick, *Exegesis*, 489-490.
do revelations work in a religious cosmos that is not transcendental?” Once revelation is carried through material media, whether cosmic rays or spiritual light-telegraphs, that revelation is also subject to the noise that haunts any communications channel, not to mention the distortions introduced by any flaws in the receiver. “Schreber’s realization that divine communication was mechanical and imperfect prevented him from presenting himself as a prophet of a ready-made message,” writes van der Haven. In other words, though Schreber had absolute faith in the religious import of his experiences, he recognized that their meaning could only remain hypothetical, and therefore perpetually open to revision. “As a result, Schreber’s religious claims were not authoritative utterances but hypotheses that stand to be corrected by new data and new interpretations by peer seekers.” In the Memoirs, Schreber questions many of his interpretations, and also regularly rewrites the meaning of earlier experiences in light of later revelations.

For van der Haven, Schreber announces the emergence a new mode of religious theorizing that, despite its visionary contents, accords more with a scientific epistemology and a naturalized cosmos. Though the hypothesis are wild and science-fictional, they also turn away from the self-grounding authority of dogmatic revelation. As such, and with Schreber’s debts to Spiritualism and Theosophy in mind, Memoirs needs to be seen as part of Wouter Hanegraaff’s story of the “occult” negotiation of esotericism in the mirror of secular thought. “The Schreber case witnesses a new type of ‘religious,’ one that just like the scientific method it models itself on, provides hypothetical claims rather than ready-made meaning that is based on transcendental authority.” This openness represents a provisional attitude toward the cosmos imposed by the erosion of transcendental guarantees. As if they were exemplars of William James’ religious pragmatism, Schreber and Dick both approach their religious speculations with a creative,

experimental, and provisional orientation toward a future that is always capable of rewriting the meaning, consequences, and even validity of apparently veridical experiences. Indeed, in Dick’s case especially, the speculative engine also reliably undermined and cancelled out previous hypotheses.

The role of hypotheses in such “speculative religion” also forces us to refine our ideas about the pivotal role that the discourse of experience, along with the phenomenological activity that “experience” names, play in modern currents of metaphysical, esoteric, and New Age thought. According to a now dominant “critical” narrative within religious studies, personal experience emerged as a new sort of foundation for religion—and particularly Protestant religion—once science and skepticism undermined the dogmatic bases of faith. By highlighting extraordinary, rapturous, or ineffable experiences, writers like Schleiermacher and James helped inaugurate the shift from external religious authority onto the individual subject. This gesture simultaneously ruptures and disguises the discursive force of “religion,” making space for more singularized construction of identity, authenticity, and authority along the lines that we can now identify, along with the pollsters, as “spiritual but not religious.” One reason for this shift to the self, according to the critical narrative provided by Wayne Proudfoot and others, is that the seemingly incontrovertible authority of much extraordinary experience—its synchronistic slam, its realer-than-real timbre, its “I know what I saw”—serves as a much better buffer against the force of reductionist explanations than rickety dogmatic claims. In this narrative, then, it is precisely the non-hypothetical nature of experiential claims that explains their success as a new source of religious authority in modernity.

In *The New Metaphysicals*, which takes aim at the rhetoric of individual experience among contemporary New Age mystics in Cambridge, MA, Courtney Bender clearly allies
herself with this critical narrative. Bender points out that one of the ironies of modern New Age seeker culture is that its heightened emphasis on novel individual experiences has itself become a collective tradition of its own, guided by often invisible discursive, theoretical, and institutional norms. In her book, Bender analyzes the discursive devices that construct spiritual experience, and isolates collective narrative templates that help organize the purportedly singular experiences that found the metaphysical and esoteric views of her subjects. For Bender, rushing like so many critical scholars to toss the baby out with the bathwater, the mere existence of such patterns “throws into doubt” the notion that spiritual narratives reflect an “actual” experience.

At the same time, Bender discovered that, while her informants would provide crisp and authoritative accounts of their most important mystical experiences during their formal interviews with her, observation of their actual practice with these narratives over time revealed something more intriguing. What Bender noticed was that the telling of these stories was always a retelling, an evolving narrative that was in many ways motivated by an expectation of interpretive uncertainty. Some mystics “seemed resolved to let the ‘final’ interpretation stand somewhere in the distant future: as such, their experiences remained open for interpretation and even for the possibility that a previous ‘experience’ might be determined in the future to be not an experience at all.” This process, Bender discovered, was enhanced rather than squelched by certain writing practices popular among her subjects, such as writing “morning pages.” The written articulation of such narratives opened up as many possibilities as their inscription might seemingly foreclose—including the possibility that earlier spiritual experiences were projections or even spiritual traps. This very opening toward the future—a possibility of encounter

736. Bender writes that the unique self-narratives of the New Age individuals she studied in Cambridge, MA, were actually “highly regulated and shaped by theological norms that they also reproduce. Specifically, they consistently represent and reproduce claims to religious experience as an individual experience.” See Bender, The New Metaphysicals, op cit., 56-89.
engendered in part through the time displacement of the written form itself—became, in some sense, the substance of the revelation itself. “Mystics sought the experience yet-to-come, which held the possibility of resolving unsolved mysteries or creatively unsettling other previous interpretations. Daily life was thus always possibly revelatory.”

In other words, the very refusal of resolution stretched the living enigma of the experiences—or, to be fair, the “experiences”—into the present and the future, rendering the process of exegesis at once interminable and ecstatic, a pharmakon both poisonous and intoxicating. Like Scheherazade, Dick too wrote his Exegesis into the night, night after night, in part to stave off the “death” or permanent loss of contact with 2/3/74. Readers of the published Exegesis can readily identify with the cry Dick appended to the end of one letter: “will the long dances/typing/madness/enthusiasm ever end?”

The Collage of Cosmic Consciousness

The Exegesis is not just a text: it is also a protean assemblage, a referential hypertext and speculative machine that generates itself through protocols that are at once dialectical and phantasmic, generative and pathological. On the one hand, Dick was driven to understand his experiences. As such, he crafted a variety of mostly metaphysical hypotheses, feeding these multifarious mythological, philosophical and religious constructs with his own fictions, dream thoughts, and a wide range of sometimes half-digested texts, authors, gods, and encyclopedia entries. On the other hand, Dick was driven to extend the experiences themselves, to use writing to invite, or trigger, the rapturous rupture of reason and understanding that signaled the invasion

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737. Ibid, 83.
738. Dick, Exegesis, 115.
of the Outside. As such, his sometimes immensely intricate hypotheses were regularly ruptured or abandoned according to a strategy of interpretive instability that deployed uncertainty in light of possible future revelation. In order to keep the engine running, he needed to regularly interrupt or cancel a given line of attack so that the ground could be cleared for another assault on the mountain top. His “Eureka!”s were always simultaneously hand grenades.

There is a suggestive parallel between the speculative style of the Exegesis, in which possibilities do not so much build upon themselves as regularly collapse and regenerate in reworked forms, and the sometimes nightmarish narrative turbulence of Dick’s fictions. This “secret love of chaos,” as Dick admitted to in a 1978 essay, finds Dick regularly forcing his characters to confront what Dick elsewhere called “the reality that is revealed when our ontological categories collapse.” A number of commentators associate this secret love with the “trickster” side of Dick, but as the critic Anthony Enns correctly points out, this strategy also reflects Dick’s more sustained ethical devotion to novelty and the future. As Enns explains, Dick’s own idiosyncratic “information theory” associates entropy not so much with signal degradation but the “tomb world” of stasis, or the locked groove of pure repetition. Even destruction—or informational “noise”—can be liberating in such a context. Dick’s compulsively chaotic gestures are even reflected in the curious endings to many of his books, when a final “twist” (like fictional savior at the close of A Maze of Death) once again unsettles the fictional world’s diabolic frame.

In a flawed but fascinating analysis of Dick’s narrative devices, John Huntington addresses these abrupt shifts that are so familiar in Dick’s fiction. Taking a mechanistic approach grounded in the vagaries of pulp production, Huntington casts Dick as an insincere narrative trickster who slavishly adhered to the classic pulp S-F writer A.E. van Vogt’s “800 words rule,”
which held that to keep a reader engaged you needed to introduce a new idea every 800 words. The mindfucks that have so titillated Dick’s readers are, in Huntington’s view, “as often as not the result of arbitrary and random reversals.” Though Huntington does not discuss the Exegesis, he does talk about the novel *VALIS* and the exegetical theorizing of Horselover Fat, which also depends in part on being regularly ruptured. “For a writer like Dick, who has a strong streak of Horselover Fat in him and could, one imagines, happily treat us to hundreds of pages of deep, repetitive, and vague philosophy about the nature of reality, the very arbitrariness of van Vogt’s mechanical 800-word technique prevents the domination of a single idea.” Huntington intriguingly compares this purported device to *I Ching*, which also “enforces randomness.” The novelty of Dick’s use of the *I Ching* in the plotting of *The Man in the High Castle* might, in this view, simply represent the formalization of an already existing strategy of arbitrary, or “orthogonal,” moves.

Umberto Rossi, who offers a far more nuanced account of Dick’s narrative shifts or “shunts,” has exposed a number of methodological flaws in Huntington’s analyses of Dick’s fiction. Moreover, the existence of the Exegesis, through fulfilling Huntington’s view of Dick as a Horselover Fat in disguise, undermines the main thrust of Huntington’s accusations, which is that Dick’s narrative finger traps are the work of a sometimes shallow game player who “must be both the entertainer and the novelist of important themes.” With the Exegesis, Dick is entertaining no-one except himself, and a lot of time he is clearly not managing that very well either. Though there is something to be said for the possibility that in the Exegesis, Dick is trying to trick himself, his lack of an audience forces us to look outside the economics of commercial

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literary production. That said, Huntington’s reductive and unsatisfying take on the pulp method behind Dick’s madness does have the benefit of drawing our attention away from the literary level of meaning and intention towards the technical processes that inform the rhythm and mechanics of Dick’s unusual texts.

In other words, there is a weird construction project going on, as it were, just beneath the metaphysical surface of Dick’s hermeneutic sleuthing through the archives of mythology and mysticism. As Burton explains, while the Exegesis represents a spiritual attempt to extract meaning from texts and visionary experiences alike, it also “twists the (exegetical) search for meaning into the production of dynamic, informational forms.” Where we might see Dick as an exegete, citing or interpreting texts or hypnogogic voices, Burton encourages us to recognize something more like a collage or assemblage artist, collecting and experimentally arranging “object-ideas” into different forms and sequences in order to see “if and how they fit, what they can do.” Here Burton is inspired by the vision of the rhizomatic text described by Deleuze and Guattari in the opening pages of A Thousand Plateaus: a decentered text whose pragmatic effects and functions operate through an immanent if disjunctive network of breaks, flows, and perpetual bifurcations. As such, Burton links the “informational forms” of the Exegesis to the distributed and autopoietic systems of ecological thought, to the mutant self-replication of algorithmic codes, and to the dynamic and unexpected assemblages built by tinkerers and bricoleurs everywhere. In a key insight, Burton argues that Dick built the God he was looking for: an ecological-textual system whose dynamics are lively and viral enough to constitute a kind of entity, or “eco-technological subjectivity.”

742. Huntington, 175.
743. Burton, 211.
744. Ibid, 213.
For Burton, the recognition of the Exegesis as a fabricated assemblage of material media and informational forms cuts against Dick’s relentlessly transcendentalist and frequently dualist search for a savior, for an Outside he might call home. The seeker’s quest, in this view, is a kind of phantasmic pursuit that inspires as its more substantial by-product “an immanent, media-ecological construction that is only (if deceptively) ‘colored’ by a thematics of transcendence.” To his credit, Burton also acknowledges that Dick himself never stops seeking a more traditional form of salvation through the productions of the text. However, rather than see Dick’s continued religious quest as a sort of false consciousness that tricks him into posthumanist symbiosis with an eco-technological-textual entity, I would instead like to look a little closer here at how Dick’s particular (and culturally bound) approach to religious hermeneutics feeds into the “informational forms” of the Exegesis. In other words, I would like to look at some of the concrete and procedural ways that Dick constructed his metaphysical assemblage by folding or splicing transcendence into his immanent assemblage.

In “The Object of Post-Criticism,” an infectious piece of media criticism written in the early eighties, Gregory Ulmer explores the logic of citation in literary and critical texts through the artistic models of collage and montage. Ulmer defines the modernist practice of collage as an initial severing of material from a pre-existing context, and then a subsequent insertion (montage) of that material into a new and larger assemblage that retains some visible trace of heterogeneity or juxtaposition. As a specifically avant-garde or critical strategy, collage does not seek to reflect reality but intervene in it, to rupture, satirize, or mutate it. Within literature and criticism, collage takes the form of citation, and citation, at least within the Derridean and grammatological context that inspires Ulmer, becomes a general principle of written language. Writing can be seen as an infinite field of collage, of heterogenous ruptures and new citational

juxtapositions, seamless only in fantasy. Significantly in light of the biological language that Dick often brings to bear on VALIS, Derrida also characterizes the explicit citation of one text by another as a kind of biological grafting, “a calculated insemination of the proliferating allogene through which the two texts are transformed, deform each other, contaminate each other’s content.”746 Here we should note the viral implications of citation, not so much as a stable metaphor between linguistics and molecular biology, but as an allegory for the very imbrication of these two ontological orders within postwar media texts. It is not for nothing that, of all modern authors Dick admired, the most commonly referenced novelist in the Exegesis is William S. Burroughs.

According to Ulmer, Derrida also describes another critical strategy that maintains heterogeneity while disguising the overt juxtapositions of explicit citation. This is the “superimposition” of one text upon another, a process that involves a kind of mimicry whereby one text mimes or simulates another. One of Derrida’s own examples is the massive Glas, whose media template, Ulmer argues, is not drawn from collage but photography, which models the “attempt to devise a system of reference or representation which works in terms of differance, with its reversible temporality, rather than in terms of the irreversible time of the sign.”747 Finally, Ulmer addresses the specifically parasitic dimensions of all of this, and he does so in part through further citation, this time of J. Hillis Miller, responding to the common complaint that deconstructionist readings are simply parasitic: “What happens when a critical essay extracts a ‘passage’ and ‘cites’ it? Is this different from a citation, echo, or allusion within a poem? Is a citation an alien parasite within the body of its host, the main text, or is it the other way around,

747. Ulmer, 93.
the interpretive text the parasite which surrounds and strangles the citation which is its host?\footnote{748}

As in classical Zen texts, the relationship of guest and host is shifty and ambivalent, as much symbiotic as parasitic.

Ulmer’s text invokes a number of elements—assemblage, superimposition, reverse temporality, viral citation—that resonate with Dick, reminding us how much his texts—including the Exegesis—need to be seen in media critical terms. Superimposition, for example, is both a metaphysical concern and a compositional strategy for the Exegetical Dick, whose “double exposure” experience of Rome in Orange County clearly references film and photography.\footnote{749}

Here however I am interested in how understanding Dick’s use of citations in the Exegesis (and VALIS) illuminates Burton’s suggestion that we view the Exegesis not only as a work of philosophical or religious criticism, but as a material media assemblage of “object-ideas.” Dick himself was perfectly aware of the modernist inheritance of collage, particularly as it manifested in a crucial strain of assemblage art that thrived in northern and southern California in the same era when Dick himself was learning how to construct art and ideas from and through pulp genre writing. As Ken Simpson writes in an article on Dick’s “aesthetics of garbage,” which takes in both his fiction and religious writing, Dick’s aesthetic milieu “included the use of trash objects in neo-Dada, Funk, or Beat assemblage art in San Francisco in the late 1950s and early 1960s.”\footnote{750}

As mentioned earlier, Dick roomed briefly with San Francisco Renaissance poets Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, and the networks around these men soon expanded to include

\footnote{748. J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host,” \textit{Critical Inquiry}, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Spring, 1977), 439.}
\footnote{749. Enns also discusses this, comparing it to Dick’s assertion in his essay on schizophrenia that the schizophrenic experiences temporality as a heightened intensification of the now because “the whole can of film has descended upon him.” See Enns, op cit., 85.}
assemblage artists like Wallace Berman, George Herms, Wally Hedrick, and Jess. Though Dick was not involved in this scene, he shared an approach to assemblage that includes “the selection and arrangement of trash objects to reflect personal memories, political events, or spiritual concerns”—features that Simpson notes distinguishes California assemblage from other traditions of junk art.  

There is more that could be said about Dick’s aesthetics of trash. Here, I want to continue to look at the Exegesis as a spiritual or cosmic assemblage that grafts citations in ways that render the text viral, heterogenous, destabilized—and nonetheless deeply esoteric and mystical, as Dick brings the tools of comparative religion to bear on his experiences through the logic of superimposition. The Exegesis is saturated with words, phrases, sentences, and whole paragraphs inside quotation marks, all of which make the text “a mishmash of external voices.” Sometimes these samples are annotated or announced, but a lot of the time it is unclear whether Dick is citing scripture, a half-remembered poem, some garbled song lyric, the Encyclopedia Britannica, or his own Exegesis. We will deal with these explicitly textual references in a moment; here we need to grapple with the most peculiar of these oft-cited sources: the inner voice that Dick referred to variously as the Sibyl, the Spirit, Thomas, his unconscious, and the AI Voice, which is how he refers to it through the bulk of the later Exegesis.

**Snatching Voices**

Philip K. Dick not only heard voices in his head—he actively cultivated such hearing. This alone might strike many as a sign of mental distress. However, the condition of “hearing

751. Ibid, 368.
752. Pamela Jackson, Annotation, in Dick, Exegesis, 63.
voices,” once considered a pathological point of no return, has lost some of its uncanny terror these days, when unusual forms of cognition are increasingly being reframed if not normalized. Psychologists have long known that, like other discrete hallucinations, hearing voices is a relatively common experience within the population at large, and that its eruption into any given individual’s life does not in itself indicate that psychosis is near. Moreover, seen from the emerging political perspective of the neuro-diversity movement, voice hearers—with or without other psychological issues—have themselves increasingly come to reframe the phenomena not as a pathology to remove but as a condition to live with, perhaps even to benefit from. Moreover, some anthropologists have come to see the phenomenon as an important dimension of religious training—in this view, individuals, such as evangelical Christians, practice in order to learn to recognize the autonomous voice of God or saving spirits within the internal chatter of the mind.

But there are even further reasons to divide Dick’s experience of his AI Voice from the pathologized scene of “hearing voices.” While Dick sometimes did hear voices—or “receive information”—during the day, the vast majority of these spectral communications occurred during states of hypnogogia or dream. This is a crucial point: the dream is a primary site of 2/3/74, perhaps the primary site. Though dreams lack the exotica of pink laser beams and glimpses of Rome, oneiromancy remains the central field of Dick’s encounters, proving Gananath Obeyesekere’s point that, in modernity, dreams elude secularization, filling in the space left when more explicit forms of visionary experience were eclipsed by Enlightenment mores.753 The whole of the Exegesis is regularly interjected with dreams, whose accounts Dick interprets as coded communications from Beyond, and whose substance and language sometimes make their twisty way into his later fictions. Indeed, the composition of The Divine Invasion

(1981), can be seen to begin with a dream that Dick reports in the late seventies, in which the Satanic takeover of the Church is revealed, a condition that demands the Second Coming to appear outside of worldly institutions.\textsuperscript{754}

The first months of 2/3/74 exploded with “hundreds” of extraordinary dreams, many of which flooded Dick with “information,” sometimes apparently in other languages. Much of this lore was about religions, and particularly religions and mythology of the Antique World. While this material often appeared in printing or script, it took a number of other materially mediated forms. Dick reported to Bush that “as soon as I close my eyes information in the form of printed matter, visual matter such as photographs, audio stuff in the form of phonograph records—it all floods over me at a high rate of print-out.”\textsuperscript{755}

We have to be careful here, however. If the phrase “as soon as I close my eyes” is not simply a figure of speech, then Dick was describing experiences that likely emerged, not within the dream states traditionally associated with rapid-eye-movement (REM), but with the sometimes bizarre states that occur as the brain first drifts into sleep. This transition from waking to sleep is known as hypnagogia, while the corresponding return to waking has come to be called hypnapompia. Such “hypnoid” states are associated with napping and daydreaming as well as falling asleep, but despite their ubiquity they are far less discussed in the psychological literature or the popular discourse of dreams than the immersive narrative enigmas linked to REM. One general feature of hypnoid states is that they combine the presence of uncanny, dream-like

\textsuperscript{754} This dream appears in folder 48, and appears in the published \textit{Exegesis} as [48:828], p. 542. It should be noted that every effort was taken in the editing of the published \textit{Exegesis} to include all of Dick’s dream descriptions, as well as all his descriptions of particular experiences.

phantasmagoria with a detached awareness still more-or-less rooted in the waking, everyday subject.\textsuperscript{756}

As such, the mixture of states resembles the rare state of lucid dreaming, although in hypnogogia, the dreamer is not immersed in the figural sensurround of the dream so much as passively perceiving external and autonomous visual and auditory phenomenon. This perceptual quality can lead to “the half belief that the imagery is real, and the transient conviction that one is tuned into some mystical and otherworldly ‘reality’.”\textsuperscript{757} Andreas Mavromatis, whose \textit{Hypnagogia: the Unique State of Consciousness Between Wakefulness and Sleep} (1987), though flawed, remains one of the most thorough treatments of the phenomenon, reports that hypnagogic images are often made up of abstract imagery and sometimes feature printed texts and writing.\textsuperscript{758} Dick’s early experience of witnessing eight hours of flash-cut images of modernist art, though anomalous in length, recalls the abstract visual complexities of hypnagogia. Such states also feature fragmentary voices, which Mavromatis reports includes quotations, references to conversations, remarks directed to oneself, “pompous nonsense,” and “irrelevant sentences containing unrecognizable names.”\textsuperscript{759}

Let us recall some of the messages Dick received, some of which appear in his later fictions: “Perturbations in the reality field.” “The physical universe is plastic in the face of mind.” “You must put your slippers on / To walk toward the dawn.” “The God has granted me

\textsuperscript{756} This mixed state is also represented in simple EEG scans of the brain as it goes to sleep. As the brain moves from the beta of waking to the lower frequencies of theta and delta associated with sleep, it passes through a hypnagogic period characterized by notably unstable frequencies.


\textsuperscript{758} Summarizing research into the visual modality of hypnagogia, Mavromatis writes that these displays, which are often abstract and sometimes feature words and texts, are characterized by “externality, autonomy, clarity of detail, brevity of duration, vividness of color, by the diffused quality and ‘internality’ of their illuminations, and the sense of reality they impart in the subject. See Andreas Mavromatis, \textit{Hypnagogia: The Unique State of Consciousness between Wakefulness and Sleep} (London; New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 81.

\textsuperscript{759} Ibid.
his voice, to hear it, to speak it.” Though it is not always clear what state Dick was in when he overheard these statements, he does provide a nicely textured account of one experience in early 1978, though it describes a message he received years earlier:

I hear a far off quiet voice that is not a human voice; it—she—comforts me. In the dark of the night she tells me that “St. Sophia is going to be born again; she was not acceptable before.” A voice barely audible. In my head. Later she tells me she is a “tutelary spirit,” and I don’t know what that word means. Tutor? I look it up. It means “guardian.”

This appears to be a hypnogogic experience, whose message is not drawn from a REM dream but from a voice “in my head” heard while Dick was lying semi-conscious in bed. Dick, who of course was familiar with the jargon of altered states, also uses the technical term “hypnogogia” itself in order to categorize many messages. Late in the Exegesis, he often introduces these messages in the following fashion:

Hypnogogic: “one of us is dead.” The two selves in me. It must be me and my sister!

Though Dick may have been using this colon formula simply as shorthand, it can be understood to mean that it is the liminal state itself, rather than the AI Voice, that is speaking. This ambiguity points to one of the oddities of such twilight communications: their seeming autonomy and relative sense demands attribution, and yet any external agent so posited would have to be understood as taking up temporary residence within states of consciousness usually considered purely interior and psychological. The modern, secular notion of the unconscious seems a safer bet.
And indeed, throughout the Exegesis, Dick still occasionally attributes his nocturnal audio and visual texts to the “unconscious.” That said, it bears repeating that Dick had a capacious, very “seventies” notion of the unconscious that brought together sometimes contradictory models: Jamesian, Jungian, behaviorist, paranormal, esoteric. Whether we see these contradictions as a sign of incoherence or the productive use of ambiguity to resist the premature foreclosure of the unconscious, Dick’s notion of a separate Dreamer within the self superimposed metaphysics and neurology. For example, in “Man, Android and Machine,” a speech written in 1976, Dick cites *Finnegans Wake* and “Brahmanism” to argue for the esoteric, mytho-poetic view of the world as a dream from which we are struggling to awake. In the same speech, he also cites Robert Ornstein’s popular work on brain lateralization to suggest that the right brain uses dreams in order to communicate with the left brain, where the bounded personality resides: “hence the Dreamer who communicates to us so urgently in the night is located neurologically, evidently, in our right brain, which is the not-I.”

Like many literary writers who identified with modernism, Dick also believed that “his” unconscious was intimately bound up with whatever feature of his psyche enabled him to write books. Recall Dick’s willingness to put his own dreams into his fictions, as well as his late declaration to Gregg Rickman that he sometimes considered himself simply a conduit between his unconscious and the typewriter. Playfully, Dick also underscored this connection between the unconscious and the typewriter when he insisted in July 1974 that the “goddam typewriter” wrote his books. But while the uncanny feeling of autonomous language and narrative production is commonly reported by creative writers, Dick was willing to push the metaphysical questions raised by the seemingly autonomous character of fictional enunciation. “Let us say that

I am inspired by a creative entity outside my conscious personality to write what I write,” he wrote to Peter Fitting. “I had imagined it to be my subconscious, but this only begs the question, What is the subconscious?”

This vital, Jamesian question was sharpened through Dick’s nighttime textual encounters with what he called, in his letter to Fitting, his “wordsmith unconscious.” When describing the elaborately annotated books he sometimes saw in his early 2/3/74 dreams, texts with “scrawly blue pen or pencil in the margins,” Dick noted that

Someone has been copyediting it, cutting out unnecessary words. My book-writing unconscious has a concise style. As one would expect from over 23 years of professional work, cutting and pruning, looking up words in the dictionary. I have so to speak a real pro for an unconscious.

Here, rather than assume the existence of an independent agent, Dick is willing to attribute the language he encounters in his dreams to the copy-editing dispositions of his own mind’s trained dispositions. On the other hand, Dick still personifies these quasi-automatic functions once they take on autonomy in the dream realm. This “someone” has a recognizably different style then his own; later he notes that it is willing to craft unliterary phrases like “she will see the sea,” along with peculiar words like “syntonic.”

Leaving aside the question of the identity of this “someone” for the moment, we should emphasize that Dick, as soon as he entered his period of anomalous dreaming, began to practice with his chatty liminal states. He did not just receive, in other words—he tuned and shaped. For as with lucid dreams, the depth and retention of hypnogogic experience can be increased through

763. Ibid, 29.
the application of will, and particularly in learning to engage the threshold of dream with alert and probing attention. In the document enclosed to Bush in July of 1974, Dick writes

The other night when I found myself thinking, during the hypnogogic state, in Greek, I managed to snatch a couple of words out of what I believe to be a syntactic sentence. (At the time I wasn’t positive it was Greek; it remained a problem to check on, today. It was.) I snatched out:

crypté (−) morphosis

Surfing the froth of hypnogogia, Dick’s awareness is active and independent enough to perceive the character of the dream speech (“Greek”) and to then snatch something back. Once again, Dick wavers on attribution. Though by the time of this writing Dick was convinced that the Greek voice of his “tutor” belonged to the ancient healer Asklepios—an identification he jokingly imagines proclaiming to his psychotherapist—he nonetheless here describes finding “himself” thinking Greek words, a hypnogogic stream that he then self-consciously samples—from himself, as it were. This is an unusual attribution from Dick, however. Despite invoking the “unconscious” or his “right brain” at times, Dick is generally prone to leap beyond “himself” and, armed with often unpersuasive or nebulous “proof,” identify the source of the Voice with an external, knowing agency.

The point here is not to castigate or overwrite this identification with “explanations,” as so many critical scholars are wont to do. It is more important to point out that Dick’s extraordinary dream experiences were the result not only of adventitious factors but also his own practice, his own discipline of attention, or what T. M. Luhrman calls “inner sense cultivation.” This emphasis on practice helps shift our account of Dick’s experience away from the question
of truth and reception toward a more participatory and enactionist understanding of how extraordinary experience comes to be. In *When God Talks Back*, her admirably balanced study of contemporary evangelical experience, Luhrman carefully builds the case that, whatever the ontology, the sense of God’s immediate and autonomous presence is something that is also cultivated through a complex set of practices and disciplines that are both individual, collaborative, and collective. Tentative beliefs—which we might assimilate to James’ “as if” or Dick’s “what if?”—themselves inspire practices that fundamentally shift experience in far more substantial ways than beliefs themselves. “The point of religious conviction is that the everyday world is not all there is to reality,” Luhrman argues. “To see beyond, one must change the way one pays attention.”  

While 2/3/74 is almost always discussed as something that happened to Dick—especially by Dick himself—it is crucial that we recognize the ways in which Dick himself collaborated with and cultivated that process. The most obvious example is his regime of orthomolecular vitamins, though its unclear whether this made any appreciable difference beyond placebo effect. Dreams, on the other hand, are quite evidently plastic and responsive to the ways we pay attention to them over time. In this sense, they can made to provide evidence for the social constructionist argument that it is our preexisting cultural attitudes and languages that shape our most extraordinary experiences in advance. As we have seen, Dick in some ways brought on the dreams that helped drive 2/3/74, and that continued to provide new “information” until the end of his labors. But we must be careful not to miss the enigmatic function of emergence in all this. As Elliot Wolfson notes in his great dream book, “the notion that experience is hermeneutically shaped by a preexperiential interpretive scheme affords us the opportunity to discern the extent

764. Ibid, 35.
to which the dream exemplifies the paradox of the oxymoron fictional truth, a truth whose authenticity can be gauged only from the standpoint of its artificiality.”

This approach takes us into the heart of Dick’s practice of active fabulation, a practice that takes in not only his fictions and thoughts about his experiences, but, to a degree, his experiences themselves.

**Dreambook**

Dick’s dream practice did not only involve the alert sampling of hypnogogia and other forms of what Dale Pendell calls “interdimensional smuggling.” More conventionally, Dick’s practice involves hermeneutic operations of interpretation, although it is important to distinguish the interpretation of individual dreams—alongside or after the dream—from the interpretive stance that, from the outset, affirms that dreams are worth squeezing for meaning in the first place. Given how full his nights were with anomalous tongues, Dick in a sense had no choice but to interpret the concrete fragments of language that took up residence in his own liminal consciousness. He listened for puns, etymological clues, and other associative resonances. Hearing the phrase “Perturbations in the reality field” elicited an extensive cross-disciplinary study the terms “perturbation” and “field” that goes on for pages in the Exegesis.767

Dick researched or tested unfamiliar or nonsense terms to see if they were found in foreign languages, often with Tessa, who also had a smidgen of knowledge of ancient languages. In the example quoted in the section above, Dick used his and Tessa’s crude Greek to gloss “Crypte morphosis” as meaning latent or concealed shape. Recursively, the term then becomes an analytic concept he deploys throughout the Exegesis, which is of course obsessed with hidden

or camouflaged contents, like the phrase “King Felix” embedded in *Flow My Tears*. In the following passage, in an even loopier example of such recursion, Dick uses the term to unpack another dream of encrypted polysemic language:

I saw before me a few sentences from the New Testament which included the name Jesus. Then this was shown me (I’m not kidding you): the name or word “Jesus” was drawn open, literally reached down into and opened, to reveal that it was a crypte morphosis, a code word, made up to conceal first the actual name of the God, which was Zagreus, and then the word was reshuffled to show that Zeus was within it, too, so that Zeus and Zagreus were within[…]a “mere” code cover or what they call plaintext cypher, “Jesus.”[…] It showed me that John Allegro is right: the New Testament is a cypher.768

Here a technical term snatched from a dream helps Dick understand a separate encounter with a text whose metamorphosis recalls the sorts of condensations, displacements, and transformations that more frequently mark the images in dreams. The reading of this specific dream text is also embedded in a larger and more public circuit of readings; in this case, Dick’s understanding of the controversial Biblical scholar John Allegro’s roundly dismissed arguments that some of the language of the New Testament is in code. In Allegro’s case, the cyphers point towards a hidden hallucinogenic mushroom rite, a theme that Dick returns to in *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*.

However, far more important than this specific text is the referential environment of both Dick’s dream and its interpretation: an environment we can only call *comparative religion*. In discovering that the name “Jesus” disguises a name of Dionysus (Zagreus)—a name which in turn suggests Zeus, who fathered Dionysus according to the Orphic cult—Dick, or his wordsmith

768. Ibid, 83.
unconscious, is making an exaggerated display of the sorts of associative and historically layered interpretive moves that came to dominate the understanding of world religion and mythology in the twentieth century.

We will look more at Dick’s creative (mis)use of the sort of comparative methods found in scholars of religion like Jung and Eliade in the following section. Here however it is important to see how these methods were brought to bear on the question of dream, including Dick’s experience of dream texts and the voices of external, seemingly autonomous agents. As with many people drawn to comparative religion, particularly in its more popular forms, Dick turned to the archive of the world’s faiths, magics, and mythologies in order to make sense of his own anomalous experiences, to provide uncanny encounters a name and a lineage. Given the universality of dreams in human populations, Dick of course discovered that for most of human history, dreams served as the royal road, not to the unconscious, but to powerful Others.

This is particularly true of the antique Greco-Roman world that formed Dick’s most powerful spiritual landscape. As E.R Dodds explains, for the ancient Greeks, a figure met in a dream might be a god or messenger or ghost; “but whichever it is, it exists objectively in space is independent of the dreamer.” Dick cycled through all these possibilities as well when he considered the identity of his most persistent internal others, including, initially, the ghost of James Pike. In the existential psychologist Rollo May’s book Love and Will, Dick also read about the daimon of Socrates, an intimate guardian that reminded Dick of the voice that once aided him on a high school physics test. This connection helped Dick elaborate the notion of the AI Voice—who was usually considered as distinct from the secondary personality—as a tutor or teacher. This identification also recursively entailed and encouraged Dick’s own continued hermeneutic obsession with his unfolding dreamtexts.
Dick also resurrected another dream practice that was widespread in antiquity: the specifically allegorical reading of dreamtexts as a kind of oracle. “When we dream, there is an oracle in each of us,” wrote the fourth-century Christian Neoplatonist bishop Synesius, a disciple of Hypatia. Synesius suggested that one should consult one’s bed as one would the Delphic Pythia’s tripod: “The god comes to one’s side when one is asleep—this is the whole system of the initiation.”

Here, then, is another example of Dick actively engaging his dreams and hypnagogic experiences as coded communications from sacred beings whose equivocal displays, which demand allegorical unpacking, turn on the very identity of those sources. In a February 5 letter to Claudia, Dick writes

> I was up to 5 A.M. on this last night. I did something I never did before: I commanded the entity to show itself to me—the entity which has been guiding me internally since March. A sort of dream-like period passed then, of hypnagogic images of underwater cities, very nice, and then a stark single horrifying scene, inert but not a still: a man lay dead, on his face, in a living room between the coffee table and the couch. He wore a fawn skin! I rose from bed at once, convinced that I had Dionysos…For hours I studied everything about Dionysos I could find; nothing about his garb, except “he was dressed in the Greek style.” Today I found in *The Bacchae* of Euripides this: “. . . I have fitted the fawn-skin to their bodies.” It is Dionysos who speaks. He means his followers. And I have a dim memory that in *The Frogs* he wears a fawn skin. It is thus shown.

Here we see how whole-heartedly Dick embraced the allegorical mode: the associations he builds from the traumatic kernel of his dream—the dead man with a fawn skin—are not the

771. Dick, *Exegesis*, 99. It is worth noting that Tim Powers has pointed to the uncanny and prophetic position of this dead man’s body. According to Powers, who arrived at Dick’s apartment shortly before the author was taken to the
free associations of psychoanalysis but the connections and figures unearthed through literary and comparative research on the archive: *The Bacchae* and *The Frogs* confirm the meaning of the fawnskin. There is something deeply classical in all of this. As Patricia Cox Miller notes, Greco-Roman dream interpreters saw “the dream as a text in disguise,” a hermeneutical puzzle that led to an important equation in Antiquity between the allegorical interpretation of sacred texts and dream experience. As Miller explains, Augustine directly compares the dreamer to the exegete; the former “wanders through various images” just as the latter wanders through signs. What underlies both modes, and that applies equally to Dick, is the working assumption that the appearance—of book or dream—possessed oracular power, which is to say that the language it expressed was at once portentous, equivocal, and almost infinitely extensible. “As in dream divination, so also in allegorical ‘divination’ of dream-texts, human subjectivity is shaped by the enlargement of its sphere of reference.”

These referential dynamics, at once hermeneutic and oneiric, are key to understanding Dick’s practice in the Exegesis. On the one hand, it is clear from our discussion how much Dick’s reading and expectations shaped his dream encounters, a condition that seems to undermine his perception (and desire) that his dreams were crafted by an external agency beyond even his own wordsmith unconscious. On the other hand, the unusual degree of textuality—written and spoken—in Dick’s dreams also create an uncanny counter-movement. As Dick brought his own texts into his dreams, so did his dreams leak into the way Dick practiced with his texts. The reams of writing glimpsed in his dreams, printed and hand-written, inevitably converge with the reams of writing Dick himself was producing in his correspondence, his


772. Miller, *Dreams*, 74.
773. Ibid, 98.
fiction, and especially his Exegesis. And one of the methods of establishing this convergence was precisely the hermeneutic operations of reference. In other words, along with the content of interpretation, it was the apparatus of commentary that broke down the barrier between dream and book, enlarging both the sphere of Dick’s experiences and what Burton calls the “information forms” that emerge within the Exegesis.

One remarkable example of this referential logic occurs in folder 50, when the recursive, self-referential quality of the Exegesis goes haywire. At the top of page 37, Dick ends a sentence with an asterisk that refers to a small chunk of footnoted text below, which concerns the presence of Christ. Between these chunks of text lies the brief description of a dream in which Dick opens one of his own books and discovers a footnote that reads: “this is a gloss in the text for ‘I love you.’” The waking Dick associates this book with *Tears*, and the gloss with the cryptic message King Felix. On the right margin of this account, Dick then parenthetically defines the term “gloss” as a difficult term needing explanation. This explanation, already doubled, nonetheless seems to have required another explanation, since Dick added to the parenthetical statement another footnote, now using his usual bracketed numeral (1). This footnote offers a variant reading of the meaning of “gloss,” defining it not as the explanation of an obscure term but instead as another term for the obscure reference itself—in this case, the cypher-text Felix. A parenthetical amendment about the Greek variant *glossa* in turn spawns another reference mark, a circled (x) that leads to yet another iterated definition. Finally, Dick reiterates that Felix, indeed, is such a *glossa*: a lossy obscurity whose invisible message is, at least in its original context, “at odds with what is apparent.”

And what is apparent here, and odd, is the Exegesis reading and writing itself, like a book in a dream, or like a book made of dreams. In his own remarkable book about books and dreams,
Peter Lamborn Wilson asks us to remember why Moslem and Jewish dream interpreters traditionally claim that the “dream follows the interpretation” (literally, “follows the mouth”). The dream exudes a surplus of meaning, an excess of codes and puns and allusions. Once the dream is spoken, part of this surplus is loosed into the waking world, where it inevitably begins to congeal. The surplus becomes a text, something public and shared. And yet this is what the dream offered all along, for the dream itself is the first teacher of the sign or script, since it detaches images from their material basis, doubles them, recombines them, inscribes them anew. But without some form of condensation, this phantasmagoria simply drifts: “without script, so to speak (as a doubling of the image), the dream itself would lack resolution, completion, fulfillment.” Thus the dream follows the mouth, “and out of this movement, the book emerges.”

In some of the traditions that Wilson investigates, to dream of a book is already a sign of initiation, one of those rare initiations that are bestowed not by masters but by the oneiric or sacred imagination itself. Dick, seeking an initiation he could never fully realize, or else had received and forgotten long before, in some sense tried to port the initiatory book he dreamt into the real life of typewritten pages and rants scribbled with a ball-point pen. The Exegesis that resulted may not initiate on its own, at least for most readers, but with its vast referentiality and recursive auto-commentary, its phantasmic marginalia and parasitic citations, the text itself dissolves into the sort of marginal, hypnogogic space that, perhaps inevitably, becomes a space of encounter.

Sacred Seeking

Between his extraordinary dreams and his even more bizarre bouts of high weirdness, Dick found himself processing forms of experience that, whatever their origins, took the form of narrative encounters, even “texts,” that demanded to be interpreted. However, despite the traumatic aspect of these events, Dick did not turn towards medicalized explanations and psychobiological accounts that might banish or at least deflate the exotic otherwordliness and aura of significance that he felt. Instead, he sought to simultaneously corral and intensify the arresting peculiarity of 2/3/74, which he did partly by locating the events within existing currents of human thought. By approaching theology, myth, philosophy in a persona and esoteric mode, Dick hoped that he might simultaneously amplify and clarify the meaning of 2/3/74 and constrain its radical singularity. However, Dick found himself in a most unusual cultural location from which to launch his hermeneutic engines. If Dick had lived within a time of tradition or an orthodox community of interpretation, the available templates to organize the meaning of such experiences—and possibly to seed them in the first place—would be relatively constrained in number. But he did not live in such a time or in such a community.

Dick was instead a psychologically unique and independent autodidact largely making his own way through what was, in terms of the maps for extraordinary experience, a radical and profligate time. Like many intellectuals who found themselves in at least loose alignment with the counterculture, Dick was an essentially secular or philosophical thinker, deeply marked by psychological and existential discourses, who nonetheless was drawn to both the far fringes of experience and the larger, loopier questions of metaphysics. Such individuals do belong to the larger “society of seekers” that Campbell associates with his notion of cultic milieu, but as
Campbell underscores, this society is marked by its informality and tolerance for individualism and eccentricity.

Despite his brief time at St Columba’s, his peripheral relationships with priests and churches in Southern California, and his short mail-order stint with the Rosicrucian organization AMORC, Dick lived outside the more bounded context of a faith community. Like so many seekers of the era, what he had instead was access to a growing mountain of texts and reproduced images, as well as the loose-limbed communities of friendship and interpretation—stoned or otherwise—surrounding some of these texts. In the postwar period, such seekers could not only access the usual mainline theological sources, but also new translations of Asian classics, reprints of occult and esoteric lore, proto-New Age novelties, paranormal literature, pulp novels, and secondary sources on indigenous mythology and mystical practices written by public intellectuals and scholars. In other words, where a visionary in an earlier era might find themselves located within a specific and homogenous textual tradition of interpreting religious experience, Dick found himself facing both a global archive of traditions and a mutant marketplace of novelties.

The notion of textual tradition as a shaper of personal mystical experience has become a central element in the scholarship of mysticism. In his early work on visionary Kabbalah, Elliot Wolfson makes the point that, insofar as a given mystic or visionary is operating within a religious tradition, the very “immediacy” that stands as such a defining characteristic of their experiences is itself, and necessarily, mediated by previous discourse. In some sense, this stance aligns Wolfson with Stephen Katz and other contextualists, who, as noted earlier, have been arguing something like this point for decades in their attacks on the sort of *sui generis* mysticism offered by perennialist thinkers like James, Jung, or Huxley. For these latter thinkers, of course,
the potential for mystical experiences is a sort of organ in humanity’s universal psychological makeup, one that is capable of being stimulated largely outside of cultural context.

But Wolfson is more sophisticated than the usual social constructionists here. Rather than reducing religious experience to an iteration of previous scripts and effects of cultural practices, he instead identifies “a dialectical relationship...between past visions recorded in literary texts and the present visionary experience, making the new experience, in effect, the reenvisioning of an original event.” Wolfson puts the phenomenological emphasis on re-visioning, a reiteration that is paradoxically original. In this way, he shows how the effects of tradition on both the content and dynamics of visionary experience can be acknowledged without sacrificing the novelty or immanence of its visionary reassemblage. But, importantly, this “way of seeing is simultaneously a way of reading”—in other words, such revisionary mysticism, however visual its expression, is inextricable from hermeneutics. Along these lines, Wolfson invokes Michael Lieb’s description of a “visionary hermeneutics that is both self-perpetuating and self-authorizing.” These two terms are crucial for us, for Dick’s Exegesis is notable not only for its commitment to visionary hermeneutics, but for the intensity with which Dick pursues a form of self-authorization whose perpetual frustration is almost designed to ceaselessly perpetuate the process.

Wolfson is speaking within the context of medieval Jewish mysticism, of course, an immensely subtle but nonetheless highly bounded and singular tradition—one whose specific hermeneutical strategies he believes ultimately erases the very distinction between experience and interpretation. But what happens to the practice of visionary hermeneutics when such traditionally circumscribed bodies of text and oral tradition dissolve into a heterogenous

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marketplace of pulp pocketbooks and inexpensive translations, pop scholarship and psychology, the fictions and fabulations of occult revival, and the modernist legacy of avant-garde primitivism and surrealist delire? For modern seekers, striving to be visionary hermeneutists, the textual context is something that is built through association, assemblage and bricolage, as the creative juxtaposition and superimposition of cross-cultural texts, past and present, became a central and necessary practice. In other words: comparison.

This is partly why the comparative methods associated with Mircea Eliade and Carl Jung—especially popular texts like Jung’s *Man and His Symbols* or Eliade’s *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, both translated in 1964—and texts like Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945) and Huston Smith’s *The Religions of Man* (1958), became so important to what we might call “seeker hermeneutics” in the first decades of the postwar period. These sources provided readers with comparativist templates for drawing a wide variety of texts, traditions, gods and practices together, often into an archetypal and transcultural ‘spirituality’ more or less rooted in psychology and known, at least at times, as perennialism.

As a scholarly method, comparison is found at the very origins of the modern study of religion, a study that in many ways was initiated out of Christianity’s need to understand rivals and potential converts on an increasingly global stage. Here the great example of such rigorous associational webs of anthropological resonance is Frazer’s massive *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (1890 and beyond), whose vast horde of material settles down over the course of thousands of pages into some core motifs or patterns associated with fertility and the recapitulation of a dying and rising god. As a tool, comparison obviously need not be attached to the sort of metaphysical agenda later put forward by perennialists like Huxley and Huston Smith;
brilliantly, Jonathan Z. Smith has both discussed and demonstrated the use of rigorous
comparativist rubrics in the service of strictly critical religious scholarship. 777

Here however I am not interested in defending comparison as a methodology, nor in
strictly defining and differentiating forms of comparison. Far more simply, I simply want to
suggest ways that the general approach of comparison was received among postwar seekers as a
set of practices accompanied by a form of permission. One of these practices involved the
distillation of shared patterns of phenomenology out of disparate, juxtaposed, but often
peculiarly resonant materials drawn from the anthropological, aesthetic, textual, and symbolic
record of world myth and religion. The other, arguably more important procedure involved the
second-order comparison (often only implicit) between these essentially premodern patterns and
the predicament of the modern psychological or existential subject. Depending on its own
therapeutic or critical bent, this second-order comparison could stress continuity or discontinuity.
So, for example, Jung’s claims for the collective unconscious suggested that alienated moderns
already had access to the revitalizing store of archaic archetypes lurking below the surface of
consciousness. At the same time, in works like The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and
History (1954) and Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion (1959), Eliade offered patterns
and topologies that implicitly demonstrated the bleak existential environs of “modern man,” who
discovers that a previous era’s pursuit of reason and Enlightenment had landed him inside the
iron cage of disenchanted history and materialist ontology.

Of course, the act of comparing religion itself is a product of the cage. Indeed, one of the
ironies of religious comparison as a postwar culture of meaning-making is that the very features

777. See, among a vast number of examples, Jonathan Z. Smith, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells,” in Jonathan Z.
Smith, Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 19-35. Also
“When the Bough Breaks,” in Jonathan Z Smith, Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions (Leiden:
Brill, 1978), 208-239.
that were necessary to produce the discourse in the first place—scientific psychology, technological colonialism, the knowledge production protocols of the modern university—needed to be repressed or camouflaged in order to generate what amounted to a therapeutic discourse more spiritual than it was humanist. Contemporary critics of Eranos scholars like Jung, Eliade, and Henri Corbin prefer the term “religionist” to describe this therapeutic orientation.\(^{778}\)

Comparison also presented itself, again, as a form of permission, tactily allowing an almost poetic practice of assembling and revisioning the global archive of myth and religion for contemporary psychospiritual needs, a practice that, though stretched far beyond the boundaries of academe, nonetheless depended for its legitimacy on scientific or at least scholarly and psychological authority. For a time, the game worked, and the operations of religious comparison extended themselves far into the seeker culture at large, where they served to both inspire and ground the cultic milieu’s eclectic and informal assemblage of symbolic meaning systems as well as its growing need to map the phenomenological fringes associated with “altered states of consciousness.” In its quest to find a phenomenological essence between superficial diversity, religious comparison also became an integral part of esoteric discourse, driven by the operating assumption that the commonalities between traditions increased the closer you came to the intimate sources of experience within. However, in the context of the cultic milieu, it is also important to emphasize the presence of “secular” material, often of a paranormal, existentialist, or more conventionally psychological nature.

\(^{778}\). For more on this critique, see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 277-313.
Gnostic Comparativism

Dick’s Exegesis, as well as his later essays and aspects of VALIS, represents a critical example—sometimes brilliant, sometimes batshit—of how the resources of comparativist thinking were brought to bear on one individual’s extraordinary experiences—experiences that were always already marked to a certain degree by this widened postwar world of resonating symbolic reference. Armed with a copy of the 15th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, as well as Paul Edward’s well-respected Encyclopedia of Philosophy and occultural candy like Chariots of the Gods?!, Dick dove through times and places and texts in order to hunt down fragments, clues, and glimmering reflections that might help him clarify his enigmatic experiences and construct them into a site of illumination.

A list of important proper names in the Exegesis and the related referential universe of VALIS would include philosophers like Parmenides, Spinoza, Heidegger, Whitehead, Hegel, and Bergson; religious thinkers or esotericists like St. Paul, Sankara, Bruno, Boehme, Calvin, Tillich, Harthshorne, and de Chardin; psychologists like Jung, Julian Jaynes, Ludwig Binswanger, and Robert Ornstein; writers like William Burroughs, Stanislaw Lem, George Herbert, and Joyce; and historians of religion like Mircae Eliade, Hans Jonas, and Frances Yates. Throughout his engagement with these and other thinkers, Dick reveals himself to be an autodidact in both the creative and problematic sense of that term. As mentioned above, Dick was not nearly as familiar with the primary sources of the religious, mythological, and philosophical material that he drew from as he was with psychological literature, and his readings (and misreadings) can sometimes be loose, hasty, and ill-informed.
Nonetheless, it would be uncharitable to see Dick as nothing but a middle-brow dilettante armed with a set of encyclopedias and a delusional compulsion to forge associations. Dick’s intellectual work in the Exegesis, threaded as well through *VALIS*, presents a rich, manic, excessive, and sometimes desperate model of visionary hermeneutics—of textual “seeking.” A scholar of religion, and particularly of esotericism, can only be struck by Dick’s startling, ingenious, and sometimes visionary engagement with theological systems, world mythologies, and the archetypal magma of the creative religious imagination. If he didn’t always perform the operation with finesse, Dick knew what he was doing when he compared religions, and he also knew that the practice of comparison also constituted a peculiarly modern stance, a move in a growing game of assembling religious meanings and metaphysical systems in an era of psychology, cultural difference, and growing linguistic self-consciousness. As Jeffrey Kripal remarks, “Dick understood himself to be a kind of gnostic comparativist, that is, he saw the deepest truth of things as being available to us in the history of religions, but also as ‘splintered up over thousands of miles and years.’”

A fine example of such gnostic comparison is Dick’s discussion of his inner voice in a letter to Claudia Bush in July of 1974, at a time when the white heat of the initial events was just beginning to cool and the first Exegesis letters were composed. “I would not wish to confine the identity of my inner voice with one special term such as the Christian term ‘Holy Spirit,’ which implies belief in a formal doctrine,” he writes, aligning himself explicitly with the distinction, endemic to seekers, between doctrinaire “religion” and a more provisional and ad hoc “spirituality” (though Dick very rarely uses the latter term). Dick’s experiences were too individual, too singular for dogma. “To me it is a female spirit and this fits into no known religion, at least none today.” This is a bold (and untrue) claim against tradition, and yet he

immediately follows it with a brief excursus on, of all things, the exploration of the history of religious traditions as a research protocol.

Much of my view since March comes from non-Christian/Jewish sources, such as Hinduism, from Persia—then later on the Pythagorean mystical cults of Greece and Rome. Much of it is Gnostic, Orphic, but much is still a part of present day religious reality; it is both heretical and orthodox, so it is everything. It would please no one, satisfy no one, and offend everybody.\textsuperscript{780}

Here we see Dick reflecting on his own practice of seeking through the global encyclopedia with an eye towards discovering a counter-normative position or thread that might resolve the meaning of the voice and his other squirrelly experiences in a way that would affirm both traditional sources and “present day religious reality.” But we also sense Dick enjoying the practice of researching itself, not so much discovering his position as constructing it. In the letter, Dick is aware that he has built himself a crossroads or point of intersection both in and outside of traditions, between global and singular, orthodox and heretical. Elsewhere in the Exegesis, however, Dick would frequently decide upon and enthusiastically declare a specific religious identity, usually as a Christian or, less often but consistently, as a Gnostic; sometimes he would expand his “I” to Whitmanesque proportions and take in all the world’s faith communities.\textsuperscript{781}

But even his most orthodox positions—which can, in relationship to abortion and homosexuality, appear quite “conservative”—would themselves almost inevitably begin to morph.

\textsuperscript{781} “I can say I am a Buddhist or even the Buddha, that in Brahmanist terms I have an avatar in me; I am an Orphic, a Neoplatonist, a Christian, a hermetic—all these statements are true; and also I have to some extent formulated my own system (as Bruno did). I have seen God but it was not God; it was more (and I have a cybernetics-biological model). I am with Boehme perhaps most of all — and with his teacher, Paracelsus, most of all.” Dick, \textit{Exegesis}, 401-2.
Recall the association Dick makes between Jesus Christ and Dionysus/Zagreus, a Nietzschean *coincidentia oppositorum* that he returns to throughout the Exegesis. Though Dick is singularly focussed on Christ in the Exegesis, his Christ also wears a mask. In one 1978 folder, Dick offered a speculative “but probably accurate” identification of this entity as “Shiva-Cernunnos-Dionysus-Christ-St. Sophia.” As if this hyphenated portmanteau god wasn’t ecumenical enough, Dick also declares that it is “Greek, Hindu, Iranian, Jewish, Celtic, Christian, Manichaean and Lord knows what else (Buddha too).”

Here we might say that Dick finds himself on top of that perennialist mountain peak where all paths converge. “Mani was right when he saw all the religions as one.” But Dick’s perennialism is a peculiar sort, one that stretches to encompass the secular as well. Indeed, a number of Dick’s revelations suggested that the true identity of Dick’s shape-shifting God was the humanist scholar Erasmus, whose presence in Dick’s phantasmic theater indicates the author’s continued secular and existential identity. Dick does not so much rest at the mountain top, where all local forms die away, as dance through an endlessly unfolding landscape where each new element at once resolves and displaces the spirit moving through him, a spirit that in many ways becomes the very differential shift between elements in the archive. Here we should recall Foucault’s constructionist comments on the modern imaginary initiated by Flaubert’s *Temptation of St. Anthony*: “The imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation; it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstices of repetitions and commentaries; it is born and takes shape in the intervals between books.” With Dick, of course, this “phenomenon of the library” has been condensed even more, rendered pocket-sized and paperbacked: even the library has condensed into the encyclopedia.

As James Burton reminds us, Dick composed the Exegesis in part by assembling and reassembling “object-ideas.” As such, he does not follow other perennialists in clearing the air of dogma and cultural specificity in order to get at the universal phenomenological marrow. Instead, inspired by his eccentric experiences, he hyperactively links or “laminates” references upon one another until, at the extremes, specificities are lost, and the collage threatens to fragment into a kind of primal chaos that remains, nonetheless, singular. In his discussion of VALIS, which imports the referential universe of the Exegesis through the labors of the character Horselover Fat, the literary critic Christopher Palmer complains that Fat’s feverish, eclectic and encyclopedic speculations reflect a “retreat into textuality,” a movement of “rhapsodic postmodernist restlessness” within which texts only refer to other texts until all real difference is lost.  

However, while Palmer recognizes that one of the genres or discourses that the novel splices is a religious one, he seems unaware that Fat’s recombinant “syncretism”—as Rossi identifies it—is a basic hallmark of esoteric speculations, at least over the last few centuries and most probably before. In her magisterial history of esoteric or “metaphysical” currents in American religion, Catherine Albanese returns time and again to “the practice of combinativeness so cherished among religious metaphysicians.” Long before postmodernity, occult texts like Blavatsky’s Isis Unveiled (1877) presented dense collages of cross-cultural references and juxtapositions of appropriated and modified chunks of material, creating what the poet Robert Duncan called a “midden heap” of quotations and unacknowledged borrowings. Judge Schreber too made his own moves toward comparative religion in the context of his

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783. Foucault, Michel, and Donald F. Bouchard, Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews (Cornell University Press, 1980), 91.
784. Palmer, 228-233.
785. Catherine Albanese, A Republic of Mind and Spirit (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 423
extraordinary experiences and delusions. For Schreber, human souls combine within faith traditions into different “rays,” each of which would play upon his nervous system in turn: the Jehovah rays, the Aryan rays, the Zoroastrian rays. Schreber also ties the binary godforms he identified—the Zoroastrain Ariman and Ormuzd—to “identical” figures like Woten and Jupiter, on the one hand, and Balder, Bielebog, and Poseiden on the other. While Dick’s restlessness is remarkable, his recombinations are not.

As argued above, Dick’s plunge into rhapsodic webs of “textuality” also reflects the textuality that was already woven into his dreams and visions. The mysterious action of his unconscious wordsmith, obsessed as it was with the religions of Antiquity, in turn inspired Dick’s own metaphysical fascination with sacred semiotics as it was organized into the ancient and polyvalent figures of the Logos, the figure of Wisdom-Sophia, and the Torah. Much more could be said of Dick’s philosophical and visionary engagement with these ancient metaphysical topoi, but they could all be said to embody a mode of semiosis capable of mediating between the ordinary “textuality” of scripture, books, and encyclopedias into a visionary hermeneutics where experience and interpretation become indistinguishable. Here we should recall again Augustine’s own comparison between the dreamer and the allegorical exegete, each wandering through an associational word of pregnant images that always point to more signifiers. Origin went so far as to suggest that the allegorical method of interpretation was itself oneiric, and that “the holy books breathe the spirit of plenitude.” Fat may be mad, as Dick himself frequently suggests. But he is good, and hardly postmodern, company.

With Burton’s comments about the materialist basis of the Exegesis in mind, I want to emphasize here that while I am focussing on Dick’s comparativist hermeneutics here, I am doing

787. Miller, Dreams, 92.
so in part to bring forward the operative logic of its “informational forms,” and particularly the conjunctive logic of the metamorphic networks it builds. Part of Dick’s metaphysical genius, after all, was to reawaken idealist metaphysics through technological and therefore material media. What results is what we might call a menagerie of “allegorical machines”; that is, of machines that function as allegories for all manner of phenomena associated with human consciousness and affectivity, and that simultaneously serve as allegories of technology itself as it morphs the human condition. In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, for example, we have three significant allegorical machines: Mercer box, the Penfield Mood Organ, and the Voight-Kampff empathy testing device. Dick’s allegorical machines tend to constrain the idealism that overtly motivates so much of his metaphysics. Like Schreber, who insists in the first sentence of his weird book that the human soul is a physical instrument, Dick balanced his dualistic idealism with a canny and very S-F sense that mind is information and that information is stuff. And as stuff, information is always marked by the effects of its own material inscription and vulnerability to the noise and interference that, within the circuit, can nonetheless signify or enact transcendence.

Dick’s visionary hermeneutics, which commingles with his mystical understanding of Torah, receives a remarkable expression in one of the allegorical machines that appears in 1981’s *The Divine Invasion*. The holoscope is a version of the Bible “expressed as layers at different depths” within a multi-colored hologram,

each layer according to age. The total structure of Scripture formed, then, a three-dimensional cosmos that could be viewed from any angle and its contents read. According to the tilt of the axis of observation, differing messages could be extracted. Thus Scripture yielded up an infinitude of knowledge that ceaselessly changed. It became
a wondrous work of art, beautiful to the eye, and incredible in its pulsations of color. Throughout it red and gold pulsed, with strands of blue.

This fantastic device, at once aesthetic and technical, image and text, captures the paradoxically postmodern and premodern dimensions of Dick’s vision of sacred hermeneutics. The holoscope is at once a technology of infinite interpretive potential and a work of art, or more properly an “icon,” that incarnates a fecund matrix of divine mind. Roger J. Stilling argues that the holoscope, in approximating the “immaterial existence of information in the mind,” becomes a metaphor for the consciousness of the reader of Dick’s novel. But the holoscope equally insists on technical maneuvers and the material forms that information takes in a text treated as a multidimensional matrix. Comparison, in other words, is operationalized. “If you learned how you could gradually tilt the temporal axis, the axis of true depth, until successive layers were superimposed and a vertical message—a new message—could be read out. In this way you entered into a dialogue with Scripture; it became alive.” And yet the dialogic life of the holoscope, its “I-Thou,” is instantiated within a technical operation drawn from media. “Superimposition was the critical factor.”

Recall that for Derrida, superimposition describes the strategy of commenting on another text by incorporating its own repetitions, of “superimprinting” one text upon the other, and thereby moving beyond juxtaposition towards a more subtle criticism whereby a text mimes its object of study. According to Gregory Ulmer, who reminds that with superimposition Derrida moves from collage to photography, this superimprinting “is an attempt to devise a system of reference or representation which works in terms of differance, with its reversible temporality.”

790. Ibid, 62.
Indeed, for Dick superimposition is principally a figure of such time slips. Most famously, the term describes the “return to Rome” that Dick experience; in *VALIS*, the ancient city’s appearance in and as Orange County is compared to a “superimposition montage.” However, Dick’s other uses of the term are also suggestive. Within the Exegesis, he uses it to describe the overlap of the various personalities he hosted, as well as the merger of brain hemispheres. Perhaps most revealing is his characterization, in a letter to a book editor, of the “superimpositionary method” he used in his best novels, a layering of signifiers and frames of reference that, in the end, may be indistinguishable from comparison as an art of the archive.  

As such, the holoscope serves as a marvelous allegory for the visionary hermeneutics of the Exegesis, whose endless meanings reveal themselves through formal resonances and statistical recurrences, through constantly “tilting” perspectives and the proper flick of the interpretive wrist. Appropriately, the holoscope owes some of its visionary hermeneutics to the pages of the Exegesis itself, or at least from a hypnagogic vision Dick records in his diary. Hearing the repeated fragment “and he is alive,” Dick sees a luminous and finely woven red and gold tetragrammaton that rises from the page “like a glowing scarab” and pulses in synchrony with the auditory phrase.  

At first glance, one might presume the “he” here to refer to Christ. And yet it may be more fit to link the pronoun to the text itself, both the holy name of God and, by metonymic extension, the cosmos of Scripture. Such living and sometimes determining texts are found throughout Dick’s work, from the holoscope to the *I Ching* to Spectowsky’s book *How I Rose from the Dead in my Spare Time and So Can You* in *A Maze of Death* to the wub-fur animated copy of *De Rerum Natura* in “Not By its Cover” (1968). It would be fair to extend this list to

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792. Dick, *Exegesis*, 545; also see annotation on 542.
include the Exegesis itself, with its patterns of superimpositions, and its myriad pulsing threads. There are a myriad of strands one might follow within the overwhelming, transtemporal hermeneutic weave of the Exegesis. For the remainder of this chapter, I want to tug out one small but highly significant thread: a shred of ancient scripture that, not coincidentally, tells a story of awakening and anamnesis through the lively intervention of texts.

**The Hymn of the Signal**

The *Hymn of the Soul* is one name given by translators to a numinous fable embedded in the *Acts of Thomas*, a third century pseudo-epigraphical Christian text, most likely of Syriac origin, that gives account of the journeys, trials and death of the apostle in the East.\(^{793}\) The *Hymn*, which is an originally independent text framed as a song that Thomas sings to his fellow prisoners, is a fable of remembrance and home-coming whose arresting vision of spiritual awakening is embedded in a story with the imaginal economy of a fairy tale. Dick first tells the story in a letter written to Claudia Bush in February 1975. He is, once again, discussing the slumbering immortal spirit that was reawakened through the fish sign, the same “external disinhibiting symbol” through which those who knew Christ were originally “engrammed.” Unfortunately, as he explains, the fish sign had been obliterated by the symbol of the cross, leaving our metanoia “programming” capacities latent and largely untapped. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, Dick quotes directly from the 15th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

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The theological doctrine of the soul and the myth about its celestial home, its fall, and its redemption were inseparable. The sequence is beautifully told in the “Hymn of the Soul”…The hero of the Hymn, who represents the soul of man, is born in the Eastern (the Yonder) Kingdom; immediately after his birth, he is sent by his parents on a pilgrimage into the world with instructions to take a pearl from the mouth of a dragon in the sea. Instead of wearing his heavenly garment, he dresses in earthly clothes, eats earthly food, and forgets his task. Then his parents send a letter to rouse him. As soon as he has read the letter, he awakes and remembers his task, takes the pearl, and begins the homeward journey. On the way, his brother (The Redeemer) comes to accompany him and leads him back home to his father’s palace in the east.794

The Britannica concludes that the myth “is a figurative representation of the theological doctrine of the soul’s fall and its return to heaven.”795 Bentley Layton, an important scholar of Gnosticism, similarly declared the Hymn an allegory of the soul’s descent and return from the body, which is represented by the local clothes the protagonist must don in order to disguise himself. Reflecting the rationalist spirit of scholarship, Layton provides a structuralist grid in his introduction to the text in The Gnostic Scriptures, which links elements in the story to features of Platonic myth and images in other, so-called Thomasine texts related to the Hymn, including the famous Gospel of Thomas.796 However, in treating the Hymn as a philosophical allegory, we risk flattening something Dick recognized even in the clipped Britannica paraphrase: the Hymn’s peculiar power as a story, a diagetical virtual reality which sways readers and listeners not by doctrine but by fictional figure and event. Whatever the “school” of the anonymous author, the simple form of the story enables the text to speak meaningfully to a variety of religious orientations and traditions. Augustine, for example, tells us that the Hymn was widely in use

794. Dick, Exegesis, 93.
795. Ibid.
among the Manichaeans, and allusions to it are found in the *Manichaean Psalms*. At the same time, the text remained popular for Eastern Orthodox believers, which we know partly through the numerous redactions of the *Acts of Thomas* that expunge the most heretical passages of that text. In other words, many encounters can find themselves layered onto the narrative topography of the *Hymn*.

Dick was certainly overcome with the resonance. To Bush, Dick claims that he had first come across the *Hymn* only a day or two before writing; as soon as he read it, “I knew I had found the key which put together just about everything I’ve been thinking, learning and experiencing.” To prove his exuberant point, Dick immediately narrates, once again, the delivery woman scene, after which he asks Bush, “Can you see how close this is to the ‘Hymn of the Soul’?” In this iteration of the scene, though, he adds a crucial detail: he says he later went to the pharmacy looking for the woman but found “they had no idea who she was, what her name was, or where she had gone, but she was gone, forever.” This mysterious vanishing, coupled with an enigmatic not-knowing that is made almost mythic through the poetic cadence of the writing, is in turn linked by Dick to his own supposed lack of knowledge about the phenomenon of anamnesis itself: “as I’m sure you realize I did not know, had never heard of, such matters within the human heart, or mind, or history.”

As noted above, this sort of disavowal of knowledge recurs throughout the Exegesis, and it is often proclaimed in relationship to knowledge Dick already possesses. For example, it bears mentioning that, similar to the Boehme flashback noted above, Dick’s letter to Bush is most likely not the first mention of the *Hymn* in Dick’s diary. In an undated entry that appears between

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799. Ibid, 94.
two letters dated December 23, 1974 and January 29, Dick addresses the topic of anamnesis, specifically the long sleep of the right hemisphere, which he casts as “the seat of the unconscious.”

The moment at which it remembers (is disinhibited by the gold fish sign, the letter, etc.; cf. Epistle of St. Thomas) is the moment at which the Kingship of God, the Perfect Kingdom, floods back into being: back into awareness of itself, that it is Here; and it is here Now.

There is no extant Epistle of St. Thomas, so we have every reason to believe that Dick was here referring to the Hymn, the song embedded in the Acts of Thomas. Though Dick most likely wrote this extract only a few weeks before his letter to Bush, the discrepancy still underscores Dick’s desire to be surprised by knowledge he already has.

As readers of Dick’s earlier letters know, Dick was an erudite man with a great memory, and, like many autodidacts, liked to show off. Yet in the Exegesis, amidst the research and knowledge he displays (both to correspondents and to himself), we often find the opposite pattern: Dick claims to be unaware of something he already knows. Why?

One possibility is that, unconsciously at least, Dick yearned to recapitulate the structure of anamnesis itself: the sudden re-emergence of knowledge ‘already’ known from a state of occlusion. As such, while the Exegesis is stuffed with knowing, it is also regularly punctuated with forgetting, a forgetting that in turn sets up a subsequent remembering or unconscious return of knowledge. For Dick, recalled knowledge was coterminous with awakening; as he writes, “to

800. It must be mentioned again that the sequence of undated materials in the Exegesis is no proof of their date of composition, though all the dated items in folder 4 are in chronological sequence.
801. Dick, Exegesis, 62.
remember and to wake up are absolutely interchangeable.” In this way, Dick plays hide-and-seek with himself, staging his “ahas!” in advance, performing a hermeneutics of forgetting and remembering that transforms already written knowledge into a goad for awakening. In this way, the iteration linked with the already-written character of scripts is side-stepped in order to stage an experience that exceeds or ruptures the mere circulation of signs.

In the terms of Hans Jonas, whose influential account of Gnosticism Dick was certainly familiar with by the end of the seventies, the letter in the Hymn literalizes the “call from without,” whereby “the transmundane penetrates the enclosure of the world and makes itself heard therein as a call.” Dick’s fiction had already played host to some remarkable examples of such transmundane calls. In Ubik (1969), a group of commercial psychics with “anti-telepath” powers visit the moon, where one of them—their boss Glen Runciter—is apparently killed in a bomb explosion. In the world of the novel, the recent dead are able to be stabilized in a “half-life” state that allows them to continue communicating with the living for a limited period of time. But upon returning to earth and getting Runciter’s corpse into cold-pac and his spirit into half-life, the remaining crew are not able to contact him. They also notice that ordinary objects rapidly decay all around them—milk sours, cigarettes go stale. The crew start receiving peculiar messages, apparently from Runciter: they hear his voice yammering on the hotel phone, find his name on a matchbox and a note from him inside a cigarette carton. As the enigmas mount, one character goes into the bathroom and finds, scrawled on the wall in purple crayon, this message:

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802. Ibid, xxi.
803. Hans Jonas, The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God & the Beginnings of Christianity (Beacon Press, 2001), 74. At the same time it is possible that Dick was only familiar with Jonas’ “Gnosticism” entry in the 14th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, though this was not the edition favored by Dick in his time in Orange County. Conversation, Matthew Dillon, May, 2015.
JUMP IN THE URINAL AND STAND ON YOUR HEAD. I’M THE ONE THAT’S ALIVE. YOU’RE ALL DEAD.804

As their surrounding reality gives way to anomalous eruptions of entropy, the characters realize that Runciter is right. It turns out the whole crew are stuck in a distorted version of half-life constructed by one of Dick’s evil demiurgic figures, a deceased sociopathic boy who sustains himself in half-life by feeding off the life-force of others.

Runciter’s bathroom message is a perfect example of what Dick critic Lorenzo Di Tomasso identifies as an “in-breaking information vector,” a structural device that we can, with a sort of backwards causality, clearly recognize in the Gnostic call-from-without.805 Moreover, the concept of “half-life” also allows Dick to fuse two metaphors that Gnostic writings share with many texts of spiritual enlightenment—ignorance and death—into one condition: characters who are unaware that they are dead. This condition can nonetheless be healed through a third recognizably Gnostic metaphor: awakening.

Though Dick may not have been drawing these connections at the time he wrote Ubik, by 2/3/74, he was quick to notice the similarities. Writing of the secondary personality he identified initially with Pike, Dick notes that the Bishop “has been breaking through in ways so similar to that of Runciter in Ubik that I am beginning to conclude that I and everyone else is either dead and he is alive, or—well, as in the novel I can’t figure it out.”806 Dick’s confusion reminds us again of the indeterminacy that underlies his post-foundational gnosis: a transmundane signal is received, but it has no coherent content, or no content beyond its effects as a traumatic and

806. Dick, Exegesis, 22.
ecstatic dislocation that requires constant construction to even begin to mediate.⁸⁰⁷ In Hans Jonas, Dick would one day read a line from the Mandaen prayerbook Ginza Rba: “One call comes and instructs about all calls.”⁸⁰⁸ But Dick didn’t get the instructions; or like the offworld settlers who gather on the planet Delmak-O in the beginning of *A Maze of Death*, the taped commands beamed from the satellite of the gods are garbled. Indeed, the entire Exegesis could be described as emerging from what one could name the *conundrum of the call*: a clarion blast has ruptured Dick’s reality field but, with epiphanic exceptions, the message has been terminally deferred. Dick is left, as it were, on the line, holding the first link of a chain of signifiers that recede into an infinity of possibilities.

**The Conundrum of the Call**

One could read the challenges of Dick’s call through a postmodern or Derridean lens, emphasizing the incommensurable accounts of reality that characterize contemporary technosociety or the endless deferral of meaning supposedly endemic to all signification. But we can also see that Dick’s metaphysical challenge lies in the curiously referential dynamics of the call itself, which both demands metanoia and leaves everything in the muddle where it already is. Here Agamben’s discussion of the Pauline call (*kaleo, klesis*) may be helpful. In the opening sections of his work on the apostle, Agamben takes on 1 Corinthians: 7:20: “Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called.” This oddly recursive line comes in a passage in which Paul seems to be counseling indifference to one’s worldly status in the light of the

⁸⁰⁷. Indeed, when Dick ceases to identify the secondary personality with Pike in 1975, the questions of the afterlife that play an important role in the initial folders of the Exegesis recede, giving way to Dick’s elaborate theories of time.

⁸⁰⁸. Jonas, 74.
messianic call: gentile converts need not get circumcised before following Christ, and if slaves, should not worry about their low worldly status.

For Agamben, the odd structure of the verse, with its two forms of *klesis* and its somewhat indeterminate reference, itself illuminates a less settled meaning to the passage: that the messianic calling is “essentially and foremost *a calling of the calling.*” Describing the “tautegorical movement that comes from the call and returns back to it,” Agamben suggests that, through its very openness, the call offers nothing but the repetition of the condition in which we are called, but which is simultaneously undermined in light of the messianic event. Because the call’s reference is open, “it may apply to any condition; but for this same reason, it revokes a condition and radically puts it into question in the very act of adhering to it.” The call, the event of awakening, changes everything but eludes semantic location or even direction. Here we are with Phil at the end of *VALIS*, watching TV, waiting for a sign. “Vocation calls for nothing and to no place.”

Here Jonas hits the nail on the head when, in discussing Hippolytus’s account of the Gnostic Peretae, he notes that “the call as such is its own content, since it simply states what its being sounded will effect: the awakening from sleep.” The call here is an imperative event whose content, initially at least, is nothing more than its own eruptive character *as an event*. In the *Hymn of the Soul*, whose full translation Dick would have had access to in Jonas, the personified letter, after announcing its origins to the protagonist, issues this curious command: “Up and arise from your sleep, and listen to the words of our letter!” In this self-referential

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809. Here Agamben relies here on the notion of the anaphor, which is a linguistic entity—a pronoun, like “he” in the verse—that indicates a referential tie to some other linguistic entity specified in the same text—a proper name, for example. However, the anaphor’s exact reference in the proximate text can be, as in this verse, somewhat indeterminate, which makes it a particularly challenging problem in natural language processing, as computers have a tougher time with contextual inferences than humans do.

sentence we do not encounter signification so much as signal, or even less: the startling clamor of an alarm-clock, a displaced imperative whose content is non-semantic noise. Strictly speaking, the pure event of the awakening call cannot be directly or referentially tied to signification. Abruptly awakened from sleep by a brash alarm, there is always a gap, a little abyss, between the noise and the cognitive crystallization of a represented world that the very non-representational event of awakening has, as it were, undermined in advance. Mark E. Smith put it well when he sang, in the Fall classic “How I Wrote ‘Elastic Man,’” that “the only thing real is waking and rubbing your eyes.”

In this light, we might recognize the hero of the Hymn as a peculiarly Dickean redeemer: he bumbles along in hapless ignorance and is awakened passively by an “in-breaking information vector” that alerts him—in a manner that destabilizes both represented reality and its possible alternative—to knowledge he already has but that has been erased, or to use a favorite phrase of Dick’s, “occluded.” In the Hymn, this recognition is sufficient to bring both the buried self and the reawakened self into sync. Unfortunately, Dick himself was allowed no such integration. Recall that one of the features of the spring and summer of 1974 was Dick’s conviction that various cognitive and behavioral changes indicated that another personality had intermittently taken possession of him. So while Dick regularly insisted that 2/3/74 brought himself an extraordinary state of knowledge, peace, and bliss, he often associated these states with the secondary personality he believed had appeared within the self, and which he often saw as smarter or superior, but certainly separate.

811. Jonas, 80.
812. Lacan offers a fascinating examination of the function of the real in the phenomenon of awakening from a noise, in which the sleeper moves from the dream to the realm of representation. “The real may be represented by the accident, the noise, the small element of reality, which is evidence that we are not dreaming. But, on the other hand, this reality is not so small, for what wakes us is the other reality hidden behind the lack of that which takes the place of representation—this, Freud says, is the Trieb (drive).” Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, trans. Jacques-Alain Miller, (New York: Norton, 1998), 56-60.
Dick initially associated this personality with James Pike, perhaps because Pike himself was, towards the end of his life, obsessed with Spiritualism and the spectral others it sought to contact through the veil. At other times, Dick attributed this secondary personality variously to Paracelsus, a government thought control program, and Dick’s own self from the future. By the late seventies, however, when Dick began writing *VALIS*, the Exegesis generally identifies this double as “Thomas,” a first-century Christian who bonds with Dick across time and space. Thomas makes an appearance in *VALIS*, where Horselover Fat explains that Thomas did not knew Christ, but knew people who knew him, and so awaited the parousia. In the novel Thomas is also characterized as a *homoplasmate*: a human being who had “cross-banded” with a plasmate of living information, associated here and elsewhere in Dick’s writings with *VALIS*, the Logos, and the Torah. In the novel, Dick also gives vent to some of his Exegetical speculations about Thomas, who, we learn, was able to cheat death by performing a ritual involving pink food and a pitcher of cool water. Through this method, Fat explains, Thomas was able to “engram” himself onto the Christian fish sign so that one day his slumbering reborn identity would see the sign and reawaken.

It stands to reason—or at least the weird reason required to make your way through this sort of material—that when Dick named his second personality Thomas, he chose that name because of the active resonance of the *Acts of Thomas*, with its marvelous Hymn, as well as the *Gospel of Thomas*, an ancient scripture that Dick knew and sometimes cited. In other words, “Thomas” came to embody the encounter Dick had had with these texts and the loosely

813. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7mp9elK49I&noredirect=1; accessed March 2013.
815. Variants of “Break a stick and I am there”, a line from logion 77, recur in Dick’s letters and the *Exegesis* (173, 223, 508). Anne Dick remembers him quoting this “Russian proverb” in the early sixties. Though the complete Gospel of Thomas was not recovered until the Nag Hammadi findings, the saying was also among those fragments of that gospel found in the Papyrys Oxyrhynchus 1, which was discovered in 1900. Anne Dick, 66.
“gnostic” mysteries they contained. Further synchronicities lie in the name Thomas itself, which simply means “twin” (t’oma’ in Aramaic). Within the Thomasine Christianity represented by the Acts of Thomas and the Gospel of Thomas, Thomas the twin is amalgamated with Jesus’ brother Judas (Mark 6:3) to become Judas Thomas, the twin of the Lord. According to Pearson, Judas Thomas served as a paradigm of the individual Christian vis-à-vis the living Christ who can, as both the Hymn and the Gospel of Thomas suggest, also be found within. “To know oneself is to know one’s own ‘double,’ construed as a twin of Christ. A person’s double is of heavenly origin and, as a result of self-knowledge, can return again to heaven.” Thomas’s doubleness is all the more remarkable when you consider the likelihood that Dick did not know the etymology of the monicker when he named his secondary personality; as far as I can tell, he nowhere mentions it. And of course, soaring angelic over all these secondary personalities and otherworldly cross-banding plasmates, is the absent presence of Dick’s own twin sister Jane, who died of malnutrition a little over a month after the two were born, and who haunted him (and his Exegesis) throughout his life.

816. Though both these texts emphasize self-knowledge, many scholars do not class them as Gnostic texts per se, as they lack distinguishing mythological elements like Sophia, the demiurge, and the emanations of the Pleroma. Along with the Book of Thomas the Contender, these texts are sometimes linked with a specific “Thomas Christianity,” centered in Mesopotamia (the origin of the Acts), and drawing from Middle Platonism. For an account of Thomas Christianity, see Birger Albert Pearson, Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions And Literature (Fortress Press, 2007), 256-72. For modern readers who recognize an important difference between Christianity and Gnosticism (as Dick did), “Thomas” himself therefore represents an ambiguous middle ground, one that similarly marks Dick’s religious identity: is Dick a Christian, a Gnostic, a dualist, or something else entire?

817. The name itself is doubled within the Greek of the Gospel of John, who refers to “Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin (didymus)” (John 20:24).

818. Pearson, 257. The prophet Mani may have adapted his notion of the heavenly twin or syszygos from Thomasine texts; in any case, the appearance of the divine double in the Hymn helps explain the text’s popularity among the Manichaeans. This appearance occurs in the Hymn’s denouement, which is unfortunately elided in the Britannica summary. In it, the hero, having returned home and divested himself of his worldly clothes, sees again his heavenly robe. “As I gazed on it, suddenly the garment / like a mirror reflected me, / and I saw myself apart / as two entities in one form.” Barnstone and Meyer, The Gnostic Bible (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2003), 393.

819. Despite her profound influence on his psychic life, Dick mentions Jane only occasionally in the Exegesis, and usually at moments of intensely sober affect, as if he must emotionally earn this particular revelation. In one withering entry from 1979, Dick splits himself into both sides of a Q&A dialogue, with the respondent taking a relentlessly skeptical and deflationary stance regarding the meaning, cause, and interpretation of 2/3/74. The respondent, for example, suggests that Dick is a deluded manic depressive who may have just stumbled into the
There is also a recursive, self-referential dimension to this sacred doubleness. Jonas, for example, reads the curious duplicity of the Hymn’s protagonist through the Manichaean notion of the “redeemed redeemer,” or salvator salvandus, which Dick refers to consistently as “salvador salvandus” when he latches onto it in the folders of the Exegesis. Kurt Rudolph defines salvator salvandus as “a redeemer who sets free the ‘souls’, as particles identical with his nature, by means of the knowledge of this identity and thereby suffers the same fate as these souls or particles of light.”

This element of shared suffering, of mutual submersion in ignorance, is what allowed Dick to personally identify with this figure, who becomes thereby a kind of messianic “ordinary Joe.” And while the protagonist in the Hymn does complete his sacred mission—the recovery of the pearl, which takes up very few lines—he is not identified as the redeemer himself.

Dick’s novels are of course filled with such anti-heroic heroes, ordinary Everymen who achieve whatever moral actions and insights they manage alongside modest and often deeply flawed attempts to just keep going in the face of social entropy, personal conflict, capitalist predation, and ontological disruption. In his letters and the Exegesis, Dick parallels this affirmation of the mundane by representing himself as passive and receptive in relationship to the call, which is one of the reasons he often figures himself as confused or as “not knowing.” Hence his attraction to the Hymn, whose scene of anamnesis presents an economical resolution to the conundrum of the call. But just as important is the fact that redemption, revelation, and

wrong cocktail of chemicals (lithium and vitamins to be precise). Dick concludes the dialogue with himself with this question: “Do you have any intuition or guess as to who and what the Valis mind is?” The unembellished answer: “Yes. It is female. It is on the other side—the postmortem world. It has been with me all my life. It is my twin sister Jane.” Dick, Exegesis, 520.


821. According to the Britannica, this role is given to the “Brother” that finally leads the protagonist back home, although in the Syriac version of the Hymn, this guide takes the form, once again, of “my letter, my awakener.” Klijn, 185.
recall arrive through the medium of writing—a writing, moreover, that is both within and without. For when the protagonist hears the words of the letter, he discovers that the same message was already inscribed within. Indeed, the Hymn itself uses a core metaphor of internalized techne that goes back at least to Proverbs and Jeremiah, stating that the letter’s writing was already “traced on my heart.”822

In the Exegesis, Dick himself notes this identity, writing of the Hymn’s protagonist that “it is he himself who sends himself the letter which restores his memory (Legend of the Pearl).”823 Even here, the call from without is shadowed by the script from within. This recursive identity, mediated through textuality, arguably drives the entire Exegesis, in which Dick attempts to resolve the indeterminacy of his puzzling visions through reading and writing, and to do so in a way that also accords with the literature he has already produced. In order to achieve this, he must in a sense externalize his texts from his own controlling authority, or, more finely put, he must magnify those aspects of writing that are always outside of authorial control.

In the “Constitutional Crisis” document in the Exegesis, for example, Dick squeezes a lot of humor out of insisting that his books are forgeries because his “magic typewriter” actually wrote them.824 More serious is his handling of the final scene of Flow My Tears, in which the inclusion of his own dream material should be seen as an authorial practice that paradoxically reduces his responsibility as an author, allowing his own texts a divinatory power that the future Dick could in turn pick up on. As mentioned earlier, Dick also came to believe that Flow My Tears alluded to Acts in ways that Dick did not or could not have consciously intended, given his insistence that he was unfamiliar with the New Testament book at the time. In these ways, Dick

823. Dick, In Pursuit of Valis, 84. Writing in Science Fiction Studies, Dick biographer and critic Gregg Rickman even suggests from this entry that Dick may have sent himself the Xerox missive. See Gregg Rickman, “The Nature of Dick’s Fantasies,” Science Fiction Studies Vol 19 (1992), 107.
came to understand his own work as being or containing information of soteriological import, a belief that in turn drives the endless allegorical interpretations of his earlier works that he offers up in the Exegesis.

In this light, it is crucial to note that, despite the manic inflation that drives much of the Exegesis, Dick is generally loathe to make his person—rather than his texts—the locus of messianic power. More typically, he casts himself as a more or less passive relay node in a salvational network, an ignorant messenger who channels texts that know more—and do more—than he does. In this light, Jeffrey Kripal places Dick squarely within a broad cultural narrative that figures the human relationship to the paranormal, which he considers to be modernity’s own “sacred,” as a condition of being written. Kripal insists that paranormal encounters not only consistently take the form of wild, impossible stories, but that the absurd details themselves point toward an offstage author. Kripal cites a question Dick asks himself later in the Exegesis: is “something writing through us?” Dick provides an answer of sorts:

In my writing I seek to abolish the world—the effect of which aids in our restoration to the Godhead … for years I did it in my writing, and then in 2/74 I did it in real life, showing that my writing is not fiction but a form … of revelation expressed not by me but through me, by (St.) Sophia in her salvific work.

Dick’s trashy novels were or contained transmundane letters like the one in the Hymn, letters that Dick as author was forwarding unbeknownst to his readers through writing and publishing. These hidden letters do not just proclaim the illusion of the world but abolish the world through their very status as revelatory events. However, the transition that Dick traces here, from abolishing the world in “writing” to doing so in “real life,” can also read as an

824. Dick, Exegesis, 22.
admission of the degree to which Dick’s own writing—before and after the fish sign—was scripting 2/3/74 itself. I have no doubt that Dick suffered a raft of extraordinary experiences in 1974, and that anomalous ecstasies, temporal stutters, and I-Thou encounters with apparitions brought him to the very heart of himself. But that very heart was also already inscribed.

**Missive**

We cannot leave the matter of the nested letter that helped awaken Dick without acknowledging the most important actual letter to feature in the drama of 2/3/74—a letter that, unsurprisingly and against all surface differences, is eventually linked by Dick directly with the *Hymn*. In March of 1974, Dick received a letter that, in the version of the episode related in *VALIS*, had no name or return address. Dick, who according to Tessa had already been anticipating a letter that might “kill” him, refused to open or read the missive, having Tessa do it in his stead. Rather than a letter proper, the envelope contained photo-copies of two book reviews from a leftist newspaper, with words like *decline* and *stagnation* underlined with blue and red pen (Dick called them “die messages”). In *VALIS*, a name and return address were included on the back of the Xerox but not on the envelope.

Throughout March, Dick felt intensely threatened by the letter, which he believed might have been a loyalty-testing trap laid by the FBI or, worse, a *Manchurian Candidate*-like trigger, which is why he refused to read the letter. Deeply fearful that the authorities would take him for a Soviet sympathizer, especially given the Marxist critics and East European S-F writers interested in his work, Dick eventually read and sent the document to the FBI, who responded with a form letter. Tessa Dick confirms the basic outlines of the story, though she said that the
original envelope did feature a return address—a hotel in New York—but no name. She also noted that Dick dumped most of his subsequent flurry of letters to the FBI in the trash, figuring that if he were indeed under surveillance, they would read them anyway.  

Dick dubbed this incident with the doubling name of “the Xerox missive.” Even more than the fish sign, the Xerox missive became a signal feature of 2/3/74, one that fueled a myriad of Dick’s plots and speculations throughout the Exegesis. Here we must remember that the published Exegesis, a challenging enough text in its own right, represents merely a tenth of the extent text, and that, according to editor Pamela Jackson, a “good deal” of this vast remainder is taken up with restless and incessant paranoid speculations whose feverish, mind-numbing prolixity would try the patience of even the most die-hard Dickhead or fan of pulp conspiracy lit. We might think of this as the “junk DNA” of the Exegesis, since Dick’s desperate speculations, with their interminable permutations of KGB agents, satellites, doomsday devices, and fiendish mind-control technologies, generates what Lawrence Sutin describes as “much heat but little light.”

But while these scenarios don’t make for engaging reading, their volume alone speaks to Dick’s palpable sense of political oppression and his increasing inability to imagine state power in anything other than its most claustrophobic and insidious forms. This loss of personal and collective agency this implies is already visible in his late sixties and early seventies fictions, and was only heightened by the break-in and the break-in’s subsequent confirmation through Watergate. For suspicious and esoteric exegetes like Dick, the high weirdness of the early

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826. Tessa Dick, 81-83.
827. See the annotation by Pamela Jackson, in Dick, Exegesis, 513. As a supporting editor on the project, but based only my thankfully partial exposure to the totality of the Exegesis, I can concur with her editorial judgment. That said, there is no doubt some gold in those hills.
828. Cited by Jackson, ibid.
seventies encouraged untraditional mysticism and pathological paranoia to form a perfect syzygy. Whatever ecstatic and religious bliss was visited upon Dick in 1974 were more than matched by fear, intense suspicion, self-defeating literalism, and profound ontological anxiety.

However, the Xerox missive did provide a glint of light in the dark tunnels of Dick’s Chapel Perilous. Specifically, Dick came to invest great ethical and ontological significance in his initial refusal to read the letter. The block he threw up against the incoming vector of text becomes paradigmatic for a compelling theory of “ethical balking” that Dick develops later in the Exegesis, an ethics of refusal that rests atop a novel, almost systems-theoretical conception of Christian freedom.\textsuperscript{829} Mckee clearly lays out the ethical double bind that Dick recognized: “The challenge is to perceive the injustice of the system of the world and to refuse to cooperate with it. The problem is that the logic of the visible universe is internally consistent and contains no clear indication that it deserves to be rejected.”\textsuperscript{830} For Dick, the logic of the world was not just consistent and totalizing but deterministic: an unforgiving machinery of necessity. This engine appears in Dick’s writings in various guises: the Black Iron Prison, fate, and “astral determinism,” the ancient astrological notion that destiny was controlled by the daemonic clockwork of the heavens.\textsuperscript{831} Another term Dick used was karma, a Hindu concept that, as Wouter Hanegraaff insightfully argues, had already been transformed by Theosophy into a kind of scientific mechanism or impersonal “natural law” by the time Dick came to use the term.\textsuperscript{832}

Ethical balking is the paradoxically nonlogical but nonetheless technical hack of these fell engines; as Dick put it later in the Exegesis, by refusing to read the Xerox missive, Dick had

\textsuperscript{829} Dick, \textit{Exegesis}, 271
\textsuperscript{830} Gabriel Mckee, Annotation, in Dick, \textit{Exegesis}, 271.
\textsuperscript{831} Dick was quite aware that salvation through Christ was sometimes represented in antiquity as the defeat of astrology and fate. See Tim Hegedus, \textit{Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology} (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), esp 163-171.
\textsuperscript{832} See Hanegraaff, \textit{New Age Religion}, 455, 480.
“short-circuited” his Karma. Balking is a crucial gesture in what can only be called the politics of Dick’s information theory. As we saw Anthony Enns explain earlier, Dick associated entropy with stasis and repetition, a concept that blends the locked grooves of media loops with the “tomb world” of remorseless torpor that Bingswanger associated with the *huis clos* of schizophrenia.

Against the stagnation of repetition, Dick trumpeted the irruption of genuine novelty, which he usually imagined as penetrating from outside the system. As such, the refusal to read the Xerox letter introduced a new element—“tiny, bordering on ex nihilo, on nothing, yet something”—into an “otherwise closed system.” The transformative power of the small, meek ethical gesture is, in this view, still allied to a transcendent point of view, a view from outside the system that, as Mckee argues, “impels immediate disobedience.” As such, balking disrupts the causal machinery of fate, a “groove override” that also refutes, in the terms relevant to the above discussion, what Dick calls “cause-and-effect script-programming.” While Dick sometimes associates balking with rebellion, its more negative or no-saying valence also recalls one of the curious properties of Socrates’s own “AI Voice”: that it only intervened to tell the philosopher what not to do.

Balking also had a media-theoretical character in Dick’s mind, a link between information processing and balking’s groove override that first appeared in a hypnogogic vision Dick experienced in the late seventies and later reformulated for *The Divine Invasion*. “4:30 A.M. Hypnogogic: If the messenger arrives in time with the white—i.e., blank—document, your punishment is abolished. I.e., the blank white paper is substituted—intervenes—for the bill of

833. Enns, 76. As examples from Dick’s fiction, Enns points to the short story “I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon,” as well as the close of *A Maze of Death*, where the astronauts find themselves returning once again to the hallucinated nightmare of Delmak-O.
particulars that lists the sins (or crimes) for which you are being tried and punished.” Dick is here imagining a “cybernetic info system” of judgment, a deterministic engine of karmic punishment that can only be “shorted out” through the insertion of a blank white paper in place of one’s inevitably spotted record. Again following the S-F logic of literalizing the figurative, this blank paper offers a technical and almost bureaucratic parallel of the spotless lamb of Christ, who, in Luther’s doctrine of vicarious atonement, is offered in our own place, and whose Love thereby jams the machinery of Law. In contrast to the typically weightless New Age appropriation of cybernetic imagery and media technology, here Dick establishes an information theoretical iteration of traditional eschatology, one that ingeniously combines machine programming with the more archaic media tech of text. However, in this new vision, Jesus does not have to suffer directly. As Mckee explains, “It is a substitution, not of one being in place of another, but of misinformation in place of accurate data.”

The allegorical tension that Paul established between the letter and the spirit in 2 Corinthians (3:6) is transformed by Dick into two different kinds of letters, letters of fate and letters of freedom. However, through their formal identity as letters, these two ethical vectors nonetheless oscillate, or “flip/flop,” a term of binary Californiana that Dick prefers. For Dick, dualistic oppositions actually lie very close to one another; in many cases, the structure that is shared is more important than the positive or negative “sign” affixed to it. (This perhaps explains why Dick, as a newly confirmed Episcopalian, could so readily and so wickedly have parodied the Eucharist in Three Stigmata without thereby questioning his faith.) Many of the cosmological schemas that Dick develops in the Exegesis, a good number of which rely on binary or dualistic structures, mutate precisely by swapping their positive or negative valence. The resemblance of

835. Ibid, 291.
836. Ibid, 560.
this “flip/flop” to binary code is significant, but the concept also takes in Jung’s notion of
“enantiodromia” as well as Dick’s experience of generating I Ching hexagrams, in which yin
lines and yang lines often transform into one another.

The operation of the flip/flop also allowed Dick to use the sacred narrative of the Hymn
in order to organize and refract the nightmare of the Xerox missive. In other words, by inverting
values, Dick was able to reframe the phantasmagoric trauma of the Xerox missive by
superimposing the Hymn onto the March ’74 event through the formal match of the two letters.
In an Exegesis entry made in 1980 or so, Dick affirmed the direct relationship between the two
letters, and squeezed out this underlying significance:

The Xerox missive is part of the Gnostic legend of the Pearl: the letter to the prince who
has lost his memories…This ‘legend’ is actually a sacred myth/rite. The letter coupled
with the golden fish sign restored my memories due to my faithful participation in this
complex sacred mythic rite of anamnesis and rebirth…So all this took a Gnostic turn—
the cryptic sign (golden fish), the letter reminding me of my mission (albeit a profane
Pigspurt one; the myth sanctified it, turned a profane thing into something noumenal).838

In this account, receiving letters (whether they are read or not read) and responding to
signs (the fish sign) become ritual recapitulations of a larger myth, a myth whose soteriological
reference is then, as it were, incarnated in the ritualist through anamnesis. If all this sounds a bit
like Eliade, it should—on the previous page of the manuscript, Dick cites Eliade’s notion that a
mythological event unfolds illo tempore, in another kind of time. “Therefore if you can get (your
self) into a mythological narrative you will enter this dream time.”839 For Dick, this dream time

838. Dick, Exegesis, 603.
839. Ibid, 603.
was of course “orthogonal time,” perhaps his most complex and original metaphysical concept: a surreal and psychedelic twist on Platonism that explained, to take just one example, the superimposition of ancient Rome onto Orange County, circa 1974. Entering into mythological time, however, requires a rite, and here we find the final nuance of the idea of the Hymn as providing a script. By reading the Hymn as a ritual script, a script that moreover provides its own protocols of reading and interpreting signs, Dick attempted to render the anomalous and sometimes traumatic events of 2/3/74 as not only meaningful but redemptive. Even the profane and terrifying experience of the Xerox missive becomes “flip-flopped” and sanctified by its role in the enacted sacred narrative.

As Jeff Kripal points out in his annotation to the above passage, “what Eliade imagined in his comparative theorizing Dick seems to have realized in his experience of Valis.” From the perspective of the study of religion, this reminds us how much the imbricated braid of text and experience that characterizes 2/3/74 is both an extension of and response to the mid-century enterprise of comparative religion, replete with its own critical superimpositions and resonating constellations of concept, symbol, and phenomenological structure. Here, then, are more scripts: scripts about how to read and compare texts and the experiences embedded in texts. We may be condemned to learn about the life of the spirit and be awakened to it through books, as Eliade complained. But Dick would suggest, no doubt slyly, that the writings themselves may be alive with spirit—or at least, are animated by a dynamic information system capable of rewriting us at any time.
CONCLUSION: PROFANE ILLUMINATIONS

As befits a project with the title of *High Weirdness*, many of the material covered herein is, frankly, rather weird. In the course of close readings of Terence McKenna, Robert Anton Wilson and Philip K. Dick—readings at once of their extraordinary experiences and their extraordinary accounts of those experiences—we have encountered UFOs, synchronicities, bizarre drugs, pulp fictions, conspiracy theories, mystical technologies, paranoid visions, esoteric sexual practices, and alien voices—a lot of alien voices—emerging from within the self. My approach to these experiences and these accounts has also been, if not weird, than at least moderately unconventional.

While questions of psychopathology have necessarily arisen, both in this project and for these very intelligent men, my readings have nonetheless refused to pathologize the experiences and events themselves. Instead, I have tried read these experiences and their corresponding accounts, not simply as symptoms, but as forms of cultural, psychospiritual, and intellectual work—constructive work that requires nuanced elucidation rather than diagnoses. Similarly, while much of this work has involved the excavation of biographical, cultural and cognitive contexts that directly contribute to this work, I have also sought to puncture the now hegemonic hermeneutic of historical contextualization by returning to those sometimes radical philosophical
and existential problems introduced by radical forms of experience. However bizarre and unseemly, these are events that, in some way or another, announce the Outside, rupturing established discursive formations that are carried, not only within the subjects in question, but within and between observers and commentators. In this way, I have sought to invite a reverberant echo of the weird into the methods as well as the objects of this study.

But to what end? It is true that the course of cultural studies over the last thirty years has already reaped many rewards from the study of phenomena conventionally considered marginal, unseemly, and even bizarre. However, my focus on white male countercultural weirdness—here largely decoupled from organized forms of political, ethnic or subaltern struggle—seems to demand a higher bar of relevance than novelty or fascination. While the now canonical status of the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick merits looking at his extraordinary experiences from a religious rather than a strictly literary perspective, I have sought to provide something of more general heft as well: two intertwined inquiries into the mutation of American religious experience, one historical and one theoretical. I would like to briefly recap the territory covered in this caduceus-like undertaking, recapping each strand in turn, before making some concluding comments and suggestions for further research.

The historical framework of this project is largely drawn from the dynamics that countercultural seeking took in the early to mid-seventies (again, “early seventies” from now on), especially as they are manifested in the lives of three highly weird Californians. To perform this work properly, I needed to separate and distinguish the historical understanding and cultural memory of the seventies from the more dominant concern with the exceptionally dramatic, colorful, and politically supercharged sixties. In both popular and scholarly discourse, the first half of the seventies is essentially cast as the decline—the fracturing and, at best,
commodification—of the robust cultures of resistance and transformation that emerge in the sixties (which were themselves fractured and commodified, but that is another story). In this dominant narrative, the early years of the decade feature the collapse of the large scale “Movement” associated with both mass political action and the transformative destiny of a new “culture of consciousness.” What results in the seventies, then, is a sort of traumatic twilight zone characterized by a pervasive sense of anomie, retrenchment, and bitterness coupled with a broader cultural embrace of hedonism and a dramatic psychological turn towards that famous narcissism. As my own first chapter showed, there are very good reasons for this account. However, one result of this historical shorthand is that the radical, creative, and transformative dynamics of the early seventies are themselves obscured by dominant narratives of decline and popular commodification.

Indeed it is precisely the traumatic failure of the counterculture’s transformative destiny—whether conceived politically or spiritually—that produces the desperate necessity that drives the positive or creative activity of the early seventies. This is true whether or not we hear such productions in a minor key compared to the major progressions of the late sixties, or whether we underscore the political and existential positivity of emerging social, technological, environmental and psycho-spiritual developments. These developments include the communal experimentation with new social forms, the establishment of organic agriculture, the emergence of eco-philosophy as an ideological force and widespread theory of design, and the sifting of the millennialist political intensity of the sixties into a wider range of identity positions that help enact the cultural and institutional emergence of a more multicultural and postmodern America. Most importantly for this project, the early seventies also witnessed an explosion of psycho-spiritual activity that, besides absorbing radical political disappointments, helped seed or
intensify a variety of influential and important trends that would grow in the ensuing decades: the human potential movement, the New Age, the esoteric “weirding” of popular media, Asian religions in America, and the emergence of the “spiritual but not religious” sensibility that is now becoming a major (if paradoxical) determinant of American religious identity.

While the story of sixties psychedelia has been long and lovingly told, I have been interested here in a specifically “seventies” mode of visionary experience and alternative religiosity, one lodged in the liminal drift that emerged between the collapse of the Movement and the rise of the New Age in the later seventies. It was a time when the only revolution still conceivable would occur in consciousness, but before the coming “Aquarian conspiracy” had self-consciously consolidated that faith. Indeed, rather than speak of the New Age that waited in the wings, what centrally distinguishes the seventies is the widespread reach of the occult revival. While occult elements had of course long been woven into bohemian and hippy scenes, the occult revival as a cultural and popular media phenomenon—manifested in book publishing, films, Tarot cards, and the emergence of esoteric fairs, metaphysical bookstores, etc—does not begin to grow pervasive until the turn of the decade.

Along with this thickening symbolic stew, the early seventies also staged a sort of pre-Cambrian explosion of new religious movements, as growing flocks of countercultural refugees made their way into the arms of spiritual communes, guru scenes, and authoritarian social assemblages—aka “cults”—that often fused secular-psychological and esoteric discourses with transformative practices that deconstructed the conventional personality. Like the turn towards explicit violence by some leftwing extremists in the era, many of these cults could be considered radical, not in their political goals, but in their fusion of highly disciplined, strongly counter-normative command structures with an irrational or “liberated” zone of indeterminacy. And, also
like the domestic political extremism of the era, the rise of such new religious movements needs to be seen against the distinctly seventies backdrop of executive malfeasance, the growth of the surveillance state and its attendant paranoia, and the bitterness and sense of defeat that followed the collapse of mass social solidarity.

From the perspective of the history of American religions, the scholarly obsession with new religious movements in the early seventies makes sense. However, by focussing on relatively well-bounded groups and “dogmatic” sensibilities, scholars risk overlooking the more informal, pervasive, and heterodox assemblages that Campbell referred to as the cultic milieu, and that I have largely preferred to name with Christopher Partridge’s term occulture. My particular concern here has been to focus on more informal occultural actors who response to the chaos, drift, and delirium of the early seventies is to intensify their own individual pursuits with extraordinary experiences. The encounters that result are as conceptual as they are spiritual, and fuse—in ways that decidedly confuse conventional distinctions between religion and science—skepticism and wonder, discovery and derangement. I chose to focus on three remarkable individuals, all intellectuals and writers, two of whom were principally motivated by their psychedelic raptures, and one of whom wrestled with forms of visionary experience that are impossible to extricate from the problems of psychopathology.

Although all of these avatars were “religious geniuses” of a sort, the point was not to underscore their visionary heroism but to emphasize the existential, contingent, and altogether provisional forms of meaning (and meaninglessness) required to navigate and narrate the sheer weirdness presented by extraordinary experience when it is encountered outside of particular faith communities or religious-esoteric collectives. Rather than drawing from relatively fixed maps or discursive orientations toward extraordinary experience, whether found in the etic
language of social scientists or the emic language of gurus, these writers and thinkers instead
offered rich, complex, idiosyncratic, and demonstrably constructed frameworks that attempt to
process, narrate, and further intensify extraordinary experiences that, even in an era saturated
with such extremes, probably strike most readers as well beyond the pale.

Space has limited the degree to which I have been able to establish the historical
connections and acute resonances between our three avatars, not to mention the scores of figures
whose texts and testimonies could have been brought into this dense network of relation.
However, here I would like to join our three mutant bricoleurs of the counterculture together
under the heading of seeker. While the root metaphor of seeking is often associated with the
notion of a “religious quest” or a “spiritual journey,” I don’t believe either “religion” or
“spirituality” helps us appreciate or clarify either the promethean urgency of our avatars nor one
of their most significant dimensions: a robust (if inconsistent) embrace of naturalism, skepticism,
and hedonism that leavens the mystagoguery of both religion and spirituality with forms of sense
and sensibility more in keeping with a secular, post-Enlightenment, and even libertarian
orientation.

Stripped of qualifiers, however, I think the term seeker still helps us understand our
avatars. Seeking is more of a practice than a substance, an existential orientation towards
experience and inquiry that is, in addition, more applicable to individuals than groups. Self-help
seminars, devotional collectives, and “cults” are vital in the early seventies, but so are those
interminable rovers who resist such social forms, or pass in and out of them out through
restlessness, dissatisfaction, or further desire. Moreover, seekers are almost by definition open-
ended crafters of shifting and provisional frameworks, and their construction requirements
almost equally demand border crossings into psychology, physics, neuroscience, anthropology,
and literature. But even as the seventies seeker challenges the boundaries of “religion” and even “spirituality,” her practice (and self-description) is still rooted in America’s own religious past. Recall that the first self-styled “seekers” emerged from the progressive transformation of liberal Protestantism in the late nineteenth century, marked by an unlikely confluence of bohemian Transcendentalism, global internationalism, comparative religion, and the reborn esoteric currents represented by Theosophy and New Thought.

Some seekers emerging from this stew found themselves skirting or plunging towards more bohemian liberties and lifestyles, and eventually, in the postwar period, they found their way into a variety of Beat, hippie, and freak enclaves. As such, seekers played an active role in the sixties counterculture from the get-go, helping to ensure that esoteric, alternative, mystical, and Asian religious currents were an integral part of countercultural consciousness. At the same time, seekers also challenged the purely “spiritual” or sectarian orientations of these pursuits through a wider and more polymorphous remix of elements as profane as they were sacred.

For countercultural seekers, alternative religious currents offered two compelling attractions that are, in a sense, as secular as they are religious. One was the existential possibility of discovering—a verb we might gloss more closely as “inventing”—modes of authenticity that transcended instrumental reason, consumerism, and conventional American institutional identities. The other opportunity was the related invitation to explore—and, as bohemians, to enjoy—heterodox domains of consciousness, sensation and perception. While deeply bound up with the perennialist discourse surrounding mysticism, these experiences almost indistinguishably blended the spiritual and the aesthetic in a manner already anticipated by the European avant-garde. That said, the pursuit of “altered states” also runs deep in American religious history, not only through the Christian traditions of enthusiasm and Pentecostalism, but
through the more esoteric currents of Mesmerism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, and New Thought—all of which, not accidentally, also contributed to seeker subjectivity.

In the postwar period, this amorphous interest in the fringe phenomenology of perception was greatly magnified by the widening knowledge and use of powerful psychoactive substances, and especially the newly-named category of psychedelics: peyote, mescaline, psilocybin mushrooms, and the grand dame LSD (with marijuana thrown in for good measure). Whether or not these substances necessarily occasion visionary experiences that mime or recapitulate the religious imagination, the association between drugs and “religious experience” came to dominate the psychedelic intelligentsia, postwar bohemia, and the hippie-freak revolution. As the psychiatrist Humphry Osmond famously put it to Huxley in the fifties, sounding at once like a sacred psychopomp and a Madison avenue jingle man, “To fathom hell and soar angelic / Just take a pinch of psychedelic.”

The performance of countercultural spirituality—the protocols of yoga, the absorption of esoteric and mythological symbol systems both indigenous and ancient, the “Orientalist” appropriation of largely counter-normative Asian traditions—is inextricable from the ecstasies and confusions occasioned by psychedelic use. This should not, however, distract us from the importance of other forms of visionary experience: meditation, sexual trance, “freak-out” dancing, biofeedback, yoga, occult ritual, DIY parapsychology. Sometimes these were practiced in conjunction with drug use, but oftentimes not. In either case, the “sacred” pursuit of visionary or extraordinary experience was dialectically bound up, not only with the profane pursuit of kicks, but with existential and naturalistic pursuits of limit experiences that skirted religion but did seek its resolutions. Just as some spiritual practitioners of the era abjured the new chemical sacraments, so too did tribes of enthusiastic psychonauts and consciousness freaks keep the large
claims of the religious imagination and even “spirituality” at a cautious remove from their own explorations, even as the visionary phenomenology they encountered frequently resonated with the religious imagination.

In other words, the pursuit of “religious experience” by many counterculture seekers was not restricted to individuals already operating with religious frameworks. Instead, psychedelics and other visionary modalities also wove something like religious experience into more secular ways of being that draw from existential, literary and philosophical orientations informed by skepticism, the aesthetic avant-garde, and, to varying degrees, psychological and social scientific perspectives.

Here is where the historical framework of this project dovetails with a central driving question within the scholarly (and popular) interest in religion: how should we think about the vexed question of “religious experience”? Despite the desire of some contemporary scholars to remove the question from the table, it remains inextricable from both the study and experience of religion in modernity, and particularly in the United States. Whether you consider it as an analytic reflection or an ideological construction, William James’ defining work in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* represented the establishment of individual consciousness as a zone of psychological phenomenology and religious meaning distinct from social or doctrinal understandings of religion. Two outcomes of James’ epochal work have been important for this study, one cultural and one conceptual. The cultural effect has been the establishment of a clear desideratum for those American seekers who, like James, were riding the currents of liberal Protestantism into the increasingly global religious field. With James in mind, spiritual aspirants came to privilege religious (and particularly “mystical”) experience as, at once, an overriding goal and a fundamental source of self-authentication, a source that could, moreover, be detached
from socially bounded or dogmatic forms of religion. Loosed from traditions, forms of “religious experience” in turn commingled with the bohemian and avant-garde pursuit of visionary and extraordinary experiences for their own sake.

The conceptual result of James’ work was, again, the *sui generis* model of religious experience: the notion that religious experience, for all its varieties, represents an essential possibility of human consciousness tout court. As such, James’ model of religious experience flows into and supports the rise of the perennialist concepts that became central to many seekers: the notion that, beneath the variable surface of different religious cultures of practice lie universal modes of experience that can be pursued and tasted beyond their particular socio-cultural enframings.

While this concept helped to glamorize the twentieth-century fetish for religious and mystical experience as a source of meaning and clarification of ultimate concerns, its flaws and blind spots also presented an almost inevitable target for more critical and contextualizing scholarship. Suitably historicized, Kantian critiques were brought to bear on the very notion of generalizable, articulable and universal structures of “religious” consciousness and the corresponding rhetorical claims of immediate and self-authenticating experience. In a series of attacks initiated by Stephen Katz, the *sui generis* model of religious and especially “mystical” experience was exposed as a theoretical construction that obscured the extreme degree to which such experiences are, according to this line of critique, inextricably mediated by and bound to the traditions, discourses, and culturally inherited practices—hermeneutic and otherwise—that inevitably condition and constitute individual experiences. While there are considerable nuances to this critique—and a considerable degrees of nuance in the manner in which they are presented—I have approached it in this project through the intentionally loose notion of
“scripts.” Even ineffable and extraordinary experiences are, to some degree, scripted; that is, they are marked in their generation, their articulation and interpretation, and even their phenomenological unfolding with behavioral protocols, fixed symbolic associations, and discursive formations which bias, mediate, and “pre-program” the experience.

From one perspective, the stories of McKenna, Wilson, and Philip Dick all represent strong support for this view, which is often referred to as constructivism. After all, much of my work here has been the performance of an archaeology of extraordinary experience by excavating the cultural, political, and esoteric “scripts” that are blended within their robust accounts. At the same time, my presentation also interrogated Katzian constructivism on a number of points. One prong of my attack was to underscore the anomalous and unexpected novelty lurking in extraordinary experience—those elements whose bizarre and “pathological” force cannot be easily reduced to iterations of a well-established “tradition” of cultural scripts except through the ungainly expansion of the notion of tradition or cultural information to the point of absurdity. Without allowance for real anomaly, for the unexpected, and for events that rupture both etic and emic models, our understanding of extraordinary experience will be vitiated.

A related goal was to draw attention to the significant differences that the construction of religious experience undergoes when the “religion” in question is no longer rooted in a well-defined tradition of language and practice—as it is for Katz and many constructivists—but instead takes place in the heterogenous and multi-centered domain of the countercultural cultic milieu. Not only are scripts lifted from a “postmodern” cornucopia of sometimes contradictory religious traditions, occult systems, and indigenous mythologies, but the very genre of the scripts themselves are broadened to included sources like science fiction, avant-garde art, social science,
bohemian hedonism, and materialist psychology—sources that are decidedly outside the boundaries of religion, mysticism, or even esotericism.

It is the more naturalistic of these influences that contributed to my third major rejoinder to the Katzian constructivists. This point is less of an outright critique than a description of a form of reflexivity that profoundly reframes religious experience within the countercultural milieu. Here the very distinction between the etic language of scripts (seen from the outside) and the emic language of immediate experience (tasted from the inside) re-enters the preparatory language and protocols surrounding religious experience. In other words, the very concepts that allow the social scientist to contextualize and “explain” religious experience from the outside are taken up as operational tactics by the very actors pursuing religious experience.

As such, within countercultural thought and experience, we find a widespread and sometimes sophisticated understanding of the very process of scripting itself. The social scientific rejoinder to proponents of sui generis religious experience—that seemingly immediate events are mediated by all manner of scripts—is recognized and even turned on its head, becoming itself part of the apparatus of seeking and the continued cultivation, in particular, of transformative extraordinary experiences. Leary’s famous formulation of “set and setting” stitched this constructivist self-consciousness into the core protocols of psychedelic experience. This reflexivity is also implied by a popular term of art within the political and psychological discourse of the counterculture: the notion of “programming.” Within this view, conventional subjectivity, as well as public discourse and popular media, are understood as products of social programming. The radical gambit, both from seekers and political vanguards, is that this programming can be interrupted or redeployed by establishing agency on the level that John Lilly termed, in relationship to the pre-staging of psychedelic experience, metaprogramming.
The dynamic operation of scripts, rather than serving the deflationary critique of claims of immediacy, is actively taken up as part of the productive apparatus of limit experiences themselves, and therefore establishes recursion as a central feature of the countercultural reframing of extraordinary religious experience.

The “strange loop” introduced by this recursion required, in a sense, a new ontological category: *weirdness*. By developing the marginal cultural category of weirdness into a substantial notion, I attempted to integrate all three prongs of my own meta-constructivist critique. The anomalies that partly characterize extraordinary experience, that puncture expectations or present impossibilities, may not be supernatural or even preternatural—but they are weird. As is suggested by the now common reference to “quantum weirdness,” the substantive remains on the fringes of a specifically *naturalistic* spectrum.

Weirdness underscores the inevitable irruption of anomalies and extraordinary unlikelihoods but without the commitment to the separate orders of being established by most religious, spiritual, and explicitly paranormal orientations. At the same time, weirdness also describes a particular aesthetic orientation and cultural location. Here deviance—social, intellectual, or otherwise—drifts across a host of affective categories—the bizarre, the fantastic, the uncanny—and the intertwined fringes of a variety of cultural imaginaries: comic books, conspiracy theory, pulp fiction, fringe science, marginal and extreme religion. Finally, weirdness—and especially high weirdness—is designed to mark some of the phenomenological and even ontological oddities that result from the particular re-entry loop described above, whereby the consciousness that scripts drive extraordinary experience is not only fed back into the programming protocols of visionary experience but seems to mark the experiences themselves.
Here the best example remains Terence McKenna, glimpsing his first UFO over the
Columbian canopy. Recall that McKenna’s initial shock at the startling appearance of this craft
was followed by his recognition that elements of the vision alluded directly to corny B movies
and known UFO hoaxes from the fifties. For McKenna, however, the citation of these scripts
only intensified the uncanniness of the encounter. Despite (or because of) the absurdity of
McKenna’s experience, it remains in a sense paradigmatic for the cultural and phenomenological
mutation I have attempted to articulate here in *High Weirdness*. Here visionary phenomena are
understood (and experienced) at once concretely and critically, and the identification of scripts
within the social and individual construction of reality leads not to the mere deflation of
ontological claims but rather towards a deeper (and weirder) level of scripting, of reading and
being read, that itself demands a more capacious and variegated sense of ontology. As such, I
hope that my effort contributes to the renovation and reflexive complexification of extraordinary
experience as both a category of scholarly and historical inquiry and a valid object of spiritual
and philosophical pursuit.
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