HIGH WEIRDNESS
DRUGS, ESOTERICA, AND VISIONARY EXPERIENCE IN THE SEVENTIES
ERIK DAVIS
PRAISE FOR HIGH WEIRDNESS

It's miraculous how High Weirdness gives us so bracingly sober an account of the far reaches of psychedelic delirium. Rejecting easy credulity on the one hand, and snarky dismissal on the other, Erik Davis explores ecstatic experience without turning it into mystical dogma, but also without ever explaining it away. High Weirdness is neither a wonder tale nor a philosophical treatise; yet it is a masterpiece of what I can only call speculative fiction, or indeed speculative realism.

STEVEN SHAVIRO, author of Discognition and The Universe Of Things

Things got so weird in the seventies that even the weirdest got to turn pro. Even if I was tripping I couldn't imagine a better guide to McKenna, Wilson and Dick than Erik Davis. He has always taken the religious dimension of modern esoteric thought seriously, yet also lightly. Here he proves yet again to be a reliable guide to the outer limits.

McKENZIE WARK, author of Molecular Red and The Beach Beneath the Street

What happens when a trained historian of religions seriously engages the magical mushrooms, flying saucers, science fiction, and invisible trickster entities of the 1970s counterculture with the open mind and heart of a gifted literary artist? What happens when a rigorous intellect encounters a monstrous bestiary of actual spectral presences? Erik Davis happens. This book happens. And I could not be happier about it. May this book, like a glowing UFO, land on your lap, and every other lap, and weird our world beyond all measure.

JEFFREY J. KRIPAL, author of Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions
Erik Davis’ deep expertise in the esoteric underpinnings of popular culture makes him the perfect psychonaut to navigate the major perturbations in our reality field wrought by those giants of the counterculture, Terence McKenna, Robert Anton Wilson, and Philip K. Dick... Thanks to Davis’ unique ability to straddle high scholarship and hipness with his learned, sympathetic perspective and lively yet rigorous writing style, the publication of High Weirdness marks an important milestone in esoteric studies and the conjunction of two previously separate worlds.

VICTORIA NELSON, author of The Secret Life of Puppets and Gothicka

High Weirdness is the first book in a very long time that's given me the feeling of discovering a secret truth—a set of corridors through the maze of consciousness, existence, anomaly, and synchronicity. It's the sense of complete novelty yet utter familiarity, like suddenly remembering a dream that you've been having every night and then forgetting. Davis is describing, perhaps even retrieving, the strange attractor driving the visionary seventies. It's a sensibility all but lost to the utilitarian, conformist predictability of the digital age. Yet it's also precisely the terrifying and awesome novelty we need to recover if we're going to preserve the uniquely human ability to embrace paradox, celebrate ambiguity, and laugh at death. Don't be afraid. It's just the weird.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF, author of Team Human and Present Shock
High Weirdness

Drugs, Esoterica, and Visionary Experience in the Seventies
for the others
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This book has been a long time coming. Some of the inspirations, and a few notions, have been kicking around since the mid-eighties, when I wrote my senior English thesis at Yale on “The Postmodern Gnosis of Philip K. Dick.” Given such a length of time, a complete reckoning of the individuals who have helped this project toward the light of manifestation would not only be 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. At the least, however, I must thank two of my Yale professors, David Rodowick and Richard Halpern, who not only watched over my initial foray into PKD criticism but helped me find a path through critical theory that kept my freaky obsessions intact. I also must pass a groovy high five to Charles Kronengold and Anne-Lise Francois, who first got me thinking about the seventies in a serious way.

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Hadn't—from books, from living—
The profusion dawmed on us, of “languages”
Any one of which, to who could read it,
Lit up the system it conceived?—bird-flight,
Hallucinogen, chorale and horoscope:
Each its own world, hypnotic, many-sided
Facet of the universal gem.
    James Merrill, *The Book of Ephraim*

Something always escapes.
    William James, *The Pluralistic Universe*
Introduction
Welcome to the Weird

This book is about high weirdness, a mode of culture and consciousness that reached a definite peak in the early seventies, when the writers and psychonauts whose stories I tell herein pushed hard on the boundaries of reality—and got pushed around in return.

My 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 Christian fish necklace knocked on the door of his apartment in Orange County. Peculiar things had been happening in Dick's life and texts for decades, but the series of anomalies, coincidences, oracular dreams, and close encounters that characterized the period he later called “2-3-74” really take the cake.

Though it erupted with the force of revelation, 2-3-74 did not deliver a coherent message or prophecy. As such, 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 his self-declared “Exegesis”—an immense and sometimes tortured private journal that eventually clocked in at over 8,000, largely hand-written pages.

The religious turn catalyzed by 2-3-74 puzzled or repelled a number of Dick's earliest critics, some of whom feared he had gone mad. Since then, his late work has been richly recuperated by the horde of science-fiction critics and literary theorists now drawn to his work. But I wanted to approach Dick's revelations from a different angle.

As a historian of modern religion, I saw Dick less as a great writer than as a revelator and exegete who also happened to be a great writer. I wanted to read his writings, both fiction and nonfiction, in light of contemporary debates about mystical experience, hermeneutics, and the cultural history of American spirituality in the
postwar period, with special emphasis on the psychedelic transformation of esotericism and the occult.

I will get to all 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 with my project. At the end of the day, it was still a story about one guy—albeit a genius of sorts, a cracked visionary who managed to be at once unmatchably singular and disturbingly multiple. But if I wanted to place Dick in the context of his times, and explore the possibility that his experiences represented a broader mutation in the culture, I needed to cast a wider net.

As I was poking around the countercultural milieu of the sixties and seventies, I kept stumbling across accounts of extraordinary experience that possessed some eerie resonances with 2-3-74. These included narratives from the writer 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 doorstop 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 were the earlier experiences of Terence McKenna, a brilliant Berkeley student and psychedelic intellectual who returned to California from the Amazon in 1971 with a tale about the mother of all trips: a massive psilocybin mushroom journey, taken with his brother Dennis, whose gnostic, paranormal, and science-fictional dimensions McKenna would later compare explicitly to 2-3-74.

And there were more stories as well—from John Lilly, Timothy Leary, Andrija Puharich, J.J. Hurtak. Indeed, the more I dug into the esoteric margins of the first half of the seventies, the more memoirs and accounts I discovered that blended elements of religious mysticism and esoteric gnosis with cybernetic media, alien communications, genre fictions, and psychedelic metaphysics. The fact that all of these stories unfolded over a few years’ time, and largely in California, suggested to me that there were larger patterns afoot.

This book focuses on close readings of what are to my mind the most fascinating of these experiences—the McKennas’ “Experiment at La Chorrera,” Robert Anton Wilson’s Cosmic Trigger experiences, and the 2-3-74 complex of Philip K. Dick. Not only were these
episodes riveting and resonant with one another, but they all catalyzed rich and diverse writings that illuminate the tricksy dynamics between text, temperament, and extreme phenomenology. While my close readings will take precedence over a comparative synthesis, I have written this book in the indirect light of those enigmatic Zeitgeist patterns that largely linger beyond my frame. So I raise the flag of *high weirdness* here as both a standard (of the unstandard) and a warning of sorts, like the indication “here be dragons” that medieval chart-makers scrawled on the margins of the mapped.
0.0.1 Highly Weird

I owe the phrase high weirdness to a long-ago encounter with one revelatory text: Rev. Ivan Stang’s 1988 catalog High Weirdness By Mail: A Directory of the Fringe: Mad Prophets, Crackpots, Kooks & True Visionaries. Stang divided his illustrated, large-format directory of “crank literature” into categories like “Weird Science,” “New Age Saps,” and “Cosmic Hippie Drug-Brother Stuff.” These categories in turn organized capsule reviews and contact information for a variety of niche organizations like Christian Technocracy, the Warlords of Satan, Saucer Technology, and the Good Sex for Mutants Dating League. All of the stuff Stang included was real, but so unusual that it was sometimes hard to believe.

Stang’s volume was part of a micro-trend of fringe catalogs that helped map the labyrinth of the eighties underground, and which also included the Loompanics Catalog, Amok Books’ Dispatch series, and Mike Gunderloy’s metazine Factsheet Five. These and other compendia reflected an important mutation in the underground, as the counterculture of the sixties splintered into a proliferation of subcultures driven to announce themselves largely through alternate, DIY media: self-published books, cassettes, videos, comix, and, most importantly, zines. These circuits of marginal media were by no means restricted to post-sixties rebellions, but also included a rainbow array of American alternatives to mass culture, many of them religious, mystical, and occult.

Stang’s high weirdness was not something the groups Stang cataloged were necessarily aiming for. Instead, high weirdness described an ironic but strangely loving aesthetic cultivated by Stang and his readers. It was a mode of enjoyment, amazed and sometimes perverse, that was pursued through mail-order trawls of an American culture haunted by conspiracy, delusion, and what he memorably called “the freak show of faith.” Stang was perfectly upfront about the role that snark played in his curation of American fringe religion. “Appreciate unexpected glimpses of the strange ‘realities’ behind religions other than your own?” he asked in his introduction. “Entranced by the thought process of the mentally ill?”

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But his Dada smirk was only one gesture in an array of attitudes that included rationalist skepticism, irrationalist pranking, and a kind of exuberant bemusement that can only be called wonder.

As a genre of culture and a mode of enjoyment, the high weirdness I will unpack has elements of all these attitudes. But high weirdness is an infectious project; it breaks down the distinction between subject and object; it loops and stains. In this sense, the most significant feature of Stang's project lay in the fact that neither he nor his readers could really keep their distance from the material that so compelled them. The proof of this is that, along with the many earnest and unintentionally weird groups he archived, Stang's catalog also included many zinesters, comics artists, authors, and musicians who, like himself, were self-consciously mining, recombining, and rebroadcasting the esoteric hijinks that Stang himself was helping to articulate.

Such intentional weirdness also characterizes the organization for which Stang still serves as Reverend: the Church of the SubGenius. Often characterized in religious studies as a “parody religion,” the Church was first developed by Stang and Philo Drummond at the end of the seventies in a variety of zines. Its prophet was J.R. “Bob” Dobbs, a clean-cut salesman whose grinning Ward Cleaver-like visage was invariably pictured with a pipe. The CoS drew a great deal of inspiration from Discordianism, an earlier parody religion—if that is the right term—whose ironic mysteries, slapstick anarchism, and terrible Zen puns were, as we will see later, transmitted into the seventies counterculture principally through Wilson and Shea's Illuminatus! trilogy.

But here is the key. For all the CoS' bad puns and smug satire, Stang and other leading SubGenii also insisted that their religion was real. However you interpret this claim—as a paradoxical mode of sincerity, a second-order irony, or a bid for tax breaks—it announces a crucial feature of high weirdness. It may start out as a game, but it ends up as a whole world. It is like some psychedelic trips—they begin as a lark, a perceptual dérive, and end up with gods and devils and the screaming abyss. Even if we think of religions or psychedelic ideations as little more than fictions, fictions have a self-engendering power to shape reality. The play of as if, which is very similar to the science-fiction premise of what if, can produce remarkable reality-warping effects. Indeed, the intertwining of reality and fantasy has
become a crucial feature of what some scholars of religion now identify as “postmodern” or “hyper-real religion”—very much including the CoS.\footnote{2}

In the section of his catalog called “More Weird Religion,” Stang listed his own Church under the heading “The One Sane Anchor In This Raging Sea Of False Belief.” With this self-referential shout-out, Stang spoke to the element of recursion that, as we will see, also characterizes high weirdness. Stang let the mask slip: \textit{high weirdness} was not simply an ironic category for feverish and esoteric strands of the American fringe, but a creative and reflexive engagement with those very same religious and cultural materials—even a playful and ironic esoteric current of its own. Think of it as a kind of visionary skepticism, or critical gnosticism. Within this questioning current, the object of weird fascination is folded back into the subject, constructing a strange loop of cultural play, recursive enigma, and extraordinary encounter that makes a raid on the real.
0.0.2  Weirdly High

Stang's book helped establish high weirdness as both a genre and a creative sensibility that marked various subcultures. But high weirdness is equally a mode of extraordinary experience. At least since the publication of Stang's catalog, the phrase (or sometimes high strangeness) has served as an underground term of art for particularly intense and bizarre experiences—especially anomalous experiences associated with paranormal phenomena, occult practice, synchronicities, and psychedelics. In encounters with high weirdness, culture becomes consciousness. Marginal and esoteric cultural narratives—particularly those wrapped up in conspiracy theories, extraterrestrials, occult forces, strange gods, and fantastic pulp fictions—intrude forcefully, uncannily, and sometimes absurdly into the texture of lived experience.

Here, for example, is a trip report included in Jim DeKorne's important 1992 book Psychedelic Shamanism, an imaginative discussion of psychedelic phenomenology, published by the underground stalwart Loompanics, that includes a good deal of DIY detail on plant preparations. In the following account, an anonymous colleague of DeKorne describes his bio-assay of a pharmacological analogue to the Amazonian brew ayahuasca, made with materials he purchased through a mail-order catalog. After swallowing the vile brew, the fellow 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.3

The first thing to note in this exemplary scene is the presence of material drawn from mythology and popular culture, including references to B-movie monsters, to Dali’s pop Surrealist biomorphs, and to the iconography of dragons. This opens up the crucial question of whether such cultural markers have been added to the account after the fact or in some sense erupted within—or even shaped—the experience itself. In this book, I will argue that, at least under conditions of high weirdness, the causal relationship between cultural codes and “experience itself” gets twisted into a loop whose unstable and resonant dynamics actually drive the mode in question.

More dramatic than the presence of this remixed cultural material, of course, is the startling appearance of an Other: the reptilian entity who pops out of the phantasmagoric scene and returns the observer’s gaze. As we will see, all of our psychonauts reported something pretty similar: visual, verbal, or intuitive encounters with enigmatic
nonhuman intelligences they could neither shake nor entirely believe in.

The entities we will meet are rather elusive, and resemble science-fiction characters more than gods or elemental spirits, and in the chapters ahead, we will make the risky move of trying to take them seriously without taking them literally. At the very least, we are on ancient ground here. After all, the encounter with supernatural agents brings us back to arguably the most archaic religious idea (or at least the most archaic idea of religious scholars): animism, the belief in, or communication with, otherworldly beings. High weirdness is weirdness animated.

DeKorne's eye-witness criticizes his own response to the dog-dragon's gaze, a comment that is, crucially, folded into the experiential account itself. Hovering around the pivot of reason and madness, detachment and delusion, the seeing of visions and the scene of writing, our psychonaut reflects a vexed ambivalence—partly skeptical, partly fearful, partly amazed—that is itself a crucial element and even catalyst of high weirdness.

These considerations raise another question that will pursue us throughout this study: how do psychonauts practice their experiences? How do they respond in situ, and how do they interpret and narrate their experiences in the sometimes shattering aftermath? The problem of extraordinary experience is also a problem of pragmatic operations, both the ethics of engagement and the ethics of interpretation—including the choices made in writing texts that are themselves highly weird.

This question of practice also rebounds on us, the readers or hearers of such experiences. When we encounter tales like the one DeKorne offers, or those from the pens of our psychonauts, many of us almost instinctively reach for all manner of revolvers: familiar explanations that effectively “kill” the weirdness, like temporary psychosis, pharmacological action, or indulgently inventive storytelling (aka, bullshitting). Such critical and even reductive responses will very much inform my discussion ahead, and not just because I am here, at least in part, to analyze and disenchant. Skepticism will also be part of the story because it plays a crucial if eccentric role in the stories told by our psychonauts themselves, all of whom deployed their own sometimes highly inventive forms of inquiry and doubt as they braved the high seas of the weird.
In the court of the mind, skepticism makes a great grand vizier, but a lousy lord, and a worse bard. As readers and interpreters, I believe we must move gingerly when dealing with reports of extraordinary experiences, which can be convulsive to experiencers, but strangely delicate things in the analytic afterglow. While I do want to analyze the experiences ahead, as well as the written accounts, I am far more interested in providing close readings of them than in explaining them away. I want to provide maps of their influences, resonances, and structural dynamics rather than unravel their ultimate meaning or origin or cause. We need to give these enigmas and strange loops room to breathe and to be—to enjoy what Bruno Latour, a philosopher and sociologist who will accompany us throughout our work, calls their own “ontological pasture.”

This is tricksy stuff, and since I also want to tell some amazing stories, I can only dwell so much, in the chapters ahead, on the deeper questions such stories raise. The rest of my introduction will open up and engage some of these thorny theoretical and methodological problems, which we will flashback to at important points in the narratives before us. (Readers antsy to get to the weird tales are welcome to skip ahead; you can always return for deeper perspectives on what I am up to.) The central problem is how to think about extraordinary experiences, particularly when such experiences verge on the religious, or the occult, or the paranormal—and possibly the pathological.

My theoretical approach here, I want to insist, will be decidedly experimental, more of an attempt—in the classic sense of “essay”—than an analytic framework. In cobbling my network of concepts together, I am driven by my dissatisfaction with the idealism of religious and mystical thinking, on the one hand, and the stinginess of the usual reductionism on the other. I want, perhaps impossibly, a middle way, a hybrid path that concepts can both clarify and craft on the fly. It is a path of radical empiricism, as well as a version of what I will be calling weird naturalism. To really engage the problems and possibilities of extreme experience, we must deal not only with representations, but with what William James called the “thickness of reality.” And I want to begin by sticking our toes into the murky, mist-shrouded mire of culture and consciousness that we can call the weird.
0.0.3 On Weird Naturalism

Most of us have had experiences that, unless we have utterly misread them, put severe pressure on conventional realistic accounts of how the world works. We may have had a prophetic dream, or been struck by an absurdly recurrent synchronicity, or received advice from a forest creature, or glimpsed a bizarre object in the sky, or felt the presence of a loved one at the time of their distant death. Or we know people who report such experiences in ways we have no reason to disbelieve. If we want to earnestly describe such experiences without rejecting common-sense realism, we reach for the language of the weird. “I know it sounds totally weird but...” or “Pretty weird, huh?”

Why do we do this? One reason is that to characterize a phenomenon or object as “weird” is to sneak in no extra metaphysical claims; no divine writ or occult rumor is needed to vouchsafe the existence of strange and uncanny impressions or experiences. They are part of human life, at least if you are paying attention. At the same time, the weird does announce the appearance of something like anomaly, or at least deviancy—inexplicable, aberrant, or unsettling events or encounters that pull or twist against the norm. Statistically, such deviations may be perfectly routine. But they never feel that way. So we don't know where to put them. Many of us forget such events, or sweep them under the carpet. And by using the label weird, we acknowledge them, but also trivialize them. The weird twists the profound depths it seems to point to into banal, even throwaway, surfaces.

By its nature, the weird is a word in motion and mutation. But to work with the term here, and to amplify it into high weirdness—the high of drugs, of high seas and high risk—we need to sketch out three different dimensions of its meaning, three overlays that will both resonate and play off each other in the chapters to come.

The first domain is aesthetic. The weird describes a peculiar domain of feelings and images associated with stories, spaces, atmospheres, and moods that relate to the uncanny, the fantastic, the perverse, and the macabre side of the supernatural. The weird here is essentially a genre—not just of cultural production, but of affect and
possibility, of the visionary imagination and the experimental body. Books can be weird, but so can subcultural happenings.

The second domain marks the weird as a space of deviancy, social or otherwise. Weird things are anomalous—they deviate from the norms of informed expectation and challenge established explanations, sometimes quite radically. In the human world, you are being weird or a weirdo when you refuse or transgress dominant behavioral and conceptual codes. Despite its numinous, supernatural ambience, the weird also hunkers down in the margins of the actual, as a centrifugal turn away from naturalistic or probabilistic or historical norms to which it remains, nonetheless, intimately tied.

The third and most substantial sense of the weird is ontological. In this view, weirdness is a mode of reality, of the way things are or the way they appear to be (which may be just two sides of the same strange coin). Weirdness here is not simply an artifact of our bent minds but a feature of the art and manner of existence itself—an existence I believe we can still talk about directly, though perhaps always with a forked tongue. More than a genre, more than a psychological mode, the weird inheres in the loopy, twisty, tricksy way whereby things come to be.

I offer these suggestions at a time when the weird, as a critical term, is gaining density, though not yet an obvious direction. My account resonates with the “weird realism” or “weird essentialism” explored by Graham Harman and Timothy Morton respectively. Harman is a realist: he holds that the things we perceive are, from their side, actual and existent. Objects are not merely subjective inventions or Kantian templates in our heads, nor are they illusions based on some more fundamental level of reality, like subatomic particles or the total consciousness of God. Objects have essences. But though he is a realist, Harman is not a materialist, since his “ontology of objects” stretches to include, not only dogs, trees, and flames, but “societies, ghosts, gods, pirates, coins, and rubies.” For Harman, these more incorporeal or storied objects—very much including fictions—all have their own autonomous existence.

This openness to fictions and abstractions makes Harman’s realism peculiar, but what makes it really weird is that, though we encounter actual objects all the time (including the objects that compose us), those objects are also essentially opaque and unknowable. Rationalism, which attempts to master the world through
coordinated representations, will always fall short of reality because things themselves are “mysterious and veiled.” The known and visible properties of things—their appearances—are separated through some “weird tension” from their essence as objects. As such, it is not simply the limitations of our minds that constrain what we can know about the worlds that both confront us and pass us by. We are actually in a weirder situation, because the very boundary between the essence and the appearances of things—even, or especially, within ourselves—is itself slippery, scrambled, and deeply enigmatic.

This is why the ontological weird is haunted by the aesthetic weird. Harman, for example, has written extensively on the weird fiction of H.P. Lovecraft, whom he rightly reads as a philosopher of sorts. (Harman is also a fan of our man Latour.) “Aesthetics” here does not simply suggest arts and entertainments, but also describes the sensory and affective impressions that haunt our encounters with the things—the real things—that mark us. The weird, in this sense, suggests the groundless being of all aesthetics, that liminal twist that stretches between our impressionistic encounters and the spectral opacity of real objects. As Morton puts it, within the term weird “there flickers a dark pathway between causality and the aesthetic dimension, between doing and appearing, a pathway that dominant Western philosophy has blocked and suppressed.” But as we will see, subdominant streams of thought—such as esotericism, imaginative fiction, and speculative realism—are more intimate with this dark pathway.

For Morton, aesthetic appearance and causality—the billiard ball universe of necessity—are two sides of the same uncanny thing, but two sides that can never exactly meet no matter how you slice it. While things are what they are, they are not consistently present: they flicker and tease, like faery lights or (machine) elves. Because of this dynamic instability, Morton characterizes reality as a strange loop, or ouroboros. We may think we are getting down to brass tacks, only to find ourselves slipping once again along the paradoxical, recursive surface of things, including the Möbius strips of the self. But these strange loops do not derive from some supernatural being or philosophical ideal lying outside the bounds of the finitude we
know—they lie rather in what Harman calls “a twisting or torsion of that finitude itself.”

I emphasize the twisting immanence of the weird here because, though we will be meeting some wild visions ahead, including gnostic downloads and alien beings, I want to understand these extraordinary experiences not as signs of a “separate reality” but as manifestations or mutations of this one. Where Harman and Morton speak of weird realism, or weird essentialism, I will speak instead of a weird naturalism. This roots the weird in the history of things, both human and not. Our experiences of the weird—as aesthetic encounter, as deviation from the social norm, as inexplicable factum—may point beyond, but they are perhaps better seen as an unnerving and enigmatic warp or wiggle in the web of reality itself. Though our psychonauts may not always stick to this perspective—a slippage that is part of the story—their experiences open up a space of encounter and evolution that does not transcend so much as loop together culture and consciousness, sacred and profane, romance and realism, gnosis and nature.
A Wayward Word

If we track the roots of the word weird, we discover an enigmatic territory that also twists between aesthetics and causality. The substantive _wyrd_ is an Old English word that describes the demands of destiny: auguries, dooms, and the Fates as personified, pan-European agents of necessity. _Urðr_, the name of one of the three Norns who weave destiny among the Norse, is cognate with _wyrd_. The adjective is first found in the phrase _weird sisters_, which was used by Scottish poets to describe the classical Fates before Shakespeare famously attached it to the witches of _Macbeth_.

These witches are the womb of the modern weird. But Shakespeare's spelling of the word is, it must be said, 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 Shakespeare often used to denote the capricious and willful refusal to follow rule or reason. This suggests, at least to some _Macbeth_ scholars, that the witches derive their uncanny power not simply from their oracular knowledge but from their willful resistance to the norm.¹⁰ The weird that enters modern English, then, suggests both the esoteric knowledge of causal necessity _and_ the perverse turn away from natural law. We might think of this as a _twist of fate_ that escapes necessity through a deviation that nonetheless extends the real.

In the hands of the Romantics, the weird thickened its aesthetic character, taking on associations of the eerie, the dreamlike, and the phantasmagoric. Shelley enjoyed the occult aura of the term, comparing his own agency as a writer to "some weird Archimage... plotting dark spells, and devilish enginery."¹¹ Poems are, in this Romantic sense, spells, the textual engines of sorcerous impressions. As such, Shelley also linked the word to a certain _type_ 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.¹²
Here the weird tales of gloomy Romanticism challenge the daylight mind of the Enlightenment, the mind that does not believe in anything unseen, but is satisfied to know, or to believe it knows, only what it can see. The weird pulls away from such confident rationality, but remains bound up with the “enginery” of tale-telling and tale-publishing. In this sense, “weird” not only describes the witches in *Macbeth*, but the play itself.

The aesthetics of the weird loomed even larger in the Gothic novel, whose chart-topping tales of ghosts, aberrant sexuality, and religious exotica eventually bloomed, after various twists and turns, into the modern genre of supernatural horror. By the early twentieth century, some writers and critics started talking about the “weird tale,” and in the spring of 1923, the pulp fantasy magazine *Weird Tales* began publication. *Weird Tales* unleashed Robert E. Howard’s wizard-battling Conan and the coruscating otherworlds of Clark Ashton Smith into the world. But it is best known for broadcasting the infectious works of H.P. Lovecraft, a writer whose captivating tales of forbidden books and loathsome cosmic monsters loom over much of the high weirdness ahead.

In the twenties, Lovecraft wrote an extended literary essay about supernatural horror and the weird tale. Here 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.”

We must note here how deeply this aesthetic encounter strays into the cosmic, the metaphysical, even the mystic.

To produce this effect in literature, the author explained, writers of the weird had to successfully balance fantastic otherworldliness—what Lovecraft called the “Outside”—with the daylight framework of naive realism and its naturalistic assumptions. Some weird stories, he explained, 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 were rooted in the rhetoric of reality, and “devised with all the care and verisimilitude of a hoax.”
As such, we might think of the weird—literary and not—as a form of the fantastic paradoxically embedded in the tricksy real.

The same year that *Weird Tales* began, the theologian and comparativist Rudolf Otto's book *The Idea of the Holy* appeared in English, setting off its own weird reverberations. 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. Sounding rather Lovecraftian, Otto argued that “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 formulation 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, all manifestations of the sacred, which he called “hierophanies,” are also marked by a profound ambivalence. Many aboriginal cultures considered certain objects—“taboo” or otherwise—to be at once holy and dangerous, an ambiguity that Eliade insists can be found in Christian mysticism and classical literature as well.

But there is a weirder ambivalence lurking in Eliade's notion of the sacred. For Eliade, the distinction between sacred and profane is ontological—the sacred is a separate reality. At the same time, the objects and events that come to embody the sacred in any given society are up for grabs, even radically contingent. “Anything man has ever handled, felt, come in contact with or loved can become a hierophany.” 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. The “paradoxical coming-together of sacred and profane...produces a kind of breakthrough in the various orders of existence.” This paradoxical coming-together, with its volatile ontological instability, is the pivot of high weirdness.
0.0.5 Uncanny

The weird bears a more than passing resemblance to the uncanny, another atmospheric and emotionally laden term associated with both literary and psychological strangeness. In his famous essay “Das Unheimliche,” written just a few years before *Weird Tales* debuted, Freud stressed the double character of uncanny objects or events: they are both familiar, even quotidian, and unexpectedly peculiar or macabre. Think of dolls or wax figures—common nonliving things that nonetheless suggest, on a level of fantasy that adheres to their very form, an eerie animation. Within his developmental understanding of religion, Freud linked this flicker to the “animist” psychology of children and primitive human cultures. But the vision of things as spiritually alive is also a feature of mystical consciousness, as well as dreams, psychedelic experience, hypnagogia, horror films, and the mind-frames of occultists. It is perhaps only from the flattened and disenchanted perspective of modern subjectivity that the liveliness of the world fails to register.

Freud also notes that the uncanny sometimes takes the form of ominous recurrence. Drawing from his own life experience, Freud described wandering lost in a city but finding oneself returning to the same spot again and again. “How weird,” one might say. Such involuntary repetitions, Freud claims, stage an uncomfortable but strangely thrilling return of the repressed. (Inviting the macabre into his theory, Freud eventually came to describe this unconscious compulsion to repeat the object-cause of our own anxiety as the *death drive*.) The uncanniness of such unintended or “chance” recurrences is also what lends a spooky significance to seemingly meaningful coincidences, which for Freud were exemplified by the experience of encountering the same number over and over again through the course of an otherwise normal day. As we will see, such “synchronicities,” as Jung would call them, are a leitmotif of high weirdness.

That said, there are significant differences between the uncanny and the weird, and these differences help explain why the weird remains a comparatively undeveloped concept. The story of the
unheimlich—which literally means un-homely— is a psychological story. As the critic Mark Fisher explains, the uncanny is not the weird. Psychoanalysis explains the uncanny by referring to an inside: in particular, to the repressed inner dynamics of the family. This hermeneutic is what Fisher calls a “secular retreat from the outside.” The weird, by contrast, does not belong at all. It “brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it, and which cannot be reconciled with the ‘homely’ (even as its negation).” These terms—Outside and Beyond—will regularly be contrasted with the “inside” of the psyche throughout this study.

Because of this psychoanalytic legacy, the notion of the uncanny carries an air of nuance, even intellectual sophistication. The “literary” quality of modernist writers like Borges and Bruno Schulz, or films like Murnau's Nosferatu or Resnais's Last Year at Marienbad, can be attributed in part to their invocation of the uncanny. The twentieth-century weird, on the other hand, rears its pulpy head in the environs of the crass: monster magazines, exploitation movies, novelty items, UFO pamphlets, tattoo art, and comic books, whose mid-century titles included Weird Science, Weird Chills, Weird Fantasy and Adventures into Weird Worlds. Staking its aesthetic claim in unserious outposts of horror, science fiction, and paranormal folklore, the weird stands as the uncanny's low-brow doppelgänger, its trailer-park country cousin.

Yet it is precisely the garishness and absurdity of the weird that gives it a paradoxically sacred power. When Eliade described the idol as a “coming-together of sacred and profane,” he also recognized that, at least among the more elementary and “vivid” hierophanies he tracked, the sacred object is often, well, rather peculiar. “Everything unusual, unique, new, perfect or monstrous at once becomes imbued with magico-religious powers.” Even in cultures unmarked by the concept of natural law, marvels and monsters are still experienced as deviant phenomena whose power derives in part from their subversion of the commonplace rhythms of reality. Twins, albinos, botanical oddities, freak weather, the sudden appearance of smelly Caucasian missionaries—all such strange and marvelous appearances were, depending on local expectations, candidates for an ambivalent flash of the sacred.
This condition of deviance also reminds us that, unlike the uncanny, the weird also describes a social position—and especially the aberrant profile associated with delinquents or outsiders, with the "un-fit". By the middle of the twentieth century, weirdness had become a sub-hip identity of sorts, even a mode of rebellion—the wayward way of the wyrd sisters, twisting away from mainstream norms. Teenagers, homosexuals, bohemians, drug users, sideshow carnies, comic book artists, bikers, and oddballs of all stripes have taken up the flag of the weird or found it draped upon them. Since the forties at least, “weirdo” has denoted not only threatening—and possibly perverted—individuals, but those who are merely, even self-consciously peculiar. Here we can note a certain resonance between weirdo and queer—both social and aesthetic outsiders whose transgressions twist in ontological, political, and erotic directions.

The weird's aura of social deviance held true throughout the long course of the counterculture. The young people of the sixties were the children of the fifties, which means they were children of EC horror comics, rock’n’roll exploitation records, UFO flicks, and Mad. Hippies, freaks, and heads were all, in a social sense, weirdos. This was reflected in their media as well; in many ways the weirdness of seventies culture devolves to the fact that so many young creators of movies, comic books, genre fiction, role-playing games, and other popular media streams were themselves heads. By the time the underground cartoonist R. Crumb launched Weirdo magazine in 1981, the term was a self-conscious marker of a post-sixties, subcultural identity whose ethos was reflected in the format of the magazine: an intentionally “low-brow” compendium of underground comix, outsider art, bleak quotidian tales, and Church of the SubGenius-style agitprop clearly aimed, like Stang’s directory, at fellow weirdos.

In the seventeenth issue of Weirdo, which appeared in 1986, Crumb published a faithfully illustrated account of 2-3-74, an account he boldly entitled “The Religious Experience of Philip K. Dick.” Though Crumb mocked hippie mysticism throughout his career, his treatment of 2-3-74 is shorn of irony or his usual misanthropy, and reflects no anxious need to distance himself from Dick’s sacred story. This refusal to editorialize, this straight talking about bent things, tells us something important about the way the
weird engages or overlaps religion. Because Dick's story is so bizarre, it can be told as a “true tale,” but a true tale that behaves differently than a UFO report or near-death experience by virtue of appearing in *Weirdo*. Here it appears as an aesthetic object, a *weird thing*, a testimony we are not asked to *believe*, but to encounter on its own terms, to swallow like a drug, or a stranger's strange story.

Which is to say that, when it comes to the weird, context and social location matter. When Crumb's strip came out, Dick had been dead four years, and his work was mostly out of print. The fact that a garish and sometimes erotic comic book like *Weirdo* kept his most incredible story alive during the nadir of his fame itself demonstrates one of Dick's own canniest claims, from *VALIS* (1981): that the symbols of the divine initially show up in “the trash stratum.” As we will see in our later chapters on 2-3-74, there is a gnostic Christian cosmology embedded in Dick's observation. But his notion of divine trash also captures the peculiar aura of the weird, the oddball glow of the sacred profane.
In naming Dick's testimony a “religious experience,” Crumb brought into play a crucial term for this study. Dick himself sometimes used the phrase “religious experience” to describe the weird stuff that happened to him, while the McKennas and Robert Anton Wilson, as far as I know, did not. Nonetheless, their extraordinary experiences all resonate with many features of religious experience as it has come to be known both generally and within the history of religion. The point however is not to classify their experiences as religious or not. The point is to read them in light of a key transformation in postwar consciousness and culture: a transformation we can call the weirding of religious experience.

Anywhere you find it, “religious experience” remains a troubled and troubling concept. What makes a given experience religious? How do such experiences relate to pathology, or delusion, or mysticism, or altered states of consciousness? What does it mean when people who are not particularly religious claim to have had them? Given all these questions, both inside and outside of scholarship, the idea of “religious experience” might seem to just get in the way of our story—especially as that story roves rather far from those religious communities and dogmatic theologies that have traditionally given such extraordinary experiences a name and a habitation.

One reason I would like to keep the term in play, however, is that I am, among other things, a historian of religions. I cannot help but see the high weirdness ahead within the context of America's long tradition of patchwork metaphysics, religious reinvention, and visionary exuberance. From mesmeric trances to Pentecostal word jazz, from pranayama in the Hollywood Hills to peyote in the Native American Church, from Shaker dances to Yankee zazen, a myriad of experiential practices have fed innumerable forms of faith and ecstasy in the life of the land.

Equally important to American religion is the very concept of “religious experience” as the central force and factor in spiritual life. We owe this concern to William James, the bearded mascot of
American consciousness culture. In his ridiculously influential book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James characterized religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude.” By shifting attention away from the collective and historical frameworks of religious institutions, dogma, and community, James helped frame subjectivity as the heart of modern religious life. As such, James both prophesied and helped invent the increasingly individualized forms of faith and practice that would explode in the twentieth century. These forms have included everything from bohemian mysticism to pick-and-choose “cafeteria religion” to the growing contemporary identity of “spiritual, but not religious.”

Most of the experience reports that pepper *Varieties* have to do with revivalism and Christian conversion, though some move in more esoteric atmospheres. But James’ most lasting contribution to the phenomenology of the spirit—and to the imaginations of later countercultural seekers—were his lectures on mysticism. James considered mysticism the “root and center” of religious experience, a phenomenon of “inner authority and illumination” that unfolds on a more abstract plane than the roller-coaster rides of the born-again or the ascetic ecstasies of the saints. That said, the mystical encounter is frequently ineffable, which means that accounts of mystical experience put—as we will see with all our psychonauts—weird pressures on language. Despite this ineffability, James held that the mystic flash takes the form of a noetic insight—the kind of direct experiential knowing that esotericists call gnosis, and that James described as “consciousness of illumination.”

By distilling an empirical and psychological model of mystical experience, James pulled the category of “mysticism” away from its traditional home in Christianity and helped reframe it as a universal human potential. Depending on both luck and practice, everyone has the possibility of tasting what James sometimes called, following the Canadian psychiatrist Richard Maurice Bucke, “cosmic consciousness.” Such thinking later fed modern perennialism, a theory of religious and mystical experience that deeply influenced the psychedelic and spiritual counterculture through writers like Aldous Huxley, Carl Jung, Stan Grof, Mircea Eliade, and Huston Smith. Perennialists hold that within the world’s various religions lie personal experiential possibilities, especially for nondual perceptions.
of unity and the absolute, that are independent of creed and cultural location. The ecumenical politics of perennialism can be summed up as *one mountain, many paths*—including, at least for a few of its proponents, the path of drugs.

Surprising no one familiar with contemporary scholarship, the notion that all human beings host a universal potential for so-called *sui generis* mystical experience has come in for considerable drubbing. According to a now familiar line of attack, perennialism has been criticized for its suppression of cultural difference. And it's true: accounts of spiritual experiences culled from the world's religious and mystical traditions evidence sometimes radical divergences in language, imagery, and underlying metaphysics. Some are monist and others are dualist; some are abstract and impersonal, others interfused with the immanence of nature, while still others luxuriate in the intimate, but sometimes agonizing, embrace of a personal God. Perennialists tend to paper over these differences, and to secretly nominate their favorite paradigm as the pinnacle of the hierarchy of spiritual states that inevitably emerges.

In the eyes of critics, this false consilience abuts another problem, one that is very evident in James. This is the idea that individuals can be understood apart from cultural context. The *Varieties* has been castigated for isolating its experiencers “in their solitude” from the concrete influences that surround them. Rather than being direct and immediate, mystical experience in this view is *mediated*, especially by language, pedagogic protocols, and cultural narratives, images, and expectations. In this social constructivist view, even the apparent directness of so much religious experience—its in-your-face ineffability, its crisp and vibrating *thusness*—is a linguistic or cultural mirage. In the words of Craig Martin and Russell McCutcheon, “the available language one uses to explain one's experience may in fact have produced the experience.”

As we will see shortly, I am not unsympathetic to aspects of this constructivist view, which not coincidentally emerges in force at the start of the postwar countercultural era. In 1966, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann published *The Social Construction of Reality*. Here Berger and Luckmann wanted to map the social processes that characterize knowledge production. But their social theory also rested on a developmental understanding of individual cognition. As individuals, we think and learn by constantly building and
recombining words, conceptual structures, and forms of relation; this ongoing work directly shapes both our knowledge and experience of reality. This learning process in turn is dependent on institutions and cultural frameworks that pre-exist and shape the individual, symbolically organizing the world through shared and enforced patterns of perception, signification, and conceptual organization. Lacan called this domain the Symbolic, while Berger and Luckmann minted a beguiling phrase that eventually leaked into countercultural critique: “consensus reality.”

I do believe that our experience is constructed in large part through cognitive, biological, and social processes. But I do not believe that all experience—let alone consciousness, or the awareness that illuminates consciousness—can be reduced to a map of its structural mediations. The argument that the wordless intensities and arresting encounters of our most radical experiences are simply a product of language or cultural codes would have to be classed as a rather “mean” account of experience—an adjective I use here to mean both “stingy” and “abrasive,” two tones that are sometimes confused, at least in the social sciences, with the tang of truth.

As historically constituted personalities, we may indeed reside in the prison-house of language. But all manner of sunbeams and birdsong and gut hunches leak through the barred windows of our talk. These phenomena not only touch us but perturb our language as well, even as those languages possess us at least as much as we possess them. The world is full of constructions, but it is full of encounters too, and the vibrant margins wherein we meet these Others shape and sometimes shatter those languages, concepts, and identities that, equally inevitably, map and manufacture the frameworks within which we make do.
James may have been a mystic of sorts, but he was first and foremost an empiricist, albeit a “radical” one. Experience for him was the central instrument of knowledge and action, more important than rationalism, logic, or the dialectics of philosophy. What made this empiricism “radical” was its stretch beyond the scientific confines of objective experimental data. Instead, James demanded that we dig into the whole enchilada of experience, a muddled mass that includes both subjective and objective poles of existence, both the surface and the depth of our felt encounters with an always multitudinous world. Facts as such are precipitated out of experience, but experience itself—which presents us with thoughts and things as well as the relations between them—is the supreme fact. That was James’ radical wager.

As a pioneering psychologist, James also played close attention to how humans fashion experience. With great descriptive flair, he tracked and articulated the ways that cognition jury-rigs its ways of perceiving, engaging, and understanding the world. He also knew that the constructions that result from all this cognitive labor are communicated to other minds, who reproduce them in turn, forming social assemblages of knowledge, interpretation, and perception. Though James approached these issues scientifically, he was also a deeply pragmatic thinker, and insisted that our ways of knowing are neither entirely objective nor grounded in eternal Platonic truths. We use our constructions less because they are absolutely true then because they are true enough. They work, in other words, which also means that they accord.

At the same time, the operational frameworks and rules of thumb that belong to pragmatism are not all we rely on. Throughout it all, the flux of experience continues to unfold, sometimes perturbing our expectations. In order to reach towards the “thickness” of reality itself, James followed the bread crumbs of experience—what he sometimes called the “wild facts”—beyond the constructs of the known. G. William Barnard calls James’ philosophical stance “incomplete constructivism,” an attitude that demands a “theoretical
openness to a preexisting, partially-formed, autonomous ‘otherness’ appearing within experience.”

That is why James experimented with altered states, collected mystical experience reports, and studied the seemingly paranormal powers of Spiritualist mediums. Rather than close the case, James kept the door ajar, wagering that we discover the world as much as we create our experience of it, and that the world is larger, and more cosmic, than we generally suppose.

James crafted a vivid analogy for incomplete constructivism in notes he made for a lecture he gave in the 1890s. He imagines standing at the back of a moving train, gazing out the window, and focusing loosely on the vanishing point of the receding track. Within this central field of view lies a dynamic but essentially stable landscape, always increasing its contents and details without changing its overall bulk or consistency. This central view, for James, stands for the familiar constructed world of representations, concepts, and language. But at the peripheral edges of vision, new objects are also constantly entering the field, impressions that bring with them a trace of the unseen and unknown phenomena beyond the margins—traces that almost immediately get rendered into the already organized central view, where they take their place in the field of the known.

James’ analogy loosely recalls Nasruditin’s well-known Sufi joke about the fellow who looks for his lost keys only where the street-lamp is shining. The central view gives us “knowledge about” the world, not the world itself, but it is so useful that we could spend our whole lives within its familiar terrain. But James held out—or at least hoped—that a different sort of encounter with things was possible. Along the fringes of the familiar, there is the possibility of “direct acquaintance,” which we perhaps can only experience by detuning (or, in Deleuze and Guattari’s wonderful term, deterritorializing) the fixed strata of the organized center. Admittedly, direct acquaintance is fleeting at best. Indeed, what makes James’ analogy illuminating is how fragile its dynamics are, as novel perceptions hurtle from beyond across the margins of vision and become quickly translated into second-hand news.

In this book, I will describe the “autonomous ‘otherness’” lurking in the margins as the Outside or the Beyond, two terms I am happy to leave perfumed with mystery and only vaguely defined, like fingers
pointing at a moon obscured by clouds. The suggestive haze is part of the point. We may think about the world-in-itself in idealist or materialist terms; as an icon or an index; as a deeply unconscious source of affects and micro-perceptions, or an external chaos our brains organize on the fly. But however you slice it, the theoretical openness modeled by James demands that we invite the Outside in, cracking the door to a Beyond that is, at the very least, capable of agitating the membrane that always bounds our talk, our concepts, and our awareness.

The doors of perception—cleansed or not—may never open onto a truly separate reality. But even if we are permanently locked inside the “accidental fences” of the symbolic order or a set of Kantian categories that forever separate us from the thing-in-itself, there remain twilight zones where the veil is thin—where, as James puts it, “the fence is weak” and “fitful influences from beyond leak in.”32 Anomalies, synchronicities, marvels, ecstasies: these are facts of experience that we need to deal with, and not just by automatically reducing them to features of reality we already understand. From within our mental and social constructions, so solid seeming and yet so flimsy, we can learn to detect traces of what Philip K. Dick (or one of the voices he heard) called “perturbations in the reality field.”
0.0.8 Construction Set

My central goal in this book is to tell some wild stories about three seventies psychonauts, and to explore ways of reading these stories that will, again, take them seriously without taking them literally. Though my accounts are largely historical and biographical, they are presented in the methodological spirit of constructivism, albeit an expanded and incomplete one. I want to show how, both consciously and not, our psychonauts constructed their extraordinary experiences—and got constructed by them in turn. The building blocks of my construction set include stories, concepts, images, and human practices, but also more nameless energies and unconscious—even “cosmic”—forces. Before we turn to these, though, I need to say more about what I mean by construction.

Here it’s important to make a distinction between strict social constructivism—the popular and frequently politicized insistence that our knowledge and perceptions can be explained as the products of society, culture, and language alone—and a broader constructivist view, which entails a wider circle of mediations. In this broader approach, our biological and cosmic situation matters: neither our bodies nor the planetary environment they inhabit are blank slates. Whatever the relationship of consciousness to the brain, the nervous tissues that profoundly shape subjective experience have been evolving far longer than state institutions or language. These biologically and cognitively situated processes also construct and mediate reality, but while they may be organized or exploited by social forces, they can in no ways be reduced to them.

This is not what we hear in a lot of humanities and social science talk today, where the language of “construction” principally draws attention to the way that objects of knowledge and experience are historically congealed out of human social processes. This approach, which shares much with ideology critique, is often used to undermine “essentialist” claims about a thing’s meaning or objective existence by showing that the thing in question—gender, race, value—is nothing but a social construction or linguistic invention.
The problem with using construction this way is that it is too tightly coupled to the *nothing but*. This puts all the stress on the critical and deconstructive force of the analysis, rather than the object's positive, productive, or (paradoxically) “constructive” aspects. In the latter approach, which I favor, the task is not principally to critique, but to trace the paths, transformations, and networks of mediation whereby things, including experiences, are constructed.

Here we should turn to the experimental metaphysician Bruno Latour. In *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (2013), Latour offers a robust notion of construction and the wide range of mediations and transformations it depends on within the messy and complex world we find ourselves inhabiting. Though he uses some of its tools, Latour distinguishes his approach from deconstruction, which he characterizes, rather simplistically, as resigning itself to the failure of mediation to present any real foundations at all. Latour contrasts this critical pessimism with fundamentalism, which argues that foundations are available without any manipulation, interpretation, or other form of mediation. Christian fundamentalists point to scripture as if it required no hermeneutics; but so too do some New Atheists promulgate “fundamentalist” views of objectivity and scientific knowledge that deny their deep ambiguities.

Navigating between the Scylla and Charybdis of pessimism and fundamentalism, Latour has placed the sociology of science at the center of his analysis. Despite the misguided opprobrium that has been heaped upon him at times, he deeply respects the specific 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” that characterizes the dominant attitude of Western modernity. This is the split between, on the one hand, human culture, with its psychological projections and various socio-linguistic constructions, and impersonal nature on the other—a universal objective world accessed and described through scientific procedures alone. Many representations, but only one real world. What results from this schema is “the irreparable crack between what is constructed and what is true.”

Latour attempts to bridge this crack by arguing that, in contrast to the one world imagined by the Great Divide, the cosmos we actually
find ourselves in is characterized by multiple “modes of existence.” Sherlock Holmes exists according to one ontological mode; the symbols that define the second law of thermodynamics according to another; the warming seas still another. These modes are not separate; they are connected through all sorts of networks and translations, but they do maintain their own distinct conditions of existence. Within this seething cosmology, which James called the “pluraverse,” there is no single logical or scientific or metaphysical level that trumps all the various ways there are for things to be or to be discovered. “The will to knowledge is not the only category that allows us to interrogate the diversity of being,” writes Latour, who elsewhere rejects what he describes as the “sovereign right of anyone wearing a lab coat to disqualify all other access routes” to truth.34

For obvious reasons, Latour has been accused of postmodern relativism. But he is more constructive than that. He recognizes, for example, that there is a qualitative difference between scientific facts and other artifacts of human labor. (He is, for example, an urgent activist on the behalf of climate science against climate deniers, who use constructivist arguments about the ultimate lack of foundations in scientific practice as a wedge against scientific conclusions.) For Latour, a fact is neither an unmediated avatar of objective reality nor a purely manufactured chunk of human culture. Instead, facts are the lively end results of complex, and often tedious, processes of mediation and translation between different modes of existence.

To establish biological knowledge, let’s say, certain features of a bacteria colony need to “pass” from a petri dish to a measuring instrument, then to a computer database where the resulting data is processed, and from there into a journal article whose argumentation and references survive various institutional pressures and processes, including perfectly political ones. If the passages between these different modes are successful, something extraordinary appears at the end of the assembly line: a fact, a strange kind of entity that is both fabricated through material and social processes, and yet is rendered autonomous and commanding through that very process.

Following Alfred Korzybski, Latour believes that the map—the fact—is definitely not the territory. Scientific descriptions, in mathematics or technical jargon, are not “the same” as the entities they refer to. Nonetheless, a well-constructed map does wonders. It allows, say, the complex folds and fissures of the High Sierras to
“pass” into a two-dimensional chart printed by the US Geological Survey, such that you are much better off making your way through the mountains with the map at your fingertips. The map is a construction, a mediation, but it also allows a faithful, if limited, passage between domains that can never be reduced to one another.35

So while a fact is fashioned, it is not simply “fashion.” Once it is established, a fact appears before us as something that must be wrestled with, as an entity that must be taken into account. In an earlier book, On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods (1996), Latour goes so far as to compare the construction of scientific facts to, of all things, the traditional carving of idols or fetishes in West Africa. In both cases, an anthropological process requiring seasoned human craft and a variety of material and cultural protocols results in a kind of entity that, in the end, takes autonomous flight, its meanings and function no longer constrained by the human artifice that produced it.

Latour here is not equating facts and fetishes, because each entity crosses and conjoins different modes of existence, whose associated methods of verification are utterly different. What he is pointing out is that many things, including facts, are constructed through a sort of bootstrapping process, wherein the entities that emerge take on lives of their own, and transform us in return. For Latour, construction is not a one-way street; it is always paralleled or doubled by the strange agency of the construct. “When someone acts, others get moving.” And this process applies not only to facts or idols, but to the entities that inhabit other modes of existence, including law and technology and art.

Consider what happens when a sculptor fashions a bust out of a block of marble. While the human is certainly driving the process, we cannot reduce the final bust to an image in the sculptor's imagination that gets projected and imposed on the block. But nor does the bust simply lurk “potentially” in that particular piece of marble. Instead it seems that the bust, as an autonomous work of art, emerges rather enigmatically from the process of its own construction. In this process, the sculptor does not, strictly speaking, create the work. Rather, she participates in a creative relationship both with materials and with an artwork that comes to be through her, but that, without her, would never appear.36 The normal arrow of causality twists here
into a strange loop, one that can head 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 also offers the example of marionettes and their operators, an example that brings us a step closer to the weird. Yes, the operator has control over what he manipulates. “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.” This causal ambiguity already gives us an insight into the esoteric agents that haunt the ontological turbulence of high weirdness. Just consider what happens if you replace Latour's marionette with the more uncanny figure of a ventriloquist dummy. Of course the dummy cannot speak without the human operator. But neither does the presence of the operator completely diminish the dummy's strange autonomy, which can sometimes produce speech that the operator neither intends nor feels responsible for.

To understand and acknowledge these bootstrapped entities is not the same thing as claiming that everything deserves the same measure or standard of being. Facts are not like frogs are not like your childhood Raggedy-Ann. Instead, these various beings ask that we rethink what it means for something to be in the first place. The old philosophical idea of substance, of “being-as-being,” suggests that beings gain their consistency by relying on some substance or foundation that assures their continuity through time. Instead, Latour opens up the Pandora's box of “being-as-other.” Some kinds of beings appear without being able to claim continuity through foundations. Instead, they leap forward discontinuously, without a ground, without a net, in a world that in some sense is just looping forward on the fly.

We will have cause to return to these ideas later in this book, when we address the visionary Others encountered by our psychonauts—beings that are hard for most of us to understand outside of pathology or deluded belief. Here it is enough to note that Latour fully acknowledges how peculiar this way of thinking is. “It’s weird, yes,” he writes, using bizarre in French. But this weirdness, he wants to insist, lies in the art and manner of existence itself.
0.0.9 Building Blocks

My attempt to grapple with the high weirdness ahead is written in light of Latour’s “experimental metaphysics.” But it also returns, with a twist or two, to James’ radical empiricism, and his illumination of extraordinary experiences in the Varieties. That said, there are some serious limitations to the Varieties that need to be addressed. While recognizing the singularity of experience, we need a model that shifts subjects out of their “solitude,” and that pays more heed to the influences that shape experience within and without. At the same time, we need to insist on the incompleteness of these constructions. We need to respect the way that social, cultural, and cognitive factors build frameworks that are cracked enough to let the weird light in.

Here the scholar Ann Taves’ book Religious Experience Reconsidered proves helpful. Taves begins by arguing that we need to split the concept of “religious experiences” into “experiences deemed religious” (or “mystical,” “visionary,” “spiritual,” etc.). This important distinction, which draws attention to the construction work going on backstage, sets up what she calls her “building block” approach to religious experience. In this approach, which is both critical of and continuous with James, two crucial moves are identified.

The first is the initial act of setting aside a certain experience as being worthy of note. Taves calls this move ascription, an immediate cognitive process that assigns qualities to experience in ways that often elude conscious intention. Taves’ favored term for such experiences is special, though I prefer the stronger term extraordinary. Experiences become special, or extraordinary, for one of two reasons: either they seem ideal—a sense of absolute peace, for example, or ultimate dread—or they are what she calls “anomalies.” Examples of the latter include many of the building blocks of high weirdness: hallucinations, near-death experiences, alien abductions, apparitions, and oracular dreams.

The second move is attribution, wherein causal explanations are developed to reduce the anomalies or to render them meaningful in retrospect. Here Taves hews to pretty standard social
constructivism. We have an extraordinary experience, and we attribute it to different causes by drawing from a pile of building blocks composed of existing beliefs, learned patterns of perception, and available cultural scripts or authorized explanations. This work of attribution is precisely how extraordinary experiences become “religious” or “mystical.” But it is also crucial to emphasize that, in a fitfully materialist and scientific society like ours, the work of attribution can also draw from things like cognitive science and psychology. While providing more rigorous explanations, perhaps, these discourses are also charged with great social power, and it is this power that we often rely on to reduce the cognitive dissonance of anomalies. This is how many of us deal with weird shit: in the rearview mirror, an unnerving synchronicity or deja vu can be relaxed by writing it off as a meaningless hiccup of neurons.

But Taves goes beyond strict social constructivism. Though the act of attribution depends on surrounding ideas and narratives, the process that she calls ascription remains a subtler operation. Ascription happens almost immediately amidst the flow of experience, and this transparency raises the vital issue of how, and through what processes, experience is mediated in real time. This is where Taves returns to the expansive empirical current of the Varieties. In contrast to strict social constructivists, Taves insists that, at least some of the time, extraordinary experiences cannot be reduced to pre-existing cultural beliefs, words, and scripts. Instead, Taves underscores the role that nonlinguistic forces play in the production of such experiences, forces that, as a cognitivist thinker, she associates with embodiment, affect, altered states, and the ever-capacious “unconscious.” These too furnish building blocks.

For evidence, Taves turns to the fact that extraordinary experiences sometimes radically exceed people's cultural expectations or religious training. Utterly secular individuals sometimes have religious revelations or sublime mystical experiences. This poses a problem for social constructivists. Unwilling to grant influences beyond the locked grooves of already established beliefs, they can only make room for experiences that are essentially scripted in advance. But this “top down” emphasis on preloaded scripts does a poor job of accounting for some of the most salient features of radical spiritual experience, especially in the countercultural era: elements like rupture, spontaneity, surprise, and extraordinary novelty.
As Taves concludes, “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.” Sometimes, scripts and beliefs play second fiddle to forces from beyond the social, including the farther fields of the unconscious, with its nebulous affects, energetic fluctuations, and singular, even pathological intensities. By paying closer attention to such bottom-up processes, we can “be more sensitive to experiences that are genuinely creative and generate new insights and, in some cases, entirely new meaning systems.”

Taves’ approach—embodied, emergent, and novelty-sensitive—is particularly appropriate for a project focused on the seekers of the counterculture, who went to the mat in their pursuit of intense, delicious, and sometimes shattering experiences. In a world of sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll, the subject always remains bound, at least potentially, to a convulsive novelty. In such an environment, the shock of the weird can jam, interrupt, and radically distort expectations, leading to the sorts of creative interpretations (and seductive traps) we will unpack in future pages. As such, we will follow Taves’ council to become “more attentive to situations in which people's ability to explain breaks down.”

But there is another weird loop here. Taves is deeply influenced by cognitive science, and her understanding of the unconscious is (almost) thoroughly biological and materialist. (Later we will see how the very concept of the “unconscious” leaves the door open to other possibilities.) But to truly study experiences “from beyond,” to not merely impose views and satisfy the machinery of analysis, observers need to do more than pay attention to extraordinary experiences that challenge the explanations of experiencers. They must also allow room for their own explanations to break down—even, or especially, cognitivist ones.

Given the problems that beset the materialist understanding of consciousness, it could be argued that some of these explanations have already broken down. Daniel Dennett to the contrary, many cognitive scientists and philosophers do not believe that consciousness has been—or even can be—adequately explained. And if we can't explain consciousness, I don't believe we can explain the
most extraordinary of our experiences. Indeed, my suspicion is that such explanations may always prove wanting.

Here we need only mention the persistence of what the 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 focusing of attention, reports on mental states, acts of discrimination, the control of behavior. But these are all comparatively easy problems. The hard problem is simply why we have phenomenal experiences at all. “Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all?” Chalmers asks.\(^4\)

Some philosophers and cognitive psychologists argue, with a certain melancholy, that the human mind is constitutionally incapable of solving the hard problem because it is already embedded within consciousness. Chalmers goes farther, suggesting that, for philosophical reasons, consciousness may have to be considered an irreducible, foundational element of the universe itself. While this “panpsychist” position comes in a variety of idealist and perennialist flavors, Chalmers offers a more hard-headed physicalist account of this ancient theory.\(^4\) As he puts it, when you boil it all down, it's not just atoms and the void—it's atoms and the void and consciousness. James, who was himself a panpsychist, could not have said it better.

I offer nothing like a theory of consciousness here, only a map of the culture of consciousness that emerged in the seventies, and some stories about a few of its wilder mavericks. I mention both the hard problem and its panpsychist solution here as a wedge against the familiar, and ultimately authoritarian, attempts to close our accounts with extraordinary experiences by papering over the significant philosophical and scientific issues that inform the question of consciousness itself.\(^4\) In order to limn the radical openings visited upon some dangerously open minds, the methods we use to study and think about them must, for now, remain radically open.
In the chapters ahead, I hope to identify some of the brilliant and bizarre ways that our psychonauts brought their intellectual, imaginative, and psychological resources to bear—sometimes consciously and sometimes not—on the construction and narration of their outlandish encounters. I want to track how features of their environment—building blocks like texts, technologies, metabolic and sonic forces—loop around to become mobilized within experience itself: seeding it beforehand, shaping it on the fly, and identifying it in reflective and literary hindsight. At the same time, the door will be propped open, a plate left for Elijah, dangling threads left untied. With such gestures, I hope to not only understand but to emulate my subjects’ openness to the Outside.

Such incomplete constructivism is, I believe, particularly appropriate for the milieu of countercultural consciousness. In the sixties and seventies, countless individuals pursued intense and sometimes shattering hedonic, pharmacological, and esoteric experiences. Many of these “spiritual virtuosi” had good reasons for launching raids on the ineffable and returning with novel goods, either to answer their own existential questions, to test and disseminate alternate belief systems, or to provoke new ways of thinking and relating to the world. When it came to shaping these new perspectives, countercultural seekers had an unusually broad and eclectic range of building blocks at their fingertips. In their local bookstores, they could find affordable editions of books on Western mysticism, Asian religion, magic, and world mythology. But they also had UFO and ESP paperbacks, Beat poetry and avant-garde art, supernatural horror and pulp science fiction, comic books and movies, and a popular intellectual environment criss-crossed with social science and existentialism and the politics of liberation.

As we will see, all of these sources informed the perspectives of our psychonauts as they navigated the seas of high weirdness. Because all our psychonauts were critical as well as imaginative thinkers, even gnostic skeptics of a sort, they recognized that their most extraordinary experiences were weirdly mediated a lot of the time—
as with the Dali prints and monster movies in the high weirdness encounter narrated earlier. As we will see, at times obvious snippets of external scripts intruded forcefully, uncannily, and sometimes absurdly into the texture of their outlandish experiences.

This recognition in turn accorded with the counterculture era's heightened awareness of how technological media shape and structure thought and perception. This awareness stretched from the Marshall McLuhan fad of the sixties to the subliminal advertisements and other technological paranoias of the seventies. This sense of the mind as an effect of media practices also led our psychonauts to *tinker* with these practices—to hack the scripting process itself. Here the constructivist emphasis on the building blocks of “immediate” experience leads to the possibility of programming experience itself.

This constructivist program is enshrined in one of the key concepts of psychedelia: the notion of *set and setting*. First announced by Timothy Leary and his cohorts in the 1964 book *The Psychedelic Experience*, but based on the insights of earlier social scientists, set and setting holds that the content and dynamics of individual psychedelic trips are, in some significant measure, reflexive. That is, they depend not so much on “the drug-in-itself” but on the user's conscious intention and unconscious beliefs (set) in synergy with the material, social, and aesthetic conditions of the environment (setting).

There is a crucial Promethean consequence to this concept. As Leary put it, the fact of set and setting allows one to “construct a ‘program’” for a trip *in advance*. Here the scripting process that subliminally informs extraordinary experience is brought out into the open, where it can be curated and tweaked, hacked and looped, the dialectics of belief and experience subjected to feedback. John Lilly, an influential mind scientist and psychonaut supreme, dubbed this process “metaprogramming,” which he boiled down into a widely-cited psychedelic and esoteric protocol:

> In the province of the mind, what one believes to be true is true or becomes true, within certain limits to be found experientially and experimentally. These limits are further beliefs to be transcended.
For Lilly, experience was experiment—a trial of the plastic limits of belief, beliefs that both crystalize and condition further experiential possibility. The metaprogramming process was therefore, crucially, iterative, resulting in “data” that would feed forward into the next round of experimental experience. In a paradoxical half-turn reminiscent of a Möbius strip, here the detached social scientific attitude of script and program got hijacked for experimental, ecstatic, and spiritual purposes by the experiencers themselves.

As we will see, our psychonauts relied on metaprogramming in different ways. Robert Anton Wilson fully embraced Leary and Lilly's paradigms, and used them to both understand and operationalize his own “experiments in brain change.” Terence McKenna and Philip K. Dick approached their games of truth with less irony than Wilson, although they both vacillated in striking ways between visionary convictions and skeptical, sometimes humorous doubts. In all cases, however, the beliefs of our subjects took the form, not of metaphysical assertions, but of hypotheses to be tested. Rather than prophetic revelations or dogmatic presuppositions, the hypothetical “what if?” came to shape both their experiences and their experiments. The fact that this conceptual operator is also a key feature of speculative fiction was not lost on our subjects, and indeed forms one of the chief characteristics of the weird dimension we are probing.
Metaprogramming represents a crucial example of a technical method that allows practitioners, not to change the world, but to change themselves. Writing in the seventies, the social theorist and philosophical provocateur Michel Foucault came to name such practices technologies of the self. He defined these as “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.”

The technologies of the self represented an important shift in Foucault's thought. Up to that point, he had focused his work on the archaeology of what he called “technologies of domination.” These are the concrete institutions and discourses, like prisons or psychological ideas, that discipline and shape the human subject through arrangements of power, knowledge, and instruments of control.

In the seventies, Foucault began spending long stretches of time in California, where, among other things, he explored altered states of consciousness. He dropped LSD in Death Valley, and experimented with the “creation of new pleasures” through “postsexual” S&M practices in San Francisco's gay dungeons. These experiments perhaps allowed him to further explore the idea of “limit experiences,” a key element of his thought that he derived from Georges Bataille. These were also the years when Foucault began to write about the history of sexuality and how individuals alter the “aesthetics of existence” through the pursuit of new forms of experience.

Foucault focused his research in late Antiquity, paying particular attention to the tension between the philosophical “care of the self” associated with the Stoics and a subsequent Christian “truth game” that subjugated the self to a confessional logic of transcendence, judgment, and asceticism. In both cases, Foucault insisted that the tensions between philosophy and faith could not be separated from
the technologies of the self that underscored them and embedded them in experience. Though Foucault spoke only sparingly about religious experience, his notion provides a wonderful way to think about transformative practices **tout court**. All our avatars can be seen as freak bricoleurs cobbling together their own technologies of the self.

More recently, in his marvelous book *You Must Change Your Life* (2013), the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk expanded Foucault's concept into the notion of “anthropotechnics.” This refers to techniques of body and mind that enable individuals to mold and experiment with their own existence. In particular, Sloterdijk emphasizes the iterative, even cybernetic nature of such learning practices, which can involve equipment and technology as well.

One feature of anthropotechnics is that the category ropes together both secular exercises, such as athletic training and acrobatics, and explicitly religious practices, like repeating mantras or subjecting yourself to ethical self-criticism. Sloterdijk argues, in fact, that “religions” as such don't exist; what exists “are variously misinterpreted anthropotechnic practice systems and sets of rules for molding one's inward and outward behavior.” Sloterdijk—who spent some of the seventies at Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's ashram in India—refers to such spiritual regimens as forms of feedback that help humans construct and maintain “symbolic immune systems and ritual shells.”

Many technologies of the self are practical and salutary, but others—especially religious ones—can be self-abnegating, dissociated, even bizarre. Sloterdijk attributes this strange transcendental thrust to what he calls “vertical tension.” Vertical tension is the existential tug that compels humans to transform themselves in light of the above: those higher things, including the heights of ecstasy, that call us to overcome the limits of body and mind through discipline, ascesis, and creative, experimental striving. At least since the axial age (the first millennium BCE), the world's religions have been visibly shaped, even twisted, by such vertical tensions—by mountain tops and stairways to heaven, by world trees and angelic hierarchies, and by scriptural exhortations to seek what is above, to rise and quit the low world and the heavy flesh.
In contrast, the secular modernity that Sloterdijk both inhabits and speaks to largely rejects the call of vertical tension. Yes, we have our moon launches and skyscrapers, mountain climbers and druggy highs. But the post-Enlightenment world is for the most part an existential flatland, with little interest in the Indian rope tricks of transcendence. Religious striving continues of course, but in *You Must Change your Life*, Sloterdijk instead focuses on those post-religious, more-or-less “secular” individuals who continue to hear the ancient call of the vertical. This vanguard rejects the literally “depressing” attitudes of modern culture, of logic and aesthetic realism. Instead, they push the boundaries of their bodies and spirits towards what Sloterdijk calls a “primary surrealism:” weirdness as aspiration. Sloterdijk's modern mutants of vertical tension include artists, dancers, poets, and other creative types influenced by the European avant-garde, whose experimental engagements with sex, drugs, and magic also presaged the spiritual hedonists of the postwar counterculture. Most poetically, Sloterdijk speaks of acrobats and tightrope walkers, those vertiginous dancers whose precarious play with tension allows them to seek the heights by directly confronting the depths.

Such performers also recall Nietzsche, that 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 discovers a tightrope walker preparing to perform in front of a crowd. It is here, crucially, that Zarathustra announces his famous doctrine of the übermensch, the overman, the superhero of the spirit. Humanity, he says, is merely a rope “fastened between animal and Overman,” a rope that passes over the abyss.

Elsewhere Nietzsche describes the spiritual acrobats who can rise to the call of the Overman as “philosophers of the future.” Nondogmatic, often solitary, with a predilection for risky behavior, these radical free thinkers are “curious to a fault, researchers to the point of cruelty, with unmindful fingers for the incomprehensible.” Nietzsche simply calls them *those who attempt*. Their truths are their own, rather than general facts, and they are “at home in many countries of the spirit, at least as guests.”
Sounds to me like Nietzsche is talking about psychonauts. After all, while we are used to comparing drug visionaries and mystical seekers, from another angle, they more resemble philosophers or mad scientists compelled, beyond reason but with some sense, to put themselves on the line, risking both paranoia and pathology through their anthropotechnics.

For Terence and Dennis McKenna, serious psychonauts both, this kind of high-wire act also recalls the indigenous figure of the shaman. In their 1975 text *The Invisible Landscape*, which we will read more about, the McKennas write that:

> 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.\(^{58}\)

The McKennas are not really describing indigenous healers here. They are describing themselves, or Robert Anton Wilson, or Philip K. Dick, or any of the many heads, freaks, seekers, and adepts who lost their heads while trying to keep their feet on the ground during the high holy days of the way weird seventies.
0.0.12 Comparison

All our psychonauts were, without a doubt, weirdos of a sort. But by lining up their tales in a row, I want to suggest that they are not quite as singular as they first appear. Indeed, their stories are full of sometimes uncanny resonances. There are alien downloads, pulp-fiction synchronicities, techno-media metaphysics, apocalyptic flashbacks, voices in the head. Their experiences were also haunted by the sense that, whatever experiments in brain change these men performed, some outside intelligence was also experimenting on them in turn. Compare their accounts of these experiences, and you will discover a number of similarities, including the fact that all of our subjects practiced a kind of comparison—a drive to understand and shape their experiences by mixing, matching, and laminating different systems of religion, science, and imagination into unique assemblages of concept and symbol.

These resonances should not be so surprising, given the common connections between these men, all of whom lost themselves in some of the key limit experiences of countercultural consciousness: psychedelics, esoteric visions, paranormal phenomena, psychopathology. As voracious readers and intellectual bricoleurs, they also shaped and interpreted their experiences by drawing from a similar store of building blocks available to the book-buying seekers of their era. At the same time, they were all freethinkers and garage philosophers, at home with naturalistic and critical attitudes: irony, skepticism, humor, and an existential realism rooted in the empirical body. They preferred hypotheses to beliefs, and played science-fiction games with their texts to infect their readers with their own conundrums. They were all futurists of a sort, fascinated with time and the sense that history itself was ramping up to a *kairos* point.

All our psychonauts are also straight white guys, which requires a comment. Despite the radicalism of the sixties and seventies, hippie and freak scenes often reflected well-established patriarchal and racialized codes. Though there were some important “seekers of color,” and though a number of women played crucial roles in postwar psychedelic culture, the most celebrated (and self-
celebrating) druggy visionaries of the era were drawn from the predictable well. Whether all this deserves the language of “privilege,” though, is debatable. Both Wilson and Dick came from working-class backgrounds, and were, more to the point, broke most of the time. And all of our psychonauts were alienated from mainstream social, economic, and intellectual institutions. White male privilege might account for the confidence to sally forth into extreme experiences that risk psychopathology—as well as the bravura to report on the journey and its supposed significance afterwards. (Perhaps no-one can let themselves unravel into temporary madness like straight white men.) But we should recognize how much these experiences and these accounts also eroded the ideological foundations of such privilege, which are welded to notions of rationality, control, individual self-possession, and mastering discourses.

Differences also make a difference, of course, and these men were not all cut from the same cloth. Terence and Dennis (born 1946 and 1950 respectively) were the only ones who actually belonged to the sixties youth culture, though Robert Anton Wilson (b. 1932) did a great job of playing catch-up, immersing himself in the LSD scene, the occult revival, and libertarian hedonism. Dick's relationship to the counterculture, and particularly to psychedelia, was more complex. While LSD, mushrooms, and mescaline were absolutely central to McKenna and Wilson, Dick (b. 1928) only tripped a handful of times on classic psychedelics, though he could gobble speed like a biker. As we will see, his drug experiences, as well as his years of immersion in drug culture, proved influential. But in some ways he had side-stepped the underground by the time of his 2-3-74 experiences.

A more significant difference between our psychonauts is the matter of intention. Wilson and the McKennas willfully catalyzed their limit experiences, playing with pharmacological recipes, ritual protocols, and—particularly in the case of Wilson—systems of belief and method. But Dick, who suffered from debilitating mental problems since childhood, more often had his highs (and lows) thrust upon him. The space he explored as a psychonaut was less psychedelia and more psychology, if not psychopathology. As we will see, Dick worked with his own technologies of the self, including vitamins and dream practices, and he was metaprogamming the
content of his experiences beneath the surface. But Dick also frequently embodied the passivity that William James claimed was one of the earmarks of classic mystical experience.

Wilson and the McKennas, on the other hand, were Prometheans. They wanted to storm the reality studio, and they kept a sometimes mocking distance from the sort of religious discourses their experiences might invoke in mystic hippies and more spiritual heads. But though Dick was capable of biting religious satire in his novels, he was in some ways an earnest religious seeker. He had called himself a Christian since the early sixties, and, following 2-3-74, he openly engaged orthodox Christian tropes in the midst of his dizzying array of esoteric, gnostic, and proto-New Age narratives. Like Fox Mulder, he wanted to believe. At the same time, Dick's Christianity was powerfully countercultural, feeding an anti-authoritarian politics of consciousness that was also shared by McKenna and Wilson, both of whom were more anarchists than leftists.

Because of the lags between life and published texts, none of our psychonauts were directly influenced by one another during the initial experiences themselves. But all later recognized the sometimes uncanny similarities between their encounters. While I will explicitly discuss some of these links, many will be allowed to resonate in the reader's head. In part this is because I want to keep my focus centered on their particular stories, rather than try and establish a more elusive Zeitgeist matrix that might explain these resonances while affirming the equally important differences. Nonetheless, my conclusion will offer some tentative ways of thinking about the network of rabbit-holes that connect these accounts.
Long Strange Trip

The most concrete connection between our psychonauts is that they all shared a certain time and a certain place: California in the early seventies. In chapter one, “Spinning Out In the Seventies,” I will focus on those times and to a minor degree on that place. I want to trace the centrifugal drift of identity that followed the collapse of the counterculture's millennialist dreams and the spread of its heretical mores through the culture at large. More specifically, I want to trace the unmooring of countercultural subjectivity as it navigated a phantasmagoric era characterized by the occult revival, the rise of new religious movements, and the emergence of what I call “consciousness culture”—a largely psychological current of empirical mysticism and proto-New Age self-care. Finally, all of these transformations will be understood as taking place within a particular media ecology, characterized here along three axes: the pervasiveness of countercultural media, including the independent literature of drugs and the occult revival; the rise of surveillance technology, which sparked considerable paranoia and concerns with subliminal control; and finally a fantastic, science-fictional, and sometimes prophetic anticipation of computers, databases, and digital networks.

The main sections of the book are devoted to close readings of the extraordinary experiences reported by the McKenna brothers, Robert Anton Wilson, and Philip K. Dick. In all cases, we will track how our psychonauts both approached and resisted something like “religion.” In chapters two and three, we will follow Terence McKenna as he travels to Colombia with his brother Dennis to perform their now legendary Experiment at La Chorrera. This massive mushroom trip inspired Terence's later career as a psychedelic raconteur and propagator of the 2012 meme. Chapter two, “Scientific Romance,” will trace Terence's life and the weird naturalism the McKenna brothers developed as they designed the protocols of the Experiment—a fusion of naturalistic attitudes with esoteric alchemy and otherworldly realism. Chapter three, “Experiments,” unpacks some of the bizarre phenomenology the brothers unleashed, and traces the
later literary condensations of these experiences in texts that scramble spirituality, synchronicity, and the practical science of domesticating psilocybin mushrooms.

In chapters four and five, we will explore another incursion of radical novelty, this time in Berkeley. In 1974, the author Robert Anton Wilson's forays into fictional conspiracy theory and psychedelicized sexual magic erupted into a fearsome bout of high weirdness, a story he tells in his remarkable book *Cosmic Trigger: Final Secret of the Illuminati* (1977). “Profane Illuminations” traces the seed crystals of these experiences back to Wilson's celebrated (if rarely read) *Illuminatus!* trilogy, a satirical and deeply anti-authoritarian “fairy tale for paranoids” co-written with Robert Shea and published in 1975. The chapter traces how Wilson and Shea combined esoteric metafictions, conspiracy theories, and anarchist psychedelic politics into a literary mindfuck designed to “turn on” the reader. Chapter five, “Cosmic Triggers,” shows how features of that fiction subsequently leaked into Wilson's lived experience, which helped establish the importance of “living fictions” within the seventies occult revival. At the same time, the chapter tracks how Wilson's tutelage with old weird masters like Aleister Crowley and H.P. Lovecraft, along with newer visionaries like Timothy Leary and John Lilly, led him into a conspiratorial hall of mirrors he famously called “Chapel Perilous.”

The final three chapters will take on the 2-3-74 experiences of Philip K. Dick, as well as the science-fiction author's desperate and brilliant attempts to read and write his way through this riot of visionary symptoms. Given the more directly psychological origin of so many of Dick's experiences, chapter six, “Stigmata,” will set the stage with an overview of the author's earlier psycho-spiritual life, and especially his experiences in the sixties. This is the decade when the bohemian Dick became both a Christian and a seeker, experimented with psychedelics, and spent some years within suburban drug culture.

Chapter seven, “2-3-74,” will plunge into the wealth of sometimes contradictory detail provided by Dick's copious accounts of his seemingly supernatural experiences. Here we will zoom in on the recursive loops between text and experience that drive much of 2-3-74, which will also give us the opportunity to dive more deeply into the equally recursive problem of trying to diagnose Dick. Chapter
eight, “Exegesis,” will in turn analyze how Dick used his experiences—as well as his own accounts of those experiences—to open up new ways of interpreting and recreating the phenomenology of high weirdness. While most of our discussions of Dick, Wilson, and McKenna will emphasize experience and text in equal measure (while erasing the clear boundary between them), in this final chapter we will plunge into the specifically literary and memetic dynamics of Dick’s revelation.

Dick, Wilson, and the McKennas were all psychonauts supreme. But they were also explorers of another kind of space—the space of writing. They all produced wonderful, fascinating, and tricksy texts about their experiences—texts that are also very conscious of their status as literary narratives that walk the line between testament and fabulation, reflection and infection. As all the authors discovered in the midst of their own stories, even the most empirical claims about high weirdness are inextricable from the uncanny flicker of fictions, and particularly the genres of weird fantasy and science fiction. For all the philosophical and metaphysical questions ahead, it is perhaps most fruitful simply to read these fascinating if sometimes troubled men as writers—wordsmiths and garage philosophers who brought all their existential, intellectual, and, yes, spiritual resources to bear on awesome experiences that blazed beyond the pale.
Part One
Set and Setting
1.1.0
Spinning Out in the Seventies

All the episodes of high weirdness described in this book erupted between 1970 and 1975, which means that any attempt to understand them requires that we take a cultural spore-print of America during this time, which for the sake of convenience I will simply call the “early seventies.” While our avatars are all rather singular individuals, and their weird encounters certainly stand far apart from the norm (whatever that is exactly), it is crucial to map some of the general conditions that shaped them and their experiences.

Stephen Paul Miller calls the seventies the uncanny decade—the “undecade.” Things were particularly weird in these years, which remain shrouded in America's cultural memory, as if by a kind of smog. One reason for the haze is the period's elusive placement between the highly overdetermined sixties—often considered by historians to last well into the subsequent decade—and the more garish icons that come to the fore later in the seventies, like disco and punk, Pong and Star Wars, Jonestown and the Bicentennial. Indeed, liminality is a key characteristic of the early seventies. Radical and transformative forces unleashed in the sixties mutated and dissipated into much broader segments of culture and society. One no longer needed to be an inhabitant of San Francisco, the East Village, or Ann Arbor to explore the creative maelstrom of drugs, uncorked sexual experimentation, and the alternative worldviews associated with radical politics or the occult revival. Thresholds were everywhere.

At the same time, and in stark contrast to the previous years, the horizon of individual and social possibilities abruptly narrowed. Whether left, right, or center, the nation drifted into a Slough of Despond perhaps unprecedented in American history. In polls taken at the end of the seventies, people looked back at a decade of “disillusion and cynicism, helplessness and apprehension,” a list we
might as well round out with disorientation, paranoia, boredom, and frustrated rage. I suspect that one reason we find ourselves dependably amused by tacky seventies fluff like shag carpet, massive sideburns, and smiley face buttons is that we need to keep the trauma and perplexity of the era at bay. This is despite (or due to) the fact that so many of the era's bummers resonate with our own: fears about terrorism and environmental collapse, surveillance paranoia, political cynicism, foreign war fatigue, and a pervasive apocalyptic undertow that tugs beneath an over-heated, desperately sexualized, fantastical, and often bleak popular culture.

The gloomy backwash of the seventies is perhaps best memorialized in the nihilistic and existential tone of so many Hollywood films of the era, populated with errant cops, ominous conspiracies, lonely lovers, and twilight 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. In contrast to the collective “bands” of the youth movement, these performers crystalized their songs around a lonely or isolated individual trying and failing to find connection. Artists like Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, James Taylor, and Leonard Cohen told bipolar tales of anxious interiority and hedonic restlessness, of opportunities squandered or snatched away. In 1971, Don McLean had a huge hit with “American Pie,” a tune whose melancholic 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.”

For people marked by the counterculture, this melancholic aftermath can be laid at the feet of one pervasive reality: the collapse of the sixties dreams of massive collective transformation, whether political or spiritual or both. This swift and bitter sunset was captured by Hunter S. Thompson in the retrospective rumination that opens his classic book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, from 1971. Standing on a hill outside the city of sin, his head momentarily cleared from the weirdness he would chronicle like no other journalist of the era, Thompson reflected on the “long fine flash” of his generation. Describing the millennialist convictions that enflamed so many, Thompson testified to 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 Nevada desert, toward the Golden State that nurtured so much of the counterculture, Thompson writes 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.”

Though we should be wary of large generalizations, the notion of “the” counterculture remains a useful way to characterize an essentially generational culture of rebellion, nonconformity, and creative experimentation with both individual and social possibility. That said, the Movement was always moving in different directions at once. Perhaps the most essential difference in the goals of the sixties counterculture was the split between outer struggle and inner transformation. The tension between these agendas—which also overlapped in a myriad of ways—inform the distinction between New Left activists and psychedelic hippies, between Berkeley and the Haight, or between what one journalist called the “Fists” and the “Heads.”

But however you divide the tribes, everyone felt the wave roll back. The Fists arguably began to lose their way in 1969, when the Students for a 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 gender-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 unarmed Kent State students protesting the American presence in Southeast Asia. Shock and anger impelled millions to continue their protests over that summer, but by the end of the year, mass demonstrations had declined in numbers, force, and media presence. Though organized gatherings against the war continued, many Fists felt they were pounding against a wall; in Todd Gitlin’s words, “helpless fury turned to spleen or withdrawal.” While new and dynamic forms of social and environmental struggle were opening up, the Movement as a collective field of radical possibility began to fade.
The dawn of the seventies found the Heads in retreat as well. Following the muddy collective ecstasy of the Woodstock festival, the hippies faced their own grim symbolic boomerang at the Altamont Free Concert in December 1969, when Meredith Hunter was stabbed by a crew of Hell’s Angels and three others died in a train wreck of a gathering. And while too much can be made of Altamont, nothing 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, knife-wielding girls and boys. With his mystic hippie rhetoric and evident charisma, Manson perfectly embodied middle America'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 minds of the silent majority but forced thoughtful freaks to reckon with the pathologies and moral drift of the scene. It became altogether clear that no one was escaping history any time soon.

As Robert Anton Wilson wrote, “The early 70s were the days when all the survivors of the Sixties went a bit nuts.” The sections that follow map some of the sociological factors that fed this nuttiness, and that form the necessary backdrop for our psychonautical tales. First I want to show how the malaise of the seventies and the growing culture of pluralism shaped a restless mode of subjectivity that I call the centrifugal self. The centrifugal self is the seeker self, the self that tried to find (and sometimes to lose) itself in what I will describe as the occult milieu—the rich and heretical ecology of metaphysical, spiritual, psychological, and esoteric ideas and practices that exploded in the early seventies. Finally, we turn to the related rise of consciousness culture, a pragmatic orientation towards intense, enchanting, and liberating altered states that both absorbed and transformed more traditional religious modes of heightened subjectivity.
1.1.1 Bummers

The flattening of the counterculture's collective effervescence was tough enough. But the political traumas and economic calamities that burdened early seventies America made things worse for most citizens, whatever the length of their hair. Despite widespread opprobrium, not to mention Nixon's campaign promise to end the conflict, the bloody mire of the Vietnam war only deepened. 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 protests that led to Kent State. 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 fall, or liberation, of Saigon in 1975.

Meanwhile, the American economy had 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 might be compared to trying to climb up a down escalator that's moving faster than you. In late 1973, 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 prime-time 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—to date —last man on the moon. In 1971, a heroic burglary of an FBI field office exposed the existence of the COINTELPRO campaign—a clandestine and frequently illegal FBI program designed to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize” organizations and individuals considered “subversive.” This category included Rev. Martin Luther King, the Black Panther Party, the American Indian Movement, the Students for a Democratic Society, and the student protest movement.
But the most epochal and psychologically significant political story in the early seventies was Watergate: a mytho-poetic perversion of governance whose real and symbolic betrayals helped feed the paranoia and disaffection with consensus reality that form the ambient political background for high weirdness.10

Richard Nixon was a vindictive politician, as well as a profoundly insecure and suspicious man. William Safire, a one-time Nixon speechwriter, called him America's “first paranoid with a majority.”11 The dark twist in the man's temperament only intensified during the re-election campaign of 1972. The Committee for the Re-Election of the President, aptly shortened by many to CREEP, practiced money laundering, bugging, and other dirty tricks, including undercover infiltrations that were dubbed “ratfucking.”

CREEP was also largely responsible for the Watergate break-in, whose cover-up forced Nixon's resignation in August of 1974. The crime itself had occurred over two years earlier, when five men were arrested at the Watergate building for breaking into, and attempting to bug, the Democratic National Committee headquarters. In October of 1972, a month before Nixon's landslide presidential victory, the Washington Post revealed that this apparently isolated event was only the tip of a greasy 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 dejected by the poll numbers, declared that Nixon personified the “dark, venal, and incurably violent side of the American character.” Then, as if lapsing into a fever 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, loping through the alleys behind Pennsylvania Avenue...

In his essay, Thompson immediately dismisses these visionary images as mere “nightmares.” The president of the United States, he writes, would “never act that weird.”

However, what Nixon and his cronies initiated did go on to warp American reality. For almost two years, the nation was plunged into a complex and bitter psychodrama, 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 those tapes—an analog aporia that Chief of Staff Alexander Haig attributed to “some sinister force.” Such uncanny tropes are inextricable from the matter of Watergate, whose 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.” In other words, Watergate was that weird.

If, as I will be suggesting, the early seventies was a time when powerful fictions took on an enhanced, world-weaving potential, we might trace part of this mythic seep to the almost dreamlike upsurge of the Watergate scandal. Nixon's crimes revealed the id-like scuttlings of secret government, revelations that justified all manner of ambient paranoias. But it also exposed the almost sacred figure of the mad sovereign, a ghoulish overlord that, as twenty-first century events suggest, lies just an orange hair's breadth away from the democratically elected office of the President. If the sixties began with JFK as the fallen King of Camelot, the era ended with Nixon's deposed Richard III—or hunchback Richard III.
When Ford took the oath of office after Nixon's abdication, he could not help but invoke this plane of myth and fantasy in his language. “My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over,” he declared, before promising to end “the bad dreams.” Ford would spend much of his lame-duck presidency trying to plug the holes that Nixon had made in the body politic. This is why the literary leap that Thompson makes in the Post article—the leap from political journalism to weird fiction—should be seen as something more than a drug-inspired gonzo digression. What Thompson did was effect the kind of genre shift that sometimes becomes necessary within cultural work, particularly when the culture in question has grown dark, twisted, and strange. As Thompson himself famously put it in 1974, “When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro.”

But the nightmares were hardly over. 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. The Committee subsequently revealed, among a treasure trove of malfeasance, the existence of a long-running CIA program known as Project MKUltra, a remarkable human research operation whose *raison d'être* lies encoded in the program's name—Mind Kontrol, ultra-size.

Project MKUltra began in the early fifties, when fears of Chinese Communist “brainwashing” techniques were running high. The program researched the radical modification of human thought and behavior using a variety of extreme, baroque, and sometimes unquestionably torturous means. Subjects were subjected to sensory deprivation, hypnosis, and strategies of isolation, as well as a wide range of drugs. Some of these 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.

Whatever the reality behind “brainwashing,” MKUltra helped turn the twilight zones of human consciousness into a Cold War battleground. While the program reached its creepy zenith in the fifties, the seventies was the era when the dark truth was out: altered
states can be weaponized. In the postwar context, even religious experiences are always already part of the society of control. LSD, a sacrament that launched a myriad of mystical trips, was also deployed as an instrument—albeit tricksy and ultimately uncontrollable—of mind control. The paradox is that, in ways we know about and probably in ways we don't, this control paradigm also helped birth the counterculture by seeding the nervous systems of intellectuals, poets, makers, and pranksters with mescaline and especially LSD-25.
1.1.2 The Centrifugal Self

Hunter Thompson’s image of the falling wave captures the sour and disorienting retreat that marked self and society in the early seventies. Public institutions were increasingly 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 individual, white and male, who blended self-sufficiency and well-defined social commitments—was over. At the same time, the Dionysian hedonism of the sixties counterculture moved toward the mainstream, as sex outside marriage became the norm and psychoactive use became commonplace across middle America. With old models of authority, identity, and perception breaking down, and the affective unity provided by “the Movement” in deep fade, many Americans 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—the nation Americans still live within, even more fractiously—became codified. While the sixties undermined the country’s mid-century norms, it was not until the early seventies that the politics of cultural pluralism gained a real foothold in American society. Policy makers, activists, and culture crafters engineered an opening to difference that acknowledged both new subject positions—many based on gender, ethnicity, and sexual difference—as well as people's increasingly atomized desires and consumer “lifestyles.” The kaleidoscopic relativism that ensued, which undermined traditional sources of authority, contributed to the existential confusion and even nihilistic tang in the era's cultural atmosphere, especially for the middle classes. But it also inspired an innovative exploration of human potentials, possibilities that followed the collapse of older, more restricted ideas of the “human.”

The breakdown of consensus and the multiplication of forms of living also provided the opportunity for reconstructing the self,
which increasingly became a central point of cultural reference. As Sam Binkley explains, hippies, ex-radicals, and the broader middle class all responded to the cultural lack of guideposts by refocusing on the self as a *project*. This “reflexive storying of the self” sought to loosen the strait-jackets of subjectivity, to embrace more natural, impulsive, and authentic experiences—an ideal of spontaneity and earthiness that was paradoxically mediated by a new class of lifestyle experts who translated countercultural values into everyday practice.\(^{17}\)

That’s why we misunderstand the early seventies if we play only to its downbeat drift. Whatever the broader confusions, many individuals and collectives practiced vital and sometimes ingenious acts of experiment and re-invention. A pluralistic array of new identities, lifestyles, and psychological frameworks developed, flinging themselves away from the previous central pivot of established cultural authority.\(^{18}\) Bruce Shulman calls this “the great American centrifuge:” a sociological engine that distributed new subcultures, visionary communities, and reborn selves through the ruins of consensus.\(^{19}\)

But centrifugal force cuts both ways. On the one hand, the decentered self becomes a charged vector of exploration and creative re-invention; on the other, it spins like an aimless and lonely satellite through random space. In his 1975 poem “*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,*” which Stephen Paul Miller argues is a key site for seventies identity, the poet John Ashbery evokes the paradoxical play 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.\(^{20}\)

Here Ashbery describes a ride—or a trip—that is characterized both by wayward propulsion and cool, even claustrophobic stasis. The centrifugal self is at once scattered and singular, and its drive towards freedom can throw it into an abyss. An “I” does crystalize during this spin, but it is discovered precisely in its distance from any possible object of identification, even with intimate things like
friends, trees, or one's own body, glimpsed in a mirror. “This otherness, this / ‘Not-being-us’ is all there is to look at / In the mirror.” One of the great questions of the era was whether this otherness is the authentic self, or a further marker of alienation. In his 1970 song “God,” John Lennon famously lists all the cultural and religious things he no longer believes in—God, Buddha, Beatles. Instead, he “just believe(s) in me.” But what, pray tell, is “me”?

Another line in “Self-Portrait” speaks of a more dynamic experience, when “something like living occurs, a movement / Out of the dream into its codification.” The dream here is the dream of the sixties, when the dominant accounts of reality melted in an acid bath of personal and political possibility, unleashing a sense of freedom and self-determination. This exuberant opening then mutated, in an early seventies shorn of genuine collective opportunity, into a more troubling sort of indetermination—a transient subjectivity that flickered somewhere between an existential possibility and an entrepreneurial opportunity. Many attempted to craft more rich and authentic lives, or at least “something like” living, as new experts and a growing pragmatism came to stress ecological balance, natural goods and services, holistic health, and the refined loosening of the self.  

Miller ties the mutant self of the seventies to the emergence of a new cultural logic: surveillance. This logic goes beyond the technological paranoia induced by films like The Conversation (1974) or the bugs and hidden tapes of Watergate. Selves, seeking individual authenticity within the wilds of cultural pluralism, discovered that “a sense of the personal also became more prominently organized within the marketplace.”

Experiments with living became consumable “lifestyles” tracked through a more observant market, as the economy underwent a major shift towards consumer spending and consumer debt. “In the seventies the malleable identities and consumer patterns that we use to survey ourselves were put in place.”

Improved credit profiles produced computerized doppelgängers of consumers, the UPC symbol appeared, and the productive possibilities of cross-checked databases were exploited by marketers, government, and law enforcement.
In the seventies, the personal became political. Living one's life was building a world. That's what the new pluralism offered. But the personal also became a product, and a paranoid one at that: at once the fruit of the new crafts of self-making, and a technical object of scanning, manipulation, and control. As countercultural mores and attitudes spread through diverse forms of media, a two-fold condition of escape and capture was folded into the electronic analog universe. As with the SX-70 film that Polaroid debuted in 1972, the media technology of the early seventies let you see yourself develop before your eyes—but only as an other.
1.1.3 Hide and Seek

It is a chestnut of seventies studies to mock the “Me Decade” for its shallow narcissism. But few recall how weird and difficult the “Me” in question had become. Shorn of its traditional supports, the new Me was not so much a triumphant exclamation point as a question mark—an existential conundrum, a workshop, and a potentially endless dérive. This self searched more than it found, and nowhere more obviously than in the domain of American religion. According to a famous analysis by the sociologist Robert Wuthnow, seventies spirituality shifted from the mode of “dwelling,” associated with home and hearth, to the more nomadic project of “seeking.”

As a term of spiritual art, seeker was over a century old at this point, having emerged in the wake of liberal Protestantism's nineteenth-century turn towards demythologized Christianity and religious pluralism. By the seventies, the new seekers, fewer of whom considered themselves Christian at all, were faced with a diverse and exploding spiritual marketplace. Everyone was finding their own “path”—even if, as the popular spiritual teacher Krishnamurti proclaimed, truth was a “pathless land.” The distrust of authority that characterized the sixties shifted towards a new caste of experts offering new and more marketable forms of positive thinking, exotic religions, and the psychologized “Self spirituality” that would initiate the New Age.

“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 wispy Jonathan Livingston Seagull, whose paperback rights went for a record-breaking million bucks in 1972. In an influential 1976 article on the “‘Me’ Decade,” the essayist Tom Wolfe noted that Bach's language reflects two widespread seventies assumptions: that a “Real Me” exists beneath the sham layers of personality imposed by society and family, and that special psychological and spiritual practices can reveal this core self.

Wolfe was a constructivist. He recognized that the search for the Real Me was less about revealing what was already there than it was about creating something fresh and different. “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.”

While some observers wrote off this turn to the self as little more than flim-flam, Wolfe more cannily recognized that the new practices worked, at least to a certain degree. This is my view as well. By stripping away social and familial imprinting, certain psycho-spiritual methods—very much including psychedelics—could clear the ground for something different to emerge. But without a guide, how did you know where to turn and when to stop? The work of the alchemical self might just initiate an endless hunt for greener grass, for the new technique or wiser guru who could finally deliver.

The Real Me was, in this sense, a classic Hollywood McGuffin. Peeling the onion of self could generate amazing experiences and transpersonal insights, as well as the sort of traumatic theater that lets you know that something powerful was happening. But there was no guarantee that the heart of the self was not, in the end, a void. The flip side of self-realization was the somewhat disturbing possibility—supported by Buddhism, by high-dose psychedelics, and by constructivist psychological and sociological concepts—that there is no solid or real Me at all.

The existential vertigo catalyzed by this suspicion is the dark secret of seventies narcissism, the Munch-like scream of the smiley face. As seekers weathered the decade’s “Grim Slide” (Wolfe), many of them sought a kind of coherence or immunity within novel religious or psychological groups and identities. Droves of countercultural free spirits, disoriented from years of sexual, political, and psychoactive chaos, sought structure and value within an exploding field of Asian guru scenes, radical self-help therapies, and new religious movements. These groups, which we simplify by calling “cults,” decorated the rents in consensus reality with new and powerful images of identity and collective belonging. They reoriented the centrifugal self around supportive, charismatic, and sometimes authoritarian centers of gravity.

To his credit, Wolfe was the first to declare that this explosion of sects, cults, and gurus represented America’s “Third Great Awakening.” The first two Great Awakenings, which took place in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, were festal moments of Christian revivalism. They were marked by ecstatic conversions,
collective mania, uncorked emotionality, and some truly outlandish behavior. As such, the Great Awakenings were by no means uncontroversial. What revivalists characterized as the spontaneous actions of the Holy Spirit were reframed by outsiders—including many conservative religious leaders of the day—in far more pathological terms. Both secular critics associated with Enlightenment values and mainstream Christian ideologues condemned such enthusiasm by psychologizing the extraordinary experiences that motivated its religious claims. The visions and passions of the holy rollers were recast as mental illness, or linked to the disreputable mindstates associated with popular occult practices like animal magnetism and trance mediumship.

Wolfe stood firmly on this skeptical ground when he tried to explain how the Third Great Awakening came about in the seventies. Anticipating the sociobiological and “neurotheological” accounts of religion that have become increasingly popular today, Wolfe looked to our evolutionary wiring. New religious movements, he wrote, do not appear in the wake of new theological values, but rather in response to

some over-whelming 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.

Here Wolfe speaks as both a materialist and a Jamesian. In Varieties, James had argued that, while established churches “live at second-hand upon tradition,” the founders of every church “owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine.” Their extraordinary experiences opened a portal to the Outside, and in an act that the poet Dale Pendell calls “dimensional smuggling,” they snatched something back.

The immediate cause of Wolfe's Third Great Awakening was, we might say, a riot of novel but actual neurological events. These were catalyzed by hallucinogenic drugs, rock shows, orgies, yoga, biofeedback, light shows, meditation retreats, unusual diets, trance dancing, psychodrama, and intense therapeutic modalities like encounter groups or est. But Wolfe also recognized that the interpretation surrounding such experiences also helped drive the
revival. Wolfe gives us a perfect example: “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.”  

The paradox here is that, by deconstructing the experiences that seduced the Me decade, Wolfe wound up putting them on firmer spiritual footing. Despite the modern, permissive, and psychologized values that drove the new seekers, their McGuffin hunts also lured them into the deepest currents of religion and esotericism. In particular, Wolfe recognized how these various experiences rebooted the classic mystical goal of *gnosis*. “In one form or another [the new seekers] 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.” Only now those sparks reflected many lights, many gods.
1.1.4 The Occult Milieu

Many of the seekers who embraced the Third Great Awakening were in flight from Christianity. But, as is often the case, we can still understand the sociology of the new spirituality by looking at it through older religious lenses. In his classic study of Christian religion, for example, Ernst Troeltsch made a distinction between churches, which are conservative establishments, and more innovative (and divisive) sects. The dynamic between churches and sects characterized Western Christianity for centuries, and continues to do so today.

But Troeltsch described a third domain as well: a “radical religious individualism” that he associated with Protestant Dissent and Christian mysticism. “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.”33 The link Troeltsch makes between media and mysticism is key here, but so too is his emphasis on the singularity of these mystics, with their yen for “psychological abstraction and analysis” over organizations and authorities.

Troeltsch’s template illuminates something crucial and often missed about the Third Great Awakening. If his “churches” represented the conservative Establishment religions that rejected the new spirituality, his “sects” stood for the riot of new religious movements, guru scenes, and divisive therapy cults. But we profoundly misunderstand the psycho-spiritual dynamics of the era if we concentrate too much on organized groups, even heterodox ones, and ignore the more informal, eclectic, and singular paths that unaffiliated and individualistic “mystics” developed.

Like many seventies psychonauts, Wilson, Dick, and the McKennas all read esoteric, religious, and mystical texts even as they pursued psychology, philosophy, science, and other freethinking endeavors. But as eccentric anti-authoritarians, they had, with a few important exceptions, little contact with churches, new religious movements, or even particular schools of thought. They were errant sparks with singular visions and singular attitudes toward those visions. But at
the same time, their pathless paths drew from the same cultural well of practices, ideas, stories, and images that fed many of the era's more sectarian endeavors.

To develop a better sense of this “well,” we could do worse than invoke a concept that was itself crafted during the early seventies: the British sociologist Colin Campbell's influential notion of the “cultic milieu.” When it came to investigating the seeker scene, Campbell decided to map the forest rather than the trees. Rather than specific “cults” (a term he used in a nonjudgmental sense), or even the core beliefs that drew people into such groups, he wanted to describe “the collectives, institutions, individuals and media of communication associated with these beliefs.”

We could say that Campbell tried to characterize the memetic ecology within which various individuals—including cult leaders and followers, but also rootless seekers and wild psychonauts—developed their often idiosyncratic mixes of faith and skepticism, metaphysics and entertainment.

To better understand how the weird operated within the cultic milieu, we need to laminate Campbell's concept with the scholar Christopher Partridge's juicier notion of occulture, which he defines as “the contemporary alternative religious milieu in the West.” This great term was first used by Genesis P. Orridge, a founding member of the industrial band Throbbing Gristle and a self-proclaimed “esoterrorist” who went on to start the antinomian Temple ov Psychic Youth in the early eighties. Partridge broadens the concept to include “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.”

The idea of occulture shifts the cultic milieu away from self psychology and the sociological templates of “cults” and towards the more individualistic and informal field of alternative media, popular or “low” oppositional culture, and personal experience. By thinking of the occult milieu as a mode of culture rather than society or religion, we also make room for the rather different ways that people relate to esoteric or metaphysical materials. Occulture doesn't only or even mainly inspire belief or practice. It also produces fascination, amusement, adventure, skepticism, and entertainment. Though
rooted in the esoteric, the occult milieu is also a profoundly open secret, as profane as it is sacred.\textsuperscript{36}
1.1.5 Bootstrap Witchery

Occult spirituality was always a part of postwar American bohemia, but by the early seventies, esoteric lore had come to saturate both the counterculture and the broader popular culture of the country. Public media and private lives were populated with zodiac signs and Transcendental mantras, Tarot cards and *I Ching* hexagrams, Eastern lore and Western magic, psychic tests and rumors of UFOs. Starting in the late sixties, hundreds of “metaphysical” bookstores popped up in urban America, often near campuses, and they did good business selling the exploding numbers of occult books (especially paperbacks) pumped out by the publishing industry.\(^{37}\) Popular arts like comic books, poster art, science fiction, fashion, and airbrushing advanced an increasingly weird, galactic, and archetypal iconography. Emerging musical genres, like heavy metal and progressive rock, regularly tapped occult themes, while the personal spiritual journeys of rock stars brought a steady stream of gurus and godsongs to the rock press and FM radio stations.\(^{38}\)

At once hazy and mercurial, heterodox and heterogeneous, the occult milieu of the early seventies is a boggy swamp to navigate. When the sociologist Marcello Truzzi tried to get a handle on this upsurge in a 1972 journal article, he mapped the field by dividing it into five distinct categories: astrology, Eastern religion, witchcraft and Satanism, parapsychology, and a “wastebasket” that contained weird stuff like the Loch Ness Monster, UFOs, Nazi lore, and the prophecies of Nostradamus.\(^{39}\) With the exception of astrology, all these categories play an important role in the high weirdness ahead, and deserve our attention here.

In the guise of neo-Vedanta and a variety of Buddhisms, Asian traditions had established themselves in the United States in distinctly religious forms long before the seventies. During the countercultural era, however, ashrams and Zen centers started popping up like mushrooms, volumes of “classics” were published and canonized, and scores of Asian spiritual leaders developed devoted followings.\(^{40}\) Many freethinking countercultural readers
were influenced by Asian texts, especially by Zen, Tantric literature, the Upanishads, and the Taoist treatises of Lao Tzu and Zhuangzi. Psychedelic experience itself was often wrapped up in notions of unity, paradox, and visionary states drawn largely from Asian sources.

While many seekers followed gurus or took up pranayama or yoga, other heads absorbed Asian texts more philosophically and existentially than religiously. As we will see, Terence McKenna's early ideas about embodied mysticism were influenced by scholarly studies of Hindu tantra, while Wilson's anarchism and Dick's cosmology were both marked by the spontaneous and holistic dynamics of the Tao. Zen classics also counseled a humorous and paradoxical approach to reality that worked well for stoned absurdists and critical thinkers alike. But with the crucial exception of the I Ching, our psychonauts were all relatively removed from the currents of “Eastern wisdom” that flowed through the era.

Of far more importance to our subjects was the Western esoteric tradition, which is actually composed of multiple, sometimes competing currents of hermetic philosophy, alchemy, gnostic kabbalah, initiatory orders, and ceremonial magic. The popular movements of witchcraft and Satanism identified by Truzzi emerge from this occult underground, but were important only to Robert Anton Wilson. Dick was always a more classic Western esotericist, reading up on Greek mysteries, Christian theology, and Jewish mysticism, while Terence McKenna drew his earth mysteries from Renaissance occultism, the history of hermeticism—which he read through Frances Yates—and the literature of shamanism. In contrast to RAW, both men had little interest in “the dark side” of the occult.

But witchcraft and Satanism brought more than antinomian heresy to the occult milieu. More importantly for our purposes, they also helped establish the experiential and metaphysical possibilities of speculative fiction. Occult practitioners demonstrated how overt fictions could contribute building blocks to the personal and collective work of spiritual world-construction. Because the loops between weird fictions and extraordinary experience will twist and turn throughout this book, it is worth tarrying a bit with this dynamic here.

The modern revival of witchcraft began with the British writer Gerald Gardner's publication, in 1954, of Witchcraft Today. Here
Gardner related his initiation into the ancient cult of Wicca by a certain “Old Dorothy.” Scholars now consider most of this account an invention, but Gardner's enthusiastic reception depended strongly on the belief that his account was true and reflected an authentically existing tradition of pre-Christian practice.

When witchcraft entered the United States in strength in the sixties, home-grown groups began to pop up alongside the proliferating lineages of British Wicca. By the seventies, these mutant American witchcrafts started to appear alongside, or within, a broader “Pagan” movement. A number of these stateside Pagan groups, though, did not ground their legitimacy in stories of direct transmissions from authentic lineages. Instead, they unabashedly appropriated some of their lore from fiction, especially from those fantasy and science-fiction novels whose fandoms have long played a role in occulture. The Church of All Worlds drew some of their ritual elements from Robert Heinlein's science-fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961). In San Francisco, the New Reformed Orthodox Order of the Golden Dawn declared themselves “bootstrap witches,” and celebrated the role that fictions and the creative imagination played in the composition of their liturgies. For the NROOGD, the authenticity of these rituals was based in their power to effect experience rather than their historical origins.

Satanists also played with the fictionality of the occult imaginary. The media-savvy Church of Satan leader Anton LaVey, always more of an atheist than a demonist, naturalized the blasphemy of Satanic rituals by describing them as “psycho-dramas” capable of changing hearts and minds without any supernatural aid. Magic was more about performance than secret powers. In his popular 1972 manual *The Satanic Rituals*, LaVey included ceremonies that adapted material from the weird tales of H.P. Lovecraft, who later became one of the most important fictional sources for chaos magicians and other “postmodern” occultists. To justify the presence of fictions in his liturgy, LaVey simply argued for the subjective and prophetic power of fantasy literature.41

More uncanny reasons for “esotericizing” Lovecraft were offered by the British ritual magician Kenneth Grant. Writing for the *Man, Myth & Magic* encyclopedia in 1970, and two years later in his book *The Magical Revival*, Grant argued that Lovecraft was directly linked to authentic traditions of ancient and contemporary magic. The link
was not conscious, Grant explained, but lay in the author's dreaming mind. As Lovecraft's letters make clear, the author was indeed an extraordinary dreamer, and his unusually vivid, often terrifying, and intensely detailed night jaunts directly influenced his fiction (the name of the dreaded *Necronomicon*, for example, came from a dream). For Grant, Lovecraft's dreams were *esoterically objective*; though Lovecraft's skeptical waking mind was too hidebound and timid to accept it, the *Necronomicon* was a “real” occult book tucked away in the astral realms.42

Lovecraft's literary games with fact and fabulation influenced all our psychonauts, but none more than Robert Anton Wilson. As we will see, the infectious paranoia of Lovecraft's weird fiction served to underscore one of the central themes of the *Illuminatus!* trilogy: that fiction and reality are impossible to extricate from one another, particularly within those zones of culture and consciousness associated with occultism, psychedelics, and conspiracy theory. This notion may strike a grim chord for us today, as we weather “fake news” and meme warfare. But Wilson also believed that the veil dance between fictions and reality could be a mode of liberation, one that releases a protean charge capable of moving the world—or at least blowing the mind.
1.1.6 Separate Realities

Depending on how you slice it, all religions can be considered “fictions”—as constructs of the creative imagination that have congealed over time into dogma and practice. But within the occult milieu of the sixties and seventies, fictions were self-consciously instrumentalized for occult or spiritual purposes. In invoking the programming term “bootstrap”—technical slang for the self-starting cybernetic loops that computers rely on to build levels of complexity—the witches of NROOGD emphasized that external supernatural forces were not required for creative religious practices to effect real change.

On one level this attitude reflects the sort of pragmatism we will be tracking throughout this book. Within the realms of spiritual experience, the proof is in the pudding. But such play also implies a particular metaphysic: a magickal realism that blurs or even erases the lines between reality and fabulation, at least temporarily. This anarchic and arguably “postmodern” attitude brings the problem of the trickster—the crazy wisdom guru, the prankster, the flim-flam man or woman—into the heart of the occult milieu.

Take, for example, the most significant magical hoax to shape seventies occulture. In 1968, the UCLA anthropologist Carlos Castaneda published *The Teachings of Don Juan*, the first in a bestselling, multi-volume account of Castaneda's 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 Castaneda's series came out in the seventies. They remain high water marks of that weird era, and their evocative tales of power influenced nearly everyone (including all our psychonauts). Castaneda also did more than any single source—even Eliade—to inject neoshamanic attitudes and operations into Western occulture.

Initially accepted as authentic, Castaneda's books fell under critical scrutiny following the publication of the second volume, *A Separate Reality*, in 1971. Within a few years, his texts had been deconstructed by multiple experts, who exposed them as—for the most part—artful
pastiches of storytelling, reworked anthropological data, and samples of mystical texts from around the globe. But though many critics attacked Castaneda as a fraud, others—including a few anthropologists—accepted his texts as forms of trickster wisdom. This qualified acceptance alone indicates how permissive the idea of spiritual “truth” had become in the decade.

But again, this permissiveness was married to the pragmatism of the bootstrap. People kept buying and reading Castaneda, not because they were hoodwinked, but because his books felt useful. For all their outlandish incidents, they served as roadmaps or manuals for the dawning era of democratized altered states. Castaneda gave you handy new concepts—like the difference between the nagual and the tonal—and offered techniques for your neoshamanic tool belt, like “seeing” or running in the dark. I suspect the Don Juan books also resonated because the cosmology of Amerindian shamanism they presented—however fabricated—also resonated with the conditions of seventies consciousness culture.
Castaneda trained as an anthropologist, after all, and his
department at UCLA specialized in shamanism and ethnographic
studies of indigenous Southwest religion. Even if he made stuff up,
he had solid sources and good working concepts about shamanism (a
term Don Juan rejected). In 1975, one of Castaneda's fellow grad
students, the respected anthropologist Lowell Bean, published a
piece on the concept of power in Native California shamanism that
illustrates the sorts of general ideas that underlay the Don Juan
books.

For Bean, power is a potential to act that, within the shamanic
cosmology of Native California (and elsewhere), is widely distributed
between various agents throughout multiple levels of reality. Rocks
and plants might be agents of power as well as animals and ghostly
beings. But since such entities are “capricious, unpredictable, and
amoral,” neither their presence nor their intentions are easily
detectable. Because they may deceive, they need to be tested by
“empirical indicators”; as such, humans live in a deeply ambiguous,
shape-shifting world where power is always being contested and
alliances made and broken.\footnote{45}

In A Separate Reality, Castaneda ties this cosmology of power
directly to psychoactive plants. In the book, the druggiest of the
series, Don Juan introduces his student to a number of plant “allies,”
including datura, peyote, and hallucinogenic mushrooms, all of
which reveal domains of “nonordinary reality” that in turn stage
enigmatic encounters with nonhuman persons and forces. Don Juan
tells Carlos about the entity Mescalito, a benevolent plant teacher or
protector spirit associated with peyote. Despite the skeptical protests
of the ever-rational Castaneda—who reminds us of the benighted if
studious protagonists in Lovecraft tales, who do not recognize the
reality of forces that we can clearly limn—the reader comes to
recognize, within the logic of the narrative, the independent reality of
Mescalito.

With his tales of power, Castaneda helped revise popular ideas
about the nature of the separate reality unveiled by psychedelics and
related altered states. Instead of the impersonal unity and
Transcendentalist fusion described by acid perennialists, Castaneda
presented a more animist and amoral universe populated with
shape-shifting sorcerers, plant allies, and nonhuman entities who
could behave like mercurial and potentially menacing tricksters. As
we will see, something like this cosmos, rather than the perennialist one, sets the stage for the high weirdness ahead. But this cosmos also resonates with some general features of seventies occulture itself, even of the broader Zeitgeist, where traditional hierarchies gave way to a pluralistic field of possibilities whose enchantments and secret powers are inextricable from a strange, phantasmagoric, occasionally paranoid undertow.
1.1.7 Wasteland

The occult milieu in the seventies might be said to resemble ancient Alexandria, a cosmopolitan crossroads of spiritual traditions. But in a lot of ways, it was more like the Mos Eisley cantina in *Star Wars*—a hot-house demimonde of fabulous creatures, mystic warriors, charlatans, sprites, and spurious legends. It is in such an environment, in any case, that we find the occupants of Truzzi's most capacious category of the occult revival: a “waste basket” overflowing with weird shit like the Loch Ness Monster, Nostradamus, ancient aliens, Nazi warlocks, Bigfoot, UFOs, and the secrets of the Egyptian pyramids. You can almost see the old paperback covers floating before your eyes (and the feverish YouTube “documentaries” today). Here the marginal, subaltern, and trashy side of occulture most perversely reveals itself—the profane fuel that lights the heights of high weirdness.

The wellspring of such feverish folklore in the countercultural era was the French team of Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, who ran *Planete* magazine (1961-1972) and wrote *Les Matins du Magiciens*, which appeared in English in 1964. *The Morning of the Magicians* included a smorgasbord of speculations about alchemy, pyramid power, the mystic George Gurdjieff, hollow earth theories, super-consciousness, Nazi occultism, Easter Island, and the Nazca lines—whose suggestion of ancient astronauts Erich von Daniken would later, in 1968's best-selling *Chariots of the Gods?*, take all the way to the bank. Reviewing *Morning* at the time of its release, Mircea Eliade identified an emerging spiritual sensibility that turned to wonders, even garish ones, in order to free itself from the fifties prisons of existentialism and scientific materialism.46

With the spirit of Surrealism very much in mind, Pauwels and Bergier dubbed their approach “fantastic realism,” a variant of what I am calling *weird naturalism*. For them, fantastic realism did not represent an escape into exotica or the merely imaginary, but rather an attempt to understand the fantastic as an aspect of “natural law.” As with the empirical claims of parapsychology—the last of Truzzi’s categories we will look at—fantastic realism depended on the claims
of experience: it was “an effect produced by contact with reality—reality perceived directly and not through a filter of habit, prejudice, conformism.” This guiding concept—which of course rested on another McGuffin, that of “reality perceived directly”—allowed The Morning of the Magicians to set pulp magazine fodder and loony conspiracy theories alongside more elevated metaphysical explorations of “ultra-consciousness and the ‘awakened state.’”

For the emerging counterculture, The Morning of the Magicians provided a Pandora's box of weirdness. But it is more fitting to lay Truzzi's waste basket at the feet of Pauwels and Bergier's own American hero: the writer and “collector of coincidences” Charles Fort, who died in 1932 in the Bronx. An independent researcher, polymath, and satirist, Fort compiled tens of thousands of anomalous events—raining frogs, mysterious airships, and other wild facts—that he drew from scientific reports, newspapers, and other testimonies. He called this data “damned” because, though reported as true, and impressive in its mass, it contradicted or escaped the explanatory regimes of the sciences of his time, and was, partly for this reason, largely ignored or condemned.

While many of Fort's personal speculations about reality read like pulp science fiction, his Mencken-like satire of scientific cant and his overwhelming collection of oddities revealed yawning cracks in the materialism his era had inherited from the nineteenth century. A sociologist of knowledge as much as anything, Fort showed that science, like all “systems,” strives to maintain and extend itself by ruthlessly policing its borders. This process involves the reflexive exclusion of material that cannot be assimilated into the dominant paradigm. “Science is not objective,” explain the Forteans Pauwels and Bergier (who was himself a chemical engineer). “Like civilization, it is a conspiracy.”

Fort was no dry analyst. His 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 Bob Rickard began publishing The News, a “miscellany of Fortean curiosities” that continues to this day as Fortean Times, the best printed source for “the world's weirdest news stories” (and one of the most entertaining magazines of that or any period). While contemporary Forteans are, by and large, more
naturalistic and skeptical than Fort himself, they nonetheless continue to speak for the potent role that anomalies play in shaping the sense of reality.

When Truzzi attempted to tie together his account of seventies occulture, he also turned to the idea of *anomaly*, characterizing the objects of occult knowledge and experience as “things anomalous to our generally accepted cultural-storehouse of ‘truths’.” From this sociological perspective, anomalies derive their aura of inexplicable mystery not from any *essential* characteristics of their own, but from their degree of divergence from Establishment narratives. In this sense, anomaly may be best defined through what the British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski called the “co-efficient of weirdness”: a quantifiable measure of deviance that must always in turn be measured against some sort of sociological or cultural norm.

Here however, I would like to make a more Fortean suggestion: *anomaly is a characteristic of the real*. Whatever frameworks of explanation are brought to bear on empirical experience—cultural narratives, neuro-cognitive models, statistical analysis—we seem to invariably encounter phenomena that undermine or escape those frameworks, or that bend them out of line. Often this errant data can be explained away as faults in our perceptions or understanding. But other times we are left shrugging our shoulders, wondering what to do with these stubborn avatars of the Beyond, these glitches in the matrix of the reality we (think we) know.

This is why *anomaly* remains an important term in science. While the word receives a bouquet of technical definitions across physics, biology, and astronomy—many of which do not rely on the idea of an unexpected aberration—the anomaly generally suggests the presence of an incongruous but actual *thing* that deviates from the norms of informed expectation in a manner that requires a revision of conventional explanations.
Of course, what constitutes a substantial or meaningful anomaly—as opposed to a merely statistical freak, or an artifact of distorted perception—is another question. But the concept of anomaly, as I use it anyway, covers both ends of the gap, the subjective and the objective and the indeterminate place in between. That’s why the language of the anomaly—which is necessary to scientific practice—has also become the *unheimlich* home for the sorts of marvelous conundrums and exotic bunkum that pepper parapsychology, fringe archaeology, cryptozoology, Ufology, and other para-sciences.54

Some rationalists have never met an anomaly they didn’t want to crush. Many have devoted themselves to “solving” or unravelling noxious mathematical and logical paradoxes, which are considered anomalies within systems of reasoning. But if we take a broader, more holistic view, we will see that such paradoxes *keep popping up*, somewhere down the line, and sometimes within the foundations of the very procedures invoked to banish them. The anomaly is a moving target, a bouncing ball always headed towards a rabbit hole.

Many occultural thinkers—whether conspiracy theorists or New Age metaphysicians—face a reverse problem. They fixate on *particular* anomalies as if these offered privileged access or “proof”
about a more essential or substantial order of the real. In so doing, such speculators miss the opportunity to try to think, or face, the anomalous itself. For even if we pin down the butterflies of the bizarre, the cosmos keeps sending them our way, over and over again. Here they come, 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.
Truzzi’s final category of seventies occulture is parapsychology, which at first glance appears to lie at some distance from the more mystical regions of Zen, witchcraft, and Nazi UFOs. After all, since the nineteenth-century origins of psychic research, parapsychologists have largely behaved as scientists (even when they fudge or misinterpret data, which “real” scientists do as well). By adopting rigorous procedures, controls, and rules of evidence—or simulating them, skeptics would say—parapsychologists aim to present empirical evidence. These procedures also help inoculate them from witch-hunts led by orthodox scientists. Joseph Banks Rhine's research institute at Duke University, the most important outpost of the parapsychology research in midcentury America, was notable for the dullness of its devotion to statistical trials.

But something happened to parapsychology on the way to the seventies. For one thing, publishers began cranking out a tsunami of popular psychic literature. Much of this pulp seemed to support the skeptical argument that parapsychology was really just the occult in pseudo-scientific disguise. But a more potent reason for the popularity of the paranormal was the mass explosion of extraordinary experiences among the young. ESP, synchronicities, and all manner of mind-melds were regular features of psychedelic reports. Suddenly there were more cards on the parapsychological table than the ones that Rhine used to test telepathy.

I have no interest in picking through the bloody battlefields of the parapsychology debate. My point is simply that, while parapsychology certainly overlaps occulture and its desires for a re-enchanted world, its strongest practitioners are still focused on the evidence of this world, even if this world behaves in ways that elude the apparatus and protocols of empirical research. We are still in the weird environs of the anomaly, which ruptures the world without abandoning the real. Despite their numinous flicker, their apparent “contact with unknown spheres and powers,” paranormal anomalies emerge from the shadows of the actual, as a centrifugal or wayward
turn away from naturalistic or probabilistic norms to which they remain, nonetheless, absolutely tied.

In 1972, the author Arthur Koestler came out with a book on parapsychology called *The Roots of Coincidence*. Here Koestler presented himself as a “reluctant convert” to the paranormal, a conversion he justified in part by invoking the peculiarities of quantum mechanics. But unlike so many wooly quantum mystics today, Koestler did not give himself over to wild speculations or simplistic interpretations. His discussion of “the Perversity of Physics” contains only the lightest hints of the spiritual analogies that would come to the fore later in the decade with bestselling books like Fritjof Capra’s *The Tao of Physics* (1975) and Gary Zukav’s *The Dancing Wu-Li Masters* (1979). Instead, Koestler argued that the “negative affinity” between quantum physics and parapsychology demonstrated that “in so far as both are unthinkable…the weird concepts of one provide an excuse for the weirdness of the other.”

Koestler also argued for some meatier points of contact between quantum mechanics and parapsychology. He pointed out that, in their attempt to become more rigorous, modern parapsychologists like Rhine resorted to the same mathematical cloud of virtual possibilities that replaces strict causality in quantum mechanical accounts: the statistical domain of probability. However anecdotally persuasive, individual instances of a guessed card are meaningless measures of telepathy. Instead, it is the percentage of correct guesses over large numbers of individual trials that should 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 methodologically established and statistically significant, the anomaly to be explained. This is the co-efficient of weirdness.

Popular science writers, as well as many physicists and philosophers, regularly use the phrase “quantum weirdness” to mark the starkly counter-intuitive challenges and apparent anomalies that any thinking person will register when confronting both the experimental outcomes and theoretical implications of quantum mechanics. These elements, sometimes also called “spooky,” include empirically established mindfucks like quantum entanglement, indeterminacy, the wave/particle duality, and other unnerving
incongruities whose challenge to both Newtonian physics and naive realism we do not have time to rehearse here.\textsuperscript{57}

What is important to emphasize is that, while the first generation of quantum physicists dove deep into these philosophical enigmas, the pragmatic demands of wartime and the creation of the postwar technological order shifted the focus almost entirely towards instrumentalizing the weirdness. According to the physicist and historian of science David Kaiser, who tells this story in his wonderful book \textit{How the Hippies Saved Physics}, the bizarre philosophical implications of quantum mechanics did not return to scientific discourse in force until the early seventies. That was when the Fundamental Fysiks Group, a ragtag and rather psychedelicized crew of young physicists living around Berkeley, began obsessing about the implications of \textit{entanglement}: the fact, first established theoretically by John Bell and later proven experimentally, that entangled quantum particles are capable of instantaneous correlation even if they are widely separated in space-time, thereby seeming to communicate faster than the speed of light.\textsuperscript{58}

Entanglement is seriously peculiar, which helps explain why no-one batted an eye when the distinguished physicist Heinz Pagels peppered his popular 1982 book \textit{The Cosmic Code} with the phrase “quantum weirdness.” But the link between weirdness and quantum physics stretches back to the seventies. In an article from 1976—the same year that an account of Hugh Everett's “many-worlds” interpretation of quantum physics appeared in the science-fiction journal \textit{Analog}—the philosopher Hilary Putnam re-assessed “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” a game-changing critique of logical positivism by the analytic philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine. In his essay, Quine argued that analytic or \textit{a priori} arguments—that is, propositions resting on apparently a-historical or transcendental logical foundations—were, despite appearances, fundamentally historical and even “psychological” artifacts. From Quine's point of view, the Aristotelian foundations of Boolean logic, including the law of noncontradiction and the law of excluded middle, aren't written in eternal stone.

To support Quine's position, Putnam brings up the fact that quantum “weirdness,” with its various “anomalies,” radically challenges these logical rules. Putnam suggests two coherent responses to this challenge. For positivists interested in experimental
results, the solution is to just not worry about quantum weirdness—just figure out what works and call it a day. This is how most physicists proceeded at the time: the maps work, so don’t worry about the territory, which might not even exist. But Putnam wanted to consider another possibility: “the hypothesis that we live in a non-Boolean world.”59

Interpreted in this light, quantum weirdness suggests that logic is not absolute, at least in our cosmos. “A” can simultaneously be “not-A.” To affirm quantum mechanics as a description of reality, and not just an instrumental method, we might just have to accept that a weirder logic rules the real. This was also the conclusion of Robert Anton Wilson, who, during the seventies, hung out with the very same Fundamental Fysiks Group that helped bring attention to Bell’s Theorem and its picture of a nonlocal universe. Along considerably looser lines, Wilson rejected the principal of the excluded middle, replacing it with a more ambiguous propositional system that he called “maybe logic.” That story will be told later: here we need only suggest that weirdness, as a feature of the real, may be nothing more or less than the uncanny return of the middle way between being and non-being, yes and no, reality and representation.
1.1.9 Consciousness Culture

To round out our portrait of seventies consciousness culture, we need to return for a moment to the abiding figure of William James. For the subjectivity hackers of the counterculture, James was a figure of authority, a Great Emancipator whose radical empiricism provided both a rallying cry and a permission slip for those pursuing “altered states of consciousness” by any means necessary. When psychologists Robert Masters and Jean Houston published their comprehensive 1966 study of altered states, they affirmed this Jamesian connection by titling their book *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*.

James was, after all, a highly regarded psychologist and philosopher who took drugs and talked about it. Though the peyote buttons he consumed left him with little more than a hangover, nitrous oxide triggered an experience that was strong and strange enough to inspire a piece of writing that continues to resound through consciousness culture. In his discussion of mysticism in the *Varieties*, James wrote that

> our normal waking consciousness...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.60

This passage, or portions of it, was reproduced in countless texts of the sixties and seventies, like a catechism for psychonauts.61 And no
wonder. Here nitrous oxide acts not so much as an intoxicant or a deliriant but as a kind of operational probe—a stimulus that catalyzes, or uncovers, real difference. Extraordinary experiences don't simply distort—they reveal “discontinuous” modes of consciousness beyond the veils of ordinary mind, which thereby becomes relativized as just another “type” of consciousness.62

As a pragmatist, James reminds readers that such novel mindstates may, in their own proper field of application, be useful for life. But he did not believe that the noetic insights reported by drug takers or mystics carried the weight of propositional proofs or public facts. James assured non-mystics that they were under no obligation to accept the authority of such experiences. Whatever “revelation” is, it does not authorize revelators to make universal claims. At the same time, James held that the mere existence of mystical and paranormal experiences, as well as their sometimes useful output for life, undermines the “pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe.”63

But what did James believe? He tells us that novel types of consciousness may open a region—that is, they may be coupled with a new, as-yet-undiscovered dimension of the cosmos. But even if these regions were restricted to the mind of the individual, James still believed that a real portal had been opened. But a portal into what?

The first answer is something like the subconscious, a concept that had been developing throughout the nineteenth century, as the nascent science of psychology confronted popular esoteric and spiritual practices like trance mediumship. To explain the source of trance states, James adopted the notion of “subliminal” or “ultra-marginal” consciousness first described by his friend, the British psychologist and psychic researcher Frederic Myers. For both thinkers, subliminal consciousness served as an explanatory holding cell for a host of previously unrelated but resonant phenomena, a litany of weirdness that included dreams, hypnotism, hysteria, Ouija board divination, crystal gazing, hallucinatory voices, apparitions of the dying, mediumistic trances, demonic possession, clairvoyance, and thought transference.64 In Varieties, James also argued that the depths of subliminal consciousness served as the most important
source for religious experiences—for revivalist conversions, mystical glimpses, and cosmic consciousness.65

James accepted that the subconscious was largely personal and regressive, housing pathologies and inchoate subpersonalities.66 But this was only true for the nearer, “hither side” of the subconscious. What lies beyond the far side of the subconscious is unknown to us. “The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely ‘understandable’ world.”67 Like the visual field of James’ man on the train, discussed earlier, consciousness is fringed with its own unseen, whose source may lie with God or cosmic consciousness. As such, the subliminal subconscious became for James what Ann Taves calls a “mediating concept”—a theoretical topos located between the domains of biological and psychological explanation, on the one hand, and metaphysical or religious possibility on the other.

Following the era of James and Myers, the academic discipline of psychology had little need for this sort of liminal thinking.68 With the significant exception of Jung, the new Freudian concept of the unconscious chased away the spooks that haunted the older notion of the subconscious; today many cognitive psychologists argue that no sort of deep mind exists at all. But in the sixties and seventies, all sorts of new “regions” of mind were being pried open through induced and repeatable “altered states of consciousness.” Among both psychologists and psychonauts, this term and its associated practices opened up the old mediating concept of the subconscious again. The twilight zones of mind became sites of otherworldly possibilities—particularly among the new, West Coast-centered field of transpersonal psychology.

A good example here is the work of the psychiatrist Stan Grof. Trained as a Freudian in 1950s Czechoslovakia, Grof became one of the principal shapers of transpersonal psychology and psychedelic psychotherapy, overseeing more acid trips than any clinician living or dead. (He also invented holotropic breathwork, a powerful altered states modality.) For Grof, molecules do not cause the strange sublinities of psychedelic experience, but catalyze material latent in the “unconscious,” a term that Grof understands in broadly psychoanalytic terms, including a highly biological notion of repression first articulated by Freud’s student Otto Rank.
Specifically, Grof asserted that many psychedelic phenomena, including demonic visions and near-death experiences, are actually visionary recapitations of repressed birth trauma. In this sense, he was a “reductive” biological psychologist.

At the same time, Grof believed that the experiences of his many patients suggested a transpersonal dimension to the mind that was much closer to Jung's panoply of collective archetypes. If personal detritus choked the hither side of the unconscious, the farther side, again, bordered on the fully cosmic. Indeed, Grof's perennialist vision of the psychedelic unconscious propels his own thinking far beyond the conventional boundaries of biological psychology or even Jung, into a fully multidimensional metaphysics that includes otherworldly planes inhabited by incorporeal beings. For Grof, as for so many seventies thinkers who brought together psychology and mysticism, social science and visionary experience, the unconscious returns as a literal mediator of separate realities or dimensions.
Whatever its many meanings, the concept of consciousness grew to outsize proportions in the imagination of the sixties counterculture. Whether “raised” through activist rap sessions or “expanded” through acid or yoga, consciousness became a thing unto itself, at once a means and a final unified goal. By the seventies, what Timothy Leary called the “consciousness movement” had mutated into a “consciousness industry.” Techniques, technologies, and all manner of discourses were brought to bear on the elusive and yet ever-present stuff.

Consider the 1979 book *Consciousness: the Brain, States of Awareness, and Alternate Realities*, which was edited by two Harvard psychology PhDs and published by a mainstream press. The title alone captures a perfectly seventies triangulation of biology, psychology, and occulture. The range of writers represented—neuroscientists, psychiatrists, journalists, scholars of religion, spiritual leaders—also shows just how many sectors of society wanted a piece of the consciousness pie. Articles on shamans and schizophrenia, methamphetamine psychosis, daydreaming, Buddhist cosmology, and action potentials fed a public hungry for information about edgy experience. The range of topics also demonstrated how the popular and public discourse of consciousness—part spirit, part nature, part process—came to mediate between enchantment and disenchantment, the subject of mystical insight and the object of experimental psychology.

This new sense of consciousness as a bridge between biology and otherworldly experience was first announced in 1969, with another collection of articles 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 extraordinary experiences: lucid dreams, the cannabis buzz, transcendental meditation, hypnosis, hypnagogia, and exotic phenomena associated with Asian contemplative practices. In its copious pages, EEG studies of yogis sat alongside
anthropological essays, therapeutic protocols besides drug experience reports.

According to the orthodox psychology of the day, most of the mindstates discussed in Tart's volume would be considered meaningless, pathological, or hopelessly stained with superstition. Instead, Tart invited his academic peers to think about altered states with an attitude of open-minded empiricism, using scientific methodology, calibrated instruments, and sociological analysis. But Tart also recognized that ASCs possessed special qualitative characteristics—qualities that eluded quantification and needed to be characterized phenomenologically. Measurements alone would not do. As such, Tart's volume also initiated a research sensibility that the transpersonal theorist Jorge Ferrer calls "inner empiricism": an attempt to bring a reflexive spirit of rigor and analysis to subjective assays of the mind's weirder borderzones.

Tart's research program raised a number of vital questions about the nature of scientific inquiry, introducing another strange loop into the crisp distinction between subject and object upon which both science and naive realism are founded. This issue was excellently posed by the psychopharmacologist and chemist Alexander Shulgin, whose creation and exploration of novel psychedelics in the sixties, seventies, and eighties makes him one of the twentieth century's greatest and most influential inner empiricists. While continuing to work in industry, Shulgin and a coterie of California peers developed protocols for synthesizing, ingesting, and assessing the effects of newly invented psychoactive compounds. Shulgin explained his research methods by arguing that, because the emergence of psychoactive effects was obvious to the user but invisible to everyone else, the most basic axiom of modern pharmacological research—the necessity of blind studies and replicability—is largely foreclosed. As Shulgin put it, "the subject is the observer, and objectivity in the classic sense is impossible."

For the freaks and heads who picked up Tart's book, the idea of a new and groovy kind of psychology was catnip. The words "altered states of consciousness" conjured up an alternate continent of the mind, an exotic topography as varied as California's. For his part, Tart did not try to rigorously police the boundary between his project and such countercultural concerns. As Tart made clear in the 1971
introduction to the second edition of *Altered States of Consciousness*, his work was designed not only to expand the domains of rigorous experimental psychology, but to shed light on the youth movement's occultural interest in drugs, dreams, meditation, and sensory awareness. Tart was especially concerned to provide correctives to the “psychopathology” that he believed stalked the chaotic labyrinth of seventies spirituality, cultic and otherwise.

That said, there are problems with the talismanic name of Tart's book. Many have pointed out that the term *altered* implies that these states are distortions of a foundational baseline consciousness that anchors all the other transformations, rather than indicating modes of consciousness with their own autonomy and integral character. Similarly, the term *states* is arguably too static and discrete to cover experiential zones that are more often characterized by boundary dissolution and montage, drift and resonance. Indeed, the dynamism of altered states is perhaps best diagrammed through the sort of three-dimensional “phase space” model proposed by the neuropharmacologist J. Allan Hobson.

Hobson's model underscores the centrality of continuous multidimensional variation in altered states. For an earlier, more linear version of such continuity, we should turn to a diagram published in *Science* in 1971. In the diagram (overleaf), which resembles a VU meter, the experimental psychologist Roland Fischer sets an array of states on a continuum of arousal, ranging from ecstatic “ergotropic” intensities on the one end to meditative states of “trophotropic” hypoarousal on the other.

In keeping with the Eastern turn of the times, Fischer's map includes Asian terms like *zazen* and *samadhi*, whose complex and culturally-embedded meanings become largely erased by their schematic placement in the diagram. This decontextualization in turn reflects the perennialist presumption that such terms refer to measurable, universally accessible neurobiological states—objective inner realms that can be parsed alongside EEG brain wave ranges and Goldstein's “coefficient of variation” (whatever that is).

At the same time, Fischer's diagram cheekily suggests the paradoxical limits of quantification. At the bottom of the diagram, Fischer graphically unites the two polar extremes of amplified rapture and tranquil samadhi with an infinity symbol. A glyph for the
mathematical Beyond, the infinity symbol also functions here as a placeholder for types of consciousness that exceed quantification and—as if realizing the mystical paradoxes described by the medieval metaphysician Nicholas of Cusa—mysteriously unite opposites.

Of course, things are trickier than Fischer’s diagram implies. Even if we abandon the fool’s errand of linking multidimensional bodymind practices like “zazen” to discrete measurable states, we are still left with the deeper issue first pointed out by William James: such states may open a region, but they furnish no map. It's been over forty years since Fischer's drawing, but as Wouter Hanegraaff laments, there still isn't much agreement among social scientists on how to name or define these experiential processes. What an anthropologist calls a “trance,” a psychologist might call “dissociation,” or a scholar of religion “participation mystique,” or even “channeling.”

Altered states have nebulous borders.

The most audacious rewrite of Tart's still-popular acronym was suggested by the British anthropologist Robert J. Wallis, who studies rock art, animism, and contemporary neo-pagan practices. Discussing the widespread recourse to ASCs in shamanic cultures, Wallis argues that “Adjusted Styles of Communication” is a more generous and anthropologically accurate account of the situation.

Instead of framing ASCs as discrete states that are internal to an individual's skull, Wallis instead underscores their transitive character, their reaching out towards objects and other beings. In this sense, ASCs establish themselves relationally, in conjunction with a lively and interactive Beyond, some inside-outside dimension of reality that seems to have something to say. Wallis is not saying these realms or beings “really” exist (whatever that means). The point is that the anthropological experience of ASCs often takes the form of an encounter, an “I-Thou” relationship (Buber) that demands a communicative attitude in situ. That's where the high weirdness often begins. The inner empiricist finds that she is not alone.

Consciousness, in this light, is inextricable from both social relations and communication. The narcissism that so worried social critics in the seventies, the self-obsession sparked by radical experiences, was only part of the story. There were others who argued that novel states of consciousness were also ways of communicating with animated realities. In this view, consciousness
itself became a sort of medium, or multimedia: a tweakable or hackable interface that can “tune into” a plurality of information sources and populated regions. This conviction was itself consonant with the increasingly technological reality of communications in the era—the ever expanding (and imploding) media ecology whose mind-bending effects were brought to popular consciousness by Marshall McLuhan. If the medium was the message, then for many seekers and psychonauts, consciousness became the ultimate medium.
1.1.11 Access to Tools

The characteristically Californian link between consciousness and technology contradicts the more commonplace idea that the occult revival of the sixties and seventies was an attack on reason. In his classic 1968 book on the counterculture, for example, Theodore Roszak argued that the youth movement's rejection of “the System” also demanded an opposition to the instrumental rationality that the System ran on. Against the technocratic logic of the Establishment, the counterculture demanded the “subversion of the scientific world view.”81 Witchcraft and the *I Ching* fit in fine alongside rock’n’roll, free love, and psychedelics, all of which “assault[ed] the reality of the ego as an isolable, purely cerebral unit of identity.”82

Today historians recognize that the reality was more complex.83 Many important countercultural developments were marked by a powerful affirmation of technological, scientific, and pragmatic values. The era was awash with tinkerers and systems-builders, with how-to guides, manuals, teach-ins, cookbooks, and catalogs. Freak hackers pushed the technical envelope on a wide variety of media, while artists, architects, and ecological designers all embraced practical know-how and the sort of ecological or holistic thought capable of understanding and reconfiguring complex interdisciplinary systems, including systems of human togetherness.

In this light, countercultural creativity can be seen as a massive and decentralized construction project designed to replace or outpace a corrupt order of technocracy. Sometimes radical and utopian, and sometimes wry and down-to-earth, all manner of freak pragmatists attempted to build new frameworks of possibility. People designed and constructed new formats for collective community, new liquid architectures, new media environments, and new social sculptures.84 The world-building reach of these efforts was nicely summed up by the name of one New Mexico hippie commune founded in the early seventies: the Reality Construction Company. In a very concrete sense, the freaks embraced the idea that reality was a social construction.
The most visible and influential organ of such countercultural technophilia was of course *The Whole Earth Catalog*, an independent California-based compendium of resources that first appeared in 1968 and ran deep into the seventies. The catalog was an outgrowth of a mobile Truck Store that Stewart Brand ran out of the back of a 1963 Dodge, a nomadic trading post filled with novel and innovative tools that could help hippies, freaks, and communalists build out their alternative worlds. In the first edition, the editor (and Merry Prankster) Brand famously declared that “We are as gods and might as well get good at it.” And the way human gods manifested their powers, at least according to Brand, was through the intelligent and creative use of technology, communications media, and sharp ways of thinking between and beyond disciplines.

The *Whole Earth Catalog* was subtitled “Access to Tools,” and the ethos of the publication depended on a capacious notion of “tool.” Developed by Brand and the frequent contributor J. Baldwin, an inventor and self-professed “tool freak,” the *Whole Earth*’s ethos of tool-use emphasized human-scaled technologies, DIY independence, and a deeply American pragmatism that looked to the past as often as the future. Within the pages of the catalog, which was full of charts and diagrams, Bucky domes popped up next to Indian tipis, Jung shared a page with cybernetician Norbert Wiener, and guides to traditional Japanese architecture and mycology intersected with a bestiary of new machines: Hewlett-Packard calculators, electronics kits, one-man sawmills, solar panels.

As the historian Andrew Kirk sees it, Brand helped define and popularize a pragmatic “design science” approach to material problems that led to a number of ecological, architectural, and energy innovations in the seventies and beyond.85 Kirk calls these countercultural makers “hippy bricoleurs,” a term adapted from anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. In his book *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss contrasted the West's rational approach to engineering with the “savage” recourse to *bricolage*, which he characterized as “a structure or structure of ideas achieved by using whatever comes to hand.” As Kirk points out, the design scientists unleashed by the *Whole Earth Catalog* fused these modes: they were rational engineers who hacked a messy world through improvisation, know-how, and a tinkerer's playful and open-ended sense for things and relationships.86
Psychonauts too are bricoleurs, a fact that helps us understand one of the more curious aspects of *The Whole Earth Catalog*: despite its reasonable practicality, the *Catalog* also included many items of and on occulture. The premier issue, for example, included entries on Tantric art, meditation cushions, Carlos Castaneda, and the *I Ching*, along with recommendations for books on Zen, yoga, and Self-Hypnotism. Writing about John Lilly's publication *Programming and Metaprogramming in the Human Biocomputer*, Brand describes it as “the best internal guidebook I've seen—far more practical and generalized than transcendent Eastern writings or wishful Underground notes.”

The mistake is to read these items as nothing more than freak flotsam. Instead, the *Catalog* helps us recognize the constructivist dimension of occulture, one that will in various ways be picked up by all of our psychonauts: a freak-geek ethos of spiritual bricolage and mystic pragmatism. These early “consciousness hackers” plucked tools and methods from ancient texts or religious traditions and reframed and recombined them as part of an informal, experimental, and sometimes hedonistic assemblage of hands-on human possibility. Rituals became protocols. What mattered was whether these ancient methods worked—that is, if they produced powerful effects, effects that in turn could be folded back into an ongoing experiment in subjectivity.

In this environment, spirituality and mysticism became redescribed in light of the tool. Take, for example, *Mind Games: The Guide to Inner Space*, a popular 1972 publication issued by Robert Masters and Jean Houston. *Mind Games* presented a host of spiritual and psychological practices, including enhanced sensory awareness, self-initiated trance-induction, meditation, dreamwork, fasting, music, chant, and what Jungians call “active imagination.” The guiding spirit of the book is the notion of operationalization—that is, of putting a system of beliefs or ideas into practice. By reframing the spirit as “mind,” and religious anthropotechnics as “games,” Masters and Houston helped transform spiritual disciplines into more-or-less secular tools that might actualize the reserve of energy that some, especially in California, were calling human potential.

Masters and Houston, you may remember, were also the authors of *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*. The message is clear: LSD
was the original tool of consciousness culture, the one that pried open all the other doors. And LSD first hit the scene as a tool. The most game-changing psychoactive drug in the postwar West was not extracted from some shaman's mushroom but sprang like Athena from the brow of an industrial chemistry corporation, who first packaged and sold it to clinical psychiatrists tinkering with broken minds. In other words, LSD entered history as an instrument of modernity. But at the same time, this anomalous molecule was responsible for boomeranging millions of modern people out of the existential flatland of commodity and instrumental reason—and then returning them to that anxious, disenchanted ground, subtly or not so subtly changed, and compelled to invent a way to patch up, or to extend, the new weird horizon. More than any other technology of the self, LSD is the ultimate key to the profane religiosity of the weird seventies.
1.1.12  We Ate the Acid

The first man on LSD was kind of like the first man on the moon: no-one in history had made that step before. This means that, in 1943, when the Sandoz chemist Albert Hofmann consumed 250 micrograms of the substance, he had absolutely no reason to expect an out-of-body experience, or a near-death experience, or ambushes by witches and demons. But according to his own account of that now famous bicycle ride day, he experienced all these things. Which means that, even when LSD was completely lacking in associations, the compound still had some rather familiar things to say. However we characterize it, LSD seems to provoke the weirding of human experience.

That said, Hofmann did not initially describe LSD as anything like a religious or “sacred” molecule. Such associations wouldn't have been of much interest to his employers, in any case, since they faced a far more secular challenge: building a market for a powerful consciousness drug with no obvious application. When Sandoz began selling LSD under the trade name Delysid, the company initially presented the compound to physicians and researchers as a “psychotomimetic”: not as a medicine that heals but as a psychiatric tool capable of producing a “model psychosis” in people. This framing story stressed the mimetic qualities of LSD, whose effects
were considered valuable for their resemblance to conditions like schizophrenia. But what exactly separates the idea that LSD simulates madness from the idea that it triggers a few psychotic hours of the real deal? This ambivalence—between the simulacrum and the actual thing—is a key to the protean identity of the drug and even the “spiritual experiences” it occasions (or models).

Such exalted experiences started to enter the clinical literature in the fifties. In 1955, the UCLA toxicologist and clinician Sidney Cohen took Delysid for the first time. Given the psychotomimetic story, he expected a phantasmagoric horror show or catatonic nod. Instead, he experienced “a majestic, sunlit, heavenly inner quietude,” a cognitive expansion that seemed to bring him to “the contemplation of eternal truth.” Over time, Cohen and other researchers found that, while acid afflicted many subjects with loneliness, confusion, and a sense of emptiness, some people also soared into the empyrean. Though some social scientists have tried to attribute Cohen’s experience to expectation, it seems far more parsimonious to simply accept that, for whatever reasons, LSD can occasion very unexpected, novel, and extraordinarily profound experiences, very much including Blake’s “eternity in an hour.”

So here we have a paradox. LSD gave anecdotal visibility to something very much like religious or mystical experience. And yet, emerging within the context of psychiatry, it also supported the reduction of soul to brain. Indeed, by showing that a tiny amount of ingested chemistry could cause radical psychological changes, LSD helped establish a new postwar paradigm in which mental illness was understood, not as a twist in the Freudian unconscious, but as an essentially biological phenomenon that could be treated through electro-shocks, drugs, and other techniques.

Cohen may have experienced gratuitous grace, but the protocols he helped initiate were far more pragmatic technologies of the self. Along with other therapists, Cohen suspected that the soul-expanding powers of LSD could help cure problems like alcoholism. Researchers began developing therapeutic protocols—like wearing eyeshades and playing classical music during sessions—designed to encourage positive, psychologically healing, and illuminating experiences. Extraordinary experience itself became instrumentalized.
By 1960, LSD had leaked out of research labs and into the offices and living rooms of intellectuals, psychotherapists, and bohemians. As it spread through these more informal worlds, the drug began another kind of mimetic drift, as LSD was increasingly enveloped in a religious or spiritual language of light, bliss, and metaphysical insight. LSD reports became stuffed with accounts of cosmic fusion, mythopoetic symbolism, and a perceptual merry-go-round of strange synchronicities and sometimes paranormal implications.

Nationally, LSD use rose in the early seventies, when the emergence of perforated sheets of blotter made distribution both easier and more colorful. Given the vibes of the times, the drug's mimetic models just kept multiplying. Despite its short life, LSD already wore a myriad of masks, having been considered a cure for alcoholism, a truth serum, an incapacitant, a madness modeler, a facilitator of psychoanalytic insight, a liberating agent of revolution, a repressive tool of counter-revolution, an aphrodisiac, a scrambler of DNA, a cognitive amplifier, a flashback machine, a group-mind melder, 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. But what LSD had really become was one of the great shape-shifters on the postwar stage, a Proteus who brought madness, mysticism and mind control together into an almost synchronistic web.

The various masks of LSD remind us that the drug and its effects could be constructed in fundamentally different ways. This openness to different roles and functions is even reflected in the action of the drug itself. Rather than producing strictly determined effects, like amphetamine or alcohol, LSD and other psychedelics act as what Stan Grof calls “nonspecific catalysts and amplifiers of the psyche.” This means, again, that the contents of the psyche—which is shaped by social processes and cultural narratives as well as psychological expectations and biological dispositions—actively contribute to the composition of the trip. Set and setting rule the roost.

At the same time, we need to recognize that there is still an interaction or relationship with a real Other here, a potential ally that adds its own nonlinear spin to the catalytic process. LSD thus supports the idea that, when we are dealing with amplified psyches, our constructivist accounts need to be open to genuine surprises—
even transcendent ones. This is what I believe a proper interpretation of Hofmann's and Cohen's own experiences suggests—that LSD had something to tell them regardless of what they expected it to say.

In the pages ahead, we are going to track our psychonauts through the seventies sensurround we have just plumbed. We will describe some of the forces that drove them towards their limit experiences and the "experimental metaphysics" that they minted as a result. We will identify some of the cultural and psychological building blocks that constructed their extraordinary experiences in situ and in retrospect. But at the same time, we will keep that door ajar, to welcome in those agencies and perturbances that are not so easily corralled within human history.
Part Two

McKenna
On February 5, 1971, Apollo 14 arrived at the moon with a dull thud, catalyzing little of the dazzle sparked by Neil Armstrong's giant leap less than two years earlier. Both cosmic highs had been delivered by America's aerospace industry, and, by 1971, the grim inertia of Vietnam throttled down public exultation in America's military-industrial might. 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 before as the underside of media spectacle. When commander Alan Shepard strapped a six iron to a lunar excavation tool and whacked two golf balls across the Fra Mauro Highlands, he became, for a spell, nothing more than a tourist, that agent of commodification whose freedom of movement, as Debord had written, is “nothing more than the leisure of going to see what has become banal.”

But the cosmic is not so easily trivialized, especially in the early seventies. During the voyage home, Shepard'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 composed of molecules forged in the maw of stars, and that these particular incarnations of those molecules were part of an unfolding and intelligent cosmic process. The universe, he saw, was “in some way conscious.” Months later, after sifting through esoteric literature, Mitchell came to identify his epiphany as *savikalpa samadhi*. This particular mode of transcendental consciousness, widely described in Vedantic literature, preserves a degree of duality between knower and known within the otherwise nondual condition of absolute mind. But before Mitchell employed the tools of religious comparison to
identify and ground his singular grok, he was just a man falling to earth, floating—and feeling—without a net.

Mitchell's extraterrestrial peak experience is a fit standard to fly over the far more peculiar journey that is our subject here, a journey that began a day after the lunar landing, when a handful of young Americans left the gritty Colombian 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 an ethnomedical expedition, a fit of hippie escapism, and an errant metaphysical dérive. The instigators of the voyage were Terence McKenna and his younger brother Dennis, both of whom would eventually leave significant marks on psychedelic culture—Terence as a popular and influential raconteur, celebrated for his highly entertaining speculations and apocalyptic prophecies, and Dennis as an ethnomedical and neuropharmacologist who studied ayahuasca and other Amazonian psychoactive preparations.

In 1971, 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 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 and, through Terence's widely distributed psychedelic raps and rants, kickstart the Mayan calendar fad that became the 2012 phenomenon.

We have three published accounts of the McKennas' Colombian adventure. In 1975, the brothers put out *The Invisible Landscape: Mind, Hallucinogens, and the I Ching*, a formidable monument of speculative weirdness that includes two chapters on 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 much humor, and was based on an earlier audio version of the tale. 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 called the Timewave, was his central revelatory take-away from La Chorrera.

All three texts 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 by the later memoirs. This meshwork is appropriate, for, as we will see, the Experiment was hardly a linear operation. Instead, it mobilized a network of resonances that passed back and forth between times, concepts, artifacts, and stories.

Again, my work here is experimental: rather than point out the numerous holes in the weird naturalism of the young McKennas, I want to try and take their experience seriously without taking it literally. As such, we first need to lay out a map of the building blocks that shaped and to some degree constituted their experiences. I am interested, first of all, in the texts, symbols, and cultural attitudes that led them to the jungle in the first place, and that informed the protocols for their experimental invocation of “the Other.” However, to use a distinction that our discussion itself will trouble, I am also interested in the natural as well as cultural side of the equation. For alongside its appropriation of occult and fictional sources, the Experiment also stands as a supreme example of weird naturalism, in which the desire for the fabulous holds fast to a visionary materialism that is both biological and, in the case of Terence especially, alchemical.
2.2.1 Freak Flag

Early in *True Hallucinations*, before Terence heads off to Colombia, he 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?”\(^3\) We will return to this curious psychoactive molecule in a moment. Here, it is important to foreground the youthful radicalism that fed Terence’s project, and the role of novelty—aka, *unlikelyhood*—in that radicalism.

The McKennas were baby boomers who came of age in the bloom of the counterculture. Though most of their reflections were written long after the fact, their accounts provide crucial insights into that peculiar moment when esoteric and psychoactive experience was woven into an emancipatory politics with radical Promethean overtones. Terence arrived at the University of California in the fall of 1965 during the Free Speech Movement. 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.”\(^4\) In 1968, he was involved in the massive student-led strikes at San Francisco State University—activities that drew the attention of the police.

These experiences force us to question the overplayed sixties distinction between the “Heads” and the “Fists.” At the same time, though Terence was actively scornful of the Establishment, he was not a man of the collectivist left so much as an anti-authoritarian individualist—an Ayn Rand fan who, like many American libertarians at the time, identified with the counterculture and its transvaluation of values. Rather than look towards mass activism, Terence was developing a worldview in which technology, esotericism, and psychedelics were pointing toward “the most interesting unlikelihood”: a revolution in the nature of reality itself.

In that sense, Terence was neither a head nor a fist but a *freak*, a self-description that was adopted by many social outliers in the era. In *True Hallucinations*, Terence refers to his group of friends more
frequently as “freaks” than as anything else. This makes the term worth unpacking here. For unlike hippie or head (which only get one mention each in McKenna's text), freak embodies the logic of the weird.

The clearest point of origin for freak's leap from the circus sideshow to the underground is the groundbreaking 1966 album *Freak Out!*, by the California band the Mothers of Invention. 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.”\(^5\) 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 drew an impressionistic distinction between heads, who used hallucinogens or meditation “as a means of self-realization or self-fulfillment,” and freaks, who were more interested in drug kicks as such, and whose excesses sometimes resulted in undesirable bouts of “freaking out.”\(^6\) Freaks, in this sense, were profane hippies. The irreverence of underground comix, including R. Crumb's *Zap* and Gilbert Shelton's somewhat more vanilla *Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, helped solidify the sensibility, which rejected straight reality but equally dodged the belief systems associated with new religious movements, mystic mysterioso, or political passion. By the early seventies, freak also suggested a strong connection to various psychedelic, technological, and progressive rock scenes, and was even claimed, with a doubled act of reappropriation, by the anti-drug “Jesus freaks.”

In his 1972 book *Freak Culture*, the sociologist Daniel Foss uses the term as an “ideal type” to unite the Fists and the Heads into a sensibility that stretched between the early hippie scene and wilder New Left agitators like the “Groucho Marxists” of the Youth International Party, or Yippies! As we will discuss more fully in Chapter Four, these subcultures were united in their desire to effect a
“complete discontinuity with the conventional reality.” And one of the tactics deployed by these freaky disruptors was “an assertion of self-conscious weirdness directed at the disorientation and destruction of [the mainstream] culture.” Such weirdness not only expressed itself through scandalous modes of dress and comportment, but through “the annihilation of meanings, the scrambling of communication, and the repudiation of culturally accepted principles of causality.” In more philosophical words, their politics were not just social but ontological.

So when Terence spoke of the drug DMT as the most interesting unlikelihood, he wasn't calling for a retreat from failed revolution into private experience, which is the standard leftist critique of the consciousness movement. In fact, while Terence was attracted to many wild metaphysical ideas, his interest in spirituality per se was pretty low. What inspired him was a form of the possible that reconfigured the relationship between consciousness, society, and material history. Here the psychedelic stress is no longer on the hippie ideals of peace and love, unity and harmony. Instead, Terence took as his task the radical subversion of reality itself.
2.2.2 High Science

In the previous chapter, we saw how freak occulture was in many cases paired with a hands-on, pragmatic interest in science and technology. Terence McKenna embodied this curious blend of occult anti-rationalism and rational technophilia. His metaphysical radicalism and attraction to esoteric consciousness was fused with an abiding interest in natural science, physics, and the visionary potential of technology. Even in their freakiest flights from consensus reality, the brothers always kept a naturalistic eye on the ball—a feeling for realism and an attention to method and detail that paradoxically contributed to the intensity of the high weirdness they would both face and foment.

Though raised, like his brother, as a church-going Catholic, Terence had always been a science nerd. Growing up in western Colorado, he collected and machine-polished rocks, 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 that help identify biological and geological specimens.

The brothers were also stone-cold science fiction fans. They devoured the pulp magazines their father would bring home, tattered copies of *Analog, Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and the more paranormal *Fate*. The boys read widely among the mid-century greats who ruled over the Golden Age of the genre, but Dennis singles out Arthur C. Clarke, and his two classic novels *Childhood's End* (1953) and *The City and the Stars* (1956), as being particularly important. But Terence (and subsequently his brother) was also drawn to the nightside of reason, and particularly to the weird tales of H.P. Lovecraft, whose 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.
When Terence arrived at Berkeley in 1965, his arcane sensibility and predilection for minting “funny ideas” was already well established, along with an intense anti-authoritarianism nursed by Rand and J.D. Salinger. At Cal, Terence 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, and focused its interdisciplinary seminars on various “cultures in crisis” throughout western history. Though Berkeley itself had become a culture in crisis, Tussman—who Dennis casts as an “intellectual father” to Terence—rejected radicalism, arguing that the freedom necessary for democracy required the strict moral development of the intellect. Plato hovered over their curriculum, an encounter that deeply marked Terence even as the young man absorbed trendier thinkers, like the historian of religion Mircea Eliade, the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, and the media theorist Marshall McLuhan.

Terence gained a modest campus following during these years, as people began to gather at his flat, whose shelves were already stuffed with an impressive collection of esoterica. They came to smoke weed and listen to Terence's pot-fueled raps. As Dennis explained, “Unlike most people, who get high and grow quiet, cannabis...only made [Terence] more articulate, more talkative, and more able to weave his enrapturing narratives.” Terence made no bones about the visionary value of pot, defining it in no uncertain terms as “psychedelic.”

The sorts of stoned conversations that Terence hosted, with their labile rambles and organic sociality, were absolutely central to the spiritual and cognitive life of the counterculture. Though the triviality of many pothead “insights” is itself a feature of cannabis lore, such insights nonetheless stoked the conversation. Indeed, many features of “cannabis consciousness” played themselves out throughout Terence's thinking life, which was largely spent stoned.

One important characteristic of stoned thinking is the riot of associational links that often sprout between different domains of knowledge and perception. In his 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.”

The religious scholar Robert Fuller links such “magnetic” cognition to another archetypical cannabis experience: connecting the same sensory impression 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 pluralistic and eclectic embrace of alternative worldviews.

Cannabis not only bathed new ideas in convivial credibility, but staged the resonant and playful dance of association **between** ideas, a dance that sometimes came to resemble the correspondence thinking found in esoteric traditions, where certain plants and metals were linked with gods or cosmic forces. As Novak noted, “for some, marijuana has served as a teacher whose principal lesson has been that life holds multiple forms of reality.” This lesson in pluralism informed the freak art of rhetorically bending and blending consensus, an art—or science—that Terence perfected like few of his generation, and that tended to absorb scientific naturalism rather than subvert it.
After completing the Tussman program in 1967, McKenna left Cal and hit the global hippie trail. Like many of his fellow wanderers, McKenna saw exotic travel as a path towards personal authenticity, as well as what one scholar calls an “idiom of fantasy.” Terence 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.” The manuscript is a fascinating, arcane, and sometimes jejune combination of social criticism, psychedelic esotericism, and science-fiction media theory. As such, “Crypto-Rap” crystalizes McKenna's first Berkeley phase, and lays down many of the conceptual elements that would later catalyze the Experiment.

In an early “stylenote” to the reader, McKenna explains that the “discursive and conversational” qualities of his text derive from his own happiest medium: the verbal “rap.” As noted above, Terence was a great talker, but here he makes a deeper claim for the integrity of the rap as its own form of communication. “Mercurial and elusive, yet illuminating,” the rap transforms its audience, making the speech act “a matter of synchronicity, being chosen by the constituents of the moment.” Here McKenna seems less interested in the full presence that authorizes speech than in the shifting meanings that emerge from the local and embodied experience of dialogue and address—a preference that is impossible to separate from Terence's own enjoyment of his cannabis-fueled eloquence.

“Crypto-Rap” was informed by weed in other ways as well. When Terence first 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. When the plants were budding, Terence got totally stoned and decided that his manuscript was terrible. The psychoactive intertwining of writing and weed had undermined the process of composition itself. And so he kept smoking his crop, day and night, as he rewrote the text over a month of extended stay on the island.

Nobody was interested in publishing the book, which Dennis accurately characterizes 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.” Along with references to Cream, Dylan, and Pink Floyd's “The Gnome,” “Crypto-Rap” features histrionic lines like “Stop the bullshit, the warmachine, the hatemachine, the deathmachine.” Indeed it is Terence's anger at America's “Bullshit” (often in caps) that is perhaps the most important take-away from the text, an affective key to the intensity of McKenna's own psychedelic escape velocity.

Terence did not write as a typical radical though. He 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.” Terence called his own program “crypto-anarchism,” which held that the transcendence of fallen history would take place “through love, cybernetics, alchemy, idealism, and Tantric Philosophy.”

Media, more than psychedelics or esotericism, inform the text. Terence was fascinated with Marshall McLuhan, the influential Canadian media theorist who announced the arrival of a kaleidoscopic electronic media universe, a universe whose formal characteristics were eroding the linear perspective and rationalist individualism hammered out by the Gutenberg technologies of print. McLuhan provided McKenna with 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 in a McLuhanesque mode. “Both are forms of media.” Terence's conclusion was revolutionary: since human reality is recursively dependent on media, then any massive transformation of those tools would necessarily shake up that reality.

McLuhan's speculations were informed by a deep if mischievous traditionalism. In contrast to the dominant tendencies in modern thought—rationalism, empiricism, and the abstract dialectics of philosophy—McLuhan was an avowedly analogical thinker. He saw himself as belonging to a premodern tradition of grammarians devoted to the “allegorical exegesis of natural phenomena.” Nature,
in this view, is a text to be interpreted, a set of analogies to be poetically unpacked, and 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 during the Renaissance, which replaced the dry logic of medieval scholasticism with juicier and sometimes esoteric worldviews that linked the cosmos into resonating networks of correspondences between different levels of reality.

Such analogical thinking also informed McLuhan’s understanding of media, and particularly his characteristic figure-ground reversal of form and content. Take his legendary slogan “the medium is the message.” This idea insists that the meaning and function of a particular medium exceeds the meaning of the various messages it carries. As such, the content carried by a medium is directly shaped by its form, whose structural and sensory characteristics thereby mold and guide developments in consciousness and culture. Print shaped linear and visual thinking over and beyond any particular text, while electronic technologies like radio and television installed a global “acoustic” space of presence and resonance that far exceeded the influence of the broadcast information.

With their telegraphic punch and apocalyptic undertow, McLuhan’s ideas were easy to assimilate into the druggy discourse of the youth culture (as well as an advertising industry salivating over the new crop of groovy consumers). At the same time, McLuhan’s pronouncements on the electronic age were themselves influenced by drugs. Using the “mystical” terms adopted by many acidheads, McLuhan declared that LSD mimes the “all-at-oneness and all-at-oneness” of the new media environment. By “revive[ing] senses long atrophied,” acid gave a youth generation already “retribalized” by media technologies like TV and transistor radios a deeper experience of communal and mythic relatedness.23

In “Crypto-Rap,” Terence further argued that the new media were booting up states of consciousness and communion described in esoteric texts both East and West. With the emergence of electronic media and computers after World War II, the “eschatological rapport with the alchemical idea of the Spiritus Mundi” was re-established after centuries of interruption. Technology not only unleashed the “mysticism of electric culture,” but also helped drive history towards a culminating moment.24 As such, the political and social program that McKenna offers at the end of his text includes a number of
specific engineering goals alongside more back-to-the-land calls for de-urbanization and gardening. These goals included global standards for electronic components; the development of holography; a computerized library capable of automating scholarship; and an “All Media Recorder” that would enable the recording and sharing of individual experience.²⁵

These technological visions are not totally surprising coming from a hardcore science fiction fan. But McKenna also tied them to a radical countercultural metapolitics that embraced technological possibilities years before Timothy Leary made his similar shift towards “Psi Phy” futurism. Terence's hyperactive McLuhanism also ensured that his own extraordinary experiences would be shot through with apocalyptic media metaphors, or what we could call *esoteritech*. 
2.2.4 Esoteritech

“Crypto-Rap” is saturated with esotericism as well as media, and reflects some important early influences that largely disappear in Terence's later raps. For example, the document carries on an extensive engagement with the “unfragmented tradition of gnosis” he believed was contained in the Tantra Shastras. Hashish alone does not explain Terence's extensive travels in India and Nepal. But despite his participation in the Asian turn of the sixties—and with the great exception of the I Ching—McKenna's esoteric heart lay in the West. Vedanta, yoga, and meditation techniques were far less significant in the end than hermetic gnosis, Neoplatonism, Renaissance magic, and alchemy.

One of the central tropes of “Crypto-Rap” is the notion that the One, a “nexus of logic and intuition,” emanates or gives rise to the Many, a multiplicity that manifests as the familiar material world. In a twist that would help set up his techno-millennialism, McKenna linked this classic Neoplatonic schema 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 out 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.

In other words, it is the Many's restless refusal of the One that makes the glorious nightmare of history unfold. But when Terence talks here about overcoming history by “stilling that surface,” he is not talking about calming the mind or some other sort of contemplative practice. Instead, he is talking about something technological: the transformation of the “material matrix” into a stable mirror that, by finally reflecting the One in all its perfection, ends and fulfills history at once. Elsewhere in the text, Terence even provides some technical
specs for this object: the ultimate machine, the philosopher's stone at the end of time, is “solid state.”

Terence was a technology nerd. He knew that solid state devices are different from earlier vacuum tubes in that their electron flows 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. A decade later it had bloomed into the first integrated circuit, which in turn kickstarted the miniaturization of digital computers.

Terence's focus on the metaphysics of the solid state also derives from his love of Arthur Clarke's science-fiction 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.*” In other words: solid state.

The young McKenna was haunted by Clarke's vision of the perfect machine, a vision that the Terence of “Crypto-Rap” then “esotericized” through his exposure to hermetic thought and McLuhan's poetic media theory. Again, for McLuhan, the formal characteristics of a given medium shape and express themselves through and around the internal “content” carried through the medium. In esoteric terms, we could call this informing expression a *signature*. From this perspective, we could say that all electronic media embody the particular material-hermetic signature of electricity, which McKenna associated with mercurial flux and the creative feminine. To be transmitted, however, electricity needs a form or body, and to perfect the material side of this polarity, McKenna looked to solid state components.

But even as McKenna superimposes electronic, hermetic, and tantric polarities, he also makes a crucial distinction between technological and esoteric expression. McKenna argues that, in the past, eschatological consciousness required a psychological constellation around rituals and symbolic systems. Technology, on the other hand, holds out the possibility of creating something else: a post-metaphorical medium that could bypass such anthropological factors. “Electrical solid state eschatologies however, by investing the
symbol in an electro-material matrix having no moving parts, create a self-sustaining symbol that is not dependent for its purity upon the transmission of a ritual or an ideology.”

McKenna's solid-state matrix therefore presents a way to port, or “electrically numinize,” older mystical metaphors into hardware.

The fantastic device that Terence imagined here would become one of the central features of the Experiment at La Chorrera: an eschatological-pharmacological-science-fictional object that the McKennas tried to construct through their psychedelic ritual. But the name they gave to this object in their La Chorrera journals is particularly telling. They called it the Stone. Terence's solid state object was not just the perfect machine; it was also the fulfillment of the alchemical quest for the lapis philosophorum, the fabled philosopher's stone.

To get a grip on this stone, we need to turn to McKenna's central source for alchemy: Carl Jung. Though Jung's alchemical writings are criticized by many scholars of religion and psychology today, he deserves credit, at least, for making the ancient art a topic of modern intellectual study. Where historians of science saw only 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 Terence claims to have devoured as a teenager, Jung argued that as the medieval and early modern alchemists chemically manipulated matter with their retorts and sublimations, they were also staging a psychic process in parallel. “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. What compelled him was the mobilization of psychic processes through laboratory practices that staged an encounter with enigmatic or anomalous matter. The second and more pertinent point is that the opus, whether considered as a mystical or physical operation, is not proscribed according to a
standardized pseudo-scientific formula. Instead, the work requires an “experimental” attitude towards the transformations of mind and matter, an experimentalism that includes a necessarily singular framework of theory cobbled together from various sources. This framework is not just conceptual or technical, but also semiotic, as much a work of mediation as of materiality. In Jung's own idealist account, the investigator's psyche, or imagination, makes up the “necessary medium” of the work, while simultaneously serving as its “cause and point of departure.” Jung attempts to capture this somewhat paradoxical loop in the language of film projection, with the camera-mind's internal images “mirrored in the darkness” of matter.

Jung believed that some earlier alchemists were conscious about this loopy process of psychic projection. For evidence, Jung points to the “Liber Platonis quartorum,” an alchemical text that insists that the operator must put himself into the work he performs (“oportet operatorem interesse operi”). This self-referential gesture, Jung claims, is also embodied in the alchemical symbols of the ouroboros, as well as the specific artifact that the Liber Platonis proclaims is the ideal vessel of transformation: a human skull. This mortal link between the matter in the retort and the matter of the alchemist's own body is made even clearer in the cry of the early modern alchemist Gerhard Dorn, also cited by Jung: “Transform yourselves from dead stones into living philosophical stones!”

Now there's a psychedelic call to arms. If Marshall McLuhan's media theory helped Terence technologize the philosopher's stone, Jung's alchemical lore encouraged a specifically pharmacological spin to the opus. For while there is no real evidence that the Renaissance alchemists were tripping the light fantastic, alchemical transmutation becomes—at least for a freak like Terence—an unstoppable analogy for the visionary metabolism of psychedelic compounds. Both are fiery material transformations, condemned to the margins of modernity, that boot up spiritual experiences that are sometimes effulgent with eschatological import. But how far you could take this particular analogy also depended on how analogical—and, by extension, how psychedelic—your worldview had grown. As “Crypto-Rap” shows, Terence was already in deep.
2.2.5 Pharmakon

The young Terence McKenna may have enjoyed talking about drugs almost as much as he enjoyed taking them. But they don't make an appearance in “Crypto-Rap” until the second half of the text, where he offers up a metaphysical hierarchy of psychoactive substances. Unlike many of his fellow freaks, Terence places LSD rather low on the scale of mystical import, below both mescaline and synthetic psilocybin. But “still higher up the tantric scale towards the One” is DMT, a potent hallucinogenic tryptamine that Terence first smoked in Berkeley in 1966.

Though DMT is widely distributed in the natural world, the stuff Terence first encountered had been synthesized in a lab into a powder or gum. After smoking a sufficient amount in a glass pipe, he was hurtled, like many users, into a vividly seething, intricately patterned, and shockingly wondrous domain, only to be returned almost equally rapidly to baseline. Terence compared the experience to “an audience with the alien nuncio”—an image whose note of sacred science fiction complements the weird Lovecraftian adjectives Terence regularly used to characterize DMT space in True Hallucinations: “elf-haunted,” “unambiguously peculiar,” “hair-raisingly bizarre,” “titanically strange.”

First synthesized in the underground by the fearless Nick Sand in the early sixties, DMT was an established part of the countercultural pharmacopeia. That said, the compound was largely absent from freak discourse, which probably indicates that most people found it too much to take. In a 1966 article on the substance, Timothy Leary reports that, of the hundred people turned on to DMT by a psychiatrist friend, only four had a positive experience. William Burroughs hated it, while Alan Watts compared it to being “fired out the muzzle of an atomic cannon with neon-byzantine barreling.” Not exactly floating downstream beneath marmalade skies.

The McKennas were enraptured with DMT, and it was this rapture that led them to Colombia. The specific object of their quest was an indigenous, DMT-containing concoction of Virola sap known as oo-koo-hé. They read about the stuff in a Harvard Botanical Museum
paper by the Amazonian ethnobotanist Richard Schultes, who pointed out that, while various DMT-containing snuffs are found throughout the Amazon, oo-koo-hé was orally active.\textsuperscript{42} As Schultes explained, DMT was generally considered to be pharmacologically inactive when orally consumed unless accompanied by monoamine oxidase inhibitors. The \textit{Banisteriopsis caapi} vine found in yagé and ayahuasca, for example, provides the MAOIs that allow the DMT in the brew’s admixture leaves to become psychoactive when the liquid is drunk. The McKennas were already familiar with yagé from William Burroughs, who had come in the nineteen-fifties to the same depressing river town of Puerto Leguizamo they visited to find and drink the brew. But the McKennas were more interested in oo-koo-hé, in part because of a peculiar detail offered by Schultes’ Witoto informant: oo-koo-hé, the fellow claimed, allows you to “see and converse with the little people.”\textsuperscript{43}

Terence writes that this last line “rang a bell”—one of those uncanny resonances that sound the networks of correspondences that saturate the occulture of the era. McKenna knew the lore of the little people through his familiarity with \textit{The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries}, a 1911 collection of folkloric accounts of fairies gathered by the independent scholar, Theosophist, and Tibetan Buddhist popularizer W.Y. Evans-Wentz. The same book also proved to be of pivotal importance to the UFO researcher Jacques Vallee, who almost certainly influenced Terence with his argument, in the 1969 book \textit{Passport to Magonia}, that the bizarre behavior associated with UFOs and their occupants may have less to do with outer space than with the often strikingly similar narratives and images of fairy lore.
These suggestive acts of comparative religion were, in Terence's head anyway, magnified by his own repeated empirical impression that DMT space was *inhabited*. Not by gods or devils or bodhisattvas, but by anomalous entities that Terence memorably characterized as “self-transforming machine elves.” In Terence's experience, these flickering beings seemed particularly interested in language, puzzles, and information exchange. In *True Hallucinations*, Terence describes an early 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” enigma of such entity encounters throughout this book. Here we need to underscore the fact that Terence was and is hardly alone in his impressions. As a number of studies have shown, entity encounters remain a persistent
feature of DMT experience reports, even among users largely free of such expectations.⁴⁵ In his own DMT account, Timothy Leary reported “a band of radar-antennae, elf-like insects merrily working away.”⁴⁶ 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”—before inviting him to join their revels.⁴⁷

Most readers, perhaps, will remain comfortable chalkling up the machine elves to hallucination, cultural suggestion, or an evolutionarily-adapted cognitive bias towards agent detection.⁴⁸ Part of my experimental aim here is to sneak up on other possibilities as well. But even if the elves are “nothing but” empty fabrications, such encounters can still deliver an existential punch whose uncanny air of veracity and high weirdness outweighs reductive explanations, even in retrospect. Sometimes that punch is strong enough to knock you out the door, and put you on the path.
2.2.6 La Chorrera

Schultes wrote that oo-koo-hé was restricted to a few Witoto tribes in the Colombian Putumayo region, near the mission town of La Chorrera. And so, in early 1971, and with an audacious daring-do not unmixed with a sense of entitlement, the young McKennas planned to meet up in Colombia to pursue their quest. The brothers were still grieving the loss of 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. It certainly helps explain some of what followed.

Terence hadn't stepped foot in America for two years, ever since the hashish he stuffed into Tibetan statuary bound for the US had been discovered by the Colorado authorities in 1969. With his name on Interpol's rolls, Terence fled the hippie scene in South Asia, opting for a long and lonely stint hunting butterflies in Indonesia. This isolated work allowed him to keep a low profile while indulging his Nabokovian love of natural history, and especially his attraction to the Victorian naturalist (and sometimes Spiritualist) Alfred Russel Wallace, who also explored the Indonesian archipelago. To get to Colombia, Terence flew through Canada with a false passport.

After gathering at Puerto Leguizamo, the McKennas embarked for La Chorrera on a trip that required multiple river hops and a four-day slog through the jungle. Accompanying the brothers were three people that Terence calls, in *True Hallucinations*, “Vanessa,” “Dave,” and “Ev.” Vanessa was a Tussman friend from Cal, while Dave was a “gay meditator” that Terence had met hitch-hiking around Berkeley. The crew encountered Ev and her boyfriend Solo shortly after arriving in Colombia. The couple were white-robed fruitarians, members of an obscure “religious happening” known as the New Jerusalem. Solo, who sometimes claimed to be the reincarnation of Jesus, Lucifer, and Hitler, soon took off, while Ev hooked up with Terence.

All told, the crew made up a representative sample of freaks, whose values were also hammered home through their 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 seeking something hovering between enlightenment and fantasy. But the McKennas’ voyage also differed from many hippie quests of the era. They were not searching for a guru or a holy mountain but a rare psychedelic plant preparation they had read about in an ethnobotanical journal. Though their “expedition” was certainly a romance, it was more of a scientific romance than a spiritual one, and the echoes of colonialist exploration were not lost on its participants. Here we need only point to the subtitle that Terence later affixed to *True Hallucinations*, whose cover and chapter headings are also reminiscent of nineteenth-century naturalist travelogues: “Being an Account of the Author's Extraordinary Adventures in the Devil's Paradise.”

In his own memoir, Dennis explains that he and Terence believed themselves to be cut from different cloth than spiritual freaks like Ev and Solo, who used a wooden knife to slice their fruit rather than a metal one, “lest the blade destroy the fruit's etheric body.” For the brothers, this sort of thing crossed the line into “hippy-dippy foolishness,” compared to which, he says, he and Terence were “hidebound rationalists.”

The older Dennis is being ironic here—as a university-trained ethnobotanist and chemist, he recognizes how blurry the line between hippie foolishness and rationalism would soon become for himself and his brother. But their foolishness hardly negates the naturalistic spirit that was guiding the young men. In their own psychedelic way, they were empiricists, skeptics, and realists (at least some of the time). *Empiricism* empowered them to pay close attention to the environment and the phenomenological details of their own experience. *Skepticism* kept them questioning cultural mythologies, and especially the supernatural claims that were attractive to hippies like Ev and Solo. Finally, the young McKennas embraced *realism*: the conviction that the worlds and entities they encountered (in and out of psychedelic experience) possessed a measure of reality beyond the Kantian limits of their subjective impressions.

Here we are back to *weird naturalism*, a sensibility that weaves the concrete facts of natural and cultural history into a renewed commitment to the unknown, the Beyond, the Outside. Terence
provides a beautiful example of this sensibility when he narrates their departure from Puerto Leguizamo. Puttering onto the broad expanse of the Putumayo, Terence complained about how people’s imaginations actually got in the way of truly perceiving the exotic setting.

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 up 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.\textsuperscript{50}

Here, as he sets off onto the river of psychedelic romance, McKenna acknowledges the stark limits of the imagination when it confronts the unknown. Truly faced, the unfamiliar interrupts already written scripts and metaphors. At the same time, McKenna did not follow many of the classic mystics in serenely praising the ineffable. The unfamiliar was not an abiding mystery for him; it can be recognized and known.

As Patrick Lundborg argues, this attitude reflects an innovative angle that the McKennas brought to psychedelic discourse, possibly for the first time. By the early seventies, a number of highly influential psychological and quasi-religious frameworks had come to map psychedelic experience. In contrast, the McKennas did not adhere to a single conceptual model, whether pharmacological or perennialist or neoshamanic. “Instead of trying to fit the contents of the trip into some presumed parallel from the field of religion or psychology,” Lundborg explains, “their novel ideas [were] developed inside the psychedelic experience” (my emphasis).\textsuperscript{51} While the McKennas extracted building blocks from alchemy and anthropology and other discourses, they built their experimental interface \textit{in situ}.

Arriving at La Chorrera, a paradisal bug-free oasis near a gushing cataract, the McKennas and their crew almost immediately discovered that the cow dung strewn throughout the pastures abutting the village hosted a riot of \textit{Stropharia cubensis}, the “magic mushroom” species now known as \textit{Psilocybe cubensis}. Terence had nibbled on some of these Colombian mushrooms before arriving at
Puerto Leguizamo, after a more knowledgeable freak had pointed them out. Terence enjoyed a mellow experience, bookmarked the possibilities, but moved on to La Chorrera with no expectation of finding cows—and the coprophagic fungi—in such a backwater.52

With no sense of dosage, the crew immediately started munching pairs of mushrooms. In his journal entry of February 23, Terence describes a “gentle and elusive” trip in terms that waver between the animistic and cosmic. On the one hand, the mushroom seemed like a benevolent instructor; like peyote, it “teaches the right way to live.” On the other hand, Terence experienced the fungi as an impersonal device, a “transdimensional doorway” left open by spectral others that seemed to lurk on the far side of the veil.

The ambiguity between mushroom as medium and mushroom as messenger was underscored a few days later, when the crew scraped off some shavings of *Banisteriopsis caapi*, the vine that forms one of the prime ingredients of yagé, and smoked them on top of their mushroom trance. The protocol gave rise to a phenomenon they dubbed “vegetable television.” This term is a McLuhanesque reminder that, for the McKenna crew anyway, form and content were starting to twist together like the loops of a tape machine. And it also suggests that, however far the McKennas believed themselves to have come from civilization, they had brought their technological frameworks of mediation with them.
One of the curiosities about psilocybe mushrooms is that, while they are widely distributed across the planet, very few indigenous societies seemed to have been particularly interested in them. The Witoto who lived around La Chorrera certainly had room in their pharmacopeia for powerful hallucinogenic tryptamines like DMT, which has a strong structural similarity to psilocybin and psilocin tryptamine alkaloids. Their lack of interest in the fungi lends some support to the strong possibility that *cubensis* was a recent arrival to the region, having followed the excrement of the zebu cattle. Recognizing the Witoto's indifference to the psychedelic marvels in their midst, Terence makes an odd and very telling remark in his journal entry for February 23: “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.”

At first glance, this statement is both unwarranted (the Mazatec tribe that R. Gordon Wasson famously wrote about in 1957 used *cubensis*) and strangely gloating. It resounds with the arrogant exuberance of the colonialist, delighted to stumble upon undiscovered terrain or a raw material unexploited by benighted natives. At the same time, we need to emphasize how far Terence is here from the stereotypical Rousseauian hippie, seeking for a wise master or noble savage. For Terence, the plant and not the human is the “teacher,” which is why he was happy to get his hands on the goods and to explore them (and the “dimension” they open) on “neutral ground.” Such neutral ground may never be possible for us humans, but Terence's desire for such a place reinstalls natural science's objective gaze and rhetorical degree-zero. Once again, the McKennas were not seduced by the romance of religion or shamanism so much as the romance of science—albeit a weird science.

Terence's weird science is Romantic in an almost topological sense. As with other forms of “inner empiricism,” including Jung's probes of the alchemical imagination, it requires the investigator to turn
within, and to treat extraordinary subjective experience as something like observable data. Such experiences have, in Terence's view, a more than subjective character; in James’ terms, they “open a region” beyond the human nervous system. Drawing from mathematical and science-fictional discourse, Terence implies that the “tryptamine dimension” is a real place rather than a state of consciousness, and that its vaulting labyrinths can be accessed through multiple portals, including mushrooms and DMT.

At the same time, Terence recognizes that such otherworldly dimensions are also directly shaped by the human and cultural imagination. Otherwise, it wouldn't matter whether or not the Witoto had already “claimed” the mushrooms. Instead, Terence suggests that the indigenous relationship with plants has a real downstream effect on the tryptamine dimension itself—even for those users outside and unaware of that particular cultural “set.” Psychedelic experience is therefore inseparable from a realist anthropology of the human imagination. This is another side of the weird naturalism that the McKenna brothers brought to La Chorrera: a framework of radical empiricism and speculative realism that authorized a wild and innovative attempt to cobble together, in real time, a schema worthy of their experiences.

Even if they hoped to set aside indigenous cosmologies, the McKennas were of course lugging their own sack full of ideas into their “neutral ground.” Spiced up with mushrooms, the already cannabis-fueled game of verbal ping-pong between the two brothers thickened and intensified. “Puns came easily; our conversation was threaded with merriment and cleverness, all spilling out spontaneously, with no apparent effort.” The brothers 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. The outline of the Experiment began to appear.

As the circuit of their wild theorizing ramped up, the brothers began to sense that a third party was overseeing their conversations. This is the first emergence of the “Other,” who, Dennis writes, seemed to be leading 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 whether
that meant the mushrooms themselves, or if the mushrooms provided a channel for communicating with some unidentified entity.”

As this external voice gained consistency, the question of psychopathology also inserted itself into their conversations (as it does in any attentive reader’s mind). To what extent was this Other simply a mascot for their growing folie à deux? The undomesticated storm of ideas spilling out of the two brothers had already led to a significant social divide in the group, as Vanessa and Dave, uncomfortable with the feverish talk, moved their accommodations while the brothers and Ev continued their mushroom explorations. In a sense this social break prefigures the conceptual one that all readers of this tale must confront. For like most accounts of high weirdness, the Experiment tends to polarize audience interpretations between pathology and poetry, diagnosis and délire.

During one round of vegetable television, Ev had a vision of an “elf-like creature” rolling a polyhedron whose every facet opened like a window onto a distant time or place. 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 the esoteric current of material metamorphosis that would lead to the Stone. Terence wrote that he “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.” But in order to grab ahold of this golden chain, McKenna also had to twist it, to update and render these Christian alchemical dreams into cosmic science fiction: “the image of the philosopher's stone as hyperdimensional jewel-become-UFO—the human soul as starship.”

This is the object that the McKennas hoped to produce in their Experiment: “the ultimate technological artifact.” In his memoir, Dennis compared this artifact to transformative objects like “starships, time machines, crystal balls, magic mirrors.” (Notice how this list ropes together both “science fictional” and “esoteric” devices—that is, technologies that penetrate space and time alongside those that mediate different orders of reality.) At the same time, the McKennas’ Stone had a more naturalistic character in that
it was, at least in part, biological and metabolic. In contrast to Jung's
notion of alchemy as a purely psychic operation of projection onto
passive, meaningless matter, or of UFOs as nothing but symbols of
the collective unconscious, the McKennas hoped to construct a
“biophysical technology,” one that would enable them to build their
apocalyptic lapis, as Dennis put it, “out of our own bodies.”
2.2.8 Radio Daze

One evening, Ev, Dennis, and Terence consumed a hefty pile of nineteen fresh fungi and settled into their hammocks. As they phase-shifted into their trip, Dennis began to describe a buzzing in his head that was inaudible to everyone else. It reminded him of some of the strange audio phenomena Terence had reported experiencing on DMT. Terence asked him to imitate the noise, but Dennis demurred. Then, as Terence tells it,

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 experimental protocol: resonance. Before we continue with the story, we need to briefly address this concept, which reverberates across and between mythic, physical, and technical registers.

Dennis provides a basic 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. Here the first string's vibrations, rippling through the fluid-like air, encounter an energetic system tuned to that same frequency. The initial oscillations thereby feed energy to
the second system, causing it to sound in literal sympathy. Resonance here describes what happens when two systems enter into an 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.63

The phenomenon of resonance operates in many different physical systems, among molecular particles, in neural tissue, and in a host of electronic technologies. Resonance is one of the fundamental features of a cosmos that vibrates about as much as it does anything else. But resonance also resounds within symbolic and philosophical frameworks. The term derives from resonantia, the Latin “echo,” and one thing that physical resonance echoes is earlier magic doctrines of sympathy.64 Among the ancient Pythagoreans and Stoics, the doctrine of sympatheia established linkages between different parts and planes of the cosmos, including the famous correspondence between macrocosmos and microcosmos established in the hermetic doctrine “As above, so below.” These ancient thinkers also found proof of their concepts in the resonating strings of musical instruments.

This erotic model of the cosmos, vibrating with attractive conjunctions, re-entered European thought with hermetic gusto in fifteenth-century Florence. Magical attitudes started there eventually become part of the modern occult underground, while also influencing Romanticism and “alternative,” non-allopathic medicine.65 Most contemporary currents of esoteric and New Age thought posit, in both theory and psychophysical practice, a vibrating realm of “energies” that follow wave dynamics while eluding the measurement devices that normally detect such frequencies. As such, despite their tacit grounding in physical wave relationships, contemporary spiritual or esoteric discourses based on “energies,” “vibrations,” and mystical “frequencies” are generally discounted by skeptics as pseudo-science. But with La Chorrera in mind, perhaps we are better off marking a fuzzy zone of indeterminacy, where the fields of physics, sound, and symbol begin to resonate across their undeniable differences.

According to the musicologist Veit Erlmann, even the strictly physical phenomenon of resonance presents a challenge to the rationalist current of modern philosophy. With its ocular bias,
rationalism frequently characterizes the mind as a kind of mirror capable of capturing accurate representations of the outside world while remaining fundamentally separate or at least distinct from that world. As such, the mirror of mind helps support Bruno Latour's Great Divide. Resonance, on the other hand, is a phenomenon of interpenetration and mutual participation, of the blurring of the boundary between subject and object, something that is much easier to hear than to see.  

For Erlmann, this dichotomy between the mirror of reason and the vibrating string of resonance lies at the root of some basic divisions in modern thought. These include Derrida's text-based critique of the “metaphysics of presence” carried by the resonant word, as well as McLuhan's distinction 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, Erlmann wants to characterize resonance, not as an aspect of McLuhan's “‘prescientific’ magic,” but as a contemporary feature “inextricably woven into the warp and woof of modernity.”  

Here, however, McLuhan would actually agree, since he saw and described electronic and electromagnetic media in terms of a paradoxically resonant modernity, an archaic echo resounding through contemporary technology.

The McKennas also heard this archaic echo. As an example, let us look at—or rather listen to—the curious transistor radio that the McKennas heard the evening when Dennis first encountered the buzz. This radio, with its solid state transistor, seems to have played a catalytic role in the production of Dennis' eerie cry, as its “small radio sound” seemed to amplify or draw forth Dennis' own inner audio. In the diary entry Dennis wrote the following day, he compared this inner sound to “a signal or very, very faint transmissions of radio buzzing from somewhere.” Here inner and outer have entered an uncanny loop or resonance.

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. “This is inherent in the very nature of this medium, with its power to turn the psyche and society into a single echo chamber.” For McLuhan, radio was the ultimate example of a technological 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. By intimately and immediately delivering the human voice into the listener's head, radio created a condition where “hearing is believing.”

Here resonance provides an immediate sense of participation and intimacy that draws multiple individuals into a shared, potentially Dionysian communion. 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 “mythic” identifications on the part of the crowd was directly tied to the medium of radio and the mesmerizing power of the broadcast human voice. McLuhan also pointed to Orson Welles' famous 1938 radio broadcast of “The War of the Worlds,” though science fictions usually took second place in his accounts to more premodern formulations of unseen forces, such as astrology and clairvoyance. “The effect of radio as a reviver of archaism and ancient memories is not limited to Hitler's Germany,” McLuhan wrote, perhaps providing the words for what Terence would later refer to, much more hopefully, as “the archaic revival.”

But there is a further McLuhanesque twist to all this, one that once again foregrounds the weird loop between form and content. McLuhan's cultural language, which uses “resonance” as a symbolic and affective analogy, is replicated exactly in the operational domain of radio, since the strictly physical phenomenon of resonance defines the technological action of radio tuners. In order to select and amplify a single radio frequency out of the thousands picked up by an antenna, 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.
The day after he first encountered 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.” Such sounds are a regular feature of psychedelic trip reports, especially those reflecting high doses of tryptamines like psilocybin and DMT. In attempting to give physical voice to this virtual or “inner” sound, Dennis needed to bring his body into the picture. By acoustically probing the resonating capacities of various cavities in his chest and skull, he both discovered and constructed a sympathetic vibration out of his voice. Once Dennis began imitating this inner signal, his voice and the sound “locked onto each other,” establishing a circuit in which “the sound was my voice.” This experience recalls precisely those participatory relationships that Erlmann associates with resonance: 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 nonhuman buzz took on a terrifying life of its own, as Dennis feared he might somehow “become” the intense vibratory circuit that he and the sound in his head were co-creating—a transformation outside of speech and language that he imagined as a B-movie metamorphosis into a giant insect. But just as the concept of resonance operates on at least two levels—the a-signifying behavior of physical vibrations and the “cultural” analogies between echoing signs—so too did Dennis’ buzz establish a circuit between these levels. Dennis’ cry is at once a chaotic noise and a call and response, an indeterminacy that itself helps explain the reality warp.

In *True Hallucinations*, Terence tells us that, following Dennis’ close encounter with the buzz, he stepped in to calm everyone by telling a story. The episode came from Terence’s time in the East, and is presented to the reader as a stand-alone chapter in the book,
the remarkable “Kathmandu Interlude.” Not only does this narrative device 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 had 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 heard a “high-pitched whine and the sound of cellophane ripping.” He encountered the “chattering of elf machines,” which soon gave way to a vision of flight over the Great Plains of Shang in the company of an undetermined number of “silvery disks.”

Returning from his visionary fugue, Terence and the woman unexpectedly made 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 saw something that utterly startled him: an “obsidian liquid” flowing over every surface, glittering with lights, a surface that seemed to reflect the contents of his own mind. Staring into the surface of this liquid, Terence saw his Tibetan teacher looking into a mirrored plate, a mirror that Terence realized allowed the lama to see him at that very moment. Shocked, Terence looked away.

This story, which mediates the weird buzz of La Chorrera through its own retelling, is itself full of mediation, including 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. Another boundary is the crossing or blurring between speech and vision—in Erlmann's terms, between the field of resonance, which touches every surface through fusion and contagion, and the mirror of mind that represents and reflects a world of external objects. For Terence, DMT had opened a world of “visible language” in which “language was transmuted from a thing heard to a thing seen.”

Terence's description of this obsidian pool of liquid language tripped something in Dennis. In a bout of journal writing the next morning, Dennis linked Terence's material to a peculiar shamanic substance described in a Natural History article by the
anthropologist Michael Harner. In the article, Harner describes how Jivaro (Shuar) shamans regurgitate “a brilliant substance in which the spirit helpers are contained,” an actual material that can be chopped up and apportioned with a machete.

Running with the associative football, the McKennas blended Harner's scant details with alchemical echoes and their own experiences with mushrooms and the ayahuasca vine. Out of all this, they developed the notion of a magical “psychofluid,” an example of “translinguistic matter” that could extrude itself or leak from the psychedelicized body. Christopher Partridge calls this fluid an example of “psychedelic ectoplasm,” like the material manifested by Spiritualist mediums. Whatever its degree of coherence, occult or otherwise, the paradoxical notion of “translinguistic matter” reminds us that the McKennas had found themselves in the hybrid abyss that separates words and things, culture and nature, subject and object.
2.2.10 Romancing the Stone

In the days following his encounter with the buzz, Dennis began to compulsively scribble theories in a feverish technical language. This download, which he believed he was receiving from the Teacher, also included the protocols for a psychedelic operatio he hoped 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 particular vocal effect he had discovered, a “psycho-audible warp phenomenon” that generated “a specific kind of energy field which can rupture three-dimensional space.” According to this wild theory, the buzz was caused by the electron spin resonance of the metabolizing psilocybin alkaloids inserting themselves into the base pairs of his neuronal DNA. Electron spin resonance is a known physical phenomenon, unlike Dennis’ interpretation of it here, which holds that this sound can be picked up and amplified through the “antennae” created through the similarly resonating harmine alkaloids of the metabolized ayahuasca. By imitating this sound with a human 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.

The challenge of understanding what the heck Dennis is talking about is in no way assuaged by directly citing Dennis’ journals. Nonetheless, it is worth doing so here in order to note the rhetorical presence of weird naturalism and its reliance on the physics of resonance as a passage between acoustic, electromagnetic, and psycho-cosmic domains.
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 overtone 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.\textsuperscript{83}

This superconductive condition would in turn 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. At this point in the operation, the stored information would become available to their no-longer-quite human minds.\textsuperscript{84} Extending the eschatological speculations of “Crypto-Rap,” this posthuman 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.”\textsuperscript{85}

How are we to understand this fantastic apparatus? Dennis’ more-or-less automatic burst of technical writing, scribbled under the guiding hand of the Teacher, offers support to Wouter Hanegraaff’s suggestion that the Experiment at La Chorrera must be seen, at least in part, as an instance of modern channeling.\textsuperscript{86} As Hanegraaff notes, channeling remains a poorly understood phenomenon, but it can be fairly characterized as an automatism where inspired or well-articulated communication is experienced as arising from sources or entities outside the self.\textsuperscript{87}

Here there is no shaking the technological overtones of the word \textit{channel}, which first emerged as an occult term of art in the context of nineteen-fifties ufology. Indeed, one distinguishing characteristic of modern channeling is precisely the “technical” quality associated
with the phenomenon by the UFO contactees who first employed the term, and who were keen to distinguish their practices from Spiritualist mediumship. Contactees like George King and George Van Tassel underscored the quasi-electromagnetic factors involved in their communications, with Van Tassel speaking of “vibration reception” and the need to be “tuned in” in order to receive “transmissions.”
In light of Dennis' protocols, it is important to note that a few early contactees also channeled technical designs for fantastic machines whose mechanisms relied on analogues of conventional wave physics. In the mid-to-late fifties, when Van Tassel organized the influential Giant Rock Spacecraft Conventions in Landers, California, the former aerospace engineer 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. In *The Saucers Speak*, George Hunt Williamson also tells the 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.” When the fellow built the device, he was rewarded with a conversation with a Martian.\textsuperscript{99}

The hypothesis and protocols driving the McKennas’ Experiment are denser and more scientifically suggestive than most contactee lore, especially as they are formulated in 1975’s *Invisible Landscape*. However, in his 2012 memoir, Dennis acknowledges that, while his notebook scribblings resemble scientific jargon, his theories are “nonsense.” Having spent decades as a professor of ethnobotany and a commercial research scientist, Dennis writes in the well-earned discourse of scientific reason—a discourse that may well have been clamoring in the reader's head these last pages as well.

The discourse of reason, again, 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 writes instead like one whose reason has entered a funhouse labyrinth of mirrors. The Experiment rested upon a kind of participation mystique that exploits the physical phenomenon of resonance, eroding the crisp boundaries between subject and object by installing a field of weird phenomenological linkages between mind and things, symbolic narratives and reality. But though the language of the Experiment may not be science, the machine that it diagrams is still a *machine*—a weird, science-fictional machine that orchestrates resonance across various modes of existence.
2.2.11 Psy-Phi

If we cannot call the Experiment an act of science, we can certainly call it an act of science fiction. In his comments on La Chorrera, Wouter Hanegraaff underscores the presence of such genre tropes. Dennis’ language, he argues, “sounds exactly like the type of technological jargon familiar from the Startrek [sic] series, which is at the origin of the ‘warp’ terminology as well.” For Hanegraaff, this language helps underscore the delusional quality of Dennis’ ideation—though, as he feels compelled to remind us, “there is no doubt that the two brothers took it completely seriously.”

But this only begs a larger question: what is “science fiction” and how should we understand it? Here we are helped enormously by a theory of the genre offered by literary critic Seo-Young Chu. Chu's argument inverts one of the most influential classic accounts of science-fiction narratives, generally ascribed to the Marxist critic Darko Suvin. For Suvin, science fiction is a nonmimetic discourse that produces an effect of “cognitive estrangement” through the construction of moderately plausible imaginative extrapolations. As a genre, then, science fiction is non-realist at its core, and it is this resistance to realism that allows it to knock us out of the familiar world.

Chu argues instead that science fiction is more like ordinary realist fiction. For all its fantastic elements, science fiction remains a form based on mimesis and representation. What has changed is the sort of objects represented. In contrast to the familiar things encountered in realist fiction, like automobiles or drawing rooms, the narrative objects found in science fiction represent anomalous but still real things—like cyberspace or black holes—that “are nonimaginary yet cognitively estranging.” In Chu's view, then, science fiction is another form of realism, whose mimetic strategies attempt “to perform the massively complex representational and epistemological work” of making unfamiliar but actual things available to our imagination and understanding. Surrealism, she suggests, could be seen as a mode of science fiction that represents the actual
phenomenon of dreaming, while gothic horror is science fiction that bodies forth “the occulted-yet-irrepressible unconscious.” Terence and Dennis took the discourse of science fiction seriously, as both a speculative engine and a representational interface for engaging the cosmic or biological Beyond. Indeed, despite their adolescent Catholicism, the McKennas’ romance of the Other comes less from a religious faith in incorporeal beings than from the thresholds and encounters found in imaginative fiction. So if we read Dennis’ circuit diagram as a science fiction in Chu's sense, what elusive object is it attempting to mimetically represent? By way of an answer, I would like to suggest that Dennis’ diagram provides a speculative representation of the abstract phenomenological dynamics of a high-dose tryptamine trance.

Many aspects of psychedelic experience have an iterative and vibratory character. Just think of all the various trails, stutters, and “fractal” patterns described by trippers. The independent researcher James Kent has described a number of these effects in his book *Psychedelic Information Theory*, a well-researched and largely level-headed speculative attempt to account for psychedelic phenomenology along neurological lines. For Kent, psychedelics destabilize the top-down control that maintains the coherence 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.” 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 techniques. Dancing, drumming, singing, chanting, and rocking back and forth—not to mention contemporary EDM beats—all act as periodic drivers. As such, Kent writes, “the shaman is the primary energetic driver, or resonator, stabilizing attractors within the chaotic hallucinogenic interference patterns created in the consciousness of the subject.”

The McKennas’ protocols for the solid state philosopher's stone can thus be seen, in part, as a science-fictional attempt to model the wave-form chaos of high-dose psychedelia. But to really wrestle with the Experiment, we need more than the abstract language of neural
oscillators and interference patterns. Dennis and Terence were not just using their technical imaginations to diagram the patterns and pulsations of psychedelic consciousness. They were also building an apparatus that might activate these energies in order to change biological matter. In Dennis’ words, “The goal wasn't simply to test the hypothesis but to fabricate an actual object within the alchemical crucible of my body.” Their aim was not simply or even primarily a matter of interiority, of spirituality, or even “experience.” They wanted to alchemically precipitate a material artifact. If theirs was a psychedelic mysticism, it was an object-oriented one.
2.2.12 Metabolic Ontology

We don't understand why human consciousness responds to magic mushrooms the way it does. We don't know what accounts for, say, the complexity of closed eye visuals, or the waves of paranoid dread and transcendent euphoria, or the not infrequent sense of animate nonhuman presences. We do not understand how to tie such experiences to specific sites of molecular activity, or how much the human psyche—whatever that is—is responsible for shaping and interpreting raw biological arousal into these experiences. But one thing we do know: whatever else is going on, the phenomenology of *Psilocybe* is—almost always—strictly correlated with biological metabolism.

Metabolism—as physical process, as alchemical allegory, and as technical-metaphysical encounter—is central to the matter of La Chorrera. In its usual sense, metabolism describes the chemical transformations within the body that energize, sustain, and in some sense constitute life. Here, of course, we should be particularly interested in the metabolic transformations of drugs, foods, and medicines into active and bio-available goodies. All these materials enter the body from outside and must be transformed to work within; metabolism, in this sense, represents a sort of encounter, or translation, or mediation. When those incoming substances are particularly unfamiliar and not normally present—as with all manner of poisons and toxins—they are known as xenobiotic, a word that employs the same “alien” root as xenophobe or xenomorph.

As Dennis reminds us in his quotation above, metabolism is the biological analog of alchemy. Both are forms of transformation through heating or cooking. Alchemical transmutation can be understood as an artificial quickening of material that takes place within the heated chambers of the vessel. So too can metabolism—which often requires oxygen and produces carbon dioxide—be compared to internal combustion. The gut is a retort, separating dross from nutritive gold. Psilocybin too must be “transmuted” before it quickens the spirit. Once the fungi are ingested, the body rapidly dephosphorylates psilocybin into the active metabolite
psilocin, which in turn stimulates the 5-HT serotonin receptors that correspond with the trip.

Of course, analogies only take us so far. Conventionally understood, the science of pharmakokinetics—which tracks what the body does to ingested drugs—does not rely on allegorical symbolism or psychological properties whatsoever. Psilocybin is converted to psilocin with or without indigenous healing rites or ideas about alien intelligence. This biological baseline is apparent to every shroomer in the fact that, whatever gods or monsters may seize consciousness during a trip, the experience itself follows a predictable metabolic arc, and will almost certainly be over in five or six hours. Indeed, it was precisely the variable rates of speed associated with different metabolic pathways that brought the brothers McKenna to La Chorrera in the first place. They came looking for oo-koo-hé because it was an orally active form of DMT, and therefore promised a slower, more manageable journey through DMT space than the rollercoaster ride that ensues from smoking crystal.

Here is one place where the differences between modern and premodern approaches to psychoactive substances become critical. In the Mazatec communities of Oaxaca, *Psilocybe* mushrooms were considered healing plants that were either identified with or associated with nonhuman spirits, Maria Sabina's “saint children.” But in the modern West, psychoactive substances are “drugs” before they are anything. This means that they are material molecules with predictable patterns of metabolism, nervous system arousal, absorption, tolerance, and excretion. Though many Western users of psychedelics resist the materialism of the scientific paradigm, few escape its implications, one of which is the tendency to subsume psychoactive consciousness within the schema of linear physical causality. As Dennis explains this position—which he disagrees with—people “think that the trip is in the drug; that the drug does this thing.”

As we have been tracking throughout this book, such psychedelic materialism is troubled by the reality of set and setting. As Richard Doyle explains the situation, the “drug action” of psychedelic compounds displays “an extraordinary sensitivity to initial rhetorical conditions.” This means that the total action of the drug, including transformations of consciousness, is in some ways more obviously “socially constructed” than in the case of non-psychoactive
medicines. As noted in Chapter One, this makes them arguably impossible to pin down within the contemporary paradigm of drug trials, since there is no neutral ground, and no obvious form of placebo.

Nonetheless, despite the recursive influence of ideas on drug action, of Logos over Bios, most Westerners still make a clear distinction between a psychedelic drug’s fixed metabolic pathways through the human body and the multiple, open-ended ways that human consciousness interprets or psychologically amplifies those events. This view reflects Bruno Latour’s Great Divide, the modern paradigm that, again, separates a single objective nature from the multiple constructions or projections of culture. In this view, the physically determined processes of physical arousal come first, and are then shaped and “experienced” by the psyche as, say, a line in a Blake poem or an erotic wave of energy or “the rising of kundalini.” As Dennis describes this position, “the trip is in your head, the drug is simply the trigger.”

But what if something weirder and less linear is happening when the body encounters a drug? In an important article subtitled “Six Effects in Search of a Substance,” the science studies scholar Emilie Gomart questions the assumption that psychoactive drugs are totally determined chunks of matter while only human uses, desires, interpretations, and experiences are malleable and dependent on circumstances. In her paper, Gomart compares two studies that present contradictory portraits of methadone’s effect on heroin addicts. Rather than insist that one of the studies is flawed, Gomart instead argues that the results are both, in their own way, true. To do this, she considers the drug as a kind of actor—with humans, lab equipment, and research protocols—in the collaborative production of events or effects that can change as the design of the collaboration changes.

In her explanation of this process, Gomart rejects both conventional physicalism and social constructivism—the latter of which tends to deny strictly material causes. Instead, Gomart suggests a middle path in which molecules are considered “entities” that operate within networks of other entities, all of whom possess varying degrees of agency—which is another way of saying they have possibilities that have yet to be actualized. Instead of talking about
what a drug “is,” or what it “causes,” she shows how different research methodologies and laboratory practices stage different performances or expressions of the drug. Here the focus switches from the essential properties of the drug to the “actions that localize, temporize, embody, subject, ‘frame’ the entities in question.”

Metabolism here is open, and ready to play.

One important consequence of this approach is that the meaning or full activity of a drug can only be worked out and constructed in practice. A drug's effects, in this view, aren't discovered, but nor are they purely invented. Instead, they are enacted. As the psychedelic chemist Alexander Shulgin puts it, in a book written with his wife Ann, “The process of establishing the nature of a compound's action is synonymous with the process of developing that action...It is only with the development of a relationship between the thing tested and tester himself that [the characteristics of the compound] will emerge.”

Dennis describes the same process as well. “It's not very interesting as long as [the drug] sits on the shelf and nothing happens to it, but when you ingest it, then it starts being metabolized and going through its cycles, and interesting things start happening.”

Here the inner assay takes the empirical lead over the physical analysis of the material, which means that the tester inevitably contributes something to the characterization of the drug's action. This is especially true given the fact that, most of the time, the tester's “rhetorical conditions” are based on earlier experience reports. Is it too much to understand this as a symbiotic process, a hybridized human/nonhuman encounter? The action of the drug (“nature”) cannot be separated here from its historical context (“culture”), because substances express their possibilities within networks of agents—human and otherwise—that manipulate them according to different schemas. And as the science studies scholar Annemarie Mol writes, “since the object of manipulation tends to differ from one practice to another, reality multiplies.”

Reality multiplies. When human nervous systems form relationships with molecules—or media technologies, or ritual objects—the resulting encounters flower and unfold as real differences. These differences are part of the history of the planet, though whether we think of this as natural or human history is hard
to call. It is not enough to say, then, that the alchemist projects his psyche onto the transformations of matter, or that the Experiment was “nothing but” delusion or naïveté. Matter too had something to add in these cases, a twist in the works, a virtual potential actualized through the particular schema that actualized them. To recall Seo-Young Chu's concept of science fiction, we might say that the unrepresentable object of the McKennas’ speculative theory and practice was not just the abstract phenomenology of psychedelic action described in the previous section, but the even more opaque operations of pharmakokinetic metabolism itself.

From this weird perspective, which we might call metabolic ontology, archaic animism and the alchemical imagination resonate with constructivism and the sociology of scientific discovery. Reality is constructed, reality multiplies and mediates, but the inhuman cosmos is doing this at least as much as we (or the McKennas) are. This does not mean that all realities are created equal or that theories or practices have equivalent consistency, utility, or staying power. There remain fundamental distinctions between, say, laboratory studies of LSD in rats and the ritualistic, speculative, science-fiction operation that Terence and Dennis had the goofy bravura to label an “Experiment.” And yet, in both cases, networks of concepts and forces are mobilized, objects and processes are brought into relation, and virtual possibilities are enacted through the empirical encounter between nervous systems and unfolding molecules. And in both cases, the proof of the pudding—if any proof is to be had at all—lies in the eating.
Life cycle of *Stropharia cubensis*
2.3.0

Experiments

In this chapter we move from the protocols of the Experiment at La Chorrera to its execution. Things will get, if anything, even weirder. As such, we will need to bring more concepts into play as we attempt to parse the McKennas’ extraordinary experiences and the building blocks they depended on. For this reason, my account will be regularly interspersed with a variety of considerations that will take us away from the scene before looping back again. Just as Terence's Kathmandu Interlude helped define and actualize the buzz that Dennis heard in the run-up to the Experiment, it is hoped that these brief voyages will help illuminate the events that boggled the two young men.

The Experiment began on March fourth, a date whose homophonic overtone was not lost on the brothers McKenna. They drew a circle on the floor of their hut, marked the four directions, and then set drawings of *I Ching* hexagrams at each of the cardinal points. In the center of the circle they placed a large fresh mushroom, which they believed would provide the material template for the holographic Stone they were going to create. 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, the McKennas had installed an experimental apparatus that clearly represents more than a “naturalist” attitude. As a ritual technology of self-transcendence, their machine crossed domains, looping together Chinese oracles, Greek literary symbols, and fungal alkaloids. As Terence himself noted, “We were operating in a world where scientific method, ritual, and participation mystique were inseparably intertwined.”

After setting up the room, Ev, Dennis, and Terence drank a small amount of home-brewed ayahuasca, ate some mushrooms, and lay
back in their hammocks. After only fifteen minutes—a bit short of the usual metabolic onset of effects—Dennis tuned into the tryptamine buzz within. Three times in succession, he released an “unexpectedly mechanical” yowl that Terence compares, in True Hallucinations, to a bullroarer, an ancient musical instrument whose vaguely electronic and unquestionably psychoactive buzz was first engineered in the late Paleolithic.

As the third siren-like drone from Dennis’ mouth died away, the brothers and Ev heard a cock crow three times. But despite this biblical overtone, the mushroom in the center of the circle did not disappear, or explode, or spontaneously cool to absolute zero, leaving a lens-shaped hologram hovering over the floor. Nonetheless, the two brothers did experience an uncanny mutual hallucination. “Look!” Dennis cried, gesturing towards the stubbornly untransformed mushroom. Terence turned and saw a miniature Earth, like the big blue marble floating on the cover of the Whole Earth Catalog. “It is our world,” Dennis declared.

Later, in a phrase we shall return to, Terence reflected on his transient impression. “I did not understand, but I saw it clearly, although my vision was only a thing of the moment.”

Though the Stone did not materialize, Dennis was still convinced the operation had been a success. They had passed into a world-rending novum, an eschatological rupture that would subsequently awaken all the residents of planet Earth to a new reality of transdimensional galactic citizenship. Greeting the morning light, Terence felt himself in telepathic communication with his brother, who claimed that the bonding of harmine into his DNA had given him access to an “enormous, cybernetically stored fund of information.” With Dennis’ encouragement, Terence began posing questions to the now transhuman Dennis using internal speech. These queries seemed to produce spontaneous answers in his own head.

The whole crew were alerted to Dennis’ new powers. At first they all seemed to recognize the peculiar voice phenomenon. But as time passed, and Dennis continued to rave beyond the point of communicability, it became clear that only Terence perceived the effect. Moreover, Terence could not confirm any of the answers he got, while Vanessa, the “resident skeptic,” was unimpressed with Dennis’ answers to her mathematical queries. Nonetheless, the
brothers felt that the Stone had manifested—not in material form, but in their own minds.

It is unclear how the Dennis McKenna database that Terence addressed in his head differed from the Teacher they had already encountered, or from the inner voice that spoke to Terence over the next weeks and off and on in trips for years to come. Terence's impression was that a higher intelligence, either posthuman or nonhuman, was in communication with him, maintaining a conversation that only grew more volatile following the Experiment. Terence came to link this voice with the loosely Christian notion of the Logos, understood as a kind of Platonic spirit of language, poetry, and structuring sense. Either way, the two young men had planted their flags in the murkiest of soils: a voice in their heads.

As Christopher Partridge points out, the McKennas' mutual trip in some sense represented standard psychedelia, as both experienced “spatiotemporal distortion and a monistic Idealistic sense of unity, both pregnant with meaning.” On the other hand, they had both broken through the standard metabolic envelope, even for a large dose of caapi-infused mushrooms. Days after the Experiment, Dennis showed no sign of coming down, while the relatively more grounded Terence did not sleep for almost two weeks.

Nor could the presence of the Logos be easily reconciled with the increasing difficulty Dennis was having with speech. Unable to follow the customary rules of discourse, he blurted out random words while others were talking, spoke to himself incessantly, and often did not respond when directly addressed. As the days passed, it was clear to all that Dennis had become “definitely disengaged from reality.” He continued to spew cosmic monologues that leapfrogged through time and space, drawing together ancient aliens and Egyptian pyramids, Tibetan shamans and New World tryptamine cults, starships and the *I Ching*. Dennis’ tongue also played host to gods and demons and members of the extended McKenna family. At one point, the bedazzled Dennis announced that he could cause any telephone to ring, including any phone in the past. In a demonstration pregnant with implications, he called the brothers’ recently deceased 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.

Terence remained closer to baseline than Dennis, and was able to directly negotiate with their friends. But he was also swept up in the
millennialist flow. He experienced a rush of synchronicities, paranormal events, and exalted visions that blended novel abstractions with the wordplay of Finnegans Wake.⁴ “Clues seemed everywhere; everything was webbed together in a magical fabric of meaning and affirmation and mystery.”⁵ Though concerned about his brother, the voice continued to assure Terence that all was well. But with Dennis spewing gibberish, one can sympathize with those in the group who begged to differ.
Psychopathology is the elephant in the jungle of La Chorrera, just as it is in most experiences of high weirdness. But before we turn to diagnoses, we should recall the famous Buddhist tale in which a group of blind men, groping a pachyderm, give widely varying accounts of the animal they believe they are touching. The take-away: extraordinary states take on very different shapes depending on what part of the phenomenon you try to grasp. And, to switch metaphors, you never see the whole enchilada.

As the days passed, everyone in the La Chorrera crew recognized that what had happened to Dennis exceeded the temporal arc of any known psychoactive substance. Something extraordinary had indeed occurred. But the friends split over why he was unable to come down. Vanessa and Dave believed Dennis had experienced a psychotic
break that activated “a shamanic archetype,” and that Terence, faced with this Jungian maelstrom, had succumbed to transference. They demanded that Dennis—and by extension Terence—get help; eventually, they arranged for an airplane to fly the whole group out of the remote village.

Terence and Ev hewed closer to a weird naturalism. They believed that the Experiment had turned a biochemical key in Dennis’ bodymind, perhaps by producing a permanent inhibition of the monoamine oxidase in his system. (MAOs in the gut normally break down the tryptamines in magic mushrooms and DMT.) Whatever the mechanism, Dennis was on a privileged voyage deep into the realms of transpersonal chaos, a process that Terence believed—as an anarchist if nothing else—should be allowed to follow its own course.

But the possibility of psychosis was stitched into the narrative of La Chorrera from the get-go. Even before the Experiment was performed, Terence worried about his brother’s mental health. “I used no psychoanalytical jargon in thinking about it, but I noted a reaction in myself that included the idea that he might be unfolding into a mythopoetic reality, or as I thought of it then, ‘going bananas.’”

In all their subsequent accounts, both brothers have regularly introduced considerations, if not convictions, about the delusional aspects of their experiences. These include folie à deux, messianic inflation, suggestion, and other modern psychiatric categories. At one point in True Hallucinations, the older Terence declares that his 1971 self had simply become “the victim of a cognitive hallucination.”

At the same time, both men, in different ways and to different degrees, use their later texts to prop open the possibility that, well, something happened at La Chorrera—even if the nature of that something remains, elephant-like, beyond our compass. Such strategies of ambivalence remain a tried and true way that educated moderns wrestle with their own extraordinary experiences in the rear-view mirror. Retelling their story in public years and decades later, when they could easily have chalked it all up to the madness of youth, both brothers continued to lean on eschatological possibilities even as they regularly invoked, in different ways, the language and skepticism associated with science.

The anthropologist Nicolas Langlitz describes this strategy as “double entry bookkeeping.” Langlitz studied pharmacologists
working with psychedelic compounds in labs in Europe and America, and one of his subjects used the phrase to describe what he characterized as “the intellectually dishonorable practice—which he knew firsthand—of holding a belief in a spiritual reality while being unable to justify it in naturalist or materialist terms.”

Entering your beliefs in two ledgers—a materialist and a spiritual one—is presumably dishonorable because of science’s monomaniacal insistence that there is only one mode of reality, and that “justification”—rather than exploration or playfulness or not knowing—is the most important value. But it’s a strange analogy, because double-entry bookkeeping also works.

In his writings, Terence followed many modern esoteric thinkers in freely blending technical thought and mytho-poetic possibilities into a sacred para-science. As we will see later in this chapter, Terence crystalized the temporal resonances he experienced in the wake of the Experiment into a formalized and mathematical “theory” called the Timewave, which he began propagating in the mid-seventies. But Dennis pursued professional scientific training, and these naturalistic rules largely shape his memoir. The reason the mushroom at La Chorrera did not implode into a DNA hologram is simply because “such an event would have violated the laws of physics.”

That said, Dennis does not lean solely on physicalist explanations to justify his continued interest in the events of La Chorrera. He remains cautiously open to the possibility that his own baroque theories—which he now recognizes as “nonsense”—nonetheless might contain seeds of truth. In his 1988 foreword to a German edition of Invisible Landscape, for example, Dennis points out a number of dangling pharmacological threads that, he believes, require further research. Some of these considerations are further developed in his 2012 memoir, albeit in a speculative science-fiction mode (Kubrick's 1968 film 2001: A Space Odyssey is mentioned).

This isn't just wishful thinking. As an experienced researcher and ethnobotanical entrepreneur, Dennis is perfectly familiar with the limitations, blind spots, and biases baked into the production of scientific knowledge. This gruffly-stated conviction, which his own exposure to scientific practice to some degree authenticates, has led him to adopt a broadly open-minded, if somewhat shifty, lack of resolution about the cause and meaning of his experiences. He does
not stop thinking as a biologist, but he also refuses to close off the call of the event. If this is double-entry bookkeeping, it doesn't seem to have harmed his particular enterprise.

This is not good enough for some readers, however. In an article on La Chorrera, Wouter Hanegraaff offers a parsimonious characterization of the Experiment's results as “no more than a temporary state of psychotic hallucination.” But in a blog review of *Brotherhood of the Screaming Abyss*, Hanegraaff seems actively annoyed by “Dennis's inability or unwillingness, even decades afterwards, to draw the obvious conclusion that what happened to them at La Chorrera...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. Faced with the sort of high weirdness that visited the brothers McKenna, the cleanest route is to simply other such narratives by putting them in a box labeled *psychotic break* or *monumental delusion*.

One problem with this strategy, however, is that it explains only by explaining away. The vagaries of visionary experience may give us no warrant to question the truth of physicalism, but the *classification* of such phenomena as “delusional” or “psychotic” closes off lines of thought that could be more creatively spent tracing the outlines of the phenomenon in question. Indeed, Hanegraaff's use of “delusion” here recalls a repressive discursive strategy he analyzes with great precision in his magisterial history *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, from astrology to electromagnetic healing. Moreover, it is the very rejection of such topics from modern academic institutions that helps establish the latter's authority—an authority which in turn justifies the strategies of exclusion pursued through these very categories.

In a similar way, *delusion*—alongside *schizophrenia* and *psychosis*—can serve as a wastebasket term wherein we might discard any number of extraordinary experiences, neuro-divergent behaviors, and singular perceptions. Given the ethical and anthropological issues raised by critical historians of psychiatry, which we will turn to
in a moment, it seems that we should be wary of resting too comfortably on the orthodox realism that undergirds such terms. Faced with the sort of high weirdness the McKennas experienced, the older Dennis’ bemused open mind seems, to me anyway, appropriately ambivalent. Hanegraaff, though, is not buying it. “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 sharply does Occam's razor really slice? Why the preference for a single blade that cuts over the many other implements that trace or tool or unlock? And what if this razor's decisive cuts sever the ties that actually bind real things to their own, always enigmatic appearances?

In his *Inquiry*, Latour offers his own pluralist vision of Occam's razor. Latour's instrument is no longer the single blade of single vision, which William Blake famously associated with “Newton's sleep”—the obstinate literalness of science in the face of Imagination. For Latour, science is always already plural, already networked between different agents, practices, and conditions. So instead of a cutting razor, Latour wants a little case made of precious wood, like surgeons once carried, in which a host of tools “adapted to all the delicate operations of reason” lie nestled in felt compartments.

The many tools in this fantasy are necessary because the world in which we find ourselves does not often offer us a single path of optimum reduction. The many domains of our phenomenal universe do not simply “emerge” from a single identifiable objective reality, bubbling up, say, from the laws of physics (which themselves possess multiple articulations, and are perhaps more habits than “laws”). Radical empiricism suggests that we begin where we are: hopelessly immersed in a pluralistic universe whose multiple modes of existence are severely distorted when we reckon everything down to a common denominator. So before we track the brothers McKenna further down their rabbit holes, we will take the next few sections to suggest that the figments and phantasms of the weird—even voices in the head—sometimes deserve their own “ontological pasture.”
2.3.2 Enunciations

Let's say that the high weirdness of La Chorrera can be boiled down to something like temporary psychedelic psychosis. Even if we accept this diagnosis, we are still confronted with what the philosopher and radical psychiatrist Félix Guattari calls 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.”13 What does Guattari mean here? What is this choice, and why is it an ethical one?

As Terence and Dennis’ own reflections suggest, it is perfectly reasonable to invoke concepts like “psychosis” or “delusions of reference” when understanding the events at La Chorrera. Such concepts are useful instruments in a tool kit that helps us clarify some of the outlandish phenomenology that courts the psychonaut. But these terms do not simply clarify; they also carry along and impose an underlying set of assumptions, even a metaphysical schema. As we will see when we explore the diagnoses of Philip K. Dick, the exact meanings of such categories are perpetually contested inside and outside of psychiatry. Nonetheless, the terms install a sharp “scientific” divide between subjects and objects, minds and biology, reason and experience.

As a decidedly unconventional psychiatrist, Guattari worked closely with psychotic patients for decades at the La Borde clinic in the Loire Valley. So we should at least bend an ear when he suggests that we can follow a different path. He does not call his approach a science, but speaks instead of an “ethico-aesthetic” paradigm. By ethics here, he means an approach that does not assume clinical mastery from the get-go. Instead, Guattari attempts to remain open, tuned to the experiential flux and the particular constructions that patients rely on. Here the goal is to trace the creative, aesthetic, and sometimes ingenious processes that dissolve the well-trodden paths of the psyche and move it towards novel, if sometimes chaotic, singularity.

Guattari insists he is not equating psychosis with works of art, nor does he deny the suffering that attends such symptoms. Nonetheless,
he offers us ways of thinking about radical forms of subjectivity—including but not limited to madness—in terms that are creative and constructive. “One creates new modalities of subjectivity in the same way that an artist creates new forms from the palette.” For Guattari, the work of subjectivity is aesthetic not just because our experience is made up of felt encounters with a constantly changing world of appearances. It is aesthetic because even excessive experiences can sometimes birth genuinely new forms of being and relating, the subjective analogs of Mondrian's ground-breaking grids or Jackson Pollock's expressionist splatter.

Of course, even such novel forms are created from a palette of pre-existing materials. In the case of subjectivity, this includes what Guattari calls “semiotic segments” of already established culture and knowledge—what I have been calling “scripts.” But novel self-constructions cannot be reduced to these scripts, as if creative subjectivity were simply the repetition of established materials. Instead, extraordinary events can produce a “mutant nucleus” of subjectivity, a fresh development in the psyche that leads to what Guattari calls “self-referential existential Territories” as well as new “universes of value and reference.”

How does one construct such a territory or such a universe? One operation that Guattari highlights is enunciation, a form of expression that releases the power of both signs and material forces. Enunciation mobilizes language, in other words, but it also expresses material or energetic forces that are not linguistic or semiotic. A particular shade of blue or a complex harmony, for example, may function as signs within a work of art, signifying emotions or alluding to other works of art. But such meanings also ride atop what Guattari calls “a-signifying” (non-semiotic) forces, especially vibrations. To underscore the way these latter forces elude the net of human meanings, Guattari refers to them as “machinic.”

As a signifying machine, then, enunciation cannot be reduced to language alone; it is always more than a “cultural construction.” Instead, the combination of signs and a-signifying processes boots up something radical for the being who enunciates: a zone of nondual fusion that precedes the usual split between subject and object, psyche and environment. As Guattari makes clear, this fusion or breakdown can definitely manifest as psychosis. But he also insists that enunciation can register as empathy, as hypnotic suggestion, as
art, and as the “participation mystique” associated with shamans, witches, and other technicians of the sacred. By dipping into this chaotic, prepersonal well, enunciation can extract the existential seed— the “mutant nucleus”— for powerful transformations of the self.

Guattari’s ideas and science fiction jargon can admittedly seem pretty eccentric. But they are almost tailor-made for understanding the phenomenology of psychedelic experience, whose intensities can open up the same aesthetic/psychotic terrain that Guattari refuses to pathologize. Guattari’s notion of enunciation, for example, almost perfectly describes Dennis’ catalytic buzz, the core protocol of the Experiment. This literal “enunciation” was at once a ritual vocalization, like a call to prayer, and an energetic, a-signifying frequency that exploits and mobilizes psychoacoustic effects. His cry was simultaneously invocation and amplification, discourse and vibration. Within the ritual theater of the Experiment, Dennis’ sound staged a very particular prepersonal fusion: the breakdown of the difference between his own voice and the mysterious tryptamine object-noise he heard within.

This resonating criss-cross of sign and signal, of shamanic prayer and “unexpectedly mechanical” buzz, eroded the distinction between Dennis, the sound, and the cosmic hive mind. This is where the “self-referential existential Territories” that Guattari describes come about. For Guattari, the act of enunciation grounds its own referents, and it does so through the “event of their appearance.” Territories are, in essence, booted up. Nothing is there before the performance begins, but this does not mean that nothing real happens (or nobody appears) once the loop between expression and referent is established. Enunciation is what systems theorists describe as autopoetic; it produces its own boundaries and identity, recursively establishing new territories by bootstrapping itself into being.

For Guattari, these new existential territories also call forth new “universes of value,” fresh folds in the aesthetic tapestry of reality. Guattari calls these universes “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.” This is an amazing statement, and it will return like a leitmotiv in the following chapters. If we let Guattari’s impersonal term entities fully resound, we are one step closer to understanding the connection
between the “processual creativity” of radical subjectivity and the esoteric encounters that characterize high weirdness.

Why should we think of these others as other when they come from loops of the self? Recall Latour's primary gesture of “being-as-other,” a position that William James wonderfully articulates in *A Pluralistic Universe*: “The simplest bits of immediate experience are their own others.” Things are never quite identical with themselves; there is a weird gap between essence and appearance. This weird gap also means that the basic operation of recursion—of self-reference—paradoxically calls forth the Other that is already within the self. A voice in the head, perhaps no different from the other scripts our minds endlessly process, can appear as a Teacher from Beyond, riding a Möbius strip that crosses and confuses inside and out. There may be no reason to *believe* in this incorporeal entity, but we may have no choice but to listen.
The weird loop of enunciation stands in contrast to our normal way of thinking about extraordinary experiences, and it may serve to calm some readers by reminding them that I am attempting an experimental metaphysics here. In the conventional view, by way of contrast, all the action in such uncanny encounters takes place within the psyche. The outside, whatever lies beyond the nervous system, is foreclosed. The older Dennis gives voice to this naturalistic perspective when, in his memoir, he speculates about the origins of the alien Teacher who egged on the brothers at La Chorrera: “the psilocybin somehow triggered metabolic processes that caused a part of our brains to be experienced not as part of the self, but as the ‘other.’”

Dennis’ thought here also reflects Jung’s split-the-difference perspective on incorporeal agents. “Whenever an autonomous portion of the psyche is projected,” wrote Jung, “an invisible person comes into being.”

In his Inquiry, Latour carves out a place for such invisible beings, but he also wants to reframe this sort of psychologizing by turning it inside-out. Planting his feet firmly in James’ pluralistic universe, Latour adopts a radical empiricism that recognizes reality as a messy and multidimensional condition, one that scrambles insides and outsides. Rather than razor the world into human subjects “in here” and scientific objects “out there,” Latour wants to map a host of “modes of existence” that fan out between these poles. Rather than collapse these various modes into a single dimension of explanation—like the behavior of particles, or the social imagination—Latour instead emphasizes the links and translations between them. By emphasizing the differences between modes and their mediations, we allow for “more diversity in the beings admitted to existence.”

We will return to some of these modes later in this chapter and throughout this book. Here we need to recognize what I can only describe as the quality of animism in Latour's method. Within the sociology of knowledge, Latour is best known for the “actor network” theory he developed to understand scientific practice. This theory, which we have already used at points in this book, attempts to
diagram the links between various agents, both human and nonhuman, that contribute to the creation of knowledge. Scientific experiments are not performed by humans alone. Instead, humans operate within historical networks of actors or agents that include microscopes, recording devices, databases, educational regimens, peer review boards, coffee pots, journals, and systems of recording marks. As noted earlier, all of these actors or agents contribute something to the work of a successful experiment.

Applied to “psychological” phenomena, Latour's actor-network asks us to diagram those agents and conjunctions that cross the gap that usually separates subjective insides and material outsides. By way of an example that we will return to in a moment, Latour considers the “spirits” encountered and deployed by shamans and traditional healers. As a radical empiricist, he cannot simply discount the incorporeal entities that play such a lively role in indigenous communities, and he rejects ascribing their apparent agency to interiority, to the unconscious, to neuronal circuits, or to “the twists and turns of the self.” For Latour, this focus on psychological interiority prevents us from recognizing the far-flung networks of human and nonhuman agents that help engender and populate subjectivity—that constitute interiority, as it were, from the outside.

Latour describes these networks of signs, objects, and processes as “psychogenic” (which is only one Greek root away from “psychedelic”). Such psychogenic networks stage the “production of interiorities,” and they do so precisely by crossing inside and outside.22 In his account of indigenous spiritual beings, Latour declares that such entities “are no longer representations, imaginings, phantasms projected from the inside toward the outside; they unquestionably come from elsewhere, they impose themselves.”23 Here the “inside” of subjectivity appears as an uncanny fold of the outside, a site where the exteriority of signs and of a-signifying forces impress themselves within.

Lacan coined a marvelous term for this fold: extimacy (extimité), a portmanteau of exterior and intimacy. Extimacy is the intimate other, the unconscious that intrudes from the outside. In a more naturalistic key, the notion that interiority is a fold of the outside appears in the idea of “extended mind” developed by the cognitive philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers. This theory holds that actual objects in the environment—like books or architectures, even
fashion—directly support cognition, memory, and even consciousness. In his own brief but suggestive writings on psychogenic networks, Latour gives us some concrete examples of such extended mind tools: drugs, television, romance magazines, psychotherapy, horror movies, kids’ toys.

It is perhaps not accidental that so many of these things rear their heads at La Chorrera. The McKennas blew their minds by booting up psychogenic networks of signs, forces, and objects that looped together inside and outside. These resonating networks resembled the sort of assemblages the brothers built in their heads and in their hut: a “prepersonal” fusion of butterflies, beta carbolines, vocal chords, pulp fictions, electronic media, weird physics, and alchemical psychology. The metabolism of psychedelic compounds remained the central pivot of their process, but as we have suggested, even metabolism suggests a molecular agency whose expression depends on psychogenic networks that twist within and without matter and mind. Though not quite art, and only the fringiest of science, the McKennas’ networks also, pace Guattari, created entities the brothers detected the very instant they produced them—entities that seemed to have been there all along.
2.3.4 Weird Media

One of the paradoxes of Dennis’ *Brotherhood of the Screaming Abyss* is that, at the heart of this book of memory, there is a fog of forgetting. Then and now, Dennis remembers almost nothing from the immediate aftermath of the Experiment. The cosmic consciousness, the telepathic database, the telephone call to his dead mother—all are largely foreclosed. At the same time, the question of what went down at La Chorrera arguably drives the entire project, which is suffused with its own version of “double-entry bookkeeping.” In other words, despite his frequent professions of skepticism, Dennis follows his brother in refusing to let go of the possibility that something happened.

To sneak up on that something, the older, wiser, Dennis rejects the speculative theories he seemed to channel at the time. Instead, like a good contextualist, he turns to personal and cultural archaeology. Discussions of Jung and Eliade take up whole chapters, along with descriptions of individuals who influenced the brothers’ “funny ideas.” While exploring these various informing forces, Dennis also includes a crucial biographical detail: his first encounter with the idea that humans coexist with an unseen world of spirits.

As an adolescent, Terence loved to terrify his kid brother with whispered late-night stories of the Nobody People, gruesome invisible wraiths who literally possessed “no body.” The Nobody People lived in the shadows of their shared bedroom; “in fact, they were shadows, or they existed on some gloomy threshold between the insubstantial and the real.” Because the very substances of these entities was shadow, Dennis refused to walk into the bedroom without first snaking his hand around the doorjamb and hitting the light switch. The trick didn’t always work. Tucked into bed, “in the delicate twilight between waking and actual sleep,” Dennis sometimes saw terrifying shades materializing out of the darkened corners of the room.26

Dennis now attributes such visitations to the power of suggestion, and what he describes as a “participant/observer” engagement with his brother's wild and already charismatic stories. But such animate
shadows speak equally to the weird force of the threshold itself—the liminal twist that mediates between domains, and translates between inside and out. In Dennis’ brief account of the Nobody People, there are three such thresholds: the ambiguity between insubstantial and real, the physical doorway between the hallway and the bedroom, and the hypnagogic “twilight” between waking and sleep. While these three thresholds exist on different levels of description—ontological, architectural, neurological—they are brought together here by virtue of sharing a structure in common: the mediating (and resonating) between.

As we will explore in future chapters, fictions also live in this pregnant between, enjoying the liminal power of the as if. In his account of the influences on La Chorrera, Dennis emphasizes the central importance of weird tales and science fiction, especially the writings of Arthur C. Clarke, H.P. Lovecraft and, later in the sixties, Philip K. Dick (who, as we will see, had his own remarkable hypnagogic life). Earlier we described how Clarke’s The City and the Stars helped Terence forge his vision of a solid-state philosopher’s stone. The same novel also provides a remarkable picture of an ontological threshold and its liminal twist.

In the book, the young Alvin feels trapped in the city of Diaspar, a technologically-managed utopian arcology whose inhabitants are terrified by the world that lies beyond the city’s sealed boundaries.27 Before he escapes the city, Alvin climbs a tower with a friend to show her one of the few prospects where the surrounding desert and stars can be glimpsed. 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, wind-carved whirlpools, and drifting gullies—the nonhuman Outside, glimpsed between the hardened grill of human categories and conventional perceptions. The vision is so striking that, Alvin notes, it was “hard to realize that none of this sculpture was the work of intelligence.”28 Seen in the light of the Beyond, the landscapes of the Outside are ghosted by the animate Other. When night falls, Alvin sees a perfectly elliptical constellation of stars in the sky—a star group that, the reader eventually discovers, is a center of galactic intelligence.

Clarke was key. But according to Dennis, it was H.P. Lovecraft who laid down the most important templates for the otherworldly thresholds the brothers would cross in Colombia. As Terence wrote
in *True Hallucinations*, Lovecraft’s weird tales contained numerous points of contact with the brothers’ own explorations: “many dimensions, strange beings, a cosmic time scale, and reckless, oddball adventurers like ourselves.” In that sense, Lovecraft’s fictions served as scripts, or protocols, for their extraordinary experience.

Recall that, for Lovecraft, the eerie shivers of a good weird tale are brought on by “contact with unknown spheres and powers.” This contact implies a threshold between worlds, not just between this world and a fantastic otherworld, but between different versions of that otherworld. Traditional religions, mythologies, and fantastic narratives paint the Beyond in supernatural terms. What makes Lovecraft’s outside different—and what makes his tales authentically weird—is its underlying realism. In contrast to the nostalgic enchantments of ghost stories or the gothic, the metaphysical background of Lovecraft's stories is a “cosmic indifferentism” not so far removed from the bleak scientific naturalism that Lovecraft himself took as his philosophy. Ceremonial magic and the archaic rites of primitive cults still play a role in his stories, but only because they encode, amidst their degenerate drivel, implacable truths about the alien inhabitants of the actual measurable universe.

These truths include methods for accessing hidden “dimensions” of reality, whose quasi-believability Lovecraft was able to suggest by parasitizing on the increasingly bizarre astrophysics of his day. Alongside grimoires and barbarous ritual prayers, the methods for accessing the Outside in his stories include some actual technologies, or what Eugene Thacker calls “weird media.” In the 1934 story “From Beyond,” for example, the scientist Crawford Tillinghast builds a device whose resonating waves—which register to the ear as a peculiar drone—stimulate the human pineal gland, allowing it to tune into domains of existence normally hidden from our perception. Lovecraft's descriptions here are pretty psychedelic, as the stimulated Tillinghast confronts a “kaleidoscopic” whirlwind, a “jumble of sights, sounds, and unidentified sense-impressions.” This sensory chaos then gives way to an appearance of incorporeal jellyfish monsters filling all of space, woozily overlapping and penetrating one another. As Tillinghast warns a friend, the most
frightening thing about the device is that it intermediates. “In these rays we are able to be seen as well as to see.”

Certainly there is much that resonates with the Experiment here, though luckily for the McKennas, their invisible landscapes were generally more sublime than horrible. For Thacker, by way of contrast, Lovecraft and the genre of horror ultimately encode a terrifying alienation from a cosmos that we will never map or understand. The otherworld, here, is utterly opaque; as such, weird media don't communicate so much as mutely indicate “a gulf or abyss between two ontological orders.” But as weird naturalists, or scientific Romantics, the McKennas still hoped for a pharmacological bridge across the abyss—a void that, for them, did not so much scream or writhe as whisper.
2.3.5 The Tale of the Silver Key

Among the various episodes that went down at La Chorrera, the weird commerce of the threshold is manifested nowhere better than in the matter of the silver key. The incident took place during the days immediately following the Experiment, when Terence found himself alternately egging on and skeptically questioning his brother. During these probes, Terence would sometimes demand that Dennis fulfill his visionary promises, and actually produce the Stone they had plotted in advance.

During one such conversation, the brothers recalled a tiny silver key from their childhood, a long-lost item that opened a secret compartment in a box of inlaid wood owned by their grandfather. As they batted this memory back and forth, associations developed, and this mysterious ancestral key became an “alchemical analogue” for the Stone itself. Terence asked Dennis to produce the key as evidence of his new powers. Dennis hemmed and hawed, and finally told Terence to open his hand, onto which Dennis slapped a small, silver key.

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...

On stage, or in a professional seance—where such materializations are called *apports*—this sort of manifestation would smack of legerdemain. Out in the jungle, the event of the key's appearance takes on a more anomalous character. Perhaps Dennis just happened to have a small silver key on him. Perhaps the brothers experienced a mutual multisensory hallucination (whatever *that* is). But unless we call them liars, then something peculiar went down. Dennis does
nothing to dispel this strangeness in his later account, which backs up Terence's story while claiming total ignorance about how his earlier self pulled off the feat.

The physical character of the silver key adds a concrete dimension to the McKennas' weird tale. Compare it to an earlier anomaly: the brothers' apparently mutual vision of the mushroom transforming into the planet Earth. Terence characterized that perception as a "thing of the moment," which is a felicitous way to describe a hallucination, whose degree of substance depends directly on the amount of time it lingers. An impossible object is one sort of thing if seen for but a moment. To see something out of joint for an extended period of time, however, let alone feeling it slip into the palm of your hand, is, literally, another matter—no longer a thing of the moment but a potential thorn in your ontological side.

The liminal twist introduced by the physical presence of the key also changes the character of Terence's tale and our position as readers. The key represents a tipping point between fantastic appearances and impossible objects, a point where most of us, already bending over backwards to make sense of this tale, simply "draw the line." What we had been reading as memoir—even a drug-distorted memoir from a less than reliable witness splashing in the deep end of folie à deux—suddenly becomes something else. The tale of the key becomes an invading anomaly or, on the flipside, a sneaky, even underhanded fiction. Either way it is the sort of "in-between" threshold story we can most easily manage by invoking the literature of the paranormal.

Recall for a moment Charles Fort's own practice as a writer and researcher who helped define the genre of the paranormal report. Methodically gathering published accounts of anomalies, Fort proceeded like a Jamesian radical empiricist, tracking and archiving the anecdotal appearance of things that eluded the science of the era. At the same time, the narrative implications that he wove from his collages of wild facts were in many ways indistinguishable from the occult tales and "scientific romances" being published in the pulps around the same time. In that sense, Fort was an early science-fiction writer.

But it gets loopier. As Jeffrey Kripal reminds us, paranormal events are not simply contained within a certain type of story, whether fiction or report. In addition, such "things of the moment" often
manifest as a story. Synchronicities in particular forge signs and stories out of phenomenal events, like the sudden and unexpected appearance of a physical key that unlocks ancestral memories. At such moments, 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.”

Anomalies thicken the plot. So even as Dennis’ manifestation of a physical object pulls us across a genre threshold from visionary memoir into paranormal report, so too does the manifestation of a silver key in turn resound through the psychogenic networks that shaped the brothers’ experiences.

And what returns to us from this sounding is, as Terence himself ironically reports, the dream tales of H.P. Lovecraft. At the beginning of “The Silver Key” (1926), first published in *Weird Tales*, we meet the dream adventurer Randolph Carter. Lovecraft introduced this character in an earlier story that concerned a demon-haunted passageway between everyday reality and the underworld—a passageway that Lovecraft had himself dreamed about before writing it down. In “The Silver Key,” Carter is an older, duller man, whose diminished capacity for wonder is due precisely to his inability to occupy the shared threshold between reality and fantasy. “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.”

Carter does still dream on occasion. One night he encounters the shade of his dead grandfather, who tells him about a key hidden in the attic. Upon waking, Carter digs around and discovers an actual silver key, encrusted with symbols. With the key in hand, Carter sets off on a journey to his childhood home, where he rediscovers a portal into the magical dreamworlds of his youth. Eventually he disappears without a trace.

Carter returns after a fashion in a later tale, “Through the Gates of the Silver Key” (1933), which Guattari and Deleuze consider a masterpiece. The story features the appearance of a bizarre Hindu guru who relates the story of Carter's return to the Dreamlands to a crowd of Theosophists. Using his grandfather's key to open gates that cut across space and time, Carter so attenuates his human personality that he winds up inside an alien body (though not, it
seems, a giant insect). As the swami remarks, “Marvels are doubly incredible when brought into three dimensions from the vague regions of possible dream.”

Rather than interpret *apports* like the silver key as affronts to our own tri-dimensional logic, we might see them instead as marvelous avatars of the very externality of the psychogenic networks that knit our insides. These networks weave the psyche with recursive loops that get under the skin, unspooling between inside and outside, fiction and fact, drugs and horror stories. And Carter reminds us that the supreme site of this threshold is that practice that is, for humans, at once marvelous and banal: the dream. As we slip from waking to sleep, every single night, we cross through that same hypnagogic twilight where, as the Nobody People showed Dennis, even the shadows of stories can sometimes bear substantial fruit.
2.3.6 Martian Hop

Toward the end of the McKennas’ sojourn in La Chorrera, Terence encountered the supreme icon of paranormal pop culture: a UFO. Warned by the voice in his head to pay attention to a particular spot on the horizon, Terence watched as the haze separated into four identical lenticular clouds that subsequently merged, “as if nature herself were suddenly the tool of some unseen organizing agency.” The clouds then coalesced into a 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 object approached him before banking steeply upwards and disappearing from view. “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.”

These genre echoes, however, did not match the peculiarity of the three half-spheres on the craft’s underside. For Terence, these instantly recalled an infamous photo of a UFO produced by the celebrated California contactee George Adamski in the fifties. Adamski’s image was not only widely assumed to be a hoax, but had been identified by some debunkers as what Terence characterized as the end-cap of a Hoover vacuum cleaner.

Terence, who maintained strong skepticism about the UFO phenomenon throughout his life, had encountered a kind of meta-anomaly: a realistic vision of a classic flying saucer that simultaneously revealed itself as a construct, a script—and an unconvincing, ridiculous, trashy one at that. Echoing the theories of Jacques Vallee, who argued in the seventies that the meaning of UFO encounters lay precisely in the absurdity of their details, Terence reckoned that this echo of Adamski’s hoax created “a more complete cognitive dissonance than if its seeming alienness were completely convincing.”

For strict constructivists, the appearance of the Adamski UFO, like the echo of Lovecraft’s texts and the Nobody People, simply points to the fact that the brothers had blown open their little pocket of
consensus reality and were filling the gap with a mix of previously existing texts and influences. The only wrinkle in this explanation is that Terence was perfectly aware of this possibility. The Adamski allusion forced Terence to ask himself, “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?”

For the brothers, the anomalies of La Chorrera were not cancelled out by the recognition that cultural scripts were unfurling in a perceptual maelstrom occasioned by extreme psychedelia. “Lines from half-forgotten movies and snippets of old science fiction, once consumed like popcorn, reappeared in collages of half-understood associations,” Terence wrote of his visionary experiences. “Punch lines from old jokes and vaguely remembered dreams spiraled in a slow galaxy of interleaved memories and anticipations.”

Rather than write off his UFO sighting as a consequence of unintended metaprogramming, Terence offers a more radical interpretation. “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.”

Here, paradoxically, the presence of mundane cultural scripts raised deeper questions about anomalous agency and control. As Dennis would similarly conclude decades later, “We were following a script, but no longer a script we'd written.”

This is the sort of rationalization that will make some readers reach for their Occam’s razors. That said, there is something ingenious here worth lingering over. Terence acknowledges the direct influence of cultural scripts, those building blocks of images, concepts, and narratives his psyche had gathered over its particular history. This recognition, however, does not undermine the apparent anomaly, but instead shifts it to a second order. What now seems bizarre and otherworldly is the particular arrangement of these fragments, as well as the conviction, no doubt fueled by the presence of the voice in his head, that the hand of an external, supernormal agency was behind the construction work. But what is perhaps most interesting here is the aesthetic judgment McKenna makes—the arrangement,
the juxtaposition, the collage, was simply too realized, too witty, to be a product of his own subconscious.

Here we can do no better than draw from the resonant thoughts of the California poet Jack Spicer, one of the more experimental voices in the San Francisco Renaissance of the fifties and sixties. Spicer conceived his poetic practice along visionary and loosely gnostic lines, describing his poems as a “dictation” received from what he called “the Outside,” or what he sometimes playfully referred to as “Martians.” In a talk he gave in 1965, Spicer insisted that poets needed to actively empty themselves of personality and desire in order to avoid interfering with the “invading” poem. But there was a limit to this ascesis, since the Outside—which was not, Spicer insisted, itself linguistic—still needed to appropriate the poet's particular language and memories.44 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. Language here is just part of the “furniture in the room” that the Martians re-arrange, the host material usurped by the parasite poem from Beyond.

Spicer was of two minds about all this, which perhaps tells us something about the weird naturalism we are tracking here. On the one hand, Spicer made a decisive and disenchanted turn away from Romantic myths of poetic “inspiration” and towards the materiality of language and the operational procedures of poetic practice. Terence believed that psychedelic phenomenology was an expression of the Logos, but for Spicer it was just the “Lowghost,” a spectral figure of phonemes and syllables, puns and images juxtaposed. Nonetheless, Spicer's Outside still remains an agent, an other that acts through human language without being reduced to language as such. Despite his anti-romanticism, even Spicer cannot banish the hand of incorporeal intelligence from his patchwork meanings while remaining true to his practice. Even a materialist understanding of signs and scripts can stage uncanny communications.
2.3.7 Daemonic Men

The Experiment at La Chorrera was marked by many anomalies, only some of which we have dealt with here. But the supreme anomaly was, no doubt, the Teacher, or the Voice—that alien or transhuman intelligence that Terence encountered principally, and that dogged him, on and off, throughout his life. Here, as readers, we may feel frustrated, because the character and outline of this figure—or multiple figures, it's not clear—remain vague in Terence's various tellings. This is largely true for our other psychonauts as well. It is as if these beings are too unnerving to personalize. Even in the novelistic True Hallucinations, we have much richer images of the cackling tykes of DMT space than we do of the Teacher.

Now most of us would probably agree that a voice in your head is not the most reliable source of truth. Such voices, in fact, remain one of the signature leitmotifs of psychopathology, so deeply do they challenge the conceptual boundaries of modern self-consciousness. At the same time, we should not forget how common these interlocutors are, whether in history, poetry, religion, or the everyday experience of a surprisingly large number of individuals. Hearing voices is almost normal, a fact we are just starting to wake up to. The contemporary “hearing voices” movement is now troubling the dogmatic psychiatric association of internal voices and mental illness. Social scientists have shown that the character of the voices heard by psychotics depends on cultural context (they tend to be nastier in the West). Some voices change their tone dramatically depending on how hearers respond to and interact with them.45

Trawling through more visionary waters, contemporary psychonauts and occultists also commonly report encounters with “entities,” spirits, ghosts, and alien beings. Riffing on such reports in the nineties, Terence McKenna noted that “Science has handled this problem 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.”46 For McKenna, such psychologizing amounts to a strategy of exclusion—one that, he opined, seems plausible to people
in direct proportion to their lack of firsthand experience of the phenomenon.

McKenna offered two other possibilities for understanding “disincarnate intelligences and nonhuman entities.” One is the cryptozoological possibility that such beings exist conventionally but are incredibly elusive, like the giant squid or, possibly, the yeti. The other option, which McKenna clearly favors along with “shamans, ecstasies, and so-called sensitive types,” is what he calls the “ontological” one. In this view, these entities carry on an existence that stands apart from ordinary modes of being, an existence that exceeds psychological projection and the fabrications of the imagination but follows its own rules.

As a student of Western esotericism, Terence knew that such disincarnate intelligences saturate the metaphysics, religion, and mythology of the West. As the older Dennis ironically notes, though he and his brother may have been delusional, “we shared that delusion with a long line of spiritual masters.”

Plato, for example, helped establish the nonhuman daimon as an agent of both natural and philosophical existence. The Symposium explains the cosmological role of such daemones, who operate as independent intelligences mediating between humans and absolute deity. These beings are responsible for oracles and instructive dreams, and the humans who are skilled at communicating with them are seen to bond with them, becoming “daemonic men.”

Socrates famously claimed that a daimonion (“little daimon”) had accompanied him since childhood, a “sort of voice” that he followed unquestioningly.

The Neoplatonic daimon proved to be of great importance to the Renaissance humanists and magicians whose stories Terence imbibed through Frances Yates’ work on the so-called “hermetic tradition.” For Marsilio Ficino, who blended Plato's cosmic spheres with the hierarchies of angels described by Dionysius the Areopagite, daimons were elemental intelligences who operated as messengers between the sublunar spheres. By reframing and extending existing traditions of magic along such Neoplatonic lines, Ficino helped insure that theurgic ritual and what we might call “psychological” congress with daemons become a signal feature of many esoteric currents. Perhaps the most celebrated 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.

Dee was an important figure for Terence, who once donned robes to play the mage in an aborted film project devoted to alchemy and the Rosicrucian Enlightenment. One reason for this special attention, I suspect, was McKenna's attraction to Dee's role as a world-bridger. Like many brilliant thinkers of his day, Dee was both a scientist and a magus, a mathematician and astrologer, a courtier and a psychonaut of altered states. Like Terence, Dee seemed to inhabit a parallel or “archaic” modernity, one in which freethinking, scientific reason moved through an enchanted world inhabited by otherworldly beings.

Terence's own self-description as a “hardheaded rationalist” may also explain why, of all the famous historical encounters with disincarnate beings that he could have obsessed over, the one he most often talked about involved 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 this line, and sometimes claimed that it came from Descartes' own hand. But though Descartes’ philosophical vocation was unquestionably informed by a series of extraordinary dreams he enjoyed as a young man in 1619, we do not have Descartes’ direct account of those experiences. And the accounts we do possess feature neither an angel nor even a rough equivalent of that maxim, which McKenna dubs the “battle cry” of science.

Of course, McKenna was hardly unfamiliar with the blarney stone. But we are still left with the question of why he returned so regularly to a half-fabricated close encounter featuring the grand old man of Western rationalism. One thing is clear though: McKenna was not party to New Age obscurantism, or even the widespread seventies yen for a “new paradigm” that might unify science and mystery and finally put down the corrosive influence of Descartes, whose “dualism” is consistently demonized in alternative spiritual texts of the era. Instead, McKenna wanted to both celebrate and confound the mythic origins of the scientific break—Latour's Great Divide—by imagining an encounter with a transmundane other who provided,
paradoxically, a reductionist injunction. Even daemonic men, this tale seemed to suggest, can keep their feet on the ground.
2.3.8 Weird Beings

Terence McKenna often proclaimed that nature loves courage. And it certainly takes courage, or at least heedless fascination, to personalize a voice in your head without pathologizing it, or yourself. Equally risky is the psychonautical decision to treat the visionary appearance of insect gods or extraterrestrial imps as encounters or dialogues, and not just phenomenal “visions.” Such questions of engagement are some of the more challenging arts of the psychonaut. Recall the high weirdness encounter we quoted in the introduction, when an anonymous tripper intoxicated on an ayahuasca analogue “blew it” after he noticed that the reptilian dragon-dog creature in his vision was staring back at him:

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.

The transitive shift from observer to participant, from gaze to encounter, requires both active engagement and a passive willingness to allow the phenomenon to reveal itself in its own terms. This visionary leap opens a dimension of experience, of ontological possibility, that is simultaneously a kind of abyss. In finding a “Thou” where before there was an “it”—as Martin Buber would describe it—the psychonaut suddenly faces all manner of risks: terror, madness, delusion, or what Terence ironically called “death by astonishment.” But to not take the chance, for some anyway, falls short of the mark.

It is an easier thing to think about such weird beings than to interact with them. After all, there is an enormous anecdotal literature—literary, religious, anthropological, paranormal—of encounters with gods or plant spirits or alien intelligences. There is a lot to sift over. But it still requires a measure of courage—or at least the courage to weather ridicule—to think about these beings without pathologizing them or immediately reducing them to neurological or sociological mirages. Or believing in them for that matter. What is required is the tentative, balanced, careful stride of the tightrope walker.
So let's take a few baby steps. The first one starts with a working hypothesis shared by both William James and Bruno Latour, discussed in the introduction: that radical empiricism leads to the conclusion that the universe is best seen as a pluriverse in which there are simply different ways for different sorts of things to be. For James, the differences we encounter are just as real as the unities we speculatively construct and intellectually establish. Reality, the actual universe we experience, is an irreducibly messy and complex manifold, a “turbid, muddled, gothic sort of affair, without a sweeping outline.”52 Reality, again, is weird.

Latour also follows the Jamesian “thread of experience” into an affirmation of a pluraverse characterized by multiple “modes of existence.” Latour populates these various modes with the beings that are appropriate to them. His careful, step-by-step establishment of these various entities takes up many dense pages, and I risk oversimplifying them here. But Latour's attention to how the processes of construction install or erect entities that develop a life of their own is too compelling to pass by.

By “beings,” Latour does not necessarily mean persons or agents, but players in the ongoing game of existence. We share the planet with all manner of biological beings of course. But there are also beings of representation, of technology, of fiction, of affect, each of which possess their own particular and peculiar way of appearing and replicating themselves in space-time. Sometimes it is hard to know in what way they exist, or even if they do exist; Latour says their “ontological status” is radically open. But what makes them beings in his terms is that, regardless of their underlying mode of existence or the work we must do in installing them, they are “nevertheless capable of making you do something, of unsettling you, insisting, obliging you to speak well of them…”53

In a later chapter we will address the tricksy beings of fiction. Here a better example are the codes, rulings, and penalties that constitute the “beings of law.” Though the legal system produces these beings through perfectly social and historical processes, once they are established, they hold their own ground, not unlike an idol installed in a shrine.54 Once laws are established, they striate the social spaces we move through, even if we break them or have no respect for them. However invented they are, these beings are enough, as Latour says,
to force a judge to wake up at night, wondering “Did I make the right decision?” On all sides, then, we are surrounded by what Guattari describes, again, as “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.”

In his *Inquiry*, Latour addresses a few modes of being that are particularly relevant to visionary encounters. Latour is, among other things, an anthropologist, and he holds great respect for the “invisible beings” associated with the healing practices of traditional indigenous communities. Latour calls these “invisible” entities “beings of metamorphosis.” His describes these beings so as not to distinguish them from a separate world of material visibility from which they are excluded. Instead, he wants to underscore the absence of the sort of sustained continuity we associate with things like golden retrievers or Maxwell's equations. These more familiar beings seem to rest on a secure foundation that is offstage, so to speak, outside of our immediate perception. But the beings of metamorphosis pursue their continuity eccentrically, without reference to some deeper ground. “They offer no assurance regarding either their origin or their status or their operator.” They do not orient themselves towards a foundation but rather “move out in front of experience.” As such, they do not persist. But they do appear and disappear—not unlike, Latour says, the special effects in horror movies. “I could swear I saw something there, but...” They are things of the moment.

As an empiricist, Latour insists that these beings are neither irrational nor supernatural. Instead, they achieve their flickering existence through the logic of otherness. “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,” writes Latour. “If we never see them the same way twice, it is because they are transformed—and so are we, as a result of the arrangements that allow us to capture them.” An animist, or a psychonaut, could not have said it better.
2.3.9 Logosophia

Nearly a decade before the book *True Hallucinations* was published, Terence's account of La Chorrera appeared as a collection of cassette tapes. This reminds us that no account of McKenna's legendary experiences is possible without acknowledging that his main expressive medium was his own charismatic vocal performances—“raps” and “raves” that, when the tapes first appeared in 1984, were just beginning to crystalize into public and eventually profitable performances. Given the role of the alien Voice in the Experiment, it is important to remember McKenna's own singular relationship with the spoken—and sometimes recorded—word. Though Terence wrote influential and sometimes fascinating books, his aspirations and practice as a writer need to be put into strong, unresolved tension with his more improvisatory role as a speaker and a stoned raconteur.

The tension between speech and writing also underlies the wild images of language that characterize so many of McKenna's visionary experiences. “Under the influence of DMT, language was transmuted from a thing heard to a thing seen,” he tells us. “Syntax became unambiguously visible.” McKenna lent metaphysical substance to this “supra-linguistic matter” by laminating his experiences with the ancient idea of the Logos. This Greek term, which can be translated as word, speech, reason, proportion, etc., was used in a dizzying number of ways in ancient philosophy and theology. (For Philo, a Hellenized Jew, the Logos served as the most supreme of those Neoplatonic beings that mediated between the worlds of form and matter). Unsurprisingly, Terence and Dennis both used the term in a wide variety of ways, including the “more perfect archetypal Logos” of DMT space. But in *True Hallucinations*, it is clear that the Logos also signified the Voice in Terence's head—it is the Logos, he writes, that led him to uncover the Timewave from permutations of the *I Ching*.

Terence's turn to the Logos invokes another one of Latour's modes: the entities he calls the *beings of religion*. Like McKenna, and Robert Anton Wilson, Latour comes from a Roman Catholic background.
But he remains a Catholic after his own fashion, one who offers a deeply empirical account of religiosity. For Latour, religion has nothing to do with dogma, institutions, or the rejection of measurable reality for some higher supernatural world. Religion, instead, is a practice of attending to the pluriverse from particular angles. “Learning to redirect attention is religion itself.”\textsuperscript{61} By paying attention in the right way, we are also capable of encountering the beings of religion that Latour somewhat parochially names angels. These entities resemble the beings of metamorphosis, but they differ in their recourse to speech, to words “capable of renewing those to whom they are addressed.”\textsuperscript{62}

Angels are messengers but they do not impart information. Instead, they provide what Latour calls Logos—a mode of language that sustains, or transforms, persons. That means that the messages his angels bring do not contain revealed truths or specific forms of knowledge, which is where so many prophets and visionaries go wrong. (Including, as we will shortly see, McKenna.) Religion and religious experience are not about establishing some rock-solid metaphysical truth, but about artfully renewing the perpetual dice-roll of our personal and uncertain fall into the future.

Like the beings of metamorphosis, Latour's Logos does not rely on any deeper substance to ensure continuity in being. And this lack of foundation, he explains, is precisely why the discourse of religion—texts, prophecies, sermons, myths—requires endless interpretation and exegesis. There is no ultimate ground, but this is no cause for despair or nihilism; indeed, it is the various interpretations that fill up the gap that invites the angels in. Referring to the immense human archive of preternatural encounters, Latour writes that “all the testimony agrees on this point: the appearance of such beings depends on an interpretation so delicate that one lives constantly at risk and in fear of lying about them; and, in lying, mistaking them for another—for a demon, a sensory illusion, an emotion, a foundation.”\textsuperscript{63} The hermeneutics Latour describes is as delicate as a tightrope walk.

Latour's religious ideas are eccentric, to be sure, and we are perhaps stretching things to find value here in our twisted exegesis of La Chorrera. Nonetheless, Latour's suggestive and enigmatic thoughts cannot help but recall Terence's own understanding of the
voice in his head as the “Logos of the Other”—a hybridization, as it were, of the angels of religion and the elves of metamorphosis. Moreover, this encounter did make Terence a different sort of person, inspiring a prophetic identity that unfolded throughout the rest of his life, and that made him, as he put it in the preface of True Hallucinations, “a sort of mouthpiece for the incarnate Logos.” At the same time, Terence was tempted precisely by the desire that Latour warns against: the desire for a visionary foundation that overcomes mediation. In Dennis’ words, which Terence would take up and elaborate, this was “a language which becomes and which is the things it describes,” a “post-symbolic” semiotics that Terence would memorably compare to the expressive skin of the octopus.

Latour's beings of religion obviously cannot be easily extracted from his own Catholicism, just as we cannot understand the McKennas or Wilson or the self-professed Episcopalian Dick without understanding their various debts to Christian thought. But perhaps the angel aliens that McKenna heard—and that Wilson and Dick would both encounter in their own way—are more modern than all that, or at least post-theological. This reminds me here of Rilke's well-known 1908 poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” which remains a preeminent example of how early modernists turned to art as a site of spiritual encounter after the death of God. Though the torso has no head, and therefore lacks the usual center of voice and conscious agency, the broken Apollo that Rilke confronts is alive through its own aesthetic presence, its pagan stone seeming to “glisten just like wild beasts’ fur.” In the famous close of the poem, the statue behaves more like the god it represents when, despite its absence of eyes, it seems to stare back:

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

Peter Sloterdijk, who treats this poem in You Must Change Your Life, describes its striking final line as “the quintessential metanoetic command.” But what sort of conversion is called for, and what is the source of the call? Here the traditionally religious scenario of being “spoken to from above” is rediscovered within a modernist aesthetic context that replaces the classic Logos with a newer “message ontology.”

Though God is out of the picture, something like
Latour's angel still speaks, is still capable of a demand that changes and transforms persons.

So who is responsible for the command? In another example of the strange loops we have been tracking throughout this book, Sloterdijk insists that this “message-thing” does not activate itself, “but requires the poet as a decoder and messenger.” For the command to be heard, the poet must first prepare himself through a kind of language game or existential wager. What is required is a certain “grammatical promiscuity” that indulgently 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.” This poetic allowance, which may lie at the root of animism, establishes a relation between subjects that takes the form of a pact or mutual benefit. In exchange for the risks of this reversal, in which the stone is endowed with the capacity to look back and speak, the poet receives the reward of being addressed with a “private illumination.” Here it is the message that makes the medium.65

Terence, of course, did not believe his illumination was meant for him alone; he and his brother were convinced they were bringing on the dawn of galactic humanity. Nonetheless, Sloterdijk's practical conclusion applies to them and to all our psychonauts: “religiosity is a form of hermeneutical flexibility and can be trained.”66 Later we will see how much the extraordinary experiences of Robert Anton Wilson and Philip K. Dick depended on their own wild hermeneutic habits. Reading the world through the eyes of a seeker, a visionary, a psychedelic animist, is an interpretive practice that, in flip-flopping subjects and objects, sets up messages that themselves speak—in the tongues of angels, of daemons, and of our inner elves.
After the Experiment, Terence and Dennis returned to the United States to pursue their own courses of research both within and outside the university. Living in Berkeley, Terence became obsessed with the *I Ching*, and began constructing a formal model of time and history out of the reverberations of his La Chorrera trip. His mathematical and apocalyptic speculations were so peculiar—and so feverishly pursued—that he alienated some of his more skeptical friends. At the University of Colorado Boulder, Dennis embarked on a more conventional study of chemistry and botany that would, inevitably, compromise (though by no means eradicate) his convictions in the integrity of their vegetable gnosis. 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 somewhat different paths.

Nonetheless, their mind-meld crystalized into two very different books they co-wrote and published in the mid-seventies. *The Invisible Landscape: Mind, Hallucinogens, and the I Ching* (1975) is a paragon of high-octane psychedelic speculation that manages to be simultaneously dry and delirious. *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 developed world by providing a relatively simple method 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 to interpret than as devices of weird naturalism that allowed the brothers to continue to work out, work through, and constellate their extraordinary experiences.67

Though *The Invisible Landscape* was not popular when it appeared, its first edition eventually became a collector's item, particularly among readers of drug literature and seventies esoterica. Grateful Dead guitarist Jerry Garcia, a more than adequate representative of such Fortean consumers of the weird, declared *The Invisible Landscape* “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 Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, as well as presenting surreal but highly technical descriptions of both the Stone and Terence's Timewave concept. Here I would like to focus on one aspect of the book: its preliminary engagement with the concept of shamanism. As an anthropological construct, the figure of the shaman has always been a shape-shifter. One transformation occurred when the category left its originally Siberian context to encompass consciousness-altering ritual specialists in Africa, Europe, and the New World. Another important metamorphosis took place in the postwar period. Until the middle of the twentieth century, most Western observers, including anthropologists, saw the shaman as a pathological creature or, at best, a showy charlatan. But in more recent Western discourse, psychedelic and otherwise, the indigenous shaman transforms into an ecognostic healer, a spiritual leader, and a psychopomp of global transformation.

The McKenna brothers found themselves somewhere in between these two poles. They begin their account with an Eliadean diagnosis of the existential impasse of the West. We are “anguished by the imminence of death, yet trapped in profane, historical time and thus able to regard death only as nothingness.” It is from the edge of this abyss, foreclosed from the saving presence of a “sacred, transcendent mode of being,” that rootless Westerners come to perceive a “useful role for a modern shamanism.” Note that the McKennas say *modern*. They weren't interested in apprenticing themselves to actual shamans, or in grounding their psychedelic speculations in the complexities of indigenous lore. Instead, the shaman becomes for them a figure of modernity—not the benighted one-dimensional modernity of mid-century man, but a possible (trans)modernity capable of integrating and navigating non-rational experience without retreating into myth.

The McKennas took Eliade's description of shamans as “technicians of the sacred” to heart. Shamans were not priests or prophets or healers, but *tool users* who deployed all manner of practices—drumming, dancing, fasting, plants—to achieve trance. But while Eliade had dismissed drug-using shamans as degenerates, the McKennas put the druggies first, insisting that shamanism without the “folk science” of psychedelic alkaloids “becomes ritual
alone, and its effectiveness suffers accordingly.”

In some sense, the McKennas’ shaman could become modern precisely because of his reliance on psychoactive catalysts. “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.” As with Terence’s vision of the solid-state Stone, modern shamans had no need for ritual or symbolism. Once you got your hands on the tech, you were good to go.

But the McKennas had another reason for opening their wild book with the figure of the shaman. Given that many colonialist accounts of shamanism attributed their social function and even their power to mental disorder (along with legerdemain), the brothers’ redescription of the shaman gave them a way to recuperate what they sometimes must have feared was their own temporary insanity. By invoking these archaic technicians of intoxication, the McKennas dodged the most obvious rejoinder to the Experiment: that the two young men had lost their marbles. The figure of the “modern shaman” became, then, a way to both acknowledge and outflank the diagnosis of schizophrenia or psychosis. But in doing so, they were participating in a larger countercultural push to question and transform the basic terms of psychopathology itself.
2.3.11 The Tightrope

In his 1967 article “Shamans and Acute Schizophrenia,” a central source for the McKennas, Julian Silverman makes a distinction between schizophrenia as an organic disease and a more episodic phenomenon he calls “reactive schizophrenia.” Silverman subdivides this latter category into “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 multiplication of magical connections is attributed to an outside agency, which is located in the environment rather than the self.

Silverman then outlines a multi-phase model of pathologic experience that, up to a certain point, characterizes both schizophrenics and shamans. Drawing from the hero's journey structure popularly articulated by Joseph Campbell, Silverman describes the earlier stages of this process as a descent into psychological chaos, a regressive state characterized by automatisms, archaic ideation, and encounters with transpersonal forces. This descent is then followed, most of the time, by a “cognitive reorganization.” It is at this point, however, that cultural conditions force the shaman and the schizophrenic to take different paths. While shamanic societies can embrace or at least allow for the creative possibilities of reactive schizophrenia, the West pathologizes and rejects them.72

Silverman’s work was part of the anti-psychiatric psychology that infused the countercultural era. He was still at the National Institute of Health when he published his article, but he soon found himself working at the Esalen Institute, perched on the Big Sur coast. Here Silverman worked on one of Esalen's main agendas: to rewrite insanity as an episodic process of psychic reorganization that follows the same death-and-rebirth model found, it was believed, in both esoteric initiations and deep psychedelic experience. Working with Esalen co-founder Richard Price, who struggled with mental illness throughout his life, Silverman also helped construct radical methods for treating schizophrenics at the Agnews State Hospital in California.
in 1968. Elsewhere, the American Jungian John Weir Perry argued that psychosis should be seen as part of an organic dynamic of healing rather than an illness or aberration.\footnote{73}

Transposed to drugs, the recuperation of psychosis suggested that even the scariest and most insane aspects of psychedelic experience—aka “tripping balls”—could be redeemed within a narrative of psychological development and integration, if not spiritual growth. But the McKennas were weird naturalists, and they went in a different, more realist direction. They held that an “invisible landscape” lay beyond the individual mind, an inner world to which shamans, schizos, and modern drug users all have elliptical access. Casting themselves as researchers, the brothers sought “to carry ourselves, as modern humans, into the same numinous landscape and to offer a report of interest to empirical investigators.”\footnote{74}

By presenting their wild ride as an empirical “report” aimed at other “investigators,” the McKennas sought to create the sort of legitimating cultural context that, as they had learned from Silverman, made all the difference between functional shamanism and madness. At the same time, the brothers also insisted that the difference between shamans and madmen was more than a matter of social reception. It was also a matter of attitude and skill, of savoir-faire. The schizophrenic is passive, an “unwilling victim, a traveler through what to him is a terrifying landscape.” In contrast, the shaman creatively “manipulates” the psychic maelstrom “for culturally valid reasons and with techniques of proven efficacy.”\footnote{75}

We have already cited the McKennas’ key image of the shaman’s 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.\footnote{76}

Here the boundary line that has haunted our discussion so far—as strange loop, Great Divide, and liminal threshold—returns as a tightrope, a site of vertiginous ecstasy and canny expertise. Recall that Peter Sloterdijk also argued that acrobats respond to the same “vertical tension” that inspired religious anthropotechnics, including
Christian ascetics and Greek metaphysicians, with their shared “acrobatics of sleeplessness.” Balancing on the razor's edge between the outside world and the primary process within, the McKennas' modern shaman performs, instead, an acrobatics of déliere.

To remain upright, the McKennas' modern shaman needs to occupy the no-longer-excluded middle, balancing between skepticism and credulity, madness and myth, technique and mystique. We might compare the art here to what John Keats famously characterized as negative capability, which allows its practitioners to remain “in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Or we could compare it to the epoché of classical Pyrrhonian skepticism or phenomenology, wherein non-evident beliefs inspired by experience are bracketed or suspended on the threshold of pure appearance. To remain upright, then, requires something like radical empiricism: a keen-eyed engagement with experience whose clarifying tension is maintained by suspending questions of ultimate meaning. This sort of cognitive high-wire act also sets up all manner of slips, falls, and stumbles. One kind of plunge is a descent into psychosis, understood here as a non-episodic rupture with consensus reality of the sort that swallowed Dennis up in the two weeks following the Experiment. A less drastic stumble might result in the sort of manic inflation Terence succumbed to in the months following his first trip to La Chorrera. But perhaps the trickiest tumble is into conviction, whether it takes the form of prophetic revelation, an obsessive esoteric system, or an idée fixe. All of these reifications of thought unbalance the open-minded tension required for radical empiricism. For much of the time, The Invisible Landscape maintains something like this balancing act. But it is also the record of one such fall.
The Timewave is the most influential concept in *The Invisible Landscape*, an abstract formulation of resonant temporality whose explication takes up roughly the second half of the book. These are, to be sure, rather recondite pages. Nonetheless, Terence’s recursive quasi-mathematical time function would eventually help birth a powerful millennial meme. Following Terence’s death in 2000, countless ravers, Burners, and neotribal mystics came to set their visionary sights on the apocalyptic goal-post that the Timewave planted on a now famous date: December 21, 2012, the end of the Mayan long-count calendar. And while Terence was by no means the sole proponent of this millennial prophecy, he gave the date its most charismatic face.

Though inspired by the Experiment and its conceptual aftermath, Terence extracted the Timewave itself from the *I Ching*, one of the most important texts of “Eastern wisdom” in the occultural canon. The oracle consists of sixty-four hexagrams, each of which is made up of a unique stack of six solid and broken lines that individually represent an archetypal snapshot of the constantly fluctuating cosmic forces of yin and yang. By using chance operations—most simply, a series of coin tosses—hexagrams are generated line by line, and these numbers and figures in turn refer to ancient core texts and “Ten Wings” of later commentaries.

Countless Beats and seekers were taken with the oracle, particularly in the Wilhelm/Baynes Bollingen edition that featured an important introduction by Carl Jung. In order to explain the oracular mechanism behind the *I Ching*, Jung invoked his recently-minted idea of *synchronicity*, the “acausal connecting principle” that he believed linked the psychology of meaningful coincidence to the probabilistic models of physical reality emanating from quantum physics. Indeed, as a venerable matrix of archaic images, cosmic correspondences, and numerical relationships, the *I Ching* almost demands such weird science, and Terence was hardly the first Westerner to start playing with the mathematical possibilities.
Terence really went to town. By multiplying the number of hexagrams by the number of lines in each hexagram, he came up with a number (384) that is nearly equivalent to the number of days (383.89) in a thirteen-moon calendrical period (like the ones that partly inform the Mayan calendar). This suggestive similarity—to my knowledge, unremarked before then by scholars of the *I Ching*—encouraged Terence to look for even deeper patterns of time by multiplying and permuting 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 date of 2012. Another pattern of values that caught Terence's fancy was the King Wen sequence, a traditional series of the sixty-four hexagrams that does not appear to follow a calculable series. Intrigued, Terence counted the number of lines that change between each hexagram in the sequence, and then mapped and graphed the resulting values. What appeared was a peculiar quasi-mathematical object: the Timewave.

In concert with the protocols for the Stone, the central organizing principal of the Timewave was *resonance*. In *True Hallucinations*, Terence tells us that, even as Dennis gradually returned to consensus reality, he himself became increasingly obsessed with "resonances, recurrences, and the idea that events were interference patterns caused by other events temporally and causally distant." One day,
Terence inscribed an ampersand in the dirt, noting that its figurative loop seemed to be a “natural symbol for a four-dimensional universe somehow bound into a 3-D matrix.” Maybe yes, maybe no, but in any case, the symbol came to indicate a unit of time he dubbed “the eschaton.” The eschaton was a temporal structure capable of generating interference patterns through space and time. “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.”

One important feature of the Timewave is that the jagged shape featured self-similarity across scale. (With good enough reason, Terence redubbed this self-similarity “fractal” for the 1994 edition of the *Invisible Landscape.*) Every stretch and cycle of time, from the cosmic to the momentary, reflected the same figure. By combining this fractal form with the apocalyptic notion of a hard stop, Terence was able to draw transtemporal correspondences between different cycles. He also came to locate the resonating culmination of the wave at a specific point. This was the moment when “all the eschatons would resonate together as a unity and thereby create an ontological transformation of reality.”

But if the Timewave was a model of the fluctuating patterns of time, what exactly was the stuff that was itself fluctuating? Here McKenna plucked a metaphysical concept from the process philosophy of one of his favorite thinkers, Whitehead: the concept of *novelty.* The Timewave modeled the degree of novelty that was “ingressing” at any particular historical moment.

Even those unfamiliar with Whitehead’s ideas should see the problem here: how does one quantify a concept like *novelty* in the first place? Does novelty increase with the beginning of a historical transformation—say, Thomas Newcomen’s commercialization of the steam engine in 1712—or the moments when the new force starts visibly transforming society? Without figuring out how to measure this stuff, the Timewave can never be a falsifiable scientific theory. As Dennis notes in his 2012 account, “It is a speculation, an interesting idea, a hallucination, a fantasy—but not a theory.”

This inherent arbitrariness became starkly apparent when Terence attempted to establish exact correspondences between the peaks and troughs of the Timewave and actual dates in history—and, in
particular, the date of the final apocalyptic spike. With a prophet's sense of imminence, Terence simply assumed that the acceleration of technological forces in the twentieth century indicates that we have entered the final stage of the novelty cycle. Fair enough. But Terence then 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 earlier discovered, he came up with a final end date in November, 2012. This moment, the point of the maximum ingress of novelty, was sucking all of human history towards it like a *Star Wars* tractor beam.

But esoteric systems, like revelations, are fungible (fungi-able?). After the publication of the first edition of the *Invisible Landscape*, Terence discovered that the end of the long count of the Mayan calendar landed on the winter solstice of 2012, a date that was also coming to feature heavily in the prophecies of the New Age author and artist José Argüelles. So when *The Invisible Landscape* was republished in 1994, Terence just bumped his *kairos* moment back a few weeks, forcing a resonance that helped launch the neo-hippie apocalypse.

There were more substantive problems with the Timewave as well. In the late nineties, a young mathematician and parapsychologist named Matthew Watkins pointed out some problems with the underlying formula. Together, Watkins and McKenna wrote an article called “Autopsy for a Mathematical Hallucination?”, which was published on Terence's website. But as both Watkins and Hanegraaff later argued, McKenna's attitude towards the so-called “Watkins objection” was not always so good-humored or even particularly honest. According to these authors, Terence maintained a passionate, even underhanded commitment to what, from anything like a “mathematical” perspective, could only be considered an error. Here the acrobat stumbled, unbalanced by his own attachments, and unable to maintain his own practices as a (weird) rationalist of sorts. To understand these attachments, then, we must turn to other sources.
2.3.13 Voices

Throughout his career as a public speaker in the eighties and nineties, Terence presented the Timewave as a theory largely supported by current events, especially 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 problems, the Timewave served as an oracular or poetic mirror of our dizzying posthuman acceleration. But for Terence the Timewave was, or had to be, more than this. Though he maintained a certain negative capability about the Timewave publicly, the theory was also the lynchpin for the reality of the Experiment. Mere poetry would have left Terence holding the psychopathological bag. Ironically, this most enchanting of storytellers needed to construct and offer something more than a story.

For Hanegraaff, the Timewave is infused with a specifically religious vision, a redemptive radicalism that expressed Terence’s fears of planetary catastrophe and his wish to find meaning in time and history. Hanegraaff plucks out one pregnant statement in *The Invisible Landscape* that summarizes the messianic hopes of the young men, whose psychedelia extended—rather than retreated from—their countercultural politics. “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.”\(^{89}\) The irony, of course, is that the mathematical literalism of the Timewave precisely cancels out its reasonableness, at least for many readers.

But there was another, more intimate spur for the Timewave, one that makes itself known through one of the occasional footnotes that Terence provides in the printed *True Hallucinations*. While narrating his discovery of the eschaton figure, Terence indicates to the reader that his wild thoughts at the time were later formalized in *The Invisible Landscape*, and continued to be refined afterwards. In
the same note, Terence also attributes these concepts to “the internal voice,” whose “presence and persistence” carried on over the years—or at least during subsequent mushroom trips. Through this voice, Terence felt like he was receiving a “holistic, systems-oriented approach to things.” At times, he even felt that he “was nothing more than a message decipherer, hard-pressed to keep up with a difficult incoming code.”

McKenna reminds us that, as readers and listeners of his work, we find ourselves at the end of a chain of ciphers and decipherments that originates in Terence’s direct encounter with what he called the Other. The Timewave is the crystallization of a daimonic pedagogical chain: from the Voice to concepts, from concepts to notebook, from notebook to the printed page, from the page back to Terence’s voice, and thence to our bemused brains. But one thing, perhaps the most important thing, is invariably lost in this translation: the uncanny presence—there is no better word—of the Voice. Indeed, the felt immediacy of this “extimate” inner speech probably established a more cosmic attitude in Terence’s mind than any philosophy, alchemical protocol, or time diagram it described.

Terence was critical enough to recognize that a voice in his head could not be expected to hold any authority or explanatory value for anyone else. After laying out Dennis’ equally wild pharmacological speculations at the end of The 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 of the Timewave in the face of its considerable problems indicates more, I believe, then his need to believe that his weird naturalism had paid off with a formal key to history. His attachment also speaks to the relational circuit of reciprocity and respect booted up by his existential encounter with the Voice.

This encounter, again, should remind us of Spiritualist seances or New Age channeling. It should also remind us of allies and pacts, whether we understand those bonds of obligation through an indigenous or occult or Castanedan lens. But in Terence’s texts—and with one crucial exception to which we will now turn—Terence could not bring this Voice forward as itself. He always spoke for, and to some extent in the place of, his inner other. And so the Timewave theory itself—rickety, but formalizable in marks and computer code,
and deeply resonant as techno-apocalyptic allegory—had to serve as the avatar of the Voice, a seal of trust in the Outside that speaks.
After a disappointing return trip to La Chorrera, Terence came back to Berkeley and settled down, while Dennis continued his studies in Colorado. The brothers collaborated on *The Invisible Landscape*, but also pursued another outstanding bit of La Chorrera business. They had returned from the jungle with spore prints of *cubensis*, and in 1975, they set themselves the task of figuring out how to reliably cultivate the fungi. As Terence tells the story, he decided to try growing the mushrooms on rye in canning jars. It was a time of intense personal turmoil, and at one point he more or less abandoned the project. Returning home from a desultory walk one day, he decided to clean out his grow shack, only to discover a thriving crop of shrooms. He tells us he wept with joy. “The elf legions of hyperspace had ridden to my rescue,” he writes with typical humor, though there is no mistaking the more sorcerous claim that follows: “I knew that the compact was still unbroken.”

Sadly, like many stories of scientific and technical discovery, this tale is too good to be true. In *Brotherhood of the Screaming Abyss*, Dennis sets the record straight: he made the breakthrough in Fort Collins, and through far less exalted means. Working with a fellow student, Dennis cultivated the mycelium in a tissue culture lab at school. Try as they might, they couldn't get the mass of hyphae to fruit. Then Dennis stumbled across an article in the journal *Mycologia* that discussed using canning jars and rye. A little elbow grease in the lab, *et voila*!

Few close listeners of Terence should be surprised to learn that he could be, as Dennis gently puts it, an “unreliable narrator.” Nonetheless, the gap between the lightning-bolt drama of his reported discovery and the more mundane and painstaking laboratory procedures that Dennis employed not only underscores Terence's need for scientific romance, but reminds us of the rivalry that, as much as their visionary consonance, defined the brothers' relationship. That said, Dennis also saw the breakthrough as a vindication of the Teacher's promises of La Chorrera—a “validation of the gnosis that had been given us.” The much-vaunted
“technology” promised by the Teacher could be seen, in this sense, as nothing more nor less than the simple methodology that the brothers made available to the world through the pseudonymous how-to manual they published in 1976.

As a handbook, *Psilocybin: Magic Mushroom Grower’s Guide* proved even more influential—if less visible—than Terence's seeding of the 2012 phenomenon. After all, the information in it was literally mind-blowing. 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. But the McKennas’ book was a bestseller of sorts, and earns its place as a major bifurcation point in the global symbiosis of *Psilocybe* mushrooms and the human nervous system. And by selling spore-prints through their Lux Natura company, the McKennas directly staged this particular meeting of mind and matter.

But here is the great paradox: the pragmatic thrust of this handbook, or perhaps its anonymity, created room for a few pages of prose that were more far-out than anything in *The Invisible Landscape*. Though Terence was generally anxious about intellectual credibility, here he let himself channel the mystery of the Voice with all its esoteric and science-fiction overtones intact. “The mushroom speaks,” Terence announces to the reader in the foreword, before handing the fungus the mic.
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“I am old, older than thought in your species, which is itself fifty times older than your history,” the citation begins. “Though I have been on earth for ages I am from the stars.” In two long, dramatic paragraphs, the Voice provides some facts about mushrooms, before describing the “hyperlight communication” it uses to maintain a galactic network of spore colonies on distant worlds. The Voice then makes a startling offer: a pact. It will provide the plans for building “hyperlight-drive ships” in exchange “for a free ticket to new worlds around suns less forsaken and nearer galaxy center.”

Despite this Starmaker-worthy monologue, Psilocybin is more a work of practical science than of science fiction. The galactic visions sometimes occasioned by psilocybin mushrooms are in this sense tightly tied to technical knowledge—not the fantasized blueprints for hyperlight drives, but the solid protocols that make up the bulk of the Grower’s Guide. And yet, the handbook's concrete practicality allowed the esoteric and fantastic desires that fuel the 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 before we bid adieu to the brothers McKenna. Like spore-prints of the Zeitgeist, they all point toward specific features of the seventies mindscape that shaped the brothers as it shaped Robert Anton Wilson, Philip K. Dick, and who knows how many other high weirdos.

One of these features is the emphasis on networks, a term that is old-hat in mycology but that would, in the seventies, take on increasingly significant technological, economic, and social meanings. Here, in an example of the sort of network naturalization that would later spread with the growth of the Internet, the mushroom's rhizomatic form is poetically amplified into a medium of consciousness. The Voice explains that the mycelial networks of psilocybe found on our planet, which “may have far more connections than the number in a human brain,” are actually hosting a galactic hypermind. Though the Internet—still a tyke in the mid-seventies—is nowhere mentioned, the mushroom's network metaphysics resonates with it nonetheless, as if its words were another foreshock from Terence's object at the end of time.

The second notable feature of the Voice is the extraterrestrial rhetoric of outer space itself. Though the brothers could have easily
wrapped their underground methodology in a Jungian-indigenous package of sage-scented ancient earth mysteries, the McKennas instead looked into the cosmos (and science fiction) for both origins and future fulfillment. What results is a gnostic or transhumanist mode of visionary possibility that simultaneously authenticates their countercultural sense of 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. In the mid-seventies, this biological concept had by no means achieved the posthuman panache it possesses today, when both interspecies agencies and human-technological hybrids are widespread sites of thought and engagement. In the mushroom's concluding words, we can recognize how deeply the ecological logic of species symbiosis resonates with the occult exchanges that compose 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 here of the results of acting without good faith. This should give us pause. After all, even a cursory glance at folklore and occult literature would turn up examples of the capriciousness of daimonic pacts. By reframing such daemonic alliances through the material symbiosis of metabolism, Terence naturalized the Voice, rounding off its sorcerous edges. In any case, Terence was clearly willing to make the deal, an alliance with the nonhuman that drove his public career and fired his apocalyptic optimism. And in *Psilocybe* he honored the Voice in his head by writing it down, creating a lasting inscription of the inside Outside, and a reminder of all that remains unassimilable—and yet strangely articulate—in the metabolic mysteries of La Chorrera.
Bavarian Illuminati

Founded by Hoamen i Sebbe, 1690 A.D. (5600 A.L., 4550 A.M.)
Reformed by Adam Weishaupt, 1776 A.D. (5776 A.L., 5536 A.M.)

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sealed in the apparently innocent
legend of Snow White and the Seven
Dwarfs?

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TURN PALE with terror at the
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Profane Illuminations

In 1975, the paperback outfit Dell published the *Illuminatus!* trilogy, a pinnacle of literary 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 hooded one-eyed being looming over a pyramid. In *Leviathan*, this strange entity transforms into an octopus.

Perfectly keyed to a countercultural readership both confused and transformed by sex, drugs, radical politics, and the occult revival, the *Illuminatus!* trilogy (henceforth, simply *Illuminatus!* ) explored the lore of conspiracy theories and secret societies with a satiric, experimental, and willfully pulp sensibility. This lent—and to some degree still lends—the novel a peculiar literary charisma, a sort of low-brow postmodernism riddled with borrowings, metafictional moves, and jokey mise-en-abymes. Shea and Wilson's work also contains all manner of appropriated subcultural voices, whose stolen thunder gives the novel an unusually dense anthropological texture, especially for a work of madcap fantasy.

*Illuminatus!* was particularly notable for broadcasting the existence of Discordianism, a tiny but actually existing “parody religion” whose metaphysical pranks and anarchist media tactics—principally communicated in the many editions of their core scripture, the *Principia Discordia*—both anticipated and engendered the freethinking mysticism that animated much of the psychedelic and esoteric underground. As we will see, Discordianism not only played with the fictional dimension of religion, but attempted to
affirm, with great humor, precisely the chaos and confusion that most religious formations are designed to combat or constrain.

The trilogy also helped establish the writing career of Robert Anton Wilson, one of the most intriguing and important fringe thinkers to emerge from the American counterculture. In the wake of *Illuminatus!*, Wilson's later novels continued to compound fiction with history, satire with esotericism. At the same time, his witty and iconoclastic nonfiction writings forged an innovative vision of hedonic and skeptical pragmatism. In books like *Prometheus Rising* (1983) and *Quantum Psychology: How Brain Software Programs You & Your World* (1990), he demonstrated hands-on reality hacking using concepts and tools drawn from a digressive autodidact's grab-bag of discourses, including existentialism, phenomenology, general semantics, parapsychology, sociology, literature, and quantum physics.

While these interests are on display in *Illuminatus!*, Wilson's own plunge into high weirdness became the topic of his 1977 book *Cosmic Trigger: Final Secret of the Illuminati*. In this memoir, Wilson provides a personal and intellectually reflective account of a long bout of paranoia, ecstasy, and speculative excess he experienced in the early seventies. These were years in which Wilson dove into psychedelics, Crowleyian ritual magic, and neo-tantric sexuality. From July 1973 until October 1974, by his reckoning, Wilson entered what he called Chapel Perilous: a persistent “reality tunnel” in which an extraterrestrial intelligence from the star system Sirius regularly sent him telepathic messages while staging ominously significant synchronicities in his everyday life.

With acrobatic acumen, and probably some luck, Wilson eventually managed to slip out of this particular cognitive framework. *Cosmic Trigger* can therefore be read as a record of, and a creative response to, the sorts of extraordinary experiences that occur when weirdness leaks out from its home in genre and smacks you upside the head. As we will see, both the form and content of Wilson's long California trip derive from the political and cosmic conspiracies mobilized in *Illuminatus!*. It was as if Wilson's weird fictions bled into the central currents of his life and mind. And Wilson was the sort who in large measure welcomed and embraced this kind of “metaprogramming” loop.
To frame and trace Wilson's extraordinary visionary experiences, we first need to look at *Illuminatus!* in some detail. Here I am not so interested in offering a critical appraisal of this delirious and admittedly dated work. Instead, I want to unearth the moves and materials out of which the novel's high weirdness is made. I want to show how Wilson and Shea played their games with consensus reality by appropriating previously existing cultural materials—esotericism, political conspiracy, and supernatural fiction in particular—that were themselves directed against the fixed being of the world.

I also want to show how the memes, symbols, and concepts in *Illuminatus!* were spring-loaded, aimed, and shot outside the page—into the reader's mind and, unintentionally, into Wilson's existence as well. As readers of Lovecraft and other pulp metafictions know, such boundary crossings are one of the great tropes of weird literature, a category within which we must surely place *Illuminatus!* But if the trilogy is an example of weird fiction, it also exemplifies the genre's infectious character—a capacity to directly shape culture and consciousness, and to therefore blur the boundaries of fiction and facticity in liberating and disturbing ways.
3.4.1 Plot, Counterplot

With *Illuminatus!*, Shea and Wilson spliced together a restless, baggy, and sometimes brilliant text that, though it has never gone out of print, lurks in its own dank limbo of literary and cultural memory. Written mostly between 1969 and 1971, and only mildly revised before final publication in 1975, it is an unquestionably groundbreaking novel that sustains formal and thematic comparisons to a number of contemporaneous postmodern classics. Like Ishmael Reed in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Shea and Wilson channel urgent political desires into a satirical collage of esoteric conspiracy stories; like Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* (1977), *Illuminatus!* plays with paranoia, fugue states, and druggy dialogue; like E.L. Doctorow in *Ragtime* (1975), Shea and Wilson invent imaginative encounters between historical figures in an irreverent fashion that challenges conventional history.

The resonances with Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) are particularly tight. Thematically, *Illuminatus!* also takes on paranoia, drugs, sexual hi-jinks, Nazis, mystical illumination, the second law of thermodynamics, cybernetics, anarchist pranks, weird science, occult arcana, goofy pop music, and rumors of apocalypse. As in Pynchon's book, characters appear and disappear, occasionally change identity mid-paragraph, and possess goofy names like Markoff Chaney, Tarantella Serpentine, and the Dealy Lama. Both novels are stuffed with an encyclopedic range of references and genres. Most importantly, both books compel the reader to question the link between the rational and the real, and to even enjoy their disentanglement.¹

That said, *Illuminatus!* resists canonization as a literary work, even as a PKD-like outlier. One challenge is the novel's somewhat off-putting blend of pulp indulgence and ironic, avant-garde affectation. On the one hand, the novel's prose and plots draw directly from popular forms like science fiction, right-wing pamphlets, porn, and the druggy slapstick of underground comics. On the other, the writing is self-consciously “experimental,” with abrupt temporal transitions and shifts of voice, Joycean word jazz,
and copious meta-fictional asides. But without Reed's anger or Dick's pathos or Pynchon's alchemical prose, Wilson and Shea's style, a mix of high-brow and low-rent, often fails to zap their Frankenstein monster of a text to literary life.

Regardless, *Illuminatus!* is a masterpiece of seventies high weirdness, despite—or even because of—its ungainly and dated excesses. Indeed, the book's very proximity to crank literature, radical zines, and the raunchy fringes of the freak scene also lends it a vivid archival density, like a slightly mildewed *arcanum* of the Zeitgeist. At the same time, and in a way not shared by the McKennas or Dick, *Illuminatus!* directly speaks to the political dimension of high weirdness. *Illuminatus!* is not just a novel but a guerrilla work of anarchist culture jamming. Mobilizing occulture, political conspiracies, and psychoactive metaphysics, Wilson and Shea show that the world is considerably more malleable than it at first appears—and that this flip-flop of fact and fantasy is always political, for good and for ill. This lends the work an almost prophetic relevance for readers grappling with the media-driven fragmentation of consensus reality today, whether it takes the form of “fake news” wars, the smirking “meme magick” of the alt.right, the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories, or the futuristic blaze of Silicon Valley libertarianism.

The origin of *Illuminatus!* underscores the central importance of political discourse to the novel's crazy quilt of voices. Wilson and Shea met as worker bees in Hugh Hefner's Chicago headquarters, where one of their tasks was to edit and write replies to the Playboy Forum. Not to be confused with Playboy Advisor, a sex advice column, the Forum was introduced in the magazine in 1963 with the express purpose of creating public discussion around “the Playboy philosophy.” This amounted to Hefner's strongly held positions on life, sex, politics, and the pursuit of happiness.

Hefner's hedonistic Epicureanism made him a vocal if self-interested advocate for strong civil liberties (including, in a rarity for the time, abortion rights). The Forum consequently attracted a wide variety of political players, including libertarian and right-wing voices who on occasion linked the encroachment of civil liberties to larger political conspiracies. Given *Playboy*'s visibility, the Forum became a clearing house for such alternative views. Wilson and Shea found themselves opening letters from cranks, paranoid psychotics,
JFK assassination researchers, and members of the John Birch Society—a rabid anti-communist organization who feared that an international cabal of bankers and statesmen was installing a totalitarian New World Order.

As a lark, the two editors started playing with another conspiratorial scenario: one in which all the plots sent into Playboy were simultaneously true. This kaleidoscopic “what if” pluralism became the basic protocol of their novel-writing. Picking through the waste basket of uncertain and discarded knowledge, Shea and Wilson forged surreal and satirical links between actual historical actors, existing conspiracy theories, radical politics, drug scene paranoia, and occulture. In contrast to Pynchon's paranoid proverbs, Illuminatus! familiarizes its readers with a web of lore that hews much more closely to actually existing esoteric and political plots. What results, then, is a disorienting epistemological dance between fact and fiction. This instability in turn generates a growing network of correspondences whose resonances threaten to overwhelm the reader's skepticism with ominous doses of synchronicity.

As such, Illuminatus! is an example of what the scholar Asbjorn Dyrendal calls conspiracy culture. In his writings, Dyrendal makes a key distinction between conspiracy theory—in which specific agents are exposed and analyzed by researchers largely convinced by their own arguments—and a broader, more “postmodern” conspiracy culture characterized by uncertainty, skepticism, and a peculiar sense of enjoyment that navigates “between ‘passive’ entertainment and active play...between mocking and belief.”

For both readers and writers, Illuminatus! was an initiation into the dangerous pleasures of conspiracy culture. At the same time, the work also paradoxically thickened the believability of certain occult and conspiratorial possibilities that continue to strut their stuff today through the margins of the political imagination. Wilson and Shea prophesied a dynamic that has today become a vertiginous fact of the American political landscape: that conspiracy media is inextricable from what we might call, pace Fredric Jameson, America's religious unconscious. But if Wilson and Shea's exuberant confusion of fact and fantasy has come to take on rather ominous overtones, that only speaks to the weird power of the political and ultimately mystical logic they stumbled upon, satirized, and spread.
3.4.2 Conspiracy Culture

Before we continue with *Illuminatus!*, we need to get a better handle on the term “conspiracy theory,” which is now routinely used to categorize and castigate narratives about current events that go against the official grain. Contemporary conspiracy theories include stories about elite child abuse rings; the suppression of scientific research data; Hollywood mind control; the origins of ISIS; and the alien lizards who lurk within the aristocratic echelons of global power. But the historical roots of the term are highly specific. As the political scientist Lance deHaven-Smith makes clear, the phrase “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.4

For deHaven-Smith, “conspiracy theory” was thus born as an instrument of elite discourse that deflected attention from its own operations by conflating two very different sorts of narrative challenges to consensus. On the one hand, you have rational but nonconforming political, economic, and historical accounts that attempt to describe and expose covert organizations or individual agents working behind the scenes to achieve concrete goals. On the other hand, you have ungrounded, baroque, and sometimes “paranoid” fabulations whose flawed logic produces imaginative narratives that are more or less akin to mythology, clinical delusions, and urban folklore.5

DeHaven-Smith argues that “conspiracy theory,” as a construction, has been able to successfully corral alternative political views by *disguising* the difference between these two kinds of narrative. (In our era of fake news and presidential conspiracy mongering, the term's power of containment has considerable waned.) By reframing reality claims as forms of fantasy, elites and other invested parties were able to brand conspiracy talk as too *weird* to take seriously. And so the stereotypical figure of the “conspiracy theorist” gets seared into America's political imagination: a feverish pedant whose
obsession with hidden networks of political and sometimes supernatural power leads them to craft and obsessively broadcast scenarios that are intrinsically fanciful, illogical, hysterical, and inaccurate.

DeHaven-Smith, writing from what now seems a distant golden age of reason, argues that the pervasiveness of actual political and corporate conspiracies in our times demands that 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.

Though similarly suspicious of elite history, Illuminatus! is founded on the opposite premise: that the distinction between the political discourse of conspiracy and the fantastic fabulations of the paranoid, psychedelic, or occult mind is impossible to locate. As such, Wilson and Shea go out of their way to frame conspiracy theories—even those rooted in historical truth—as political forms of mystery religion. Meanwhile, they represent gnosis and other forms of mystical experience as inherently political, always enmeshed in the sort of control systems described by William Burroughs, in which esoteric truths are always potentially weaponized. Politics, for them, is inextricable from cosmic paranoia.

The historian Richard Hofstadter famously identified the “paranoid style” of American politics in a Harpers magazine article written in 1964, when the gunshots of Dealey Plaza were still echoing through a rattled nation’s collective brain. Hofstadter made it clear that he was not deploying paranoia in a clinical sense, but as a figure for a certain political personality type—the sort of person that hunts Commies in Hollywood, joins the John Birch Society, and occasionally sends in screeds to the Playboy Forum. By using the language of psychopathology to understand America's long political tradition of “suspicious discontent,” Hofstadter helped connect the emerging discourse of conspiracy theory—he did not use the term—with the paranoid's “leap into fantasy.” Moreover, Hofstadter recognized that this domain of fantasy was laced or laden with religious figures and forces. “The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms,” Hofstadter writes. “He traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values.”
As a few contemporary writers have noted, there are also significant points of contact between conspiracy talk and esotericism. Both use symbolic correspondences and other forms of associational thinking to emphasize hidden hierarchies of power, “secret chiefs,” mind control, and counter-normative histories. These discourses in turn shape the initiate or researcher into a “diamantine self” capable of waking up to the deeper reality of things. Like esoteric thinkers, conspiracy theorists offer their readers a strangely doubled gnosis. On the one hand, their heretical lore frees the reader from malevolent historical, ideological, and psychic spells cast by evil or ignorant manipulators. On the other, this liberation is achieved by initiating the individual into an elite (or counter-elite) current of knowledge that is also rejected by the majority of people in society. In this light, both esotericism and conspiracy theory, again, are forms of rejected knowledge. Once thrust into the same junk heap, the commingling of the two domains becomes almost inevitable.

When he penned his essay in 1964, Hofstadter was writing in the shadow of the John Birch Society's support for Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign, as well as the more distant gloom of Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist witch-hunt. Hofstadter sincerely hoped to clear the air with his observations. But when Wilson and Shea started *Illuminatus!* five years later in Chicago—where Wilson ran in the riots outside the Democratic convention—the air was full of tear-gas and smoke. Reasoned discourse was not on the table. With vertiginous abandon and radical joy, they engaged paranoia as an infectious, playful, and dangerous mode of literary world-building (and destroying). Paranoia, for them, was an altered state of political consciousness that forced a confrontation with the shadowy phantasms that, whether by design or not, cloak actual instruments of power. In particular, Wilson and Shea used their text to invoke one particular *bête noir* of fringe political history frequently excoriated by the contributors to the Playboy Forum (and now held responsible for the insidious subliminal messages in hip-hop videos): the Bavarian Illuminati.
Wilson and Shea's invocation of the Illuminati goes to the heart of their weird method. The fictional spell they weave draws its words and stories from deep history, from the core fact, which still feels like fantasy, that the Illuminati are, or were, “real.” Mainstream 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, Illuminati talk was revived by right-wing groups like the John Birch Society, and, as such, makes a notable appearance in Hofstadter's seminal essay. 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.
Early in *Illuminatus!*, Wilson and Shea introduce the lore of the Illuminati through cut-and-paste assemblage, a method that helps confound the distinction between fact and fiction while reflecting on their own practice as editors and researchers. Detectives Saul Goodman and Barney Muldoon investigate the bombing of the offices of *Confrontation*, a leftwing magazine whose editor has disappeared. Uncovering a stack of memos from one of the magazine's reporters, Goodman begins piecing together elements of the Illuminati narrative, with the reader faithfully following at his heels for many pages. These memos combine actual conspiracy literature—like Bircher pamphlets on the Council on Foreign Relations, or Arkon Daraul's *A History of Secret Societies* (1961)—with citations that Shea and Wilson had planted pseudonymously in the Playboy Forum and the rock magazine *Teenset*. (More about these pranks in a moment.)

Wilson and Shea do not just pour this data into the reader's mind. As they narrate Goodman's reactions, they also model the different sorts of cognitive processes that can be catalyzed by exposure to
conspiracy material. To organize the memos, Goodman first applies 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.” But then Goodman applies a different cognitive tool. After following his gut, the detective 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 discussed in an earlier section, is offered almost as a training exercise for the readers of Illuminatus!, who are only just girding their loins for seven hundred more exposition-stuffed pages.

Of course, these memos ultimately prove to be little more than sacrificed pawns in the seemingly endless proliferation of Illuminati plots and Discordian counter-plots that Illuminatus! teasingly and only partly unpacks. The profligacy of these scenarios, and the authors’ willingness to put compelling historical sense in the mouths of all manner of characters, makes the ideological and occult networks of Illuminatus! all but impossible to diagram. This confusion is part of the point: not only does it draw the questing reader into a state of political and ontological uncertainty, but it reflects the fact that even the most sober students of secret societies and esoteric undercurrents must enter a psychologically trying and intellectually taxing labyrinth of ambiguity.

In keeping with many contemporary conspiracy theories, some Confrontation memos describe a shadowy cabal of global elites who maintain their power through the Machiavellian manipulation of political and ideological movements. At the same time, these networks also rely on more esoteric technologies of control and obfuscation in order to disguise the New World Order that they almost entirely control behind the scenes. As such, concerns with covert power begin to inevitably give way to occult and metaphysical possibilities. One memo, for example, tracks Weishaupt’s Order back to the medieval hash-smoking Ishmaelian sect the Order of the Assassins, whose leader, Hassan i Sabbah, 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 the first of many pet theories:

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.11

Talk about the politics of consciousness. The Illuminati, which *Illuminatus!* implies are responsible for the assassinations that devastated liberal and progressive America in the sixties, are also linked to the sorts of extraordinary experiences associated with the counterculture's use of drugs and mysticism (not to mention sex). As such, the novel's black hats are not reactionaries, royalists, Straussian statists, or law-and-order cops—many of whom are actually portrayed by the authors in a reasonably positive, almost Phildickean light. Like the anarchist Discordians that make up their supposed foes, the Illuminati are instead made up of what the novel characterizes as *homo neophilus*—neophiles who shun traditionalism and want to exuberantly accelerate the deterritorializing forces associated with capitalism, technology, and secular modernity. The end result of their neoliberal science, then, is not simply control but a sort of diabolical transhumanism.

Later, much later, we learn that four of the five leaders of the Illuminati are in a German rock band named the American Medical Association, whose headlining appearance at a huge free festival in Bavaria forms one of the climaxes of the novel. The ultimate goal of the AMA is to “immanentize the eschaton,” an apocalyptic phrase popularized by William F. Buckley in the sixties. Buckley drew the phrase from the conservative historian Eric Voegelin, who warned
that modern totalitarian movements were attempting to forcibly realize the Christian millennial kingdom—the eschaton—on earth. In his *The New Science of Politics*, from 1952, 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” Voegelin linked directly to Marxism and other utopian and collectivist movements that he helped no one by labeling “gnostic.”

Like the term “Illuminism” itself, the notion of immanentizing the eschaton fuses and confuses the secular and the mystical, technology and gnosis, Enlightenment and enlightenment. Like the notion of emancipation itself, the phrase simultaneously speaks to something attractive and terribly destructive in modernity: a secular yen for emancipation no longer circumscribed by theology or natural law but manifesting as a plenum of novelty that overturns the traditional foundations of transcendence and makes the world anew.

Such immanence, which in some sense is shared by both the white hats and the black hats in *Illuminatus!*, is profoundly ambivalent. In *Leviathan*, the final volume, this eschatology takes a turn towards B-movie horror, when we learn that the AMA plan to achieve their immanentizing operation (and become immortal) by harvesting the life-energy of the festival fans after slaughtering them with battalions of, yes, Nazi zombies hibernating at the bottom of a nearby lake. Here, and neither for the first nor last time in our study, massive historical forces are allegorized in the tawdry genre forms of the weird. To give shape to the political unconscious, Wilson and Shea suggest, one must first confound politics with pulp. The challenge, then, is not to be captured by the archetypes that bubble up from the depths.
3.4.4 Fnord

Against the nefarious schemes of the Illuminati, *Illuminatus!* both depicts and offers its own forms of critical gnosis. Such edgy awakenings, whether we see them as “spiritual” or not, are an important component to the work of emancipation, which is perhaps the supreme value shared across the fissures of the counterculture, motivating radical leftists, hippie seekers, and psychedelic anarchists alike. Paradoxically, however, the goals of emancipation and liberation were often paired at the time with sociological ideas and structural analyses that radically decentered the autonomous individual psyche. Attitudes, motives, dreams and drives—even the personal experience of reality itself—were, it was argued, shaped or programmed by often pernicious political, institutional, and ideological forces. So who is there to be liberated?

This koan suggests the way that sociological, cultural, and ideological analyses already lend themselves to a kind of conspiracy thinking. But to truly escape these influences and imprints, if only to turn around and reconstruct society, something more than critique is required. The external struggle, whether collective or anti-authoritarian, needed to be paralleled with the internal work of “raising consciousness”—of becoming, in contemporary terms, “woke.” Gnosis—raising consciousness to a peak of world-rending insight—becomes in this context a political gesture, one that both illuminates the dark archons that manipulate reality, and provides a direct experience of that part of the self that seeks—or is—liberation itself. Awakening, here, is not an escape from the wheel, but a vertiginous discernment that goes against the grain.

While there are many modes of revelation offered in *Illuminatus!*, the forms of insight capable of penetrating covert ideological controls are associated, in particular, with the ability to “see the fnords.” Fnords are trigger words planted by the Illuminati in television shows, newspapers, and other popular media. Fnords exploit two forms of previously installed conditioning, whose mechanisms are never explained. The first response produces Pavlovian anxiety upon stumbling across the word “fnord.” The second, self-cancelling
response hypnotically over-writes this moment of recognition with amnesia, leaving us feeling “a general low-grade emergency without knowing why.” Advertisements, of course, never feature fnords, because they want us to happily consume.

By overcoming this second moment, the amnesia of business as usual, one is able to see the fnords and know that one is seeing them. This amounts to a gnostic (or paranoid) media critique that, following the esoteric dialectic of conspiracy theory described earlier, simultaneously exposes a hidden order of control while initiating the seer into a heretical counter-cabal of ostracized knowers. Seeing the fnords is a kind of waking up, since the fnords normally work beneath the crucial threshold where the arts of persuasion and propaganda, which are still addressed to more-or-less conscious subjects, cross over into a technical order of subliminal or a-signifying behavioral control.

Wilson and Shea were hardly writing in a vacuum here. While concerns with propaganda, social conditioning, and “brainwashing” were a pervasive feature of the ideology-crazed postwar world, the early seventies proved a particularly ripe environment for such concerns, both in the avant-garde and in popular culture. William S. Burroughs—whose spirit lies heavy over Illuminatus!, as it does over Philip K. Dick—wrote a number of essays in those years that outlined a theory of control influenced in part by his ten-year immersion in Scientology. In particular, Burroughs emphasized L. Ron Hubbard's concept of the “reactive mind,” which the old Beat defined 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 viral theory of language, positing “a very small unit of word and image” that can be “biologically activated” as part of a control system. In other words, a fnord.

Within popular culture, one might also point to the bestselling 1973 book Subliminal Seduction. In these rather crude pages, Wilson Bryan Key claimed that the media universe was saturated with what he called “embeds”—words, images, and symbols, usually redolent with sexuality, that were ever-so-faintly layered into both audio and visual advertisements. (Copulating figures in ice cubes were particularly compelling for Key.) Though some of Key's examples
were convincing, his vision was so totalizing that it resembles conspiracy theory. Nonetheless, the resulting public outcry led to an official Federal Communications Commission statement in 1974 condemning the practice of subliminal advertising.

Here we should recall Timothy Melley’s insightful argument that modern conspiracy theory hinges on the experience of “agency panic.” Agency panic is what happens when the individual's enjoyment of autonomy gives way to a fearful suspicion that one's actions and beliefs are being controlled by external forces. In the face of this, conspiracy theory attempts to “defend the integrity of the self against the social order.”

This defense, which attempts to protect and preserve autonomy, also depends on a corresponding—and arguably perverse—attribution of agency to the social order. To protect the self, the theorist must make society more of a self as well, and an insidious one at that. Aspects of society that sociologists might call “structural forces” are animated and combined with older notions “of a malevolent, centralized, and intentional program of mass control.”

In this light, conspiracy theory becomes a crude form of ideology critique that projects demiurgic agency onto the sort of institutional power formations analyzed by social scientists and Foucauldian historians. While acknowledging that something like this “paranoid style” has existed for centuries, Melley also argues—correctly to my mind—that the style undergoes a significant shift in the postwar era. In particular, the concern with hidden institutional power shifts to a concern with hidden semiotic power. Now the real threat is less a specific agent or group than “a system of communications, an organized array of ideas, discourses, and techniques.”

While the evil boardroom cabal remains at the phantasmic core of the spiderweb, the real action takes place within the universe of mediation itself, where the apparatus of control operates on the threshold between the pop culture arts of persuasion and the dark science of conditioning, behavioral psychology, and other subliminal techniques.

Melley’s analysis helps us understand the critical gnosis pictured and offered in Illuminatus! Postwar suspicions about the system of communications, whether sprinkled with fnords or not, open up the possibility of a reverse action within the same space. Such media
tactics suggest a mode of resistance that depends less on the paranoid defense of individual autonomy and its fragile boundaries, and more on the destabilization of the system of communication itself through tactics of chaos, cut-ups, and ironic reversal. Here gestures minted from earlier moments of the avant-garde—nonsense, noise, aleatory juxtaposition—become tactically redirected against the mediating structures that support the social construction of reality.

Burroughs remains the key figure here. The cut-up practices he explored with Brion Gysin and the film-maker Antony Balch, as well as the spliced tape-recorder tactics outlined in his seventies essays on the control society, suggest the possibility of interrupting or “jamming” the demiurgic signals of dominant culture. These tactics can certainly be understood as part of a secular media praxis of pranks and Situationist détournement. But for Burroughs, as for the Discordians, these were also eminently occult acts—spells of esoteric evasion and spectral resistance against the dominant sorcery of capital and the state. 19

Illuminatus! operates deeply within this current of culture jamming. Even its narrative fabric follows the avant-garde logic of the cut-up, with an abundance of abrupt transitions, promiscuous (and not always acknowledged) appropriations, confusions of fact and fiction, and relentless mash-ups of heterogenous materials and perspectives. The book is also 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 the McLuhanesque space of electronic communication that took historical form during the countercultural era, and sets up interference patterns and other unruly resonances within that system.

As such, the book is peppered with both gnostic esoterica and media pranks—a few of which, as we will see, took place in the actual world. Indeed, Illuminatus! itself can be seen as one of the biggest Discordian media assaults of all. But amidst all the zaniness and bad puns, Wilson and Shea sought to expose and undercut the ideological, psychological, and linguistic abstractions that constrain and construct our experience of reality. And they did so even at the cost of initiating the reader into an abyss of freedom that is at once
absurd and utterly clear, disturbingly uncanny and deeply liberating— and never without another weird twist in the works.20
3.4.5 Open Source Sacred

THE MAGNUM OPIATE OF MALACLYPSE THE YOUNGER

NOT JUNK MAIL

PRINCIPIA DISCORDIA
OR
How I Found Goddess
And What I Did To Her
When I Found Her

Wherein is Explained
Absolutely Everything Worth Knowing
About Absolutely Anything

A jug of wine,
A leg of lamb
And thou
Beside me,
Whistling in
the darkness.

Be Ye Not Lost Among Precepts of Order...
THE BOOK OF UTERUS 1:5
One of the fatal flaws of conspiracy thinking is its monological—even monotheistic—rejection of the deeply pluralistic fabric of human and cosmic reality. In the face of the incessant struggles, negotiations, and opportunistic alliances that characterize visible history—natural or otherwise—the theorist focuses on their pet omnipotent organization, unified in purpose and method, whose insidious plans somehow rarely clash with powerful rivals or countervailing internal factions. This is part of the genius of Illuminatus! By weaving together a myriad of conspiracies—some invented, some lifted from the political fringe, and some from consensus history—Wilson and Shea were able to mock this monomania without denying the existence of an unseen world of esoteric organizations, apocalyptic plots, and subliminal stratagems. Instead, this literally “occult” world comes very much to resemble conventional history, with all its contests and contingency.

So even as we watch the Illuminati take violent and demonic steps towards immanentizing the eschaton, their nefarious hijinks are continually thwarted and diffused. Their most important rivals are the Discordians, aka the Legion of Dynamic Discord. Mirroring the endlessly splintering factions of sixties radicalism, the Discordians share their anti-Illuminati underground activities with other groups like the Erisian Liberation Front, the Eristics, and the JAMs, or Justified Ancients of Mummu. The Discordians are internally divided as well, following the anti-collectivist injunction that “We Discordians must stick apart.” As such, the Discordians incarnate the anarchic force of pluralism itself. But it is a pluralism that can still break bread over a shared if shifting value: the worship of chaos, which is at once an ontological principal, an anarchist politics, and a literal goddess.

Though they may sound like a pure fiction, the Discordians that appear in the novel were a small but very real “movement” occupying a rather recherché fringe of American bohemia. According to its origin story, the movement began when two young Californians named Gregory Hill and Kerry Thornley—smart-aleck humanists, Mad magazine readers, and ironic fans of Southern California's wacko religious landscape—visited a late-night bowling alley in Los Angeles county, most likely in Whittier, in 1958 (or 1959).21 Bitching over coffee about the hassle and discord of life, they were suddenly struck by a great light. Time froze, and a chimpanzee appeared,
enumerating mysteries like nipples on males and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, finally declaring that “Somebody had to put all this discord here!” By way of an answer, the simian then unrolled a scroll inscribed with the yin-yang symbol of the Tao, though now modified into the Sacred Chao, with a pentagon and an apple inscribed with the word ΚΑΛΛΙΣΤΗΙ.

Like good mystic hermenauts, Hill and Thornley researched the elements of their vision over the following days. The apple led them into the arms of the Greek goddess Eris, known to the Romans as Discordia. As Saul Goodman later explains to his partner in *Illuminatus!*, Eris is best known for catalyzing the Trojan war. Snubbed by the Olympians, who did not invite her to a wedding, Eris tossed a golden apple into the gathering, inscribed with the phrase ΤΗΙ ΚΑΛΛΙΣΤΗΙ, which means “for the prettiest one.” The assembled goddesses start vying for the prize until Zeus commanded Paris to make the call. He chose Aphrodite, who rewarded him with the opportunity to kidnap fair Helen, thereby triggering the Trojan War.22

Five nights after the bowling alley vision, the young men both dreamt of Eris, a beautiful goddess who told them

I have come to tell you that you are free. Many years ago, My consciousness left man, that he might develop himself. I return to find this development approaching completion, but hindered by fear and by misunderstanding.23

This rather anthropotechnic revelation became scripture in 1965, when the first edition of the *Principia Discordia* was published in five xeroxed copies. The subtitle was “How the West was Lost.” Almost entirely the work of Hill, known within the group as Malaclypse the Younger, the first edition rather methodically lays out some of the Discordian doctrine and (dis)organizational structures that would later appear in *Illuminatus!*: the law of fives, the lore of the Eris and her golden apple, and the variously named Discordian splinter groups.
The *Principia Discordia* continued to evolve over the years. By the time that the fourth edition appeared in 1970, its humorous atheology was enlivened with chthonic myths, antinomian Zen, and metaphysical one-liners like “No two equals are the same” and “King Kong died for your sins.” The text itself had ballooned into a dense collage of cartoons, slogans, rubber stamp impressions, fake certificates, and organizational charts. The new aesthetics reflected Hill’s transformation of the Society from a private project of religious invention into an intensely collaborative artistic-esoteric experiment that Hill called The Paratheo-Anametamystikhood of Eris Esoteric. This is 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.” The fourth edition, for example, included material provided by Thornley (aka Omar Ravenhurst), Robert Anton Wilson, Camden Benares, Thomas the Gnostic, and a few other oddballs, most of whom were already enthusiastic participants in the exchange of personal proto-zines through informal mail networks.

The Discordian Society thus became an “open source” artistic-esoteric current, a non-zero-sum game of “occultural bricolage” that invited anyone who tuned in to play. The fourth edition also replaced the usual copyright statements with language that parodied both the idea of property and the then-popular Satanic mass: “(K) ALL RIGHTS REVERSED—Reprint what you like.” As such, the *PD* managed to anticipate three utopian features of what—with some nostalgia—we could perhaps still call “Internet culture”: open source content, collaborative multimedia, and the creative power of humorously deployed pop religious memes that earn their charisma...
(and entertainment value) from the winking confusion of faith and fabulation.

Wilson discovered the Discordians after moving to Chicago to edit for *Playboy*. Having been a contributor to Paul Krassner's freethinking journal *The Realist* since the late fifties, Wilson was a longstanding devotee of and contributor to periodicals and zines devoted to anarchism, pacifism, and the New Left. These informal print networks, partly modeled on the science-fiction fanzine world, eventually led Wilson to Kerry Thornley, then serving as the editor of *The Innovator*, a libertarian zine from Southern California.

*The Innovator* included lively discussions of science fiction, private fire departments, and the possibility of establishing libertarian countries on floating platforms at sea. Having recently shifted from Ayn Randian Objectivism to individualist anarchism, Thornley had become one of many sixties libertarians who rejected American conservatives to form alliances with New Left activists, particularly regarding the war in Vietnam. Not coincidentally, Thornley had also joined a free-love community in Southern California and started dropping acid.

There are different stories of exactly how Wilson met Thornley. The most Pynchonesque version has Thornley submitting an *Innovator* article about non-governmental postal systems to the Forum, which regularly featured gripes about mail tampering by the USPS. But no matter. Thornley had turned Wilson on to the great game of Discordianism. And a few years later, as the conspiracies of *Illuminatus!* were just starting to cook, he gave Wilson the opportunity to make his first move.
To fully appreciate the Discordian stunts that Wilson pulled, we need to back up for a moment and address some rather strange facts about Mr. Kerry Thornley. After palling around with Greg Hill in Southern California, Thornley entered the Marine Corps in 1959, where he served alongside none other than Lee Harvey Oswald. Thornley was fascinated by the Pravda-reading Oswald, whom he dubbed “the outfit eight ball,” and he began to write a novel based on the soldier's life. (He finished it a year before the assassination of John F. Kennedy.) In 1961, Thornley moved to New Orleans, where Oswald also lived 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.

Two years later, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, the subject of Oliver Stone's film JFK, began to dive into the many holes that puncture the lone gunman theory established by the Warren Commission. Garrison tapped into what he believed was a wide and nefarious conspiracy directed by elements of the CIA. Garrison's zealous investigation, which even many anti-Warren Commission historians considered reckless, focused on a network of New Orleans characters that eventually included Thornley. Given the loose physical resemblance between Thornley and Oswald, 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.

It was time for Operation Mindfuck. Thornley had discovered that Allan Chapman, one of Garrison's aides, believed that the JFK assassination had been masterminded by the Bavarian Illuminati. Working with Wilson and Shea, Thornley decided to prank Chapman by planting articles in the press that connected the Illuminati to all manner of contemporary malfeasance, including the decade's wave of political assassinations. 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. As part of the Operation, Thornley also invented a Do-It-Yourself Conspiracy Kit, which included stationery with Bavarian Illuminati letterheads that Thornley, Wilson, and others would use for over-the-top letters they sent to the John Birch Society and other gullible individuals and organizations. Much of this material made its way into *Illuminatus!*, whose great esoteric secret is the fact that it itself is part of Operation Mindfuck: a big fat mind-blowing mushroom fruiting out of an underground mycelial network of collaborative hoaxes and anarchist politics.

But what kind of politics is this exactly? In her book *Anti-Disciplinary Protest*, the social historian Julie Stephens argues that the dominant view of sixties activism today, including the usual distinction made between the Fists and the Heads, ignores the important presence of what she calls “anti-disciplinary politics.” This style of protest rejected hierarchy and leadership, offering instead a colorful psychedelic politics of satire that was “distinguished from the New Left by its ridiculing of political commitment, sacrifice, seriousness and coherence.” This third rail included the Diggers, the Yippies! (including Wilson's *Realist* editor Paul Krassner), and the folks that Jerry Rubin dubbed “Marxist acidheads.” Such anti-disciplinarians were behind a number of classic protest spectacles of the era, including 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.

Unfortunately, like too many historians of sixties politics, Stephens ignores the influence of American anarchism on anti-disciplinary protest, especially from individualistic (or right-wing) libertarians like Thornley and, to a degree, Wilson. After all, it is easy to recognize the Discordians in her portrait of a countercultural sixties that 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.32

Stephens ties this sort of slap-happy media politics to the subsequent emergence of postmodernism, both of which she blames for deconstructing the realist politics of solidarity into self-conscious image play and ironic bricolage. In her view, the anti-disciplinarians gave countercultural activists little more to work with than Ken Kesey's classic tactic: “get them into your movie before they get you into theirs.”

By exposing the Venn diagram between the Fists and the Heads, Stephens gives us a fresh way to think about sixties politics. But I don’t believe that the Discordians and many of their fellow metaphysical radicals were simply relaxing into the relatively safe circuits of media parody. For some anti-disciplinarians, the rejection of the secular materialism of the New Left militants did not lead to an ironic nihilism but rather to the rejection of a nihilism perceived within secular rationality. The Frankfurt School attacks on instrumental reason and the barbarism of the Enlightenment—alluded to but not developed by Stephens—were read by some young radical intellectuals as an invitation to place their bets on a different ontology entirely.33

To her credit, Stephens recognizes that paradox and incoherence were specifically political tactics for anti-disciplinarians. But her focus on irony and mediation obscures the ontological and esoteric sources that some activists glimpsed and grasped through their public chaos rituals. So while Stephens underscores the social critique that motivated anti-disciplinary politics, she entirely misses the aesthetic world-building, to say nothing of the religious twist introduced by psychedelic mysticism. As Christian Greer explains, the Yippies! were not just mockers, but also practitioners of “psychedelic militancy.” Inspired by the Dadaists and Surrealists, they “orchestrated media hoaxes, street-theatre, and bold demonstrations of love that were designed to effect a permanent
change of heart in their opponents. Instead of conquering their foes, the Yippies! aimed to convert them by ‘blowing their minds’ into a higher order of awareness.”

Let’s take, as an example, the attempted levitation of the Pentagon in 1967. A week or so before Halloween, tens of thousands of demonstrators, including New Left activists, pacifists, and hippies, massed in Washington D.C. to protest the Vietnam war. After hearing speeches on the Mall by civil rights leaders and Dr. Benjamin Spock, around 50,000 people set off towards the Pentagon. Among the crowd was what the East Village Other enumerated as “witches, warlocks, holy men, 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 manifesting what historian James Webb calls an “illuminated 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 filmmaker Kenneth Anger performed hidden magickal rites without the slightest bit of irony. On the one hand, the attempted levitation of the building—which somehow also involved turning it orange—fits in with what Todd Gitlin described as the Yippie “politics of display,” of ludic and media-savvy pranks. But the levitation was not just nightly news theater; for some participants at least, it was also mass ritual magic, however carnivalesque. As such, the event became an icon for a heterodox politics of consciousness that was at once oppositional, playful, and enchanted.

Wilson and Shea capture this ontological politics in one of the great set pieces in Illuminatus!: an extended scene, set at the Chicago Democratic Convention of 1968, that takes up much of the first novel of the trilogy. During the convention, the future Confrontations editor Joe Malik—who, like Wilson, was an “ex-Trotskyist, ex-engineering student, ex-liberal, ex-Catholic”—overcomes his skepticism and embraces the esoteric radicalism represented by a wild freak named Simon Moon. After his conversion, Malik “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."\textsuperscript{39}
3.4.7 Mindfuck

Like *Illuminatus!*, Operation Mindfuck engaged the political through a disruptive and sometimes perverse blend of prank, satire, and misdirection. As such, the operation could not have been better named. As the OED has it, a mindfuck is “a disturbing or revelatory experience, esp. one which is drug-induced or is caused by deliberate psychological manipulation.” This combination of revelation, tribulation, and possible trickery makes the mindfuck a key element of high weirdness. But it was also a general feature of countercultural consciousness. In the sixties, when the term first emerged, mindfucks could be had everywhere—in 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.

Mindfuck was also a crucial term of art for the Discordians. At once a practice and an experience, the mindfuck juxtaposed pleasure and deception, absurdity and illumination, politics and chaos. But it was more than Dionysian antics. Operation Mindfuck may have been an anti-disciplinary weapon, a form of symbolic *détournement* that would later be recognized as “culture jamming.” But the Discordians also had reasons for their tactics drawn from solid intellectual sources, particularly the game theory of von Neumann and Morgenstern, which suggested 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. His Pynchonesque name refers to the Markov Chain, a mathematical way of modeling stochastic processes whose behaviors are not based on the long-term memory of the system but only on its current state. The Discordian debt to game theory and probability is not accidental (or random). Though Wilson mocked rationalism as a philosophy of life, his understanding and appreciation for engineering, physics, and cybernetics always fed directly into his anti-authoritarian but “model agnostic” worldview.
For the Discordians, the mindfuck was also more than a tactic wielded against external opponents. It was also a mode of subjective experience that, following the model of orgasm or the psychedelic “grok,” abruptly catalyzed a different order of reality and possibility. The Discordian historian Adam Gorightly defines the practice here as “sowing the seeds of chaos as a means of achieving a higher state of awareness.” In this light, the Discordian prank was also an instrument of expanded consciousness, a stinging stick wielded by American Zen scalawags who wanted to expose what Simon Moon called the “thermoplastic” nature of reality.

The mindfuck was not just an epiphany, however. It was also an invitation. Discordian pranks gestured towards a separate reality that lay just next door, a plane of possibility whose existence depended, at least in part, on the collaborative game of staging it in the first place. One example that Gorightly cites are the business cards that Hill used to give out, 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 trick, this simple device of cognitive dissonance was inextricable from social performance—as well as the possibility of collaboration, of friendship, even of initiation.

There is a dark side to the mindfuck as well, something few would deny in the era of 4chan, gaslighting and alt.right meme magic. In a sense, the word simply intensifies the troubling ambiguities already carried by the term *fuck*, which can signify selfish pleasure, transgression, anger, degradation, and manipulation. The term's appearance in the sixties is therefore hardly accidental—psychoactive drugs, sexual license, and social instability lent themselves to all manner of coercion and charismatic cons. These excesses fed into what the philosopher Colin McGinn argues is the dominant contemporary sense of mindfuck: the manipulative use of dishonest means to mess with people's psyches in an aggressive, even violent fashion. Comparing mindfucking to bullshit and lies, McGinn argues that mindfucking is, in addition to these other forms of deceit, “an illegitimate exercise of power” that aims to enforce emotional as well as cognitive effects.

One of the central psychological features that mindfuckers exploit is the human proclivity for paranoia, which is another reason the term emerges in the sixties. The traumatic effects of the JFK
assassination and the fishiness of the lone-gunman theory drew many people into an alienated and conspiratorial mindset that was only amplified by later assassinations and the massive counterintelligence operations aimed at the protest movement. Indeed, one of the primary functions of the FBI’s COINTELPRO program, which loosed a myriad of snitches and agent provocateurs into student groups and radical activist cells, was to destroy social cohesion by sowing suspicion—that is, by mindfucking people.\textsuperscript{46} Such turbulence was 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.”

Operation Mindfuck also exploited people's proclivity for conspiracy thinking, and used paranoia as a kind of sand trap. From McGinn’s perspective, this makes the Operation unethical, if not dangerous. A similar sort of critique was later levied against Robert Anton Wilson by the science-fiction writer Thomas Disch, who saw Wilson's ironic promulgation of conspiracy theories and esoterica to gullible and possibly paranoid readers as just another example of the cynical “right to lie” enshrined in American popular culture.\textsuperscript{47} Today it is impossible not to recognize the high cost of media pranks that exploit the ambiguity between truth and fiction.

But the Discordian game must also be understood as an inoculation \textit{against} paranoia. At a time when drugs, covert operations, and the critical analysis of power all increased the possibility of pathological suspicions, Discordian consciousness upped the ante, becoming another version of the high-wire act we have been tracking throughout this book. In this version of the tightrope walk, paranoia provides the tension of the line, while the balance comes from Wilson's “maybe logic”—a form of suspending or bracketing ultimate questions that we earlier identified as negative capability, and that Wilson would later wield against his own Sirius revelations.

The ironic discord between paranoia and negative capability can spark illumination, a sort of Discordian Zen that also informs the structure of \textit{Illuminatus!} On the one hand, the book's relentless series of plots and counter-plots, rumors and 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 scrambled early seventies. But *Illuminatus!* also grabs the bull by the horns by transmuting paranoia into a form of insight and even enjoyment, a kind of gnostic *jouissance* that subverts the heaviness of conspiratorial conviction through the weird play of uncertainty. The book's slapstick and gags are not just satiric nonsense, then, but are offered as apotropaic antidotes to the real gravity of the situation.

Writing later about the atmosphere of paranoia that saturated the antiwar movement in Chicago, Wilson gave voice to this healing balm. “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.’” Wilson's sangfroid may have come naturally to him, or he may be putting us on. In either case, we can still understand his attitude as an ethical and political commitment to the practice of liminal weirdness. But as we will see in the following chapter, the practice was not without its own considerable risks.
We cannot leave the topic of the Discordian mindfuck without mentioning how Wilson and Shea render sexuality in *Illuminatus!* Always exuberant, sometimes puerile, and frequently indistinguishable from the pulp pornography of the era, these scenes remind us that Wilson and Shea were, after all, editors at *Playboy*. But for all its raunchy freedoms, sex in the novel performs an almost alchemical function as well—a transmutation of pulp rutting into esoteric gold.

Take the story of George Dorn, a staff writer from *Confrontation* who is sprung out of a Texas jail by a crew of Discordians and brought onto a yellow submarine, the *Leif Erikson*, captained by the charismatic libertarian adventurer Hagbard Celine. Shortly thereafter, Dorn is initiated into the Legion of Dynamic Discord with a stoned sex magical ritual. At the end of the ritual, Dorn finds himself on top of a pyramid, thrusting into an unseen female partner through the glory hole of a giant golden apple made of steel and inscribed with *Kallisti*. The orgasmic moans of his invisible partner reach a peak that 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 climaxes, a hanged man drops down toward him from a trapdoor in the ceiling, and commences ejaculating—a scene that, as Celine later notes, is drawn equally from William S. Burroughs and the Marquis de Sade. But what disturbs Dorn most is the face of the hanged man, which he recognizes as his own. “Thou art that,” laughs Celine when Dorn complains about the ceremony’s sadistic sleaze. “Death is the price of orgasm.”

Dorn's initiation points to the central role that sexual ritual plays in the hedonistic metaphysics of *Illuminatus!* (as well as Wilson's personal experiments in “brain change”). Sexual ritual is also of course a central feature in the lore that surrounds esoteric or secret societies, both real and imagined, past and present. While such rites play an explicit role in modern movements like the Ordo Templi Orientis and some strains of witchcraft, they also populate the fantasies that outsiders have promulgated about underground cults,
such as the antinomian Carpocratians of antiquity or the supposedly sodomite Knights Templar. But the mystic raunchiness of *Illuminatus!* more simply reflects the countercultural fact that, for the legions of freaks, sex was not just about freedom or pleasure. Sex was also about catalyzing mind-bending altered states—particularly when orgasm, tantrically manipulated or not, combined with psychoactive drugs.

Such sex could be cosmic, or Dionysian, or unquestionably weird. In any case, it was often *extraordinary*, and as such plays a crucial role alongside the other visionary practices and outlandish altered states that drive the intertwingled narratives of *Illuminatus!* In a sense, orgasm becomes the core template for gnosis in all its countercultural forms. These experiences are sometimes erotic and joyful, manifestations of a hedonistic spirituality that reaches beyond the bounded limits of quotidian consciousness. But as Dorn's initiation shows, extraordinary experiences in *Illuminatus!*—even orgasm—are rarely pleasurable or ecstatic alone. Wilson and Shea were not naive countercultural celebrants but mindfuckers. The extraordinary experiences that pepper the novel are often tied to a delirious and sometimes terrifying experience of cognitive dissonance that heightens paradox and—in a move prophetic of our own vertiginous era—destroys self-knowledge and certainty. “Illumination is on the other side of absolute terror,” Joe Malik is told 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.”

Throughout *Illuminatus!* Wilson and Shea weave these radical intensities into a comparative history of religious experience, encompassing *satori*, gnosis, and the sorts of magickal initiation dramas that Dorn encounters on Celine's submarine. But the authors always keep Malik's epistemological horror in mind. *Illuminatus!* does not hold out the hope, dear to countercultural seekers and the subsequent “self spirituality” gurus of the New Age, that individual mystical experience can provide a solid metaphysical or psychological ground. Revelation in *Illuminatus!* is principally a centrifugal force, a disruption that knocks the perceiver out of known frames of reference, a vertiginous limit experience whose existential force—and potential for eros, humor, beauty, and terror—has not been blunted by the ironic shrug of postmodern relativism. These events can terrify.
Though we cannot say where Wilson and Shea “really” stand, *Illuminatus!* clearly presents complex views about the informal and hedonistic revisions of religious experience that populated postwar bohemia and the counterculture. By paying attention to the novel's various subplots, we see that the illuminated face all manner of traps: they become paranoid, they start seeing things, they go violently psychotic. In the telling British phrase, they lose the plot. For all their liberatory force, then, the profane illuminations illustrated in *Illuminatus!* also threaten to unleash precisely the sorts of problems that conservative upholders of religious traditions like Eric Voegelin or R.C. Zaehner have always blamed on heretics and visionary mystics.

Early in the novel, Goodman and his partner visit Father Muldoon, a conservative Catholic theologian who provides them (and the reader) with a potted historical account of “gnosis” among the antinomian Cainites, the radical dualist Manichaeans, and modern Satanists. Muldoon is no fool, nor is he represented as one. Defining gnosis simply as the “direct experience of God,” the priest argues that such illuminations almost inevitably go awry when they flare up outside the institutional boundaries and deep grooves of established traditions. Seers veer off into megalomania, cruel license, and apocalyptic violence. “Rationalists are always attacking dogma for causing fanaticism, but the worst fanatics start from gnosis,” says Muldoon.51

Muldoon's conviction that gnostic experience is a tool of the devil is given a more paranoid twist of cosmic horror later in the novel by a psychic named Mama Sutra. In Sutra's bleak vision, the world's religious leaders are all members of the Cult of the Yellow Sign, an ancient sect that hoaxes the rest of us on behalf of dark cosmic entities known as the *lloigor*. According to Mama Sutra, religious experience is a central vector of this insidious control of consciousness. “Revelations, visions, trances, miracles, all of it is a trap.” The only hope for the liberation of humanity, in her view, is the Illuminati, whose pursuit of reason and science remains the sole path that can counter the lloigor.52

Like many walk-on characters in the novel, Mama Sutra and Muldoon tell coherent stories that simultaneously support and radically reframe the big picture that readers are trying to piece together in their heads. By serving up authoritative narratives that
contradict Discordian accounts, Muldoon and Mama Sutra work to further disorient the reader by destabilizing the political and metaphysical sense of the novel. White hats become black hats, not unlike the coincidence of opposites pictured in the yin-yang symbol, in which a dollop of yang appears in the wave of yin, and vice-versa. At the same time, these conservative takes on gnosis also pull the rug out from under any easy countercultural claims of liberation or insight through extraordinary experience, hedonistic or otherwise. Traversing the possibility space of critical gnosis, the novel offers no safety net.
3.4.9 Eldritch Palmer

Though *Illuminatus!* was marketed as science fiction, the novel is perhaps better categorized as a species of *weird fiction*—a genre that, as we have noted, often provides its heebie-jeebies by blurring the boundaries between fantasy and the reader's reality. Wilson and Shea themselves link the Illuminati to the genre of supernatural horror. We learn that Adam Weishaupt performed rites so bizarre that their “psychic vibrations” struck every sensitive mind in Europe, generating such literary productions as Lewis’ *The Monk*, Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and de Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*. Secret societies are, in this eldritch light, *weird* societies, lurking in the grey zone between paranoid rumor and actual existence.

Wilson and Shea had more direct reasons for yoking weird fiction into their conspiratorial web. They wanted to exploit one of the more mindfucking moves associated with the genre: the implication that the stories we are reading are not mere fictions, but camouflaged truths or symptoms of realities that, like the devil, trick you precisely by disguising themselves as mere fictions. And one way to play this game is to write stories that include books that, like Lovecraft's *Necronomicon*, begin to warp reality once they are opened and read. Such books are essentially portals into other diegetic worlds, and they demonstrate to the reader that running your eyes over texts—including, by implication, the one you hold—actually can shatter reality.

The origin of Mama Sutra's Cult of the Yellow Sign, for example, lies in *The King in Yellow*, a deeply creepy 1895 short story collection by the American writer Robert Chambers. But *The King in Yellow* is also the title of an ominous and only vaguely described play that appears in a number of Chambers’ otherwise unrelated stories.\(^5^3\) Officially banned and widely shunned, even by “literary anarchists,” the play nonetheless spreads “like an infectious disease,” inflicting its readers with enigmatic but poisonous effects.\(^5^4\) A few Chambers stories also feature the Yellow Sign, an eerie glyph that opens the minds of its possessors to control by baleful beings, including the
King in Yellow himself—a demonic entity whose name, once again, not only graces the play but the book in your hand, with its yellowing pages.

Chambers shows us a crucial way to play the weird fiction game. By establishing a network of references between otherwise unrelated stories, the intertextual web begins to “thicken” into a larger frame of reference that expands beyond any individual story or volume. Here the master is Lovecraft, who, inspired partly by Chambers, established a “cycle of synthetic folklore” that included place-names (Miskatonic, Arkham), creatures (Cthulhu, Yog-Sothoth), and book titles (the Necronomicon) that would recur across many stories, sometimes inconsistently, and often interfused with real references.\textsuperscript{55} Passing on the infection, Lovecraft also encouraged his fellow \textit{Weird Tales} writers to start dropping the same grimoires and beasties into their own stories, just as Lovecraft himself did in the many stories he edited and ghostwrote for clients.\textsuperscript{56} Soon literary pals like Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, and August Derleth were minting their own arcana. Mama Sutra's lloigor, for example, were an invention by two members of Lovecraft's circle.

Lovecraft's game resembled Wilson and Shea's Discordian strategy of increasing the believability of occult conspiracies through intertextual references and collaborative hoaxes. Though neither Hill nor Thornley were particularly into Lovecraft, Wilson recognized a surprisingly snug fit between the Cthulhu Mythos and the matter of Discordia. Besides carving out space for new gods of chaos—Azathoth in Lovecraft's case, Eris in \textit{Principia Discordia}'s—both the Mythos and Discordia can be seen as playful and twisted literary hoaxes that grew out of collective insider games of invention and self-reference. The \textit{PD} even plays a \textit{Necronomicon}-like role in \textit{Illuminatus!}—a charismatic source-text that leads readers to ask (correctly in this case): is this a \textit{real} book?

Lovecraft himself pops up a few times in the novel.\textsuperscript{57} Flashing back to the nineteen-twenties, we meet a bracingly skeptical horror writer who is harassed by mysterious cultists. They are angry at Lovecraft for revealing their secrets—secrets that the writer claims he simply cribbed from books written by “mental cases” and stored in the library of Miskatonic University.\textsuperscript{58} One cultist tells Lovecraft that the occult societies have left him alone so far only because the readership
of pulp magazines is so marginal. But he warns that the situation is not likely to last once the genres of fantasy and science fiction take off.

Wilson later wrote 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.”⁵⁹ That said, when Wilson personifies demonic forces in *Illuminatus!* (or in his 1973 smut book *The Sex Magicians*), he turns as often as not to horrible Lovecraftian monsters like Yog-Sothoth, who appears in *Illuminatus!* as a crude petroleum demon imprisoned in the Pentagon.⁶⁰ Wilson and Shea also present the lloigor as ancient inhuman intelligences that guide and interact with the Illuminati. With this they added a cosmic ET dimension to conspiracy culture, which later authors like David Icke would further inject into conspiracy culture.

Should we read all this as just an extended Discordian lark? As Lovecraft himself put it in one of his letters, “it is rather good fun to have this artificial mythology given an air of verisimilitude by wide citation.”⁶¹ Fun, yes, but the term *verisimilitude* points us towards some of the more vertiginous and disturbing implications of this weird mindfuck. Best glossed as the *appearance of the truth*, verisimilitude flickers with its own unnerving ambivalence, since both true and false things may appear true. As Lovecraft wrote in a 1930 letter to Clark Ashton Smith, “My own rule is that no weird story can truly produce terror unless it is devised with all the care & verisimilitude of an actual *hoax.*”⁶²

This statement is more curious than it first appears. As Dan Clore explains, actual hoaxes cannot be presented *as* hoaxes and remain hoaxes. But neither can fictions serve as actual hoaxes unless readers take them for something other than fictions. So the actual hoax is to produce in readers of fiction the *impression* of a second-order or “inverse” hoax, one that masks truth as the fiction.⁶³ This is the paranoid magic of verisimilitude. “*The usual hoax: fiction presented as fact,*” says *Illuminatus!*, knowing that greater power is squeezed from the opposite possibility: “*fact presented as fiction.*” Or at least,
the impression that such facts are lying in wait behind the veil, waiting to reveal themselves.64

That is one reason that Wilson and Shea stuff Illuminatus! with so much information—journalistic accounts, citations from real books, potted histories, scholarly materials, appendixes. This data draws the reader into a milieu of research that in turn sets up Lovecraft's central and most infernal dialectic: the equation of knowledge and madness. Readers of Lovecraft's mature tales follow bookish and blinkered protagonists as they piece together alien and repellant possibilities from fragments of evidence and experience, usually drawn from texts or dreams. As in detective narratives, both reader and protagonist are involved in the work of weaving together these patterns of implication, though Lovecraft's readers invariably recognize the horrifying import before the characters do. And when these characters do finally recognize the impossible truth built from correlating the content they've gathered, they frequently go mad from that very knowledge—the same knowledge that the reader has already pieced together.

Lovecraft scholar David E. Schultz traces the twisted curve of this 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, we have been drawn into and forced to become part of the horror and we are helpless to retreat.”65 Lovecraft's fictions are sticky, like bubblegum you can't remove from your shoe. Similarly, Wilson and Shea want their lore to worm its way under your skin, which is why they play so much with the uncanny power of verisimilitude. In his letters, Lovecraft insisted that he was “of course” not interested in actually fooling his readers with his invented mythology, though critics argue that here he protests too much.66 Wilson and Shea never even bothered to make the claim.
3.4.10 Sacred Chaos

These days it can feel that we have passed some point of no return in the mutation of consensus reality. We live in a hypermediated world of opinion silos and weaponized conspiracy theories; of fake news and the accusation of “fake news;” of flat earth attacks on science and the alt.right's marriage of postmodern media pranks with racist and sometimes esoteric nationalism. This world feels at once chaotic and engineered for mind control. Though we can hardly blame the Discordians for this world, we are right to accuse Wilson, Thornley, and their fellow popes of playing with fire.

But the chaos celebrated in *Illuminatus!* and the *Principia Discordia* represents something more than postmodern irony or antinomian politics or nihilistic relativism—even more than the black hole of Lovecraft's cosmic entity Azathoth, “that amorphous blight of nethermost confusion which blasphemes and bubbles at the center of all infinity.”[67] Chaos, for the Discordians as for Wilson and Shea, is a *positive* ontological principal—at once a goddess of play and eros, and a fecund universal force that incarnates Eastern ideas floating around in the American underground. The dark hijinks of *Illuminatus!* are infused with an intoxicating spiritual ambrosia: the grace of chaos.

To appreciate this sacred chaos—the goddess Eris and the Taoist currents she rides—we first need to grapple with the vexed issue of how to think about Discordianism as a religion. While it is a trap to reify anything about Discordianism, it is equally wrong-headed to ignore the movement's sacred undertow by describing it as nothing more than a “parody religion.” There is no doubt that the architects of Discordianism sometimes took their parodic material earnestly, though not always seriously. In a 1969 letter to the Reverend Kirby Hensley, the illiterate pastor from Modesto, California who founded the Universal Life Church, Greg Hill made his hopes clear:
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.⁶⁸

At the same time, we also miss something important if we class Discordianism as a religious path or mystic philosophy disguised as a joke, which is how some scholars have resolved the question.⁶⁹ Discordianism, we might say, raises its depths to its jokey surfaces; the mask becomes the truth it veils. But in that case, does “straight talk” like Hill's above really help us? Perhaps we can take a lead here from Malaclypse the Younger, who proclaims, in a “personal note” appended to the first edition of the Principia Discordia, that the question of what its authors “really believe” is simply incoherent. “Discordianism absolutely destroys the distinction between ‘being serious’ and ‘not being serious.’”⁷⁰

Faced with the mutant fish of Discordia, some scholars simply avoid discussions of “religion” at all.⁷¹ Others see in the movement a progenitor of “hyper-real religion,” a newish object of study that largely consists of Internet-driven niche scenes like Jedism, which fuse pop culture memes and patterns of religious thought and practice.⁷² Some sociologists have taken a more functional angle, analyzing how Discordianism fits into the lives of particular individuals. But as the sociologist Carole Cusack notes in her book Invented Religions, the Erisian sensibility is so iconoclastic that agnostics and atheists have embraced it alongside seekers, mystics, and Pagans. Is their enjoyment of Discordianism also “religious”?⁷³

While problems of classification abound in scholarship, here our object is a real anomaly: a fiercely individualistic current of mystic misdirection and outright nonsense that admits to its invented origins, seemingly takes nothing seriously, and rejects the institutional frameworks of faith. As such, the question about Discordian religion is also, in a sense, a question about high weirdness itself. As we have seen, the vectors of the weird both approach religion (including esoteric and mystic religion) and swerve away from it, even through the détournement of mockery and blasphemy. Take this twist far enough, though, and spiritual issues
return in the question of the swerve itself: the cosmic clinamen, Markoff Chaney’s “random factor” in Illuminatus!, the chance toss of an I Ching coin. Both Illuminatus! and Discordianism, then, can be seen as deploying high weirdness as a both a satirical practice of avoidance or disavowal and an experimental leap of metaphysical freedom, an almost erotic surrender to a random factor both infinite and unknown.

Wherever we locate the Discordians in the history of religion, however, there is one solid fact: they were among the first refugees from the postwar Western order to take up worship of a goddess. Recall the origin story in the PD. Five nights after their encounter with the talking chimpanzee in the bowling alley, Hill and Thornley both dreamt of a woman whose psychedelic appearance included pyrotechnic hair, rainbow secretions, and a body that formed a “spectacular dance of atoms and universes.” She tells them:

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 chaos. I am alive, and I tell you that you are free.73

Despite the signs that we are being pranked, including the overwhelming sense that this story is fiction, Eris’ generous, hieratic language here suggests a numinous revelation only lightly dusted with irony. For all the gags that surround her, Eris is presented within the Discordian materials as both a visionary principal and an entity worthy of praise, if not worship—a being not of command, but of seduction, play, and a liberating rapprochement of art and science.

The theophany of Eris also needs to be considered part of the American turn towards witchcraft, mythic polytheism, and earthy nature religions in the postwar world—a current that, by the seventies, many started calling Pagan. The term itself can be traced to Kerry Thornley, who was the first writer to describe the earthy new religious experiments as “pagan.”74 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 sexually and pharmacologically as well as metaphysically.75

Discordianism represents a rather more tricksy path, whose core gnosis is, as we have shown, more paradoxical than sexy. Nonetheless, it shares with Kerista a life-affirming and even bawdy erotics of liberation. That we might judge this bohemian randiness as excessive almost goes without saying—the best known subtitle of the Principia was, after all, How I Found Goddess And What I Did To Her When I Found Her. Such schoolboy humor often conceals sexist entitlement. But even with today’s critical eyes we should appreciate how the Discordians helped revive the notion that god could be a goddess—and a wild one at that. At the same time, they also warded off the self-seriousness and gender essentialism evidenced in some rival Paganisms. Eris demands neither reverence nor even belief; she is not a ruler or archon, but anarchy incarnate in a dance of veils.
3.4.11 Zenarchy

Paganism is not the only or even the most important subcultural context to understand the Discordian scene. Carole Cusack, who describes Discordianism, fairly enough, as a “religion of liberation,” draws particular attention to its connections with American Zen. By the time of the bowling alley theophany, Zen had already become the de facto mystical sensibility of any number of Beats, bohemians, and avant-garde artists and intellectuals. The “Beat Zen” that Alan Watts described in 1959—in contrast to the “square Zen” practiced by the religion's more orthodox students and roshis—was informal, jokey, even hedonistic. Though Watts warned that the liberation of mind from conventional perception was not the same thing as rebellion against convention, American Beat Zen possessed a distinctly antinomian flavor by the time the Discordians drank the tea.76

The Discordian ethos in *Illuminatus!* and the *PD* draws principally from two features in American Zen. One is the framing of enlightenment or *satori* as what Cusack calls “a moment of total awareness:” the sort of extraordinary experience that shatters conventional categories.77 But Zen equally models the question of how to live an ordinary life in the shadow of such blasts from the blue. Much of Zen literature and practice wrestles with the problem of how such ineffable insights are communicated, integrated, and discarded as the path unfolds. As such, the possibility of satori is rarely untangled from the problem of *expression*: poetic, gestural, conversational. Because the “openings” themselves cannot be intellectually delineated, practitioners must resort to what Watts called “non-symbolic actions and words.”78 Sometimes these actions and words are so ridiculous or bizarre that they remind us of Dada, or even the Three Stooges. Think of when Joshu answers a question by putting sandals on his head, or when Yun-men declares that the Buddha is a dried-up shit-stick.79

All this, needless to say, is very Discordian. For the devotees of Eris, sudden awakenings always open the possibility of antinomian illumination, or of what I have called critical gnosis—a kind of
metaphysical flash that goes against the grain of business as usual, even against the business of the sacred and its profound “depths.” Such flashes are morally ambiguous, even reckless in their rejection of convention, but they can be funny too. Mystical experience in *Illuminatus!* and the *Principia Discordia* is at once the ineffable illumination of *thusness* and the enjoyment, or sufferance, of a corny punch line.\(^80\)

Zen was not the only important feature of the Discordians’ Eastern turn. *Illuminatus!* and the *PD* were also marked by the Chinese notion of the Tao, a concept their authors discovered, like many of their bohemian brethren, through the philosophers Lao-tse and Zhuangzi, as well as the *I Ching* and the koan books. In the *Principia Discordia* (first edition), the sacred Tao takes pride of place, appearing as the “Sacred Chao,” with the famous “yin-yang” (*t’ai chi*) symbol of Taoist polarity morphing into the almighty “hodge-podge.” *Illuminatus!* as well regularly rings with a fundamentally cheery Taoist affirmation: the cosmos does not require human domination to fulfill human needs and desires. As in Lao-tse, this affirmation has explicitly political as well as spiritual consequences. “There is no governor anywhere”—a citation from the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi* that Wilson and Shea drop into *Illuminatus!*—suggests at once a way to live and a way to lead—or not lead, as the Taoist case may be.\(^81\)

The Discordians were not the first to link Taoist literature to anarchism—Peter Kropotkin made the connection in 1910.\(^82\) As a number of more recent libertarian writers have pointed out, the Taoist vision of generative chaos can also be said to anticipate Austrian economist F.A. Hayek’s central notion of “spontaneous order”—a characteristic that Hayek believed applied not only to physical and biological systems but also, of course, to markets. Some hardcore libertarian capitalists have sought to naturalize their economic views through these connections; one article on the Cato Institute website is simply called “The Tao of Adam Smith.”\(^83\) But while it is important to acknowledge the links between antinomian anarchism and market libertarianism, we should not collapse the two, nor forget how much libertarianism itself has changed since the salad days of the Discordians. (We will address more of these issues in the following chapter.) From the earthy and empathic perspective
of *Illuminatus!*, the notion of a “Taoist market” sounds like one of those monstrosities that result when concrete liberatory forces twist into new and abstract forms of domination.

*Illuminatus!* also provides a great Western example of this fusion of chaos spirituality and anarchist politics: the origin story of the Justified Ancients of Mummu, one of the groups allied with the Discordians. According to Simon Moon, the JAMs got their start around the time the Babylonians composed their creation epic *Enuma Elish.* That epic, a founding myth of civilization's origins, begins with the chaos that pre-exists the formation of the heaven and earth. According to the myth, which influenced the opening lines of Genesis, this primal flux is inhabited by Apsu, the fertility god, and Tiamat, the dragon goddess of the sea. Against the wishes of Apsu and the vizier Mummu, Tiamat gives birth to a host of younger gods who eventually rise up and defeat the old ones. The young god Marduk slays Tiamat herself, forming the heavens and earth from her divided body. Using the same logic of division and control, Marduk then founds and rules the city-state of Babylon through what Moon explains are monopolies, land ownership, and usury. “It was the beginning of what we laughingly call civilization, which has always rested on rent and interest,” Moon says. “The old Babylonian con.”

In response, the Justified Ancients of Mummu rise up as the first anarchist group to pit themselves against the new monstrosity of the state. The JAMs recognized that citizens were not only dominated through economic arrangements, but through beliefs, gods, and laws that naturalize the social apparatus of domination. Within Babylon, abstractions like “God” and “debt” begin to seem more real than the embodied, empirical self. For the JAMs, resistance to the state was and is not limited to physical struggle, but also demands an antinomian act of consciousness that attacks, mocks, or eludes those abstract fictions—even, perhaps, the fictions of “society” or “being” itself. As such, they call for a return to a more natural, instinctive, and embodied way of life, a position that resembles, we are told, Taoists in China and the Cynics in Greece—philosophical drop-outs all.

Adapting a term that Peter Lamborn Wilson (no relation) first presented under his *nom de plume* Hakim Bey, we can call this
ontological anarchism. At once political, religious, and philosophical, ontological anarchism recognizes aboriginal chaos as a spontaneous giver of life that precedes all law, even including the so-called laws of nature. This chaos metaphysics in turn forges a deep link between anti-state politics and the esoteric imagination. As countercultural historian Christian Greer explains, “by shifting the ontological foundations of anarchism to an esoteric reading of Chaos,” Discordians ceased to conceive liberation in terms of material gains won from the oppressor class, but rather “in the freedom to (re)create reality.”

This is, in essence, a magical idea, something that we will explore at greater length in the next chapter. Because ontological anarchism posits an aboriginal source of spontaneous variation that eludes all second-hand knowledge—what William James called “knowledge about”—it requires direct acquaintance with the lawless cauldron of magical reality. This is a key point to recognize in Illuminatus! What can look like drop-out hedonism or nihilistic satire also manifests an antinomian spiritual politics that refuses a purely materialist or economic index of liberation. The Discordian gambit, infused with a considerable dose of sixties Romanticism, was that individuals and groups can align with and activate such generative chaos through the creative amplification of desire and the satori-like rupture of the ideological spooks that haunt consensus reality. Religions of love are often religions of faith, but here the hieros gamos is between love and doubt.
3.4.12 Discordia Oppositorum

In *Drawing Down the Moon*, her classic 1979 book on witchcraft and Paganism in America, the journalist and witch Margot Adler characterized Discordianism as a “religion of paradox and play.” Adler's account helpfully nests Discordianism within the social context of upstart American nature religion, especially in California, where many Discordians lived; in the next chapter, we will talk more about Robert Anton Wilson’s relationship to witchcraft and ceremonial magic in the Bay Area. Here I want to focus on Adler's (rather Pagan) insistence that, for these new religious movements, practice is more important than theological positions. And perhaps the key Discordian practice was paradox.

We have already met with some general examples. Recall Greg Hill's “no friend”/“no enemy” business card, or his claim that “Discordianism absolutely destroys the distinction between ‘being serious’ and ‘not being serious.’” These are both examples of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the coincidence of opposites that forms a central leitmotif in much traditional mystical discourse. For the fifteenth-century mystic Nicholas of Cusa, who first named the principal, God lies beyond opposites and contradictions and therefore can be discovered, as it were, on the site of their coincidence, or mutual occasion.

The *Principia Discordia* presents many paradoxes, a number of which feature the coincidence or superimposition of contraries or contradictions. One example is “Starbuck's Pebbles”:

“Do these 5 pebbles really form a pentagon?” asks the *PD*. According to the text, those who favor the “Aneristic Illusion”—that order truly exists—will say yes, while those who favor the opposite Eristic Illusion—that such order is only apparent—will say no. But there is another operation possible in this gag koan: “Criss-cross them and it is a star.”

For occultists, there are definite esoteric overtones to this solution. But whichever answer you favor, the *PD* claims, an “Illuminated Mind” can see all possibilities; “yet he does not insist that any one is
really true, or that none at all is true.”\textsuperscript{95} Instead, such a mind adopts a sort of critical realism: “The real reality is there, but everything you KNOW about ‘it’ is in your mind and yours to do with as you like.” Though “Starbuck's Pebbles” takes the form of a demonstration or proof, it doesn't really make an argument—instead, it enjoins a practice that may produce extraordinary experiences that point beyond the mechanism of paradox itself.

To help understand the role that paradox plays in Discordianism and high weirdness, it may be helpful to invoke a distinction made by the philosopher of religion Matthew Bagger. Bagger's book \textit{The Uses of Paradox} attempts to analyze, on naturalistic and critical grounds, the immense appeal that paradox has held for mystics and religious thinkers throughout the ages. Bagger isolates two dominant modes of what we 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 in an ascetic manner that parallels self-abnegating ordeals like 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.”\textsuperscript{96} 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 in order to effect what the Danish philosopher called the “crucifixion of the understanding.” Ascetic paradox can be understood as principally deconstructive.

In contrast, mystics like Cusa celebrate the paradox as a springboard towards transcendence and what Bagger calls “paranormal cognitive states.” For Cusa, this higher state of unity could only be grasped through “learned ignorance,” a paradoxical state that “resolves contradictions without violating the integrity of the contrary elements and without diminishing the reality or the force of their contradiction.”\textsuperscript{97} Rather than ascetically intensify contradictions in order to undermine everyday cognition, the mystic mode enjoys the overcoming of boundaries through such paradoxical consciousness.\textsuperscript{98}
For Bagger, these two approaches also model two different relationships between the in-group and the larger society. Inspired by Mary Douglas’ classic studies of how different societies treat categorical anomalies, Bagger argues that the attitude toward paradox “functions to exemplify or intimate the dangers or rewards of boundary crossing.” Cognitive asceticism, in his view, 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 affirmation of the unity and harmony of a Church strong and catholic enough to include contradiction. Cusa hoped to integrate schismatic tendencies within the Church, and also served in the controversial cause of union between Rome and Constantinople. 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.

Bagger’s distinction helps us understand the unique character of Discordian paradox, since both the PD and Illuminatus! bring both modes to bear (“paradoxically,” one might add). On the one hand, Discordianism is ascetic in that it cultivates great doubt, deconstructing business as usual and testing itself on its capacity to endure contradiction and the unresolved suspension of categorical distinctions between irony and sincerity, fiction and truth. This is the balance of the tightrope walker again. Following Bagger, all of this can be seen as a mechanism of erecting an ascetic boundary between Discordian and square society, between the psychedelic in-joke and the war machines of rationality.

At the same time, the tone of Illuminatus! and the PD is mostly playful and joyous, and more than a little hedonistic. This suggests a more “mystical” orientation to paradox, one that recognizes contradiction as the expression of an erotic cosmos of Whitmanesque proportions. Discordians transgress boundaries through play—an exuberant humor that was reflected in their incestuous interpersonal exchanges and in the nascent Pagan current of which they were a part, and which also milked some rich pleasures by crossing erotic and ontological boundaries. Here paradox does not just deconstruct
the edifice of rationality but affirms and enjoys a pluralistic universe of real differences and surreal encounters.

*Illuminatus!* and the *Principia Discordia* both exemplified and propagated the Discordian religion of paradox and play, a religion that was also very much a politics, albeit an anti-disciplinary one. Though these books were both highly weird, and can appear both dated and delirious today, they also evangelized in the manner of classic scriptures. To spread the good news of happy anarchy, Wilson, Shea, Hill, and Thornley all provided memes and models designed to get under the reader’s skin, to strip the scales from their eyes, to undermine the walls we erect against the questions we can’t answer. But in the case of Wilson at least, the project proved, if anything, too effective. For high weirdness is more than a style of fiction, or a hallucinogenic philosophy: it is also mode of existence with a life of its own.
Chapel Perilous.

like the mysterious entity called “I”,

cannot be located in the space-time continuum;
it is weightless, odorless,
tasteless and undetectable by ordinary
instruments. Indeed, like the Ego, it is
even possible to deny that it is there.
Cosmic Triggers

Two years after *Illuminatus!* debuted in 1975, Robert Anton Wilson published a nonfiction book called *Cosmic Trigger: Final Secret of the Illuminati*. As much an intellectual memoir as an exotic trip report, *Cosmic Trigger* describes the ideas and experiences that led Wilson to embark, in the early seventies, on a series of experiments with personal “brain change.” By that time he was living in Berkeley, California, and his protocols mostly involved sex, drugs, and occult practice (which very much includes reading). In the end, Wilson got more than he bargained for. High weirdness came home to roost, as the alien conspiracies, occult fictions, and mindfucks of *Illuminatus!* started to invade his everyday life. Before long, Wilson landed in what he called Chapel Perilous: a weigh-station of paranormal possibility that one escapes, he famously said, only in one of two possible modes—as an agnostic or a stone-cold paranoid.

In this chapter, we will spend some more time with the life and mind of Robert Anton Wilson, one of the most interesting and under-appreciated writers of the American counterculture. In *Cosmic Trigger*, Wilson presents a frank account of his own thoughts, influences, and conceptual encounters, and the narrative derives much of its power from this performance of intellectual candor. As such, *Cosmic Trigger* also represents a genre shift: from the fictional invocation of high weirdness to a manifestation of the real deal. Of course, the distinction between weird fictions and weird experiences is never clear—a blur that will form one of the central themes in this chapter. But though *Cosmic Trigger* in some sense keeps weaving the threads of *Illuminatus!*, Wilson no longer plays the trickster. Instead, he plays the tricked.

*Cosmic Trigger* also represents an important turn in Wilson's career, away from mainstream journalism and into the feral ranks of the underground intelligentsia. High weirdness here is not just a
genre, or a mode of experience, but a social location and subcultural sensibility. Though *Cosmic Trigger*'s subtitle was designed to exploit the popularity of the Dell trilogy he wrote with Robert Shea, the book itself was released by And/Or Press, a scruffy Berkeley publisher that had released the McKennas’ *Psilocybin* manual just the year before. Wilson's book also featured a number of juicy occultural illustrations by John Thompson, perhaps the most explicitly esoteric of the Bay Area's underground cartoonists and erotic comix artists. In California terms, *Cosmic Trigger* was homegrown.

After this book, all of Wilson's nonfiction would be published through independent publishers. As such, *Cosmic Trigger* can be seen as a kind of workshop where Wilson refined the persona that would sustain his livelihood for decades. Though he had been publishing cultural criticism since the fifties, Wilson now assumed the role of an avuncular cult intellectual—a twinkly-eyed shit-shooter who provided crazy and canny wisdom to an audience of freethinking heads and deep weirdos. And while this audience may have been drawn initially to Wilsonian staples like conspiracy theory, sex magic, and psychedelic consciousness, they stayed for his often incisive digressions into psychology, political history, quantum physics, existentialism, anthropology, literature, cybernetics, and the sociology of knowledge.

Wilson always played the garage philosopher, packing his conceptual jams with chatty riffs and refrains, corny jokes and outlandish follow-my-wink enthusiasms. This makes his work appealing to late adolescents, but less so to others. Still, he remains an important and serious thinker, albeit an unsystematic and sometimes sloppy one. In *Cosmic Trigger* and the many nonfiction books to come, he argued for a pluralistic psychedelic pragmatism that he sometimes characterized as a “neurological model agnosticism”—a term based on applying the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics to consciousness. In the preface to the 1986 edition of *Cosmic Trigger*, he 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.²

Here we can identify a few key Wilsonian themes. Wilson holds that our conceptual frameworks are all provisional, and need to be continually rejiggered in light of experience—including, in his view, extraordinary experience. This is fallibilist pragmatism in a bohemian nutshell. Another Jamesian theme is radical pluralism. Wilson holds that both the universe and society are composed of many autonomous, interacting, but non-overlapping domains, including those self-reinforcing media echo chambers we know too well today, and that Wilson brilliantly called “reality tunnels.”³ Finally, Wilson puts the individual nervous system in the driver’s seat. Recognizing that scripts directly shape experience, and that we are to some degree responsible for the scripts we run, Wilson adopted a radical constructivism that playfully metaprograms—“edits”—the possibilities of experience and knowledge.

Wilson’s “guerilla ontology” was also deeply political. In his social criticism, Wilson relentlessly exposed and mocked the reality tunnels that dominate modern institutions, cultural behavior, and individual minds. But though he marched on the Pentagon in 1967 and fought in the Chicago riots in 1968, Wilson was no man of the left. In 1973 he provocatively described himself as “a spokesman for an extreme right-wing libertarianism that prides itself on being more radical than left-wing anarchism.”⁴ We will unpack this in a moment. Here we can simply appreciate that Wilson’s writings give us a window onto a strain of freakdom often elided in counterculture histories: an explicitly libertarian “illuminated politics” whose pursuit of altered states of consciousness was intimately tied to a program of cognitive liberty and ontological anarchism.

One particularly intriguing and influential feature of Wilson’s thought is his curious version of skepticism. This is not the snarky scientism of today’s myth-busting “skeptics,” who seem untouched either by the sociology of knowledge or the mystery at the heart of
existence. Wilson's skepticism, though inconsistent, resembles at its best the classical Greek philosophy of Pyrrhonism, whose practitioners followed a skeptical anthropotechnics designed to bring the soul to happiness. At the core of their method lay the *epoché*—the intentional “bracketing” of judgments about any non-evident matters that may lurk behind empirical phenomena. As such, these old-school skeptics rejected all manner of dogmas—including the assertion that nothing can ultimately be known.

One of the more charming aspects of Wilson as a writer is the fact that, unlike many charismatic autodidacts, he does not pretend to think in isolation. His texts are unusually generous in acknowledging his sources, his influences, and his intellectual heroes; much of *Cosmic Trigger* is a record of these sorts of apprenticeships, in person and not. As such, in addition to tracking Wilson’s earlier development, we will devote some of the sections ahead to important influences like Timothy Leary, H.P. Lovecraft, Aleister Crowley, and John Lilly. These men provided Wilson with many of the building blocks that structured his own experience of high weirdness. But they also inspired some of the visionary skepticism that made Wilson an exemplary tightrope walker and canny modern shaman. By creatively programming his own extraordinary experiences while (mostly) refusing the temptation to reify their meanings, Wilson was able to enjoy and engender religious visions and esoteric transformations of consciousness without, for the most part, falling into religious or esoteric beliefs. At least, that is, until he wound up on the threshold of Chapel Perilous.
Robert Anton Wilson grew up during the Depression in working-class Brooklyn. He suffered from polio as a child, which perhaps explains why in later life he was more of a *mensch* than an *übermensch*. After abandoning the Catholic faith as a teenager, he became a committed materialist, absorbing Marxism while studying engineering and mathematics at New York University. In his twenties, he treated his sometimes intense anxiety attacks with various courses of psychotherapy, including work with a Reichean practitioner who opened up Wilson's interest in uncorked sexuality. Reich's insistence that social forces constrained the erotic body—and could be deconstructed—proved very important to Wilson. The therapy must have worked; he married the poet and feminist Arlen Riley in 1958, embarking on a happy marriage that lasted until Arlen's death in 1999.

In the late fifties, Wilson started to contribute essays to *The Realist*, a New York rag devoted to “freethought criticism and satire” edited by Paul Krassner (later to become both a Merry Prankster and a Yippie). Wilson's essays for *The Realist* combined lacerating critiques of power and economic domination with cultural criticism, wry humor, and an intense commitment to pacifism. Unlike many young intellectuals, Wilson remained rigorously non-dogmatic. In a column from 1960, Wilson responded to a reader's question about his political affiliation with evasion, admitting support of only two theories, which he also, characteristically, sourced: “‘Don't be a victim’ (Rimbaud)” and “‘Avoid the authorities’ (Lao-tse, by way of Kerouac).”

In some of his *Realist* appearances, Wilson listed Alfred Korzybski's Institute for General Semantics as his institutional affiliation. Like William Burroughs and L. Ron Hubbard, Wilson was swayed by Korzybski's argument that human beings constantly distort reality by laminating our experience with linguistic categories whose distance from the embodied world of sensation we then forget. Korzybski's famous slogan, “the map is not the territory,” attacks this habit of overwriting sensation and perception with
reified abstractions, an analysis that resonated with Wilson's hands-on Reichean work as well.

For Wilson, there was a politics to all this. By collapsing map into territory, semantics comes to directly shape people's experience, leading to symbolic and ideological manipulations of the body and behavior. As such, emancipation requires a shift in our relationship to language, including what Korzybski called a “consciousness of abstraction” capable of recovering the perceiving body—what *Illuminatus!* called the “biogram”—from the clutches of abstract conceptual templates (aka, the “logogram”). Though very much an ideas guy, Wilson always rooted his thought in the body of experience, a body that needed to be actively disentangled from cultural codes through critical inquiry, the skeptical epoché, and the embodied pursuit of hedonic experiences.

Wilson was no sensual primitivist. Instead, general semantics gave him permission to suspend the authority of any single conceptual map while allowing him to try them all on for size. In the late fifties and early sixties, Wilson explored all manner of models, including phenomenology, cybernetics, Buddhism, physics, libertarianism, and existentialism. He stuck with ideas he found liberating or entertaining or empirically sound without worrying about how they all fit together. He also started smoking a lot of pot, no doubt supercharging his well-read brain with all manner of resonant associations.

Wilson did not believe that the world was a neat and tidy place; he followed William James in finding it a muddled and “gothic” affair, without a sweeping outline. As such, he joined Korzybski in rejecting the absolute claims of the rules of logic. Though Wilson believed in the value of science and engineering, and so respected Aristotle’s axiomatic laws of thought, he also held that rationalist axioms made for bad metaphysics. In absolutizing the principle of identity (A=A) and the principle of excluded middle—which holds that a proposition is either true or false, with no middle option (*tertium non datur*)—we fundamentally misconstrue the real ambiguities and pluralism of the phenomenal world. This is why Korzybski called his own system “non-Aristotelian,” which the science-fiction writer A.E. Vogt renamed “Null-A.” Decades later, Wilson took aim at the *tertium non datur* by describing his own approach as “maybe logic.”

In *Illuminatus!* Hagbard Celine voices the libertarian politics implied in all this. For Celine, the law of identity, like the law of excluded middle, is part of the old “Babylonian con” described earlier: a system of cognitive capture and restraint, an enslavement to the rulership of eternal substances that any self-respecting ontological anarchist should reject.7 “A is not A. Once you accept A is A, you're hooked. Literally hooked, addicted to the System.”8

Celine—and Wilson behind him—also had more concrete rivals in mind with his rant. For American libertarians, “A is A” was not just an Aristotelian axiom but a rallying cry of the Objectivists, the sometimes cult-like followers of Ayn Rand and her influential libertarian philosophy of selfish individualism and laissez-faire capitalism. Rand believed that objective existence was more fundamental than consciousness, and that our only hope of crossing the chasm of epistemology lay through rationality, experiment, and mathematical law.

In *Illuminatus!* whose maybe logic makes hash of such views, Wilson and Shea regularly satirize Rand and her book *Atlas Shrugged*, which appears in the text as the anti-communist crusader Atlanta Hope’s novel *Telemachus Sneeze*. It is only one of the novel’s many satirical forays into anarchist politics, which was at least as riven by factionalism as the New Left, and even harder to track by virtue of the confusions it introduces between right and left, to say nothing of Fists and Heads. In *Illuminatus!* Joe Malik attends the final convention of the Students for a Democratic Society and muses about the range of anti-authoritarians present. There were

the individualist-anarchists, who sounded like right-wing Republicans (except that they wanted to get rid of all functions of government); the anarcho-syndicalists and Wobblies, who sounded like Marxists (except that they wanted to get rid of all functions of government); the anarcho-pacifists, who sounded like Gandhi and Martin Luther King (except that they wanted to get rid of all functions of government); and a group who were dubbed, rather affectionately, “the Crazies”—whose position was utterly unintelligible.10

So what sort of libertarian was Wilson? He was no anarcho-capitalist. He was sympathetic to Marx and the plights of wage-
slavery in a world of growing corporate rule. But his distrust of government brought him in line with Proudhon and nineteenth-century American anarchists like Josiah Warren, Lysander Spooner, and Benjamin Tucker. These classic Yankee individualists offered principled attacks on the illegitimacy and 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 socialists. As the libertarian historian Brian Doherty points out, the influence of this older anarchist legacy set Wilson's thought apart from the many hard-edged “radicals for capitalism” that came to dominate the libertarian movement following World War II.

Throughout his life, Wilson regularly mocked the business-libertarian obsession with Austrian economics and the evils of the welfare state, arguments he believed were often driven by a brute hostility towards the poor that he, as a frequently poor person, by no means shared.

In the end, Wilson probably considered himself a Crazy. Alongside his participation in the Discordian scene, Wilson's central anarchist praxis lay in the identification and expiation of what the German philosopher Max Stirner called “spooks”—the abstractions in the mind that too often overwrite our experience. For Wilson, the pursuit of liberty therefore meant an integrated life of freethinking critique and embodied experiences that scrambled all the codes. The sovereign in his individualist anarchism was not the selfish “I” of the Objectivists, which Rand described as a rationalist monad operating in a laissez-faire utopia that depended on fixed ideas of natural law. Wilson rejected the concept of natural law and the desire to root the ought in the is. The singularity he wanted to mobilize was not the individual ego, but the aboriginal precursor of conceptual and linguistic identity itself—that kernel of chaos, at once abyssal and down to earth, that is discovered within existence itself. For Wilson, this meant sex, children, marriage, work, humor, friendship, poetry, pot. In other words, life.
3.5.2 Encounters

In the early sixties, Wilson moved with Arlen and their daughters to the School of Living in Brookville, Ohio, a back-to-the-land intentional community run along decentralized and proto-hippie lines influenced by Josiah Warren. Fascinated by alternative forms of human togetherness, Wilson edited the community's tiny periodical *Balanced Living*, which he renamed *A Way Out* and stuffed with characteristic obsessions like Reich, sexual liberty, and modernist literature (Wilson knew his Joyce and Pound).

Soon Wilson added psychedelics to his list of interests. Wilson scored some peyote from a jazz musician and explored the cactus regularly over the next few years. He experienced telepathy with plants, waves of transcendental bliss, and occasional hints of some sort of super-human consciousness. He adopted what he called a Jungian or “trans-religious” attitude toward such phenomena—neither believing in them nor dismissing them as mere hallucinations. But even this characteristically “maybe logic” frame was tested by his weirdest vision, which took place a full day after coming down from a trip. Looking across a cornfield while pulling weeds, he saw a dancing man with green skin and pointy ears. By the time of *Cosmic Trigger*, when he had read Castaneda, Wilson called this figure Mescalito.

Wilson soon stopped taking peyote, lacking what he felt was a sufficient “methodology.” He would not try LSD until 1970, though that didn’t stop him from seeking out Timothy Leary earlier on. In 1964, as a journalist for *The Realist*, Wilson traveled to Millbrook, New York, to meet the man who would become a life-long friend and collaborator, as well as a crucial influence on Wilson's experimental esotericism.

Like Wilson, Leary straddled the worlds of social psychology and hedonic mysticism, but unlike Wilson, he was a pro. Leary’s first book, 1957’s *The Interpersonal Diagnosis of Personality*, offered a dense personality typology that defined the self according to social roles and interpersonal “scripts.” Dissatisfied with both behaviorist models and Freud, Leary was already coming to understand social
agency as a kind of “game” when he discovered psilocybin and LSD. By 1962, the psychedelicized Leary had pushed the concept of game far beyond typical social interactions. The subject-object game, for example, structured ordinary perception and science alike, while the most dominant and tragic game of all was the ego game. In its place, Leary outlined a pragmatic program of “applied mysticism” that used psychedelic trauma to “shatter the gamesmanship” out of people. For Leary, the mystic experience became “the non-game, meta-game experience.”

Leary provided Wilson with a social-psychological model of gnosis, one that conceived the mystic glimpse as the rupture of predetermined scripts and programmed roles. But he also showed the atheist Wilson other uses for religion. At Millbrook, Leary turned to “spiritual” texts like Lao Tzu, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and the I Ching in order to develop a new framework for psychedelic consciousness. Religious discourse also became a political weapon for Leary. Through a series of cheekily-named organizations—the International Federation for Internal Freedom (IFIF), the Castalia Foundation, the League of Spiritual Discovery—Leary asserted that psychedelic use was a religious right.

Arthur Kleps, who lived at Millbrook during Leary's reign, founded the Neo-American Church in 1966 to similarly assert such rights. Unlike Leary, Kleps also used the occasion to satirize religion and larger society with the sort of psychedelic humor we find in Discordianism, among the Merry Pranksters, and in Illuminatus! The ministers of Kleps’ church were called “Boo Hoos,” their mascot was a three-eyed toad, their house organ named Divine Toad Sweat, and their supreme goal the bombardment and annihilation of the planet Saturn. Though Kleps sincerely accepted the mystical sublimity of psychedelic experience, he rejected religious dogma as well as the “programming” proffered by Asian gurus. Instead, he identified with 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.”

Wilson’s future career would follow this particular current of spiritual and cognitive liberty.

Another reason that Leary's psychedelic mysticism worked for Wilson was because it remained rooted in the biology of the human nervous system. In his book High Priest (1968), which reflected on
his first few years of psychedelic use, Leary offered this view of what happens when you trip: “Your nerve endings, neural cameras, cellular memory banks, protein structures become broadcasting instruments for the timeless humming message of God located inside your body.” This quotation neatly summarizes Leary's strange techno-biological vision of mystical materialism, which resonated with Wilson's own foundations in engineering and cybernetics. Leary also turned Wilson on to the associated idea of “hedonic engineering”: the technical pursuit of happiness and pleasure, very much including the higher raptures associated with psychedelic mysticism.

As a plucky hedonist himself, it was not altogether surprising that Wilson, fed up with commune life and needing cash to support his family, wound up working for *Playboy*, where he met Robert Shea and started writing fiction. Though *Illuminatus!* was not published until 1975, the text was largely completed by 1971, the year that Wilson quit his editing gig and left Chicago. He wanted to escape the workaday world by supporting himself as a freelance writer, a vocation he stuck with for the rest of life—which meant that poverty, welfare, and Grub Street modes of over-production were always a part of the mix. But Wilson wasn't just heeding the siren call of independence when he quit *Playboy*. His existential horizons were expanding as well. After years of caution, he had started taking LSD.

Wilson and his family moved for a spell to San Miguel de Allende in Mexico, before heading to the Bay Area, where the bulk of the incidents in *Cosmic Trigger* take place. During these years, Wilson earned some money by working on two hard-cover nonfiction books for Playboy Press, *Sex and Drugs: A Journey Beyond Limits* (1973) and *The Book of the Breast* (1974). In 1973, responding to the growing market for countercultural pornography, a paperback outfit also published Wilson's solo novel *The Sex Magicians*, whose goofy romps drew as much from *Playboy* as from the sleazy excesses of underground comix. But *The Sex Magicians*, along with portions of *Sex and Drugs*, also reflect Wilson's evolving ideas about sexual ritual and esoteric states of consciousness, matters he was coming to know from the inside out.
3.5.3 T’angpoon Tantra

Wilson was always more of a hedonic engineer than a mystagogue, and in *Cosmic Trigger*, he provides a handy (and male-orientated) nuts-and-bolts description of sexual magic: “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.” Like “prolonged hatha yoga,” sacred sex also “seems to produce a permanent change in neuro-physiology.” And like nitrous oxide, sexual magic “seems to condense an LSD trip into a few minutes.”

For more lurid accounts of such ecstasies, we should turn to Wilson’s smut book. *The Sex Magicians* is saturated with goofy occult eroticism: pornographic Tarot cards, swingers practicing Pranayama at sex parties, and dumb quips about sex as a “voodoo possession ritual.” At one point, we witness a *Weird Tales*-worthy flashback to a goddess-worshipping sexual ceremony in old Atlantis called the Epiphany of Mum-Mum. While being serviced by the high priests Lhuv-Kerapht and Klarkash-Ton—get it?—the nude priestess Salome evokes the sacred energy of T’angpoon in her loins. The gathered acolytes, having already smoked the magic herb Ak-opokogol, grow 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.

In the midst of this Lovecraftian romp, Wilson then drops the mask—or at least manages to slip in a few frank, almost technical comments about higher orgasmic consciousness. “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 of the T’angpoon possession. “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.”
Wilson regularly refers to this current as “Tantric” in *Cosmic Trigger*. In this, he was seemingly jumping on the bandwagon of Orientalized sexual mysticism that Vedantic scholar Georg Feuerstein castigates as “California Tantra.”²³ For Feuerstein, California Tantra is debased and deluded, and makes the fundamental error of confusing higher meditative bliss with the physical orgasm. Even for scholars without Feuerstein's faith commitments, though, California Tantra often represents a suspicious blend of bad faith, projection, and materialist desire. For all its apparent exotica, Hugh Urban considers California Tantra's appropriation of South Asian techniques of ecstasy to be “the quintessential religion for consumerist capitalist society.”²⁴

At first glance, Wilson's first non-fiction book, *Sex & Drugs: A Journey Beyond Limits* (1973), seems to support Urban's argument. Unlike *Cosmic Trigger*, the book was a seventies commercial affair aimed at the mainstream consumer market for sensual diversions. “Hedonic engineering,” after all, is what the engines of lifestyle capitalism pursue. Published through Playboy Press and blurbed by Alan Watts, the cover of the paperback edition features a kaleidoscopic image of a woman moaning in ecstasy alongside an equally alluring question: “Are drugs the answer to better sex?”

But Wilson's answer has more to do with esoteric ritual and mystical thinking than it does with erotic techniques or psychoactive substances. Wilson presents both Asian Tantra and Western magic as technologies of the self whose transcendent fruits potentially exceed the altered states available through psychoactive drugs—with or without the sex. In saying this, however, Wilson does not invoke the mystic lingo of enlightenment, satori, or union with Godhead. Instead he uses Leary and John Lilly—who we will turn to in a moment—to reimagine visionary experience according to a neurologically-based mystical pragmatism that disenchants as much as it enchants. As Wilson explains, when inner empiricists like Leary or Lilly “saw gods and heavens and experienced ‘occult’ energies, they did not take these dramatic events at face value.”²⁵ Instead, they dug down to discover the strange metaprogramming loops that shape the beliefs and experiences of what Lilly called the “human biocomputer.”
Even the mystic pearl of “unification”—the ecstatic collapse of subject and object sought by acidheads and Vedantic nondualists—is framed by Wilson in systems-theoretical terms rather than “spooky or metaphysical” ones. Here Wilson was heavily influenced by Alan Watts, who refers to cybernetics in a spiritual context as early as *The Way of Zen* (1957). For Wilson, the experience of fusion with God or the universe simply represents “the shift of attention from the conscious ego to the previously unconscious organism-environment feedback network.” Such systems thinking had shaped Wilson's thought since the fifties, but he did not follow many seventies New Age intellectuals in mystifying the idea of “systems” into a new spiritual ideology of holism. Instead, Wilson wanted to use systems talk to redescribe mystical experience as a cognitive grok about the co-created construction of self and environment.

*Sex & Drugs* also democratized esoteric secrets by presenting them in accessible, pragmatic language. This recalls Hugh Urban's identification of one of the central paradoxes of California Tantra, which is that it transforms the “dangerous power and secrecy” that surround Eastern Tantric practices into the “healthy pleasure and liberated openness” of the sexual revolution. Consider the somewhat paradoxical title of the book *Sexual Secrets: The Alchemy of Ecstasy*, written by the British Tantric initiate Nik Douglas and the artist Penny Slinger in late seventies California. The “secrets” presented by this popular manual do not require initiation or long apprenticeship, but are offered up like the tools and machines reviewed in the *Whole Earth Review*.

At the same time, Wilson also retained the sense of Tantra's “dangerous power and secrecy,” especially once he left *Playboy* writing behind him. *Cosmic Trigger*, after all, is a cautionary tale, and it veils more secrets than you might expect. Early in the volume, for example, Wilson explicitly refuses to detail the protocols of some of his “neuro-psychological experiments” 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 mental hospital. This seems rather opposite to the guiding message of *Sex & Drugs*, which is that sex, drugs, and magic can,
well, really blow your mind. What has changed? Why the note of caution here?

One reason is that Wilson pursued the more hair-raising end of the California Tantra spectrum. His quest was not simply for pleasure or mystic bliss, but for gnosis. While Wilson was a hedonist, he was a philosophical rather than a sensualist one, and his sexual magic was as much an “experiment of truth” as an exotic enjoyment. Pleasure for him is *Promethean*, an engine not just for the satisfaction of the self but for its deterritorialization. And as a participant in the Bay Area’s occult revival, with its wild Thelemites and bootstrap witches, Wilson gathered plenty of first-hand evidence about how often such experiments could go south. To recall his earlier cited observation, “The early 70s were the days when all the survivors of the Sixties went a bit nuts.”

At the same time, Wilson’s evasion of detail also has powerful rhetorical effects. After all, *Cosmic Trigger* is partly a platform for Wilson’s performance as a mindfuck guru. By explicitly invoking what he refuses to spell out, Wilson intensifies the desirability and power of his experiments, just like Lovecraft's emphasis on “forbidden” books. By staying mum, Wilson grants himself the authority of a master who can handle such operations, knows when to reveal them, and when to keep silent. Though this kind of authority goes against the grain of Wilson's demotic sensibility, it also charges his text with the charisma of secret codes, of encrypted opacities. It's an old esoteric trick, but Wilson learned it—if he needed to learn it—from a master trickster guru: Aleister Crowley. But Crowley taught him much more as well.
Skeptical Theurgy

Wilson discovered Crowley in 1970, when Alan Watts turned him on to Israel Regardie's recent biography of the magus, illuministically titled *The Eye in the Triangle.*³³ It was a good time to stumble upon the works of the Beast and his religion of Thelema. After years of obscurity, Crowley underwent a posthumous revival at the dawn of the seventies, his once scandalous yen for sex, drugs, and magic proving him a prophet of the counterculture. Publishers like Samuel Weiser, Lancer, and the Sangreal Foundation flooded the market with Crowleyania, including the first edition of Crowley's powerful Thoth Tarot deck. Major fanboy Jimmy Page bought Crowley's Boleskine House in 1970, while David Bowie sang of “Crowley's uniform of imagery” in his esoteric song “Quicksand” from 1971. That same year, two notable Thelemic events occurred in California: the experimental cineaste Kenneth Anger completed his visionary Crowleyan film *Lucifer Rising*, while Grady McMurtry, a friend of Wilson's, spearheaded the revival of the Ordo Templi Orientis, registering Crowley's moribund magical order as a legal entity.

Wilson disliked Crowley's politics, which he dismissed as “a blend of Nietzschean Supermanism and anarcho-fascist Darwinism.” But he did enjoy Crowley's outrageous character. He particularly appreciated 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. Here Crowley, writing at the height of his sometimes considerable powers, offers a brilliant if occasionally puerile series of short, cryptic, and clever verses shot through with kabbalistic symbolism, numerology, and sexual double-entendre. Inspired by this playfulness, Wilson started weaving Crowleyania into *Illuminatus!* and *The Sex Magicians*, as well as his own ritual experiments.

In the second volume of *Cosmic Trigger*, which was not published until 1991, Wilson offers an account of one of these psychedelic rites. Of course it is a story, told by a professional story-teller, and as such must be taken with all manner of salts, alchemical and otherwise. But the story does give us a sense of how Wilson deployed the
skeptical imagination in situ. In 1972, Wilson found himself in a farmhouse in Mendocino county, where he performed Crowley's Mass of the Phoenix, a solo ritual described in The Book of Lies. After dropping 250 micrograms of LSD and putting on some Beethoven, Wilson performed the invocation.

Soon Wilson found himself surrounded by a ring of slavering dog-faced demons who stood out solidly against the room's actual furniture. Wilson was not a passive viewer here, for the creatures seemed perfectly aware of his existence.

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.”

Having found the right protocol, Wilson faced the terror by directing his imagination to feed the demons with a tasty phantasmic snack—in this case, shrimp cocktails. Once they were sated, the entities transformed into dwarf-sized replicas of the nuns Wilson recalled from grammar school in Brooklyn. Laughing, he then closed the circle, writing, in an echo of Crowley, that he was “totally convinced that all the ‘entities’ invoked in Magick are parts of our own minds.” But the evening was not through with him. Suddenly, his bed started shaking “like a scene from the Exorcist.” It was a mild earthquake. With a further dose of self-protecting, apotropaic irony, Wilson writes, “It would be best to not even think of it as a synchronicity.”

As Wilson’s Berkeley period unfolded, Wilson increasingly read Crowley through the paranoid-critical lens of Illuminatus! In Cosmic Trigger, he places Crowley’s system of Thelema within a broader current of Western occultism that utilizes “dangerous ‘physiological experiments’” involving drugs and sexual ritual. In particular, he came to suspect that the sexual mysticism 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. Though Wilson provides relatively scant details, the thoughts and experiments inspired by this apparent arcanum cocked the cosmic trigger.

At the same time, Wilson’s reading of Crowley emphasized his critical distance from visionary experience. He praises Crowley’s use of “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.”36 To understand Wilson's own deployment of the occult—which later proved to be a great influence on chaos magic and other esoteric currents—we should spend some more time with what Crowley himself called his “skeptical theurgy.”

Certainly the Great Beast enjoyed the freethinking stance of empiricism. He described his own esoteric system as “Scientific Illuminism,” while the famous motto he devised for his spiritual organization, the A.˙. A.˙., proclaimed “The Method of Science, the Aim of Religion.”37 Crowley's most reductionist views of occult experience were expressed early in his magical career, especially in the version of the Goetia he published in 1904. Here Crowley writes that the demonic spirits that the sorcerer conjures in the Triangle of Art are 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 Marco Pasi argues, Crowley's stance reflected a Jamesian pragmatism that Crowley had imbibed, like so many, from The Varieties of Religious Experience, which had appeared only a few years earlier.38 As Crowley wrote in a founding statement of the A.˙. A.˙., “There is only one Rock which Skepticism cannot shake; the Rock of Experience.”

Crowley’s skepticism, like Wilson's, was inconsistent. After receiving the Book of the Law in 1906 and fashioning himself as a prophet, the Beast often embraced supernatural beliefs or messianic convictions. Even so, the scholar Egil Asprem persuasively argues that Crowley’s pragmatism was sincere and based on his own philosophical and esoteric studies. These influences included
Crowley's early exposure to Theravadan Buddhism, whose disenchanting operations of self-analysis were typically interpreted in his era as signs of a "rational religion." Even more important, though, was the psychological orientation provided by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the ground-breaking British occult society where the young Crowley cut his magical teeth.

On the surface, the Golden Dawn's interest in initiatory rituals, ancient gods, and angelic tongues reflected a Romantic reaction to industrialized fin-de-siècle Britain. At the same time, the Order's pursuit of the mysteries was, as historian Alex Owen insists, "entirely regulated by reason." Rejecting the protocols of Spiritualism, with its passive reception of independent incorporeal beings, the Golden Dawn magicians instead stressed the control of the mind and will, even when exploring the intuitive, hallucinatory, or twilight dimensions of human consciousness. As Owen writes, "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.'"

One of Owen's strongest examples of this attitude comes from—surprise, surprise—Aleister Crowley. In *Magick in Theory and Practice*, Crowley enjoins astral travelers to use rational methods in the wake of their visionary journeys in order to distinguish between "authentic astral phenomena and figments of personal imagination." Here Crowley assumes a realist attitude: there is a real distinction between the astral plane and personal imagination, and this difference can be established through intellectual means. Elsewhere, though, Crowley abandons such convictions for a more pragmatic approach. In one instruction manual for the A.˙. A.˙., he writes that

> 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.

This is a remarkable statement of skeptical theurgy—or, perhaps more accurately, a kind of esoteric positivism: supernatural
phenomena may exist, but there is no reason to embrace any non-
evident metaphysical assumptions about them. Wilson loved this
quotation, which is given pride of place in one of Thompson's arcane
comix illustrations for *Cosmic Trigger*, and this emphasis helped
shape the countercultural profile of the Beast.

In his A.˙. A.˙. manual, Crowley was not just reflecting on the
passive experience of visionary images. For the magician, gods and
spirits are beings that are *conjured*, whether through rituals or
writings or experiments in “brain change.” In other words, they are
constructed, or at least result from “doing certain things.” There is a
crucial pragmatic argument here. In the words of the transpersonal
psychologist Jorge Ferrer, “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 co-
created by the different elements involved in the participatory
event.” It is neither a matter of fantasy nor pre-existing reality; it is
about the installation of psychogenic networks that take on a life of
their own.
3.5.5 Al Azif

Wilson was not just a solo practitioner and reader of Crowley's system. Living in the Bay Area, he also had the opportunity of plunging into the region's rousing occult revival. Along with his wife Arlen, he socialized with members of the revived Ordo Templi Orientis, including order head Grady McMurtry. The couple also joined two small witchcraft groups, the Stone Moon coven and the Moebius Circle. Both of these 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.”

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the NROOGD broke rank with most witchcraft groups of the day by unabashedly celebrating their creative fabrication of the Old Ways. The group owed its beginnings to a course taught at San Francisco State by the poet and film-maker James Broughton, who asked his students to create a ritual. Aidan Kelly, Glenn Turner, and other future pals of Wilson began to weave together a variety of literary, mythological, and performance traditions. They didn't expect their rite to produce extraordinary, almost paranormal experiences. But it did.

In short order the crew had midwifed 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 deeply pragmatic reasons: it did not require individuals to violate their intellectual integrity; it “operated nonintellectually;” and it could alter people's states of consciousness. By pulling themselves up by their own imaginal bootstraps, people could make real magic that remade themselves in turn. As even the skeptical Lovecraft noted, “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?”
In this section, we need to get a better understanding of this bootstrap witchery, for these are the sorts of living fictions that lured Wilson into his perilous chapel. What is at stake is the ontological place of imagination in the modern era, when science and technology are typically understood to “disenchant the world.” Instead, we will show how the presence of skepticism and irony, far from destroying enchantment, can in some ways fuel the fire—not just in literature, but in extraordinary experience as well. Indeed, it is precisely the tension between a skeptical perspective and a meaningful commitment to visionary practice that helps set up the metaphysical acrobatics of high weirdness. And one name for that tension is the *as if*.

The scholar Michael Saler traces the emergence of “disenchanted enchantment” to modern popular literature. 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 thrill of the marvelous—already found in the Aesthetic fantasies and decadent literature of the time—with the rhetoric of reason and objectivity. (In a sense, this was not altogether different from the roughly contemporaneous strategies of the Golden Dawn.) The great example of these scientific romances is H. Rider Haggard’s enormously popular novel *She* (1887), whose exotic story of a mysterious white African queen—the famous *She-who-must-be-obeyed*—came equipped with maps, chronologies, and doctored photographs of archaeological finds. Later examples of such *as if* fictions that Saler addresses include Sherlock Holmes, *The Lord of the Rings*, and, of course, the Cthulhu Mythos.
For modern subjects accustomed to the industrial revolution and the rise of scientific technology, these texts offer new ways of engaging and playing with the imagination. In contrast to Romanticism, which both exalts and divinizes the imaginative faculty as an irrational power, disenchanted enchantment runs on a more
secular logic that Saler calls the “ironic imagination.” By consuming fantasy within an armature of verisimilitude, readers can “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.” What results is a reflexive form of wonder, one that “delights without deluding.” At the same time, this approach also requires work: as Saler insists, “the double consciousness of the ironic imagination requires ongoing practice to maintain.”

Lovecraft was a master of the ironic imagination, and he also did us the favor of articulating what it felt like from the inside. In a letter to Clark Ashton Smith, Lovecraft described his method of invention: “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.” In addition to providing readers with the pleasures of disenchanted enchantment, Lovecraft also liked to play the trick on himself. As a writer of speculative stories, he admits,

[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.

Using the science-fiction strategy of extrapolating from settled facts to satisfy his speculative reason, Lovecraft's ironic imagination nonetheless takes its pleasures by sneaking up on the marvels and wonder associated with religious experience. Yet the cosmic awe produced by promise and possibility are, in the end, a literary tease tied to an ultimately worldly 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 here, since nothing brings the Romantic or religious imagination down to earth as much as the
drugs that seemingly disenchant such sublimities. In the classic terms of the history of religion, we might say that the ironic imagination enjoys the sacred only at the cost of its profanation.

So what happens when the ironic imagination is brought to bear on religious or occult practice? This, in essence, is the question raised by the bootstrap magic mobilized by NROOGD, Cthulhu sorcerers, Crowley's “skeptical theurgy,” and Wilson's practice. Within the magic circle, as within the covers of a novel, suggestions and possibilities are treated as if they were true—not just for the fun of it, but because that stance produces richer effects, both in terms of experience and in the subsequent blossoming of possibilities. Here the safety of the ironic imagination that Saler describes breaks down as practitioners “enter the fiction.” Within the circle of the ritual, or the referential network of texts, a peculiar phenomenon starts to scratch at the door: a fiction that has a life of its own.

The pirate Hagbard Celine gives us a remarkable statement of this imaginative pragmatism towards the end of Illuminatus! When another character protests that the goddess Eris must be an allegory or a symbol, and can't be really real, Celine demurs.

When you're dealing with these forces or powers in a philosophic and scientific way, contemplating them from an armchair, that 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.

How should we think about this operationalism, whose consequences we will be tracking through the rest of this chapter? Saler himself provides us a hint when he makes a joke about “A History of the Necronomicon,” a pseudo-scholarly essay written by Lovecraft about his dreamed-up book. The Necronomicon, we are told in this hoax tract, is a translation of an earlier Arabic text called Al Azif, whose title Lovecraft says refers to the demonic wailing of
nocturnal insects. But Saler considers another possibility: that Lovecraft was alluding to *The Philosophy of “As If”*, a book by the German philosopher Hans Vaihinger that first appeared in English in 1924—the very year that the *Necronomicon* made its debut appearance in Lovecraft's “The Hound.”

Vaihinger followed in the footsteps of Kant, and accepted the impenetrable wall that Kant installed between our knowledge of the world and the nature of the world itself. Vaihinger argued that many important concepts in science and philosophy—the atom, the infinitesimal, even Kant's own *Ding-an-such*—are simply fictions that we treat “as if” they were true in order for us to get on with the practical business of the day. This pragmatic line of thought also recalls William James, who applied something very similar to it to religion. Though abstractions like God and soul may be meaningless in themselves, “strangely enough they have a definite meaning for our practice.” Even if religious concepts are fictions, they can still bear moral fruit in our life once they are wagered in the craps game of existence. “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; lay plans as if we were to be immortal...”

Vaihinger was no irrationalist, and was not a particularly religious thinker. He also believed there were crucial differences between merely useful fictions and true hypotheses—the latter, after all, can be tested experimentally. Nonetheless, Vaihinger held that even if fictions were considered errors, certain fictions could serve as “a more conscious, more practical and more fruitful error.” But Vaihinger also pointed out a problem with “as if” fictions. Just like unproven hypotheses, they create an irritable tension in the mind, a disturbance that naturally seeks the equilibrium provided by the settled interconnection of facts or truths. (This tension is the tension of the tightrope.) Facts or consistencies can resolve this tension. But if no facts are forthcoming, and if this disturbing “as if” stress cannot be maintained, fictions settle into fabulous dogmas, *as if* congeals into *because*. The acrobat falls.
Wilson provides relatively scant details about the occult and psychedelic protocols he pursued in the core years covered by *Cosmic Trigger*. Many centered on Crowleyian magick, and included rituals designed to establish contact with the Holy Guardian Angel. A Catholic example of one of Latour's beings of religion, the Holy Guardian Angel first appears as a magical entity in the fifteenth-century grimoire *The Book of Abramelin*. There the central magical goal, as characterized by Crowley, was achieving the “knowledge and conversation” of the Holy Guardian Angel. To some students, Crowley would describe this figure as a superhuman intelligence; to others he claimed the Angel was just a projection of the personal unconscious. This double-entry bookkeeping delighted Wilson.

Wilson had other practices as well. Sometimes he played a “hypno-tape with positive suggestions on it.” These tapes mostly drew from mainline New Thought sources within the American metaphysical tradition: Christian Science, self-help literature, and, eventually, *A Course in Miracles*. As Gary Lachman points out in his book on Trump and contemporary occult politics, there are some intimate connections between modern magic and the positive thinking tradition, and it is no surprise that a pragmatist like Wilson would recognize their intimacy.

Wilson's self-hypnosis here was also another example of freaks messing around with tape machines. The McKennas brought one to the jungle, the Merry Pranksters used them in the Acid Tests, psychedelic music was made with them, and Leary recommended committing the prayers and prompts of *The Psychedelic Experience* to tape. But tape machines were more than tools in the countercultural era—they were also media allegories, the technological instantiation of models of cognition characterized by reality-programming, feedback loops, and the repeating tapes of the mind. Tape machines mediated consciousness both literally and figuratively, reframing thought, language, sound, and experience as a kind of material amenable to inscription, repetition, splices, and overdubs. Tape recorders were icons of metaprogramming.
Just consider another one of the hypno-tapes that Wilson liked to use: John Lilly's “Beliefs Unlimited.” In his classic memoir *The Center of the Cyclone* (1972), subtitled “An Autobiography of Inner Space,” Lilly quotes the “Beliefs Unlimited” script he used for one of the many esoteric workshops he taught in the early seventies at places like Esalen. For the exercise, which was intended to establish “an open-ended set of beliefs about the unknown,” listeners simply lay back in a darkened room and quietly absorbed the “metaprogramming” instructions recorded and repeated on tape. The script begins with one of Lilly's most widely cited claims:

In the province of the mind, what one believes to be true is true or becomes true, within certain limits to be found experientially and experimentally. These limits are beliefs to be transcended.61

Note that Lilly is not just offering a metaphysical proposition here; he is also providing a protocol, an operational demand—*transcend!*—to be fulfilled through the very practices that would confirm the claim. This was just the sort of transcendental pragmatism Wilson was looking for. Alongside Leary and Lovecraft, Crowley and Burroughs, Lilly came to heavily influence Wilson's own “neuro-psychological experiments.”

Wilson rightly recognized Lilly as one of the great figures of postwar consciousness culture, a psychoanalytically-sophisticated inner empiricist who operationalized beliefs into possibility probes. Lilly also happened to be an actual scientist. A graduate of Caltech, he began doing cutting-edge neurophysiological work at the NIMH in the fifties. He researched the direct electrical stimulation of neurons, studies that drew the attention of the CIA, then neck-deep in MKUltra.62 Lilly also began researching how the brain and mind behave when freed from external perceptual input. To this end, Lilly constructed the first immersive sensory deprivation tank, later one of the key technologies of the self among consciousness explorers of the seventies and beyond. The intelligence agencies were also interested in the tank, but tensions over Lilly's insistence on keeping his briefings and research unclassified led him to abandon his position in 1958.

Lilly then turned to the study of dolphin intelligence, work which raised questions about communicating with non-human
intelligences that would continue to haunt his far-out psychedelic work. Lilly began to explore LSD in conjunction with the isolation tank, research that eventually led to his book *Programming and Metaprogramming in the Human Biocomputer*, one of the best examples we possess of a rigorous inner empiricism coupled with the active cultivation of extraordinary experiences. Though written in the late sixties, the book was not widely available until 1972, at which point Lilly had largely shifted his allegiance from mainstream science to the esoteric counterculture, leading workshops at the Esalen Institute and studying with the Gurdjieffian teacher Oscar Ichazo in Chile.

Influenced by cybernetics, psychoanalysis, and neurobiology, *Programming and Metaprogramming* is written in a dry and abstract style whose only rhetorical flourishes are neologisms like “supraself metaprograms” and occasional references to science fiction. The book presents a complex and reflexive portrait of the mind as a recursive, multi-tiered “biocomputer:” a nested hierarchy of programs, tacit beliefs, and controls that are themselves subject to manipulation and experiment. By decoupling our senses from the external cues of the surrounding environment, the isolation tank allows the self-organizing, reality-constructing capacities of the mind to take center stage. With the normal sensory world dissolved, “the ordinary perception spaces, the ordinary projection spaces, [become] filled with cognition and conation processes.”

For his own psychonautical journeys, Lilly—or rather “the self-metaprogrammer”—experimented with adopting different “basic beliefs” before embarking on a session. These included *as if* science-fiction prompts that included the possibility of communication with non-human intelligences. In *Programming*, Lilly does not provide narrative accounts of the trips themselves, almost as if that were beside the point. What was important was the mop-up work, when Lilly would submit his trips to a process of “ruthless self-analysis”—modeled in part on psychoanalysis, and later supported by the Gurdjieff work—that attempted to deconstruct and disenchant his bizarre and sometimes mystical experiences.

For Lilly, this disinterested practice began to founder when he came to replace LSD with ketamine, a psychedelic dissociative he was introduced to by a doctor at Esalen. In K-space, Lilly achieved contact with the benign Earth Coincidence Control Office, who
claimed responsibility for the synchronicities that saturated his life. ECCO also recruited Lilly in the struggle against the Borg-like machinations of the Solid State Intelligence, a supercomputer-like entity devoted to conquering all biological, carbon-based life in the universe. Ketamine can be a seductive muse, and Lilly, who compulsively used the drug off and on for the rest of his life, had been ensnared in its tentacles—another cautionary tale in the annals of high weirdness.
3.5.7 Beliefs Unlimited

Wilson found Lilly's protocols and tapes invaluable in breaking down conditioned expectations about the boundary between “the possible and the impossible.” That said, while Lilly's metaprogramming scripts freed Wilson from his usual convictions, Wilson also noted that they encouraged a gullible faith in the mind's secret powers—the familiar psychedelic (and mystical) problem of inflation. These temporary states of messianic magical thinking did not overly concern Wilson however. Once the experiment was over, he tells us, he generally found it easy to re-establish his skeptical stance, though he noted that “skepticism during the experiment prevents any interesting results.” In the delicate double game of the ironic imagination, too much doubt would kill the rush.

Actively cultivating weird experiences which challenge the rational order of the world, Wilson would nonetheless selectively deploy reason in order to critically undermine supernatural convictions and other over-beliefs arising from his encounters. An appendix to Illuminatus! gives us an esoteric portrait of this transcendental pragmatism. In a brief and totally concocted account, Wilson and Shea outline the Ishmaelian 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.”

This critical gnosis is another version of the high-wire act, of course. It maintains its precarious connection to the mythopoetic sublime by refusing to submit to the pressure to resolve such experiences into the frameworks of faith or knowledge. This refusal, though it relies on a certain tension, is itself a form of spiritual freedom. In this way, critical gnosis resembles, again, the classic skepticism of Pyrrho, whose relativistic epistemology was designed
to deliver a state of ataraxia, or tranquility. At the same time, Wilson's “anti-belief system” can be seen as an esoteric extension of the ironic imagination described by Saler, which enabled readers of genre fiction to enjoy the fruits of enchantment without falling into the clutches of credulity. This, then, was Wilson's illuminated “game of truth:” the temporary assumption of as if fictions and esoteric beliefs, running on a “maybe logic” biocomputer, and open to skeptical reflection and reprogramming in light of pragmatic or desirable effects.

How are we to understand this game, whose intentions seem so far from both spirituality and science? Does it simply represent the modern ego’s further colonization of the Beyond? There is, after all, a link between Wilson's “atheist-anarchist subject” and the rational individual enshrined in the neoliberal order, with its emphasis on autonomy, rights, pleasures, and calculated self-interest. But it would be wrong to strictly conflate these two subjects. For it is only the latter who feels “agency panic” when confronted with conspiratorial or occult influences, or with evidence of his or her own constructed nature. The neoliberal subject is a self that, in order to be at all, must be real.

In contrast, Wilson's writings reflect very little panic when the everyday self is challenged, whether through psychoanalysis, social constructivism, demonic encounter, or the self-dissolving seas of high-dose LSD. The paradox with Wilson's atheist-anarchist subject is that its anti-authoritarianism sometimes turns against the primitive authority of the self as well. Wilson was happy to accept the psychoanalytic portrait of the self as internally divided, its apparent independence paradoxically dependent on a wrangling internal society of partial subjects. Indeed, Wilson tells his story in Cosmic Trigger from the shifting perspective of these various internal characters. At various points, we hear from the Shaman, the Poet, the Oracle, the Struggling Writer, and the Skeptic. And yet it is only the Skeptic, Wilson notes, “who usually possesses veto power over all the others.”

Wilson is right to qualify this claim with usually. In some of his later nonfiction texts especially, this veto power is nowhere to be seen. At times, Wilson’s “maybe logic” gives way to strong paranormal assertions and attacks on orthodox science that arguably twist evidence to support dogmatic positions. But that is another
story. Here we need to follow the flow of impossible encounters and strange synchronicities that, in the dog days of 1973, drowned the Skeptic in the high seas of the weird.
During the early summer of 1973, Wilson ratcheted up his acid magick. He principally employed Crowley's Bornless Ritual, a performance of Goetic sorcery originally based on an ancient Greco-Egyptian rite of exorcism. Using the ritual, which Crowley had used to achieve “knowledge and conversation,” Wilson experienced a series of “deaths-and-rebirths” into other modes of being: animal, divine, stellar. Wilson does not speak much of cosmic oneness in these accounts. Instead, the universe revealed itself as the endless orgasmic copulation of a Divine Couple—of difference conjoined, rather than unity. As a psychedelic comparativist, Wilson saw these figures as Shiva and Kali, Pan and Aphrodite, even Jehovah and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Other beings stepped onto the cosmic stage as well. “The Shaman achieved a rush of Jungian archetypes, strongly influenced by the imagery of Crowley's Invocation, but nonetheless having that peculiar quality of external reality and alien intelligence emphasized by Jung in his discussion of the archetypes.” As with the McKennas, Jung's archetypal animism allowed Wilson to both sidestep “religious” belief and to personify beyond the limits of caution. Soon, as Wilson reports, “the Skeptic was whacked out of his skull.”

In July, Wilson decided to redo one of his hypno-tape experiments. Instead of taking LSD, he entered a “Tantric sex trance” with the help of Arlen, whom he charmingly refers to as the Most Beautiful Woman in the Galaxy. The following morning, on July 23, Wilson awoke from a dream and scribbled down the following phrase: *Sirius is important*. This dream prompt, inserted like a virus into Wilson's already wacky weltanschauung, triggered a series of coincidences, paranormal experiences, and interlocking references that drew Wilson into what Lovecraft called a “structure of indefinite possibility and promise.” This structure, whose style and content would be instantly recognizable to readers of *Illuminatus!*, involved Egypt, the god Horus, the dog days of late summer (when Sirius the dog star rises), Dutch Schultz, Aleister Crowley, Kenneth Grant, and, perhaps most memorably, the “23 mystery.”
According to the *Principia Discordia*, one of the oldest Erisian mysteries is the Law of Fives, which states that all things happen in fives, or in divisions or multiples of five. Witchcraft pentagrams, the Pentagon, and a laterally sliced apple all support the Law of Fives. Indeed, as Omar Ravenhurst noted in *PD*, “I find the Law of Fives to be more and more manifest the harder I look.” Wilson started looking hard, using his big brain, selection bias, and “hermeneutical flexibility” (Sloterdijk) to discover all manner of implications. These included, in addition to the Erisian law, the 23rd chapter of *The Book of Lies*, the American slang term 23 Skidoo, the 23rd hexagram of the *I Ching* (“Splitting Apart”), and the writings of William S. Burroughs, who told Wilson about the strange number in the first place. As the connections started to mount, Wilson half-heartedly tried to lash himself to the mast of maybe logic. But soon he could no longer deny the songs in his ears, nor their even more unsettling source: higher dimensional intelligences from the star system Sirius.

It is tempting to follow Wilson’s researching mind into the labyrinth of rabbit holes that confirmed the Sirius Transmissions over the weeks and months ahead—very much including Robert Temple’s compelling book *The Sirius Mystery*, from 1976. Instead, I would like to turn our attention to the mechanism that built this structure of indefinite possibility: the mechanism of *meaningful coincidence*, or what Wilson calls “the paradoxical paranoidal paranormal parameters of synchronicity.” Indeed, as the accounts of the McKennas, Philip K. Dick, and Wilson all suggest, both the concept and the experience of *synchronicity*—the perception of acausal but meaningful coincidence—is one of the central drivers and features of high weirdness.

Synchronicity was enshrined in the acid mysticism of the sixties, where it functioned like the psychedelic equivalent of Christian grace. In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, we often find Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters enjoying, tracking, and even helping to stage uncanny coincidences, which Wolfe (but not Kesey) calls synchronicities. Prankster lore included a number of examples of this “weird shit,” like the time Neal Cassady ran out of gas driving everyone into the High Sierras, only to encounter, the next morning, a Chevron gasoline tanker that stopped and filled up the bus before heading further up the isolated road.
Synchronicity is the wink of the trickster. Emerging unbidden and in your face, a strong synchronicity suggests (without confirming) the existence of a mischievous and almost paranormal network of intentionality—what Kesey called “cosmic control” and what Lilly attributed to ECCO (Earth Coincidence Control Office). There are thus two levels of synchronicity, one explicit and one implicit. The first level is the link formed between explicit elements of experience, like an empty gas tank and the highly unlikely appearance of a gas truck, or yet another repetition of 23. But this experiential level also suggests a second-order network that is only implied, or folded within, the explicit connection: a hidden webwork of coordinated meaning, memorably described in the Alex Cox film *Repo Man* (1984) as “a lattice of coincidence that lays on top o’ everything.” The explicit synchronicity, then, seems to provide a brief localized slice of this larger second-order lattice, which lies both in and outside of linear history. And it is this flicker or wink, at once revealing and concealing another order of meaning, that makes the whole thing feel so weird—a quality, we should recall, that was originally linked to the invisible workings of fate.

In *Chapter Two*, we discussed the tension between reason and resonance, between the mirror's representational control and the struck string's absorbing vibrations. Synchronicity, in these terms, is an event of resonance that resembles a representation. Indeed, we might even define synchronicity as the entrance of two or more causally unrelated elements of experience into semiotic resonance, allowing seemingly meaningful overtones to emerge. Such elements of experience might be words, objects, gestures, numbers, texts, or images. But what is crucial is that they simultaneously cross between and collapse different modes of existence. And the main threshold they cross lies between the external world of material object-events and the internal theater of thoughts, memories, and desires.

Carl Jung co-created the term *synchronicity* with the physicist Wolfgang Pauli in the nineteen-fifties, but he began noting the phenomenon thirty years earlier. His bedrock 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 was given a golden scarab jewel. At that moment in the patient's narration, Jung heard an insect slam against the outside of the nearby windowpane—a common rose-chafer beetle
with a gold-green carapace. Jung then opened up the window, telling the patient, “Here is your scarab.” According to Jung, the gesture broke down her intellectual resistance to the analysis.

What is important in this story is less the appearance of the beetle than Jung's decision to put the coincidence into play. Rather than respect the chasm that modern thought inserts between nature and human consciousness, and which would a priori reject any meaningful correlation between a dream narration and a scuttling bug, Jung turned instead to a creative act of juxtaposition. Jung did not try to establish or imply a linear or causal connection between these resonating events, or even define the nature or “meaning” of the connection at all. Nonetheless, by merely pointing out the marvel, his tuned attention remixed reality, staging a transrational event that undermined the walls of resistance. And he did so by pointing out an enigmatic knot in the tapestry of experience, one that simultaneously demanded sense (the coincidence must be meaningful) and foreclosed it (no rational cause is imaginable).

It is important to underscore that Jung's notion of synchronicity is a naturalistic concept, one that forwards modernity's long-running literary and scientific engagement with meaningful coincidence. Influenced partly by Pauli, who was interested in paranormal research, Jung argued that the phenomenon of synchronicity pointed towards a “psychoid” intertwining of unconscious archetypes and physical matter. Though Jung tried to explain his model in loosely scientific terms, we can skip his tortured attempts to explain an “acausal connecting principal” without slipping into causality (explanations that were excellently critiqued by Arthur Koestler in his 1972 book The Roots of Coincidence). The important point here is that the concept of synchronicity that Wilson embraced, and that embraced him in turn, represents a paranormal reframing of the sorts of resonances that earlier undergirded the supernatural workings of fate. As such, synchronicity establishes what Egil Asprem calls “a uniquely naturalistic mode of enchantment.”

Synchronicity also reformulates one of the most archaic relationships between the human mind and the patterns of nature: the arts of divination. It is no accident that Jung introduced the term in an essay on the I Ching, for like the cracked oracle bones that lie at the origins of the hexagrams (and of Chinese writing), the event-signs of synchronicity take the form of writing, like a rebus or a
series of hieroglyphs. In this sense, the lattice of coincidence also resembles the meaningful patterns that scholars, writers, and historians construct, sometimes quite serendipitously, from the archives of knowledge. That's why, as Wilson catalogs the Sirius Transmissions in *Cosmic Trigger*, he comes to use the term “synchronicity” to refer to both startling coincidences and unexpected connections between texts and talk. Research too is a field of weird resonance.

Wilson illustrates this trickster link between coincidence, paranormal possibility, and textual reference in a tale he includes in both *Illuminatus!* and *Cosmic Trigger*. In her book, *This Timeless Moment* (1968), Laura Huxley, Aldous’ second wife, describes her attempt to contact the spirit of her deceased husband through the medium Keith Milton Rhinehart. The medium told her that Aldous wanted to transmit “classical evidence of survival”—in other words, a message that could not be explained away as Rhinehart’s telepathic ability alone. Later that evening, Rhinehart passed on a message from Aldous, which 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 identified by its location on the shelf. She was then to look on a certain page and a certain line.

The book she discovered at the appointed spot was a Spanish anthology of literary criticism that Laura had never noticed before. Translated, here is the sentence she 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.” Though this sort of “book test” is the bread and butter of mentalist performances, the evidence here has the additional feature of wit. Synchronicity, again, is the wink of the trickster, combining paradox, poetry, and humor. When telling this story at the close of *Illuminatus!*, Wilson adds the *coup de grâce*: the line in question—the textual location that the spectral message described—was line 23.75
The 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. Such 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. 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.

Late 1973 also saw the naked-eye appearance of the Comet Kohoutek, dubbed the “comet of the century” by the media. Though the comet’s appearance in the night sky proved to be dull, its anticipation stirred a number of apocalyptic pronouncements, channeled texts, and musical celebrations, including a concert from Sun Ra and a widely distributed doomsday claim from David Berg, the founder of the cultish Children of God movement. In early 1974, with the comet coursing meekly across the evening sky, John Lilly was riding in an airplane that had just begun its initial descent into LAX. Returning from the bathroom, where he had injected ketamine, Lilly looked at the comet and received a message from the Borg-like Solid State Intelligence, who promised to demonstrate its power by shutting down all the electronic equipment at the airport. Within moments, the captain came on the intercom, announcing that the plane was diverting to Burbank because of a power outage at LAX, which Lilly later discovered was caused by a crashed airliner. Spooked by this experience, Lilly attempted to contact the White House about the alien threat, and subsequently found himself institutionalized.

Wilson and Lilly’s alien encounters were roughly paralleled by a bout of cosmic communications reported by Wilson's old pal Timothy Leary. 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, Krautrockers, and psychedelic high society. By early 1973, he had been recaptured and was now in Folsom prison. Facing decades of time, locked in solitary confinement alongside Charles Manson, Leary began writing a series of very weird texts that his partner Joanna Harcourt-Smith independently published in the following months.

These texts represented a significant turn in Leary's thought. Rejecting the “mustard cash” of hippie Hinduism, Leary described his new thinking as “PSY PHI,” or “scientific philosophy.” NeuroLogic outlined a social-cybernetic and ultimately mystical model of the human nervous system. This schema was later known as the “eight-circuit model,” which Wilson helped propagate in Cosmic Trigger and later texts like Prometheus Rising. In the late summer, Leary and Harcourt-Smith published a more apocalyptic essay called Starseed, a Kohoutek-inspired text that speculates that “life is an interstellar communications network,” and that any contact with the extraterrestrial intelligence signaled by the comet would most likely occur through a properly tuned nervous system.

But Terra II...A Way Out was a different kettle of fish. Published in 1974 following Leary’s transfer to Vacaville, Terra II presents itself as a channeled text consisting of the “English translations” Leary made of telepathic transmissions from Higher Intelligences that a fellow prisoner had received in the late summer. 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.

Assessing the earnestness of Leary's statements is something of a fool's game, and some readers have pointed to details about prison life included in Terra II as evidence that the book was designed to seed and assist another prison break. Nonetheless, these texts represent Leary's prophetically transhumanist turn towards cosmic futurism. The new Leary embraced technology, libertarianism, and the offworld goals he soon summarized as S.M.I².L.E. (Space Migration + Intelligence Increase + Life Extension). With its explicit mention of John Dee, Terra II also reflects Leary's growing interest in occult practice, and hints at an obsession with Aleister Crowley.
that had begun a few years before in North Africa. In any case, Leary's transhumanist turn proved particularly important to Wilson, whose self-narration in Cosmic Trigger is not always easy to disentangle from Leary's influence. Nonetheless, it bears mentioning that Wilson did not start corresponding with Leary until the fall of 1973, a few months after the onset of their mutual cosmic communications.

By this time, Wilson was fully convinced that contact with an alien Higher Intelligence had begun. Even sympathetic readers of Wilson, when retracing the coincidences that constituted much of his proof, will note examples of flabby thinking that should not have gotten past the Skeptic, whether whacked out or not. Amidst a hard rain of high weirdness, Wilson often slipped into what cognitive psychologists would describe as delusions of reference, confirmation bias, and off-the-hook agency detection. Wilson—or rather, the fruitful alliance of the Shaman and Skeptic—considered the possibility of madness, but rejected the idea. “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 wrote Cosmic Trigger after escaping from Chapel Perilous, which means that he could have presented his earlier convictions in any number of ways. He chooses not to explain the unthinkable thought of extraterrestrial contact as the only reasonable conclusion, nor, on the other hand, as an experience of temporary psychosis or skeptical failure. Instead, Wilson explains that his own “neurometaprogrammer” had decided that a real contact with Higher Intelligence had begun. In the terms of the psychiatrist Edward Podvoll, whose work outlines the various ways that bipolar and other unhinged individuals actively participate in their own psychosis, Wilson may have been “seduced by madness.” But Wilson also took responsibility. He recognized that he was willfully seduced—that the visionary convictions that possessed him were a co-creative endeavor.

This still leaves the problem of how we might think about the alien “other” that Wilson perceived. Perhaps the Sirius Transmissions were a set of overtones booted up by the resonating coincidences that
enveloped Wilson through his own habits of attention and attunement. As the semiotic synchronicities began to lock together, the network engendered its own author. Coincidence became communication, and communication became encounter. With the Skeptic out of commission, Wilson’s “Shaman” came to experience his own dreams, intuitions, and waking visions not only as extraordinary but as relational. The unknown itself begins to shine, becoming what Wilson calls a “being of light.”

Or maybe not. Wilson himself did not stop asking questions. He wondered, for instance, whether his new consort was the Holy Guardian Angel described by Crowley or an extraterrestrial being using a cosmic “ESP channel” that Wilson had “tuned into” through his experiments in brain change. But this distinction only gets you so far. Historians of esotericism have long recognized that the ETs that appear in Ufology and channeling lore are mutations of earlier types of intercessory beings, including the Secret Chiefs of Theosophy, the Enochian angels of John Dee, the ancient daimons of Iamblichus, and the feral demons of Egyptian popular magic. The anecdotal record about such intermediary agents is rather robust. Sirius may have been a will-o’-the-wisp, but Wilson was still facing a most ancient flicker.

Like the McKennas, Wilson underscores the entity’s discourse. In Wilson’s case, this flow of speech included melodious and edifying statements (“They live happiest who have forgiven most”), successful predictions (the arrival of a desperately needed check), and a lot of “gibberish” about time, infinity, and the future. For those conversant with the discourse of Spiritualist mediums and New Age prophets, this latter admission is what, paradoxically, strikes the bell of authenticity. Terence’s mushroom Voice was also obsessed by squirrelly notions about time and the future. Again, we seem to be in the presence of the strange phenomenon of channeling disincarnate beings.

Of course there is a reflexive dimension to the uncanny discursive network that Wilson plugged into. For Wilson had in many ways scripted his own extraordinary experience. Cosmic Trigger describes what happens when the sort of mischievous mindfucks that Wilson had unleashed in Illuminatus! come home to roost. Religious conversions and esoteric experiences are often like this, of course. But unlike the many naive examples of such self-scripting, Wilson
was perfectly aware of the elements of “fictionality” that were shaping the “four-dimensional coincidence-hologram” his life had become. The irony was that this critical awareness did not dissolve the entities who seemed to be pulling the strings.
3.5.10 Beings of Fiction

In Chapter Three, we discussed McKenna's mushroom Voice in terms of what Latour calls beings of metamorphosis and beings of religion. But Wilson's *Illuminatus!* Transmissions, like Lovecraftian magic and the NROOGD, seem to have more to do with beings of *fiction*, another one of Latour's modes of existence. When Latour considers these beings, he talks about Balzac, who like many authors claimed that he frequently got “carried away by his characters.” Latour thinks we need to seriously consider this claim, even if Balzac is just riffing, or succumbing to cliché. When an author's characters take on a life of their own, and seem to drive their own dialogue and plotting, we have an instance of doubling that Latour calls *faire faire*. “When someone acts, others get moving.”

Here we have a postmodern paradox: the author may be dead, but the beings that arise through her pen are sometimes *undead*. Through their persistent otherness, beings of fiction shape our subjectivity by occupying prominent nodes of the psychogenic networks that implicate us. That is the pact they offer us: they shape our selves (or at least entertain them) in exchange for the attention we return to them. It is simply part of the nature of fictional others—the mode of existence appropriate to Madame Bovary, Don Juan Matus, Darth Vader—that they need us to keep them going even though we cannot simply invent them. “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.”

Not long before Wilson found himself in the Sirian doghouse, a similar experiment in occult fictions was going down in Toronto, Canada. In 1972, the Toronto Society for Psychical Research decided to see if they could intentionally generate psychokinetic phenomena. The group, which was led by a mathematician, considered themselves “skeptical and scientific” about supernatural claims but open-minded about the events themselves. For their experiment, they decided to conduct a group seance for a fictional person they would create, one whose biography featured known divergences from
historical fact, and that everyone participating knew was invented. Over months of work together, they constructed and eventually contacted “Philip,” who communicated through raps and table movements. Philip also confirmed the details of the fiction through physical phenomena that no single individual in the group was directing.

There are occult precedents for Philip, but it is difficult to find examples where the practitioners involved had no investment or belief in the invention's supernatural reality.\(^{83}\) Despite Philip's apparent agency, nobody in the group ever believed in him. In fact, the group found that if they took his presence too seriously, the phenomena would fade, so they made a point to crack jokes and tease the spirit, who would sometimes goof around with them in response. They also realized that “positive and expectant thought were absolutely necessary to keep the phenomena ‘alive’.”\(^{84}\) Indeed, one of their key operating principles was that participants should believe that the spectral communication was possible, and not feel surprised when the table raps actually occurred. Once again, we encounter the modern weird as a tension or flip-flop between enthusiastic enchantment and a disenchanted shrug of the shoulders.

Both the Philip Experiment and the Sirius Transmissions present a strange loop of authorship, practice, skeptical encounter, and the beings of fiction. A similar conjunction occurs at the close of *Illuminatus!* Joe Malik is aboard Celine's submarine, confronting a giant sea monster, when the absurdity of the situation finally compels him to realize that he is just a character in a novel. This is a familiar metafictional move, especially in genre fictions, but Wilson and Shea crank it up a technocultural notch. Celine admits to Joe and the other characters that his computer, called FUCKUP, actually wrote the novel after being programmed to “correlat[e] all the data on this caper” and render the results as fiction. This moment of revelation, which recalls both the opening paragraph of Lovecraft's “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928) and—as we will see—the close of Philip K. Dick's *A Maze of Death* (1970), also engenders its own authorial overtone. Following Celine's admission, the novel's omniscient third person invades the flow of prose, adding its own extra-diegetic note
of self-discovery: “(So, at last, I learn my identity, in parentheses...).”

Less wacky writers might have ended it here. But not Wilson and Shea, or Celine, or FUCKUP for that matter. The twists of self-reference they unleash propagate up the authorial chain until they spill outside the frame, and make a stab at transcendence.

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.

Here the self-referential play of metafiction both authors and authorizes a metaphysical picture of the cosmos as a vast and veiled being of fiction—a text whose enigmatic author(s), who might be the higher-dimensional heavies behind occult societies like the Golden Dawn, raise all the old paranoid problems of secret control. Though it is unclear when Wilson and Shea wrote this scene—Illuminatus! was not published until the Sirius Transmissions ceased—we can still say that, when it comes to Cosmic Trigger, Wilson had meta-programmed his own esoteric theater.
As such, Wilson's reception of Sirius Transmissions recalls the stage of Realization that Jeffrey Kripal describes in his book *Mutants and Mystics*. Kripal's generous study traces the circuits between paranormal experience and genre writing that drive twentieth-
century occulture. Through what Kripal recognizes as the “uncanny practices” of writing, reading, and artistic production, individual writers encounter paranormal events that in turn “reveal a dimension of the world that works remarkably like a text or a story.” The Realization that bubbles up from this encounter is the understanding, prefigured at the close of *Illuminatus!*, that we are *already being written*: “we are caught in a story (or stories) that we did not write and that we may not even like.”

Wilson too became caught in a story that, though partly ghostwritten in his own hand, still came from beyond. And it was not one that he entirely liked. It remained for him, somehow, to pass on to Kripal's final stage: Authorization, in which the act of reading the paranormal writing us becomes the act of *writing* the paranormal writing us. This is precisely the act that Wilson performs in and through the text of *Cosmic Trigger*—an ultimately therapeutic inscription, a *pharmakon* that risks passing on to its readers the very contagion it heals in its author. Indeed, not unlike the various McKenna memoirs, or Dick's writings in the last years of his life, *Cosmic Trigger* is an attempt both to communicate the pathological extremes of extraordinary experience and to rescue its author from mysteries whose infectious charisma is nonetheless sustained, and even broadcast, through the act of writing.
To escape from an emotionally compelling, self-reinforcing belief system is no doubt as complex and nuanced as converting to one in the first place. But Wilson tells a pretty straight story of his own backsliding. He traces his exit from Chapel Perilous to, of all things, a “Crowleymass” he helped organize in October 1974 to celebrate the 99th birthday of Aleister Crowley. Besides Discordians like Greg Hill, a number of key figures from California's occult scene were in attendance, including Grady McMurtry and Dr. Jacques Vallee—astronomer, early Internet researcher, and independent UFO investigator. During the evening, Wilson described some of his experiences to Vallee, who played an important participant-observer role in the Bay Area's esoteric demimonde. The resulting conversation, Wilson claims, pulled him out of his extraterrestrial reality tunnel, setting him back on the road to maybe logic.

As Crowley's poetry was intoned by nerdy witches, and stoned freaks got more stoned, Vallee questioned Wilson's convictions. But he did not present the sorts of skeptical or common sensical arguments you might expect. Based in part on his own extensive research into occultism, saucer lore, and the history of secret societies, Vallee agreed with Wilson that something was going on. But he argued equally strenuously that absurd encounters with alien intelligences should never be taken at face value. Vallee then explained his theory, which he published a year later in The Invisible College (1975), that close encounters did not feature actual beings from other planets, but were rather part of a terrestrial “control system” designed to tweak human culture and consciousness for purposes he did not claim to understand. To get caught up in the magic theater was to simply take the bait. “Ufos can never be analyzed or conceived, because they are the means through which man's concepts are being rearranged.”

One dimension of this cognitive control that particularly concerned Vallee was the growth of religious, esoteric, and authoritarian belief systems based on extraterrestrial lore. As a scientist and open-minded skeptic, Vallee rejected the more religious or sectarian
aspects of seventies spirituality, concerns he would trumpet loudly in 1979's *Messengers of Deception: UFO Contacts and Cults* (a book, also published by And/Or Press, that Terence McKenna dismissed as “paranoid” in the audiotaped *True Hallucinations* from 1984). *Messengers* developed an insight from *The Invisible College*, which is that many UFO encounters structurally resembled the initiation rituals of secret societies. Like an esoteric version of the “shock doctrine,” these rituals were designed to trigger fear and disorientation in the aspirant in order to best draw them into a new cognitive framework. To track his suspicions, Vallee took what we would now call a “big data” approach to UFO phenomena, correlating large collections of sightings and reports over time, and discovering something like a behaviorist “schedule of reinforcement.” In the final paragraph of *The Invisible College*, Vallee also expressed his gnostic desire to step outside the “conditioning maze” of reality and see what makes it tick. “I would like to stop behaving as a rat pressing levers—even if I have to go hungry for a while.”

The paradox for our story here is that Vallee's disturbing, enigmatic ideas had a salutary effect on Wilson. In other words, Wilson did not escape the Chapel through psychiatric disenchantment but through an *even weirder possibility*. After all, Vallee's control system theory depends on the existence of powerful and mysterious agents lurking behind the surface of consensus reality, and even behind the surface of the alternative reality of UFO reports and experiences. What inspired Wilson, perhaps, was Vallee's ability to keep his feet on the ground even as the ground seemed to disappear. In other words, Vallee was a superb tightrope walker. On the one hand, he rejected naive realism, and was willing to “go hungry” in the face of potentially satisfying ordinary beliefs—including the beliefs condensed in the contactee's claim that “I know what I saw.” At the same time, Vallee continued to think critically and independently in the midst of ideas and possibilities that were faintly paranoid, science-fictional, and certainly beyond the pale. Either way, Vallee exemplified the sharp steps of the weird acrobat.

Wilson exited Chapel Perilous as a bemused agnostic, not a total doubter. In *Cosmic Trigger*, he even declared that the “objective and documented evidence” he had gathered in the book suggested that “something is going on—something more physical and palpable than
What shifted for him at the Crowley mass, what drew him back from the brink, was not so much an argument as an ethics—a therapeutic “care for the self” that used critical thinking to outrun the domination of ultimately isolating and disruptive beliefs. In the early nineties, Wilson described this escape as a pragmatic decision he made rather than a truth he finally realized. “I…decided to safeguard my sanity by choosing the subjective theory (It’s all in my head) and ruthlessly repressed any tendency to speculate further about possible objective theories (There are super-human forces at work here...).”

Though we might question the voluntarism this account implies, Wilson's language does underscore an important issue: the practical counter-magic of reason itself. Especially when combined with humor and the distancing effects of the ironic imagination, reasoned reflection is self-protective regardless of the particular truths it mints. As with apotropaic magic, which turns away disease or baleful influences in advance, reason allows a prophylactic reckoning with weird things whose fantastic implications threaten to pull you under. And this is true even if, in acknowledging the reality of the phenomena in question, you have already stepped well beyond the world of naive realism. Even though Vallee's control system concept is a form of conspiracy thinking, the concept still returns a degree of critical agency to the researcher, who might otherwise just swallow the ancient alien Kool-Aid.

Here scientific hypotheses do not represent a materialist ideology so much as a potentially helpful tool. In his 1991 account of the Sirius Transmissions, for example, Wilson reports that he took solace at the time in the popular seventies discourse of brain lateralization, which emphasized the essential differences between left and right cerebral hemispheres. With this theory in mind, he reframed his experiences as “my over-developed left brain learning to receive signals from the usually ‘silent’ right brain.” As we will see in the following chapter, Philip K. Dick would turn to this same theory for very similar purposes in the mid-seventies. Writing in 1991, however, Wilson criticized both the model and his interpretation of it at the time—an admission that underscores his acceptance of the error-correction involved in scientific falsification and of the pragmatic “cash value” of hypothetical theories for wanderers of the weird.
Here as elsewhere, Wilson's tricksy perspectivism allows him to play both ends against the middle while having his cake and eating it too—a characteristic that, depending on your taste, might strike you as savvy or disingenuous. What makes Wilson's agnosticism important here is that it represents a novel and influential example of how naturalistic and reductive explanations about extraordinary experience “re-enter” the meaningful exploration and production of such experiences themselves. For even if the outside is a feature of the inside, it still functions as a beyond. For Wilson, as for all our psychonauts, visionary experience was an “experiment in truth” whose insights could only be discovered through in-your-face practice. Weaving a spiral dance between materialism and mysticism, Wilson played a double game of skeptical theurgy that lured thought itself into the very limit experiences that stage the unthinkable.
3.5.12 Saving Networks

However extraordinary his experiences, Wilson remained a largely skeptical thinker who embraced many “reductive” accounts of religious phenomenology, whether they came from linguistics, sociology, systems science, or other secular discourses. If you want to smoke out dodgy metaphysical claims from the redoubt of personal experience, these are the sorts of concepts you will turn to. At the same time, Wilson's garage philosophy—which began with *Sex and Drugs* and *Cosmic Trigger*, and carried forward in substantial texts like *Prometheus Rising* (1983), *Coincidence: A Head Test* (1988), and *Quantum Psychology* (1990)—is not concerned with deflationary explanations per se. Wilson was a skeptic, or contained a Skeptic, but his skepticism was Pyrrhonic rather than rationalist. It accepted our epistemological limitations and affirmed the ethical (and countercultural) value of suspending judgment in the face of experience. And he wanted to push the envelope of experience. Naturalism was great, but it should be weird.

Unsurprisingly, Wilson believed that quantum mechanics offered insight into the peculiar imbrication of consciousness and physical reality that paranormal phenomena like synchronicity point towards. In the seventies, he cadged much of his physics from ongoing relationships with the far-out Bay Area physicists chronicled in David Kaiser's history *How the Hippies Saved Physics*. (One of the members of this Fundamental Fysiks Group, Saul-Paul Sirag, provides the afterword for *Cosmic Trigger*.) Perhaps this explains why, unlike the most influential New Age physics writers, Wilson was not content to parasitize the authority of science or stump for the Eastern Wisdom-inflected holism unfurled in books like Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (1975). Instead, Wilson turned to physics to argue that reality is weirder than we generally suppose; that the weirdness involves consciousness; and that our situation places limitations on our own capacity to know things even as it authorizes cosmic speculations, maybe logic, and paranormal experiments in truth.
At the same time, Wilson’s thinking was essentially anti-metaphysical, and followed the general “postmodern” turn that took place across diverse fields of thought in the seventies—a turn that has more to do with psychedelics and their anti-disciplinary politics than is conventionally acknowledged. In a 1993 introduction to a collection of Philip K. Dick’s letters, Wilson declares himself a “Deconstructionist,” finding a common link between his own Pataphysical attitude of “baffled suspiciousness” and the philosophy of “Lacan, Foucault, Fort, Derrida.” For Wilson, reality was not only relativistic, but constructed. Indeed, Wilson’s model agnostic framework could be described as an observer-driven neurological constructivism: the nervous system builds its reality, which gives the observer (or neurometaprogrammer) some control over the process. The problem of adjudicating all the “reality tunnels” this framework suggests lands us in the spin cycle of total relativism—a chaos that Wilson felt no call to paper over with moral or ontological guarantees.

As such, Wilson can be seen as an edgy outlier of the New Age, whose platitudes he often mocked but whose “epistemological individualism” he significantly overlapped. Indeed, in some ways his philosophical effort may be understood as an existentialist corrective to the New Age gambit that we “create our own reality.” Here Wilson most resembles James, who argued that “all the insights of creatures of a day like ourselves must be provisional.” This realization led both men to embrace religious and metaphysical pluralism, something that even James admitted sounded “anarchic.” But this is not “anything goes” anarchy; it is anarchy open to the actual world.

For like James, Wilson was an incomplete constructivist. For all his confidence tricks, Wilson underscored the infinite capacity of reality to surprise, confuse, wound, and delight, and to do so well beyond the wishes of the individual will.

Cosmic Trigger concludes with the most grim and undeniable of facts: the 1976 murder of Wilson’s teenage daughter Patricia (called Luna in the book) by, of all things, a mentally disturbed man. Wilson frankly addresses both his grief and his gratitude for the “Clear Light” provided by his daughter. Wilson’s decision to conclude his already psychologically vulnerable text with this meaningless and
horrible loss tells us something important about him. For one thing, it indicates his resistance to cheap New Age idealism and its bubbly iteration of America's positive thinking legacy. Indeed, one suspects that it was as much Luna's violent death as Jacques Vallee's strange ideas that coaxed Wilson back to agnostic sanity. But Wilson's decision to include this private agony also reflects his belief that writing renders and extends the connections that sustain both the lattice of cosmic coincidence and the human bonds that root us in the here and now.

The final synchronicity of *Cosmic Trigger* begins with a telegram of consolation from Wilson's old friend Timothy Leary, who had recently been released from prison. “YOU ARE SURROUNDED BY A NETWORK OF LOVE AND GRATITUDE,” wrote Leary. Flipping through Luna’s notebook shortly thereafter, Wilson discovers a poem she wrote called, of course, “The Network:”

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Look into a telescope
to see what I can
   see:
baffled by the sight of
   constellations
   watching me.
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As we will discuss further in the Conclusion, the “network” here is not just any old figure. Within the context of seventies consciousness culture, the network played a crucial analogic role, at once invoking interlinked computers, underground subcultures, media webworks, and non-hierarchical forms of organization. For Wilson, the network suggested by Luna's and Leary's text was a Network of Love, no longer “one hypothesis among many” but, for a spell, an omnipresent reality. “Once my eyes were truly open to it, the Network was everywhere, in every tree, every flower, in the sky itself, and the golden merry light that had been Luna was part of it.”

The term *network* puts a technical spin on the benign conspiracy of friends and family that surrounded Wilson, even as it also affirmed the void of Luna's absence. But the figure of the network also suggests something about the very form of such pregnant coincidences, a “synchronicity mesh” that does not tell stories so much as build a matrix of implications distributed non-hierarchically
throughout spacetime. Of course, such a lattice can appear oppressive as well as liberating and loving; one person's blissful realization that “everything is connected” is another person's terrifying glimpse into the locked grooves of a cosmic prison. The signs, events, and texts that constitute *Cosmic Trigger*'s own “lattice of coincidence” leave this particular question of emotional valence open and unresolved. As Luna's own poem suggests, even the discovery of the deeper patterns that organize the world cannot be separated from the baffling abyss that frames them—an abyss that, sometimes, stares back, and even whispers.
Part Four
PKD
THE BLADE RUNNER NOVELIST
PHILIP K. DICK
THE THREE STIGMATA
OF PALMER ELDritch
4.6.0

Stigmata

Since his death in 1982, Philip K. Dick has posthumously achieved a dream that remained painfully unfulfilled in his life: to step beyond the ghetto of genre fiction into the ranks of the most important novelists of postwar America. Dick's funny, absurd, and nightmarish science 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. Dick's complex personality and colorful biography—or psycho-biography—also mark and magnetize his œuvre in intimate and unusual ways. It is no accident that Dick's bearded, avuncular, and bemused visage appears in the introduction of Amazon's Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams TV series and on the paperback covers of many of his novels, especially the Bluejay editions from the eighties and nineties. Popular accounts of his work routinely trot out his paranoia, his use of acid and amphetamine, and his scandalous number of progressively younger wives. But his greatest scandal was a sacred one: the series of extraordinary visionary experiences 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.

Dick wrote so much and so variously about his experiences that the distinction between experience and writing breaks down even more than is usual for authors of spiritual ecstasy. Sometimes he sounds like a classic mystic, as when 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." But this invading 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 database he sometimes called VALIS, which stands for Vast Active Living Intelligence System. Dick received prophetic transmissions in dreams; had eight hours of rapid-fire “colored graphics” blasted into his eyes; and, on more than one occasion, saw the lineaments of ancient Rome pop through the ticky-tacky landscape of Orange County. At times, Dick also felt possessed by a secondary entity, a being he identified variously as a controversial Bay Area bishop; the prophet Elijah; a form of “plasmatic information” called Firebright; and a second-century Christian named Thomas.

The overriding message of these cracked revelations was that our world—or rather Dick's early seventies California world—was a colossal cosmic illusion. Dick came to believe, at least some of the time, that he was still living in apostolic times, and that the intervening centuries of history were a fabulation. He and everyone 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. 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,” encountered a miraculous blast of pink light that downloaded the information that his son Christopher was suffering from a potentially fatal inguinal hernia.

Dick's bizarre experiences—which persisted steadily for a few years, and then appeared off and on until he died—challenge our categories of understanding and narrating religious experience. Even the question of how to refer to all these exotic phenomena presents a conundrum, since most terms—revelations, religious experiences, anomalies, hallucinations, psychotic symptoms—carry their own mode of being with them, pre-determining the meaning of the events in question. Luckily, Dick did us the great service of dubbing his experiences “2-3-74”—a neutral term that, first and foremost, establishes the episodes as space-time events that fundamentally eluded Dick's obsessive attempts to categorize them in any satisfying way.
It is precisely for this reason that Dick's biographer Lawrence Sutin declared *indeterminacy* to be the essential message of 2-3-74. This turbulence in meaning and being lent Dick's experiences a boundless speculative potential, as well as a traumatic irony that sets them apart from more classic examples of religious revelation. For Dick, the intensity of the sacred encounter did not authenticate a relatively fixed or coherent message. But the endless questions that 2-3-74 spawned in Dick present a different doubt than the sort of skepticism that Robert Anton Wilson deployed to elude visionary convictions. Dick's doubt was metaphysical, rather than operational. He was less of a tightrope walker than an aerialist, leaping from one precarious structure of thought to another.

Dick wanted to *know*, but he never did, and the insights and restless hermeneutics this restless not-knowing provoked infused nearly all the writing Dick produced before his death. 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 weirdly—the Exegesis, an enormous speculative diary the author kept until his death, and that ultimately comprised over 8,000 mostly hand-written pages.

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. For Dick's earliest critics, who were mostly lefties writing in the seventies and eighties, Dick's later "theological" works were considered significantly inferior to his best sixties novels. In fact, with the release of *VALIS*, Eric Rabkin worried in print that Dick had simply gone insane. In the early nineties, a second wave of Dick criticism began, which was saturated with postmodern concerns. Dick's engagement with simulation, androids, and cybernetics significantly outweighed the humanist, ethical, and mystical strains of his work.

Today, Dick's work continues to inspire scholars working with posthumanist concerns, though his subtler critics more rightly locate him at the uncanny crossroads between modernism and postmodernism, humanism and posthumanism. At the same time,
and to some degree in concert with the larger “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, sometimes from posthumanist angles. That said, Dick's life and fiction have rarely been treated as a chapter in the history of religions, with its toolkit of relevant methods. This is what I aim to do in the next three chapters, which will trace Dick's encounters with high weirdness in a more gnostic, and less psychedelic, direction.
4.6.1 Gnostic Psychonaut

Dick's visionary run of pathos, trauma, radiance, esoterica, and paranoia stands as one of the towering peaks of high weirdness in the seventies. But though Dick was in some important ways a “druggy” writer, we cannot chalk up 2-3-74 to psychedelics (unless we invoke the *deus ex machina* of the “flashback”). Instead, Dick stepped through the portal on the natch. This means two things here. One is that, because Dick suffered from all manner of psychological problems, 2-3-74 will force us to grapple more directly with the relationship between mental illness and visionary experience. The other important point is that, beyond a certain threshold, high weirdness cannot be reduced to a discussion of its immediate causal factors. This is not, in the end, a story about drugs.

The links between our psychonauts bring up the inevitable matter of comparison. On the one hand, Dick's experiences clearly resonated with the bouts of high weirdness suffered by both the McKennas and Robert Anton Wilson. We have a similar mix of sacred and profane, of extraterrestrial possibilities and paranoid conspiracies, of mystical databases, redemptive psychoses, and turbulent time loops—all of which suggested that the world as we know it is not at all what it seems. Like these men, Dick also availed himself of the postwar intellectual's bag of tricks: existentialism, psychoanalysis, experimental psychology, sociology, and comparative religion. Finally, he worked out the consequences of his experiences in reflexive and abidingly fascinating texts—novels and essays that themselves helped constitute the pulp canon of American weirdo culture, even as they seeded that trash stratum with elusive memes of the sacred.

That said, there are two significant ways that Dick differs from our other psychonauts. One is that, though he tried LSD and other hallucinogens and was for good reasons considered a “druggy” writer, Dick did not ascribe much significance to psychedelics, and personally preferred all manner of amphetamines and pharmaceuticals. Though Dick's life and work are deeply embedded in the conundrum of drugs, his story forces us to look outside the
relatively neat metabolic arcs of psychoactives and towards another dimension of countercultural consciousness, one that we have already touched on in previous chapters: the heretical reframing, and even potentiation, of psychosis. Indeed, if we can see Dick as a psychonaut, which I believe we can, the “psycho” space he explored had more to do with psychology than psychedelics.

Dick's relative disinterest in the mystical possibilities of psychedelics also underscores a deeper if subtler distinction from our other psychonauts, who were all Prometheans storming the gates of heaven. With a few important exceptions, Dick's texts do not extol or romanticize techniques of ecstasy, and by the time of 2-3-74, he had come to vociferously reject the countercultural rhetoric of chemical nirvana. Instead, the experiences of high weirdness that defined the last eight years of his life were, in a formal sense, not experimentally staged but passively undergone. While Dick was certainly looking for a miracle, and contributed more to his experiences than he generally acknowledged, the events themselves were not experienced or narrated as intentional acts.10

This difference leads to another major distinction. While the McKennas and Wilson both turned away from their Catholic roots, Dick both desired and directly grappled with the possibilities of faith and redemption in explicitly Christian (or Judeo-Christian) terms. As such, some aspects of 2-3-74 and their narration lend themselves to mainline theological discourse.11 McKenna was marked by the concept of Logos and by features of Christian eschatology, but Dick drew directly and substantially from Acts, from Paul, from the concept of metanoia, and from the linguistic superabundance of the Holy Spirit. So while Dick should be read, with qualifications, as a bohemian intellectual seeker, dabbling in psychedelics and absorbing elements of Asian religion and the occult revival, we also need to take seriously the fact that he regularly described himself as a Christian and an Episcopalian.

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 contrasted and superimposed Taoism, Vedanta, hermeticism, Kabbalah, idealist philosophy, Plato, the pre-Socratics, Greek polytheism, alchemy, Jung, the I Ching, and a number of proto-New Age texts.12 Moreover, Dick's Christianity
cannot be disentangled from his Gnosticism (nor from the Judaic concerns that grew late in his life). Though some contemporary scholars of early Christianity argue that the descriptor Gnosticism is too vague and polemical to be of use in the study of religion, Dick took this orientation very seriously, and, as we will see in a later chapter, wrestles between “Christian” and “Gnostic” identities throughout the Exegesis.

Dick did not always identify with the counterculture, but he did inhabit the same Zeitgeist whose rich contours we have been painting throughout this book: California bohemia, the occult revival, weird fiction, media systems, and the “spiritual but not religious” tensions between neuroscience, psychology, and mysticism. In an essay on the late Dick, the critic Darko Suvin—the Marxist doyen of science fiction studies—declared the author to be a “quintessential countercultural figure” of postwar California in the fifties and sixties. While largely disappointed by Dick's 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. Writing in 1988, the critic Carl Freedman also continued to see Dick as an essential writer of the sixties, arguing that the defining characteristics of Dick's worlds—commodities and conspiracies—were intrinsic to the socio-cultural period, which like many writers he stretches to include the downbeat early seventies. Both Freedman and Suvin 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 and aesthetic vibrancy.

For these leftist critics, Dick's career could be said to function as a synecdoche for the fate of the freaks and radicals in the seventies, so many of whom drifted away from revolutionary possibilities and fell into something like “religion.” In this sense, and despite being in many ways a strikingly idiosyncratic figure, Dick was also a man of his times. Like so many, he needed to renegotiate his place in society during the centrifugal seventies, when he sought to continue his “mental fight” with reality and to shift away from overly damaging countercultural identifications. For Dick this negotiation itself took the form of high weirdness. But before we get to the weird seventies, we need to get a better grounding of the sixties Dick. In what follows,
I want to present a highly condensed psycho-biographical account of Dick's life in that decade, concentrating on those aspects of his experience that most directly set up the phantasmagoria of 2-3-74: drugs, hallucinations, and religion.
In 1960, when Dick was in his early thirties, he moved with his second wife Kleo to Point Reyes Station, a bucolic rural area in west Marin County, north of San Francisco. The couple moved from Berkeley, where they had led lives marked by poverty, progressive cultural life, and occasional visits from the FBI. Not long after the move, with his marriage failing, Dick met and soon married Anne Rubenstein, moving in with her and her daughters in their classy, mid-century home.

When he hooked up with Anne, Dick still identified as a “Berkeley beatnik,” combining a voracious intellect with the sartorial style and scruffy attitude of a member of the “working proletariat.” He wasn’t a mystic hipster—he hated the Alan Watts lectures broadcast on KPFA—but he was a liberal-left Berkeleyite. He was also an inveterate and knowledgeable pillhead who took the amphetamine Semoxynine twice a day, along with quinidine and a raft of prescription meds for any number of ailments he diagnosed himself. “Adults are sick all the time,” he explained to Anne. In terms of faith, Dick, who was not raised with much religion, considered himself a freethinker and atheist.

That said, Dick had been writing and thinking about religious and mythic material almost from his beginnings 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. In the novel, two characters named John and Paul search 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.” Dick’s precocious interest in esoterica may well be linked to some of the 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.

These young men, most of whom were gay, were all fascinated with the mystical and surrealist practices that fed modernist literature.
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—discussed earlier in relation to Terence McKenna—that conceived of the writer as a kind of Orphic radio set. The poets experimented with automatic writing and exquisite corpse tales, along with some drug use. Rickman believes that Spicer and Duncan influenced Dick in both his mystical and literary leanings, and speculates that Dick may have imbibed the Gnostic current from Lamantia, who was delving into alchemy and hermeticism at the time. But Dick contributed to the scene as well. One day he returned home from the record store where he worked with a Wilcox-Gay Recordio—the first home recording machine. Poetic hijinks ensued, as the device helped hard-wire the conceptual circuit between electronic media and voices from the outside, a motif shared by both Dick and Spicer.

Though Point Reyes was the sticks compared to Berkeley, it was still Northern California. The local UFO cult raised eyebrows, but not pitchforks. Anne was an intellectual, and shared with Dick a rather timely set of interests. They talked Schopenhauer and game theory, existential psychology and Proust. Anne later described “synchronistically” reading the Tao Te Ching alongside a book on cybernetics that, lo and behold, compared Norbert Wiener's science of communication and control to Taoism. And while Phil had already been reading Jung for years, the couple followed up the Swiss wizard's comparativist bread crumbs and discovered seeker classics like The Secret of the Golden Flower and Evans-Wentz's Tibetan Book of the Dead.

But the most important text they found through Jung was the I Ching, the ancient Chinese classic of change that so obsessed Terence McKenna a decade later. The I Ching proved enormously important to Dick, providing him the prototype and real-life equivalent of the oracular, often randomized books scattered throughout his fictions. Dick explored the book with a Black friend from Berkeley named Maury Guy, who changed his name to Iskander after getting into a new religious movement called Subud. Though Guy reports that Dick was initially more interested in the book intellectually than spiritually, Dick was soon using it compulsively. One night he dreamt of an old Chinese man whom he later
interpreted as an avatar of the oracle. Here we find the stirrings of an associative 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 power to stage Sloterdijk's “message ontologies.”

Dick also famously used the *I Ching* to navigate plot points in one of the most important books he wrote while living with Anne, *The Man in the High Castle* (1962). This alternative history novel combined science-fiction elements (“What if the Axis powers won World War II?”) with what Dick considered his more “literary” concerns with character and social commentary. 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. 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. Here we have a crucial instance of how esoteric practice not only informed Dick's fiction, but transformed his fiction into an experiment in oracular experience.
4.6.3 Eye in the Sky

The Man in the High Castle was Dick's first big success. With a wife and family, a sports car and a growing number of readers, Dick was making the closest pass at a conventional mainstream life he would ever manage. But things were hardly stable, even in those years. The couple began to fight dramatically; Phil would occasionally hit Anne, and more than a few plates were hurled through the open, glass-walled parlor. On Good Friday, in 1961, Phil was working in the garden when he suddenly ran inside, telling Anne in terrified tones about the great streak of blackness that swept through the heavens. “For a moment there was utter nothingness dividing the sky in half,” he said.

The intensity of Dick's consumption of amphetamines before moving in with Anne is unclear. He had been prescribed aphedrine for asthma as a child, and had gotten Semoxydrine scripts for mood regulation while living in Berkeley. By the early sixties, his consumption of speed was prodigious—and pragmatic as well. As Marcus Boon points out in his book on literature and drugs, speed is in many ways a proletarian drug of production, of intensifying and maximizing time. Given the pittance paid for science fiction, amphetamine helped Dick write nearly a dozen pretty incredible novels in the years 1963 and 1964. More than that, speed shaped and supported the rapid-fire, immersive, and deeply personal way that Dick wrote his books. Though Dick researched and stewed over his novels in advance, the manuscripts themselves emerged with visionary ferocity, their multiple threads, plot turns, and narrative foci largely fashioned on the fly. Before 1970, Dick didn't even do multiple drafts. As Jonathan Lethem put 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 of Dick's writing. But it also helps explain the uncanny and charismatic immediacy of his fictions and their strange proximity to Dick's emotional and psychic life. “I am merely
an intermediary between my unconscious and my typewriter,” Dick once claimed; here, the once Romantic image of inspiration has become a concrete circuit of psycho-media channeling. Speed—both the substance, and the headlong flight through narrative time—removed resistance from this loop, at once liberating and liquifying his writing. As Boon notes, amphetamine-fueled texts rarely feature 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. By the fall of 1963, Dick's marriage had devolved along with the emotional stability of both partners; 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.” For once, Dick was not just writing the weird; he was staring it in the face. The visage 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.

The exact relationship between the slot-eyed vision and Dick's embrace of Christianity is murky. In some accounts it was the cause, while in others, he explained the turn to the church as Anne's last-ditch attempt to save the marriage. In any case, the family began attending St. Columba'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 fascinated with the Eucharist, which in the high church tradition embodied at St. Columba's remains haunted by the mysterious logic of transubstantiation found in the Catholic rite. According to Sutin, Dick's fascination with this almost alchemical transformation of God into matter led him to Jung's “Transformation Symbols in the Mass,” where Dick may have encountered the explicitly Gnostic notions of the fallen and ignorant demiurge for the first time.

In a 1969 letter, Dick describes this pivotal 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 way that paradoxically speaks to the force of such spectral encounters, even as they flicker on the edge of the real: “I didn't really see it, but the face was there.” In the late seventies, despite being neck-deep in the Exegesis, Dick reduced his earlier mystical experience to psychological causes, particularly extended isolation and “sensory deprivation.”

Switching to a more psychoanalytic register, Dick also explained 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 abandoned the family when Dick was four—would sometimes don when Dick was a child. But even as Dick deflated his sky vision into an “atavistic” encounter with the absent and terrifying father, he still suggested that such psychological ciphers can nonetheless be hijacked by “transcendent and vast” forces. Regardless of origins, Dick’s imaginal encounter still had (metal) teeth. “Anyhow the visage could not be denied.”

Dick translated his dark vision into the titular character of 1965's nightmarish novel *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. Eldritch’s three stigmata include artificial eyes, a metallic hand, and steel teeth that, for Marcus Boon anyway, suggest the motor-mouth jaws of speed freaks. In the novel, the evil Eldritch wrests demiurgic control over the subjective realities of poor Martian colonists and others who consume his new-fangled reality-twisting drug, Chew-Z. Though written when Dick felt like a born-again believer, the drug scenes in the book represent dark and debased parodies of Christian communion. The book also reflects the breadth of Dick's mystical comparativism. Instead of the *I Ching*, Dick fleshed out the novel's metaphysics with another seeker best-seller, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, as well as popular reports about LSD.

Dick was a huge H.P. Lovecraft fan, and his use of the Lovecraftian adjective “eldritch” is unquestionably an allusion to the *Weird Tales* master. Dick admired Lovecraft's ability to create the sense that his disturbing stories were somehow true—a feature that we have identified as one of the keys to the weird. Indeed, despite its mutant offworld trappings, *Three Stigmata* is as much an example of supernatural horror as of science fiction. It certainly left many readers with the stoned Lovecraftian hunch that the same reality warp that imprisons Chew-Z users also absorbs the readers of the
novel, preventing them from ever quite exiting its discursive labyrinth.

*The Three Stigmata* was unnerving, but it was also deeply *weird*. And it was recognized as such by many budding freaks and heads, who were scarfing up paperback metaphysics and pulp novels that not only included drugs but mischievously played with the malleability of reality and perception. With novels like *Now Wait for Last Year* (1966) and *Three Stigmata*, which one review dubbed a “Satanic bible,” Dick earned a reputation not only as a psychedelic author, but as the author of books that functioned as drugs. As Emmanuel 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.”

These science-fiction devotees had more influence on the cultural explosion of the sixties than is usually acknowledged. Indeed, one of the secret histories of the era is the migration of some very idiosyncratic bohemian writers from the tiny world of science-fiction fanzines into the emerging rock press, where they exerted an outsize influence on the vibrant spunk of the scene. Paul Williams, the most important of these science-fiction rock geeks (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. In 1967, in the introduction to his seminal *Dangerous Visions* anthology, the Los Angeles science-fiction writer Harlan Ellison notoriously claimed that Dick had written his contribution, as well as books like *Three Stigmata*, on LSD. For a while at least, this was a myth that Dick, having found a new identity in a countercultural world that was not entirely his own, was happy to nurture himself.
4.6.4 Fabulous Freak

In 1964, Dick left Anne and Marin County and returned to Berkeley. Though Dick's growing paranoia and agoraphobia kept him at home, he still managed to cultivate 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. Dick's pal and hipster mentor Ray Nelson got his hands on some Sandoz capsules and Dick soon ate his first psychedelic. Unusually for the time, Dick had a terror trip. Transported back to ancient Rome—an important theme of 2-3-74—Dick found himself lanced with a spear and quavering before an angry God. Dick was reduced to barking prayers in Latin, a language he had not studied since he was an adolescent 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.34

Dick hated to be single, 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, the couple moved across the Bay to San Rafael, in Marin County. Nancy's mother was also the lover of a man who would exercise a decisive spiritual influence on Dick: James Pike, the hard-drinking Episcopal Bishop of northern California whose radical progressive 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 touched on the Dead Sea Scrolls, and, most likely, John Allegro's theories of the amanita mushroom trance as the basis of Christianity—encouraged the heterodox bent in Dick's theology. Following the suicide of his son in 1966, Pike began attending Spiritualist seances, sometimes with a skeptical Dick and Nancy in tow; later, he formally renounced his office and formed the ambivalently named Foundation for
Religious Transition. In 1969, Pike died in the wadis near the Dead Sea, hunting for the origins of Christianity. Joan Didion compared him to the Great Gatsby, another not-so holy fool lost in the loosening afforded by California's cult of endless reinvention.\(^{35}\)

Pike would later become the model for the titular character in *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* (1982), in which Dick portrayed the deep human cost of the sort of madcap religious speculations favored by both the Bishop and himself. Dick also cited 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 novel, *A Maze of Death*, written in 1968 but published two years later, and which formed a crucial staging ground for the ideation of 2-3-74.\(^{36}\)

The bulk of *Maze* takes place on the planet Delmak-O, where, following the framework of Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* (1939), a crew of colonists get mysteriously picked off one by one. More disturbingly, the fractious crew begin to sink into their own subjective world-views, or what Robert Anton Wilson would have called “reality tunnels.” About the only thing they can agree on is the theology they all share, with its four deities: the Mentufacturer (the demiurge), the Form-Destroyer (death, entropy), the Walker-on-Earth (an Elijah-like prophet), and the Intercessor (the Redeemer). With consensus reality fraying, the colonists come to suspect that they are actually amnesiac inmates of an insane asylum on Earth. But they still can't explain why each person is tattooed with the phrase “Persus 9.” To find out, they ask the tench, a fantastic oracular creature who inhabits the planet. Instead of providing his usual cryptic *I Ching*-like answers, the beast explodes in a mass of gelatin and computer circuitry, as Delmak-O itself is destroyed.

We then learn that Persus 9 is the name of a disabled spaceship circling a dead star. 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 then enjoy through “polyencephalic fusion.” The parameters for Delmak-O’s theology run on the same arbitrary postulate that Dick claims he and Sarill used to create the theology in the first place: that God exists. The virtual world of Delmak-O and the fictional world of the novel are even closer than they first appear.

The bleak locked groove of *Maze* nurtures the sparks of 2-3-74, whose striking events are bound up in all manner of loopy ways with
Dick's own previous writing. At the close of the novel, the crew prepares to enter another simulation. But one character, the Jewish Seth Morley, can't take it anymore. He wanders off alone, and prepares to kill himself and the whole crew by venting the oxygen from the ship. He is interrupted by a strange 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.” Meanwhile, the rest of the crew submit themselves to the death drive of pure repetition, finding themselves once again on Delmak-O.

Here a being of fiction, programmed to run on the inside of a concocted digital world, achieves an invasive exteriority. This ontological Möbius strip 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.” But what sort of transcendence? Dick's (and Morley's) metafictional redeemer hardly represents a traditional mode of salvation. But nor is he simply psychological 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 trapped space crew and the T.E.N.C.H. 889B. Once again, we should recall Latour, who reminds us that every act of construction “opens up an *enigma* as to the author of the construction: when someone acts, others get moving, *pass into action*.”

For Dick, this enigma is concentrated on the doubled figure of the tench. Not only does the tench operate both inside and outside the fabricated world of Delmak-O, as both beast and technology, but it thematizes two different but deeply related “writing machines.” One machine is the spaceship's computer, an algorithmic inscription processor capable of digitally “reading out” realities based on arbitrary postulates. The other machine is the circuit between Dick's typewriter and what he memorably called his “wordsmith unconscious”—a site not only of dreams and archaic Jungian archetypes but of the recombinant Joycean smithery of language, continuously forging new scraps (and scripts) beneath the surface of consciousness.
A Maze of Death holds a curious place in Dick's canon. Though rarely listed among his greatest works, it is the most important theological allegory he wrote before 2-3-74—and was recognized as such by Jonathan Lethem, who wisely included it alongside the VALIS trilogy in one of the Library of America collections he edited. Certainly the novel supports Patricia Warrick's observation that, during the second half of the sixties, Dick turned from “political fiction exploring capitalist-fascist-bureaucratic structures to epistemological and ontological questions”—that is, from outer to inner space. But the book can be tough to read, its depressing prose unenlivened by Dick's usual impish humor. As Warrick argues, Dick's late sixties works not only start to diminish in quality, but show increasing signs of exhaustion, despair, and what Dick himself recognized as psychological dysfunction. Indeed, Dick sometimes named the Jung-soaked The Galactic Pot-Healer (1969) as his one unquestionably psychotic work. Something, it seemed, had to give.
Thinking about Dick’s life in the late sixties, Sutin wrote that “Phil longed for a revelation.” In 1967, Nancy’s mother Maren killed herself, and a year later, after moving into the predominantly Black neighborhood of Santa Venetia, Dick was audited by the IRS. The audit was stressful. Not only had the impoverished Dick failed to pay back taxes, but he worried that the audit was payback for his choice to sign a war tax protest petition sponsored earlier that year by the New Left magazine *Ramparts*.

Dick’s intensified consumption of amphetamines, tranquilizers, and other drugs was 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, emotional, and metaphysical roller-coaster his life had become. Though Dick could be mentally unstable even without drugs, psychoactive chemicals had become so integral to his work and psyche that we could consider him a kind of pharmaceutical cyborg.

Dick himself came to place his extreme psychological symptoms on a continuum with his psychedelic drug experiences. In the summer of 1967, Dick suffered what he called a “psychotic episode” that lasted eight hours, an event he compared in a 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 both terrifying and sublime. According to a letter written shortly afterwards, he felt like there were bees in his head, and that his new baby daughter had morphed into a disgusting vegetable. He also 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, who believed that mental breakdown represented a healing process, Dick tried to frame his rather nasty experience as a “redemptive psychosis” that overwhelmed his 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 a new narrative for psychosis itself, a soteriological template that Dick amplifies at the end of his letter through a return to the Leary-inflected bardo lore of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Such links were *au current* of course, and even a little dated by 1969. What's important here is that Dick intertwined spiritual experience and psychosis through a comparative act of religious reading rooted in the episodic metabolism of a trip. Both psychoactive substances and psychotic symptoms warped his experience into phenomenological material out of which he read and wrote his way towards both healing and hell. Such strange loops had thus begun long before 2-3-74.

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 man 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 (Anne was not a drug user), but instead writes as if his recent blast of beatific empathy had stabilized into a 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.” Dick also claims that his normal patterns of behavior have changed. “I like to hug people and be hugged by them all the time, now...My shell is broken...For the first time I'm really alive.”
Dick ties this affective conversion to the breakthrough in his fiction represented by *Flow My Tears the Policeman Said*, a novel that he started and largely completed in 1970. The book is a darkly prescient fable of false memories and the paranoid horrors of a total surveillance state, but the Phildickean bummer is offset with an extended meditation on different kinds of love, particularly Paul's
notion of caritas. Dick explains to Anne that his book sales had fallen off in recent years, something he and his editors attributed to Dick's growing obsession with the unstable nature of reality. His editor suggested that he take a more positive stance; "I had to say what is real." Though readers of this sometimes frightening book should be forgiven for not recognizing the exuberant reversal Dick claimed, Dick describes *Flow My Tears* 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 open the doors of his house to local young folks paddling around 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. When he had money, Dick was generous with it. And there were always drugs around—most notably, the jars of white crosses and other uppers that Dick 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 that his former step-daughters concurrently attended. But Dick's 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, a collective flowering that can be traced in part to the playful intimacy, sustained adolescence, and goofy conversations facilitated by the collective effervescence of drugs. Needless to say, such families were frequently dysfunctional. Paul Williams, visiting the house, called it a "weird scene" in which Dick played a "kind of guru role." But as Sutin argues, Dick was far too needy and broken to have become one of the creepy charismatic authoritarians that characterized the era.

Dick wrote hardly anything from late 1970 through 1972, though he was absorbing material he would deploy with great humor and feeling in the masterful *A Scanner Darkly* (1977). Not begun until 1973, that book's portrait of low-rent California drug culture reflects the cracked bonhomie and the mental, emotional, and physical degradation of Dick's Santa Venetia years. For though he may have
stopped writing, he did not stop 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 milligrams of the tranquilizer Stelazine a day.

Dick's bouts of paranoia, tolerated and sometimes intensified by his feral household, had grown ferocious, and he increasingly expected a hit on his house. In November, we might say that Dick got what he wished for: he came home to discover doors broken, windows smashed, and his stereo and many possessions gone. Most ominous was the damage done to the massive fire-proof file cabinet that contained Dick's manuscripts, business documents, pulp science-fiction magazines, and rare LPs, all of which were now missing. Though the details are (unsurprisingly) 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 poisoned gift. The break-in handed him an enigmatic trauma that simultaneously confirmed his paranoia and inspired a plethora of dramatic speculative possibilities whose compulsive articulation staged a sort of secular run-through of 2-3-74. Dick variously blamed the Black Panthers, military intelligence, the local cops, the FBI, drug-crazed rip-off artists, and right-wing groups; occasionally he wondered if 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. Leaving his house to sink into foreclosure, Dick flew up to British Columbia with nothing more than a battered suitcase, an old trenchcoat, and a Bible.
4.6.6 Paranoid Android

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. As technologies and electronic systems grow more intelligent and interactive, he argued, they restore the anthropologically “primitive” sense that our environment is enchanted and alive. This posthuman return of animism resonates with the neoshamanic turn of modern psychedelia, and picks up some of our themes about the strange modes of being that characterize a pluralistic universe. But Dick argued that, along with the liveliness of machines, we also come to recognize a more disenchanted truth: that humans are and have always been directed by “built-in tropisms.” Today we would describe these machine-like processes as the fitness algorithms and decision trees posited by evolutionary psychology, cognitive science, and behavioral economics.

In characterizing his two central ontological categories, Dick does not commit the contemporary sin of essentialism: both people and machines are capable of behaving as either androids or humans. What defines the android is that it is deterministic, both psychologically and socially: it is obedient from within and calculable from without. In an eerie presentiment of our current era of consumer surveillance and algorithmic forecasting, Dick stresses that the most important dimension of control is this predictability. “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.”

In contrast to the predictable android, the “true, human individual” pursues and manifests the random lawlessness of the rebel, the joker, the thief. Dick’s countercultural rallying cry here 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.” Though many commentators have castigated this view as naive, it does give voice to an authentic politics that we have been tracking throughout this book: the prankster anarchism that
shadowed the more visible collective radicalism of the New Left. But Dick, one suspects, was also trying to sentimentally affirm the outlaw values of his now lost family of Santa Venetia miscreants.

The mention of electronic gadgets here is hardly incidental, given the central role that technology and media control played in the authoritarian societies Dick both tracked in the Soviet bloc and fabulated in *Flow My Tears* and many other novels. However, in a characteristically Bay Area move, Dick held out the hope that technologies could also resist or outflank the apparatus of power. In his speech, he praised the example of Captain Crunch, aka John Draper, who had discovered that the 2600 Hz tone of a plastic toy whistle found in Cap'n Crunch cereal could be used to control AT&T trunk lines and therefore place free phone calls. Draper went on to build “blue boxes”: tone controllers that streamlined the unauthorized use and exploration of the phone system and inspired a scrappy subculture of “phone phreaks” (their preferred spelling) that included the young Steves Jobs and Wozniak. In other words, Dick had zeroed in on the logic 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 his speech, Dick did not give way to seventies despair, but held out hope that the disaffection of the post-hippie youth culture reflected a liberating politics of refusal and subversion. Dick also opposed this “phreak” logic to the claustrophobic “Systems” of the mind, and particularly to the oppressive phantasms of paranoia. By refusing randomness and unpredictability, conspiracy theories and paranoid reality tunnels reify the hubris of systematic rationality 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 paranoia, Dick called for an injection of surprise into life—a cultivation, as it were, of noise on the line. “We should be content with the mysterious, the meaningless, the contradictory, the hostile, and most of all the unexplainably warm and giving.”

While Dick rightly recognized that paranoia had become the pathology of the early seventies, he was also talking to himself. After all, Dick could be deliriously suspicious, and he fed those suspicions
with his narrative brilliance. He seemed addicted to developing
dense and sometimes ridiculously baroque conspiracies to explain
the 1971 break-in—just as, in the wake of 2-3-74, he would fill his
Exegesis with a myriad of concocted metaphysical systems and florid
speculations in order to explicate his experiences. For Dick, the
negative capability—or Wilsonian maybe logic—that allows one to
stay content with the mysterious and meaningless was easier said
than done.

Dick certainly wasn't very content in Vancouver, where his needy
infatuations and crazy mood swings put tremendous pressures on
the people who continued to put him up after he delivered his
speech. Psychosis, it seemed to some, was in the air. One unhappy
host played Phil a copy of Marshall McLuhan's 1968 LP *The Medium
is the Massage*, an audio collage inspired by the resonating global
echo chamber that McLuhan believed formed a new electronic form
of “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 to the
hospital.”

After he was asked to leave one apartment, Dick drifted through
the city, increasingly isolated. He later reported two weeks of
“missing time” that neither his memory nor anyone else can account
for, though he told his fifth wife Tessa that some of the time was
spent driving around limousines with “men in black.” Finally finding
himself alone in a newly-rented apartment, Dick decided to kill
himself. He swallowed 700 milligrams of potassium bromide before
he reconsidered and called the suicide hotline, whose number he had
scrawled on a piece of cardboard.

Having few options, Dick entered a drug treatment center called X-
Kalay, which mostly treated heroin addicts. Though Dick was in
another country, he still could not escape weird California: 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. 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 grueling
sessions, residents were encouraged 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 echoed Tom Wolfe’s assessment of the Me Decade. Dick perceptively noted that the ideology of encounter groups was premised on the “metaphysical” assumption that there is “a ‘real’, hidden, authentic personality” that appears once all the false layers are violently unmasked. Dick contrasted this with his own more contingent and constructivist view: a person’s authentic nature is developed through, 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.” But the framework of relationships at X-Kalay was so hostile and impoverished that the newly adjusted personality was reduced to a “conditioned-reflex machine”—that is, a paradoxically deprogrammed android.53

X-Kalay still proved transformative for Dick. It not only furnished the author with more material for A Scanner Darkly, but it helped him break his amphetamine habit. The rehab stay 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.”54 In some ways, Dick succeeded in this task, and the rest of his life was, comparatively, happier for it. Though Dick had not had his revelation, he had taken one step towards being saved.

That said, Dick did not go straight edge after leaving X-Kalay. His hypochondria did not abate, and he continued to enjoy snuff, alcohol, “Mary Jane,” and the occasional stimulant. He also experienced one of his most important visions in 1975 after taking the long-acting psychedelic phenethylamine DOM, a compound invented by Alexander Shulgin and sold on the street as STP.55 Nonetheless, by the early seventies, Dick was riding the very same 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 transcendent experience, attempted to reconstruct a more grounded behavioral center outside the deterritorializing confusions of drugs.

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 desperate letters with the news that some of his students were willing to put the author up until he got on his feet. But the California Dick returned to was a very different place than the California he had left. Rather than the progressive and bohemian Bay Area, Dick wound up in Orange County, the most conservative county in coastal California, the home of Disneyland and an influential center for the exploding Jesus Movement that would exert a decisive influence on Dick’s revelations.

Among the Fullerton students, Dick discovered a kinder and gentler version of the youth community he had earlier conjured in Santa Venetia. 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 his last child, Christopher. Though Dick missed Northern California and disliked the tacky towns 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 and Spanish-style post offices became for him, at least at times, a visionary landscape.
4.6.7 Bullshit Artist

In his novelistic account of Dick's life, Emmanuel Carrère argues that, by 1973, the author was calming down both emotionally and spiritually. Gaining distance on his own compulsive speculations about the break-in, Dick joked about starting a group of recovering “meaning-seekers” along the lines of Alcoholics Anonymous. Though Dick continued to experience intense mood swings and paranoid episodes that year, his published letters 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 hectored previously about Christian virtue.

There is one important visionary episode during this period, which is also highlighted by Sutin in his biography. This was a strange hallucinatory encounter with a personified Death that Dick describes in a letter to Patrice Duvic dated February 14. Terribly sick with pneumonia, Dick saw Death materialize in a single-breasted “plastic” suit, sporting a “samplecase” filled with psychological tests. Death determines that Dick is insane and tries to lure him up a winding road towards a mental institution where, Death promises, Dick 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 just to make his reaper 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 are good reasons 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 in which experiences are drafted and rehearsed through a progressive remix of signs and signifiers.

Five days before writing to Duvic, Dick 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 a single-breasted plastic suit and a “briefcase.” Dick asks Death what the point of “this whole dreary procession” is. Death replies, “Look, I got my own troubles.”

Two days before typing up this amusing scenario, Dick wrote to another correspondent about another encounter he had while lying sick and “dying in bed.” This time, the encounter was with Tessa’s cat Pinky, who jumped up onto 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.” So Dick asks the cat about the meaning of life.

In all 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 published 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.” 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 the left shoulder teaching first appears (and which, for all we know, Dick may never have read). That said, Castaneda does 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 encounter then collides with Dick's sick-bed interaction with Pinky, recently emerged from a “suitcase”—a rather quotidian scene that 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 hidden, tucked away in the “samplecase” that the 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 that saturate 2-3-74. For one thing, Dick can unquestionably be accused of making 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 whom 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 characterization is provided by Thomas Disch in his tart book, *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of*, where he accuses Dick's claims about 2-3-74 as further symptoms of the grand American “right to lie”—a national predilection for enthusiastic and guiltless mendacity that marks the country's religion as much as its fiction.

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 captures 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 metaphysical hoaxters like Carlos Castaneda or Robert Anton Wilson. Indeed, even in the Exegesis, where Dick was presumably capturing his private thoughts and opinions, the exuberant performativity of his bullshit artistry is never very far from the earnest metaphysical “theory.”

The error here would be to relax into the conclusion that Dick was *simply* bullshitting. With Dick, nothing is simple. Dick's life and work and psyche were densely imbricated, and this multidimensional hairball impossibly complicates conventional distinctions between fact and fiction, let alone between reading, writing, and experience.
After all, Don Juan's Death is not just any old concept or signifier. Birthed in Castaneda's neo-shamanic spirit, Death here is a visionary fabulation—a being of fiction—explicitly designed to catalyze the reader's metaphysically transformative encounter with her own mortal condition. This is the sort of existential confrontation with the Beyond that is, in itself, impossible to symbolize. And for that reason it always lurks over the shoulder of our discourse, and can never be reduced to simply a mutation of symbols.

For Dick, sick to death in bed, Castaneda's imaginative invitation seemed to stage such an encounter, however feline its physical trigger. Who is to say that in Dick's mind this event did not, in the end and even retrospectively, “take place”? Perhaps the place that is taken, the *topos* established, is memory itself, or the phenomenological surface that is temporarily created when we encounter the Outside. Dick was writing about and from his own altered, suffering consciousness after all—that strange liminal zone of fever and scrambled recall where fearful fictions and tricksy phantasms gain existential heft.

As we enter into the environs of 2-3-74, our hermeneutic task needs to be something more evocative and tangled than reductive detective work. The great matter here is revelation, and what is required for such messages is an evocative archaeology of esoteric hieroglyphs, historical traces, and the infectious signifiers that at times leap from Dick's discourse into our own minds. But we can't forget that our interpretations are always already part of a weirder psychogenic loop. For like the technological artifacts in “Android and the Human,” Dick's signifiers grow more animated the more they surround us.
THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE
OF PHILIP K. DICK

PHILIP K. DICK was a writer of science fiction. In 1982 he died suddenly of a stroke. His books often dealt with the illusory quality of reality as we know it. In March 1974 Dick saw what he later described as "a vision of the apocalypse" and spent the rest of his life trying to understand what he had experienced. Was it the onset of paranoid schizophrenia, or was it a genuine mystic revelation, and then again, is there any difference?

FULLERTON, CALIFORNIA, MARCH, 1974:
"I had a wisdom tooth extracted. They gave me a tremendous amount of sodium pentothal. I came home and was in great pain. He hadn't given me any pain medication and my wife called the pharmacy."

"I was in such pain that I went out to meet the girl when she came. She was wearing a golden ash in profile on a necklace. The sun struck it and it shone, and I was dazzled by it."
One of the challenges in thinking about other people’s extraordinary experiences is that, even if we assume that there is something like “pure” experience—a big assumption—we can only know about it through the expressive acts of the other. Usually these acts take the form of verbal or written language. And if we are at all familiar with the tricks of language—to say nothing of the vagaries of memory and self-narration—then we cannot accept such accounts as transparent revelations that somehow transcend the concrete work of mediation. By the time we encounter them, in fact, even the most bare accounts are already interpretations, just as the transcription of dreams we might make in the morning are interpretations even before we ask ourselves what that cigar business was all about. All accounts laminate reference and event, framework and phenomenology.

But we must step lightly here. To reduce extraordinary experiences to “nothing but” the language of their expression represents a miserly and pessimistic refusal to accept the phenomenological life that spills over the brim of our talk and text. Indeed, the more seriously we take language the less we fall into this “nothing but” trap, because language is always already wrapped up in even the most “ineffable” of experiences.¹ With the strange domains of high weirdness, signs, associations, and acts of signification are part of the vibrant flux our psychonauts are attempting to describe.

The flipside of this spiritual intertextuality opens up a strange possibility. Just as the “experience itself” was already riven with words, so might the accounts of such experiences—and even the second-order interpretations of such experiences, like this one—be animated by traces of the encounter itself. Rather than being hopelessly belated or out of tune, reading and writing are thus central features of the mysteries of extraordinary experience. In Jeffrey Kripal’s words, “Reading and writing are the most powerful
paranormal technologies that we possess, if only we knew what and how to read.”

In this book, we have attempted to model some approaches to the question of how to read extraordinary experiences. One of these is to trace what Kripal calls “the strange loopiness of particularly profound acts of interpretation.” This loop unfurls when the hermeneut—who may be the psychonaut or the reader—“finds herself in a paradoxical ‘circle’ or ‘loop’ in which the reading transforms both the read and the reader.” Studying talk and texts about weird and impossible things, then, demands of us a strangely doubled reading: at once a hyper-awareness about the ways that language and narrative shape and slip into experience, and an almost naive embrace of the words we actually have before us—not because they communicate without distortion but because they are the most daemonic of messengers, potential initiators who demand respect and attention if they are to unfold their squirrelly and sometimes infectious goods.

In the previous two sections, we have taken the published accounts of the McKennas and Wilson largely at face value. There I preferred to analyze the stories they told rather than deconstruct the always rickety framework of the story-telling itself. But with Dick we find ourselves in more labyrinthine terrain. Dick's experiences were not only weird but multitudinous, complicated, and temporally confused. In addition, Dick had an obsessive, hypergraphic drive to produce multiple accounts of his experiences, and to do so using many different kinds of writing—fictions, essays, correspondence, and private journal entries. Given the myriad of accounts, we have no choice but to superimpose these multiple drafts of revelation, and attend to the contradictions, mutations, and deeper patterns that emerge. For as we will see, Dick's core revelation was itself a kind of text from beyond.
4.7.1 Letters

Dick's earliest accounts of 2-3-74 are contained in letters he wrote later that same year, a number of months after the initial events went down. These letters suggest a long period of gestation during which Dick organized, selected, and tentatively constructed various versions of the extraordinary events. From the very beginning, Dick's experiences were revised in light of shifting interpretive needs, the perceived differences of individual readers, and—perhaps most importantly—their own potential for creative and philosophical flowering. If part of what Dick received was “living information,” that life animated the tsunami of words that carried the marks of 2-3-74 into the future.

Take, for example, the letters Dick writes to the graduate student Claudia Bush in the summer of 1974. These lengthy missives are intense, goofy, and unreservedly otherworldly. He tells of receiving messages from an ancient Cumaean sibyl, of plucking words in ancient languages from dreams, and of hosting a secondary personality, possibly a highly educated Greek-speaking scholar of the third century. These letters are packed with religion, and Dick speaks intimately and knowingly of Brahman, Ahura-Mazda, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. They are also redolent with the positive feelings that sometimes flooded Dick in the months following his initial experiences—feelings of love, gratefulness, and peace with the world. As Mike Jay writes, for a time “Descartes's demon was vanquished by an empathy with the world that cleansed the human condition of its solipsism and alienation.”

But Dick did not always feel—or talk—this way. In his letter to the science-fiction critic Peter Fitting on June 28, Dick adopts a far more reserved and secular tone. In the letter, which became one of the first entries in the Exegesis, Dick describes many of the core phenomena of 2-3-74: the nighttime slide show of modern abstract paintings; days filled with distinctly new thoughts and anomalous 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 more clinical self-reporting of his
impressions. In the place of supernatural speculations, Dick presents naturalistic (thought still weird) explanations: the “tachyon” theory he picked up from Arthur Koestler, or the possibility that a “disinhibition” of GABA fluid in his brain had been caused by the megadoses of vitamin C he was taking at the time. These explanations allow Dick to cordon off religious or supernatural language, with its aura of credulity, if not 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.”

Such vacillation between revelation and doubt, religion and (weird) science, sets the tone for the whole Exegesis. (It also recalls Robert Anton Wilson's resort to the theory of brain lateralization.) While Dick's ambivalence partly reflects the ambiguity of the experiences themselves, readers of Dick's letters will also recognize the sometimes shocking degree to which the author dons different masks for different correspondents, often on the very same day. Sometimes, these shifts seem like manipulative attempts to elicit sympathy or respect; other times they come off as just more shuckin’ and jivin’. But Dick also used his correspondence to stabilize himself psychologically, 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 extremely challenging, to say nothing about establishing a relationship between that framework and Dick's “actual” experiences.

Things become no clearer when we leave the letters aside and focus on the 2-3-74 accounts that Dick wrote within the private context of the Exegesis. This meta-document began in the summer of 1974, when Dick began to type up undated personal philosophical pieces and combine them with the carbons of his early 2-3-74 letters to folks like Bush and Fitting. By 1975, he had largely stopped including letters in the Exegesis, though his correspondence continued to be saturated with religious and philosophical concerns. By 1976, in a sign perhaps of the increasingly personal nature of his philosophical diary, Dick gave up his trusty typewriter and wrote his notes in ball-point pen, sometimes cranking out as many as 150 pages in a single night.
Unfortunately, with some important exceptions—especially regarding dreams and hypnagogic voices—this purely “Exegetical” Dick is less interested in logging the details of his experiences than in riffing off them. Instead of capturing the specifics, Dick generally prefers to label these complex events with short-hand tags—some of which remain hopelessly obscure. Then he leaps from these tags into his evolving speculations, where the experiences become pawns on a cosmological chessboard, constantly rearranged to fit the ever-evolving models. For these reasons, and many others, no standard narrative sequence of 2-3-74 and its attendant visions, voices, dreams, and synchronicities can ever be reconstructed with much satisfaction.

Of course, all of us perform this sort of reconstruction work as we attempt to stabilize our mutating selves through ongoing self-narration. But in contrast to more typical memoirs, in which elements of fabulation can be teased to some degree from a reasonably settled bedrock of personal history, Dick’s ceaseless interpretive assemblages throw the reader (and himself) into an endless hall of mirrors. The inextricability of 2-3-74 and the Exegesis underscores the core argument we touched on above: interpretation cannot be separated from event, nor can previously established scripts be unpeeled neatly from phenomenological accounts—and possibly even from the extraordinary encounters themselves. If Dick or his readers want to render his experiences in terms of revelation, we should also recall that the Book of Revelation that closes the Christian Bible is itself saturated with writing—with letters (Alpha and Omega), scrolls sealed and unsealed, and texts eaten like hallucinogenic honey.

Despite the kaleidoscopic variation in Dick’s narratives, however, there are still a number of relatively clear episodes that Dick returns to throughout his letters, personal writings, and fiction. These visionary events, which include the golden triangle, the palm tree vision, and the AI voice, provide the best opportunity to identify the phenomenological “building blocks” of Dick’s extraordinary experiences. Perhaps the most memorable of these visionary topoi, and certainly one of the most significant, is the golden fish sign. This encounter took place in February 1974, and over time, Dick came to see it as the cosmic trigger that catalyzed the entire series of events. But this is not the impression he gives in his earliest accounts, which
locate the first significant events in March (or “3-74”). Over time, Dick returned to the fish sign, which achieves increasing prominence in his later writings, including VALIS. Today, along with the pink light, the golden fish is the visionary element that is most firmly wedded to popular narratives of 2-3-74. In what follows I want to unpack the various scripts, stories, and histories that are condensed within this one furtive sign.
4.7.2 Fish Sign

Dick first told the tale of the fish sign 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 pentothal he had taken 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 by the woman. He tries to think of what to say to her; noticing her gold necklace, he asks her about it, “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” that she said was used by the early Christians.

In the Le Guin letter, nothing strange seems to occur until many hours later, when a “dazzling shower of colored graphics” comes over Dick that night. Dick had already offered extensive descriptions of
this hypnagogic display of abstract images in earlier letters that do 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 the modern art slideshow and 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 over details. But what really changed over time is the significance that Dick accorded the encounter. As late as March 1975, when he—unusually—took 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 tag of “3-74,” which restricted his initial experiences to March.

The intensity and significance of the fish sign encounter was retrospectively inscribed with increasing depth as the years went along. In these later accounts, Dick drops his “low” motivation to chat up the attractive girl (a motive that was seconded by Tessa), and intensifies 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 that he 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 explicitly 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.11

There are a number of things to note about this passage, whose immediacy—“in that instant”—is the paradoxical result of careful construction, as Dick gingerly compresses what are elsewhere described as independent experiences into a single event. Alongside this urgency, however, Dick also invokes mediating scripts through the very terms he uses. With the word “anamnesis,” for example, Dick invokes the Platonic notion of waking up to knowledge one already possesses. According to his own account, Dick only learned this term after the revelations of 2-3-74, a fact that paradoxically authorizes Dick to allow the fish sign encounter to transform over the long time of its recall and reconstruction from 1974 to 1978. Getting his initial memory jogged wasn't enough for Dick—he needed to study and encounter further knowledge in order to return to the original site of recollection and re-member it—and himself.

In this passage, Dick also alludes to Corinthians, where Paul writes that the last trumpet will sound “in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor 15:52). Though the turn of phrase suggests the punctum of a moment, the reference itself opens up a broader eschatological dimension to Dick's visual encounter. In other words, though Dick gets struck with a sacred beam, he does not have a Damascus moment of metanoia or full revelation. Instead of bringing Dick into the transcendent presence of Christ, the fish sign delivers him into the deferred condition of waiting for a further twinkling to come.

This is how Dick finds himself in the open-ended “messianic time” that, to speak theologically, stretches between Christ's resurrection and the final parousia. Typically, parousia is considered the “second
coming,” as if naming a historical event that lies at some particular number of days following the resurrection. But as Giorgio Agamben argues in *The Time that Remains*, his illuminating treatment of Paul’s letters, parousia is better read as *presence*—a presence that is yet to come, and so beyond the clutches of representation, including the calendar. As Agamben explains, Paul uses the term parousia to underscore the notion that messianic time is made up of two heterogenous times: the chronos of everyday, historical time—like February 20, 1974—and the eruptive, immanent Now of kairos.

Messianic time is out of joint; it is dislodged from ordinary chronology but has not yet arrived at the end of time. Using one of Dick’s most memorable metaphysical terms, we might say that messianic time is *orthogonal* to ordinary history. This is not unlike the way that Rome, with its secret Christian remnant, superimposes itself on Orange County in a number of Dick’s open-eyed visions, as if both eras reflected an underlying archetype eccentrically poking through historical time. The cryptic fish sign does not just awaken Dick to recovered memories; it also *dislodges* him, both temporally and ontologically, producing what Dick sometimes called a “meta-abstraction.” In this, the fish sign resembles nothing so much as writing itself, which displaces and defers references along chains of signifiers that never finally hit home.

At the same time, we miss the power of messianic time by only understanding it in terms of waiting and deferral. As Agamben explains, the parousia yet to come paradoxically makes messianic time available across time. “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.” The parousia is not just the original event or the future fullness; it is also something in between, the fragment or bit of realized time we face in the otherwise mundane moment. Paul (and Dick) capture this quality through the image of *twinkling*—a term that refers not only to an evanescent moment, but to an almost diamond-like play of light.
In his numerous variations of the fish sign scene, Dick consistently underscores the shimmering, gleaming, glittering light that illuminates (or projects from) the necklace. This energetic, almost vibrational presence is sometimes confused and conflated—occasionally by Dick himself—with the famous “pink light” that later struck Dick on a few occasions. The golden light from the necklace also recalls the “red and gold shining mercury” that Dick often saw flickering at the edges of his vision, a fiery light he once compared to the “over-amped (valent) red phosphors in the tube gun (cathode tube) of a TV set.” Dick associated this light with Zebra, one of his names for the invading spiritual presence that camouflaged itself in and as ordinary objects.

Light, of course, is an avatar of energy, and 2-3-74 needs to be seen in the context of those otherworldly energies that are staples of extraordinary experiences, from the blasts of kundalini to the visions of holy lights to the electromagnetic zaps of UFO encounters. At one point, for example, Dick compared the luminous plasma he glimpsed to St. Elmo's Fire, a purely physical phenomenon that, like the Northern Lights, produces uncanny effects. But Dick's energies were not only a-signifying. At times, he also linked the liquid shimmer to the letters in illuminated manuscripts; in one hypnagogic vision from 1979, the light flickered in and as the tetragrammaton of the Hebrew Bible (YHVH). In the context of 2-3-74, even cosmic photons serve as literary traces or further semiotic triggers.

One of these triggers is the motif, not of twinkling, but of twinkling metal. In later folders of the Exegesis, Dick takes up the ideas of Jacob Boehme, the sixteenth-century German mystic and esoteric writer. Like Dick, Boehme was attracted to the goddess Sophia, and he also tended to describe the spiritual world in terms of intensely dialectical polarities. (Boehme was also working-class, and worked as a cobbler.) When Dick discovered this resonance across time—probably by reading the encyclopedia—he rooted the link not just in thought but also in the signatures of experience. In particular, Dick associated the fish sign with the sunlit reflection from a pewter dish.
that, according to tradition, occasioned the young cobbler's first great mystical vision in 1600.

At the same time, the fish sign's reflections also flickered back into Dick's literary past. In one of the great scenes in *The Man in the High Castle*, from 1962, the protagonist Nobusuke 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.15

A number of elements central to 2-3-74 appear here: the blinding reflection of light, the “speaking” of transcendent vision, and the inability to control or refuse the experience. To his credit, Dick came to recognize the connection between the fish sign and Tagomi's epiphany, though, as is typical, he believed that the resonance argued for the prophetic nature of his fictions, and not the possibility that he had to some extent scripted his experiences in advance.

Dick's famous “pink beam” encounter is in turn associated with a second fish sign: a small, rectangular silver-and-black bumper sticker that Phil stuck on a west-facing window in his apartment.16 Tessa told Gregg Rickman that, after the delivery woman visited, the couple purchased a few of these fish stickers at a local Christian bookstore. They put one on the window and one on their car. While the necklace itself 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 schooling across the rear ends of automobiles everywhere.

Shortly after purchasing the sticker, Dick saw it blaze in the sunlight, producing a blast of pink or “strawberry ice-cream” light. Later that summer, while Dick was listening to the Beatles'
“Strawberry Fields Forever,” this same sticker fired a “pink beam of info-rich light” at Dick, informing him that his son Christopher had a life-threatening health condition.\textsuperscript{17} This is perhaps the most paranormal of Dick’s claims, though like Kyle Arnold, who argues that Dick and Tessa already had worries about their son’s condition, I feel that the matter is too murky to make too much of. What is important here is that this seemingly prophetic message underscores that, for Dick, supernatural energies and semantic meanings were looped together into the single figure of “living information.”

In one of the final entries in the Exegesis, Dick returns to the multidimensional refractions of the fish sign. Uncharacteristically, he offers a sober and phenomenologically spare reckoning that deflates as much as it magnifies these various lights.

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.\textsuperscript{18}

Given its placement toward the close of the Exegesis, we cannot help but read this lucid condensation of Dick’s initial visionary experiences as a sort of green flash on the horizon just before the sun goes down. Shorn of metaphysics, of the drive 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 cosmic laser-gun after all, but simply a sunbeam that left a pinkish phosphene glow in his eyes. And yet, even here, the sign still signifies, as if it were alive. A Greek letter grows into a tree, while historical mystics and fictional characters reflect and refract one another through Dick’s resonant experience. It’s Christ, Dick decides. But there is also the sense that the medium—the IXΘYΣ sign itself—is the message.
Since Dick got so much out of staring at this glyph, it behooves us to do a bit more of the same.
4.7.4 Jesus Phreak

The fish was a common symbol in the ancient Mediterranean, and became popular among Christians around the second century. In some of these appearances, the fish functioned as a kind of code: ἰχθύς, the Greek word for fish, also formed an acrostic for the phrase Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ, which translates as “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” By the fourth century, the glyph began to disappear from Christian iconography, and remained largely out of fashion until the countercultural Jesus Movement in the sixties and seventies.

Popularly known as “Jesus freaks,” these followers of “the One Way” first emerged on the West Coast in the late sixties, and hit the cover of Time magazine in 1971. But despite the beads, the theology always leaned conservative, and by 1974, the movement had been largely absorbed into existing church institutions in ways that would influence American evangelism for decades to come. As such, the Jesus Movement occupies a somewhat occluded space in cultural memory. Though the hippie Christians owed their origins, ethos, and sensibility to the counterculture, they don't fit neatly into the conventional histories of the youth movement (or of American Protestantism for that matter). In a sense, this was by design. Like the Jewish cultural matrix that spawned the original Christian church, the counterculture gave the born-again longhairs a context they could simultaneously reject and fulfill.

As such, the Jesus Movement used a variety of countercultural tactics to construct a radical, visionary, and collectivist alternative to both mainline Christianity and the hedonistic spiritual confusions of the drug culture. These methods not only included hippie fashion, but the whole-hearted embrace of youth culture media: underground newspapers, t-shirts, rock LPs, posters, buttons, and, yes, bumper-stickers. Rather than copy bible-belt Christian iconography, the Jesus freaks also invented new gestures—the “one way” raised forefinger—and revived ancient symbols, like the dove and the fish. While these symbols made for groovy pop graphics, Kevin John Smith argues that they retained a radical spark. The fish, he writes,
was “reintroduced as a sign of the marginalization of the faithful in the catacombs, in defiance and rebellion against the pagan power of Rome.”

In the early seventies, Orange County was a hotbed of the Jesus Movement. Twenty miles from Dick's apartment, Chuck Smith's Calvary Chapel became the first and most important mainline congregation to recognize and incorporate the underground movement into a more visible and institutional youth revival. Dick himself knew about the Jesus Movement, and was critical of it as well. When Nancy wrote him in early 1974 about possibly entering a Christian community house (which may well have been the People's Temple run by Jim Jones), he warned her against the coercive tactics and physical force used at some “Jesus communes.”

But 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.”

This comment raises the complicated question of Dick's Christianity, and how we should integrate his faith—if that is what it was—into our understanding of 2-3-74. As mentioned earlier, Dick not only regularly declared himself a Christian, but included a good deal of Christian material in his fictions even before his late “religious turn.” That said, hardly anyone—fans, literary critics, journalists—thinks of Dick as a “Christian writer.”

One exception is Gabriel McKee, who makes an extended case for Dick's Christianity in his monograph Pink Beams of Light from the God in the Gutter. Going against the grain of Dick's esoteric reception, McKee argues that Christianity was more important to Dick than his much-vaunted Gnosticism. Despite his many heterodox views, Dick “truly believed in the salvific power of Christ,” and this true belief means that the Christianity woven through the Exegesis is not just another theory but an axiomatic assumption. McKee may be simplifying the matter of “belief” here, both Dick's and in general, and I am not convinced that we can cordon off Dick's “truly” Christian beliefs from all the other hypotheses he held. Dick was a profoundly syncretic and comparativist seeker. But McKee is correct to insist that Dick's religious identity be seen, at least in part, as an idiosyncratic expression of an anarchic countercultural Christianity that remains, nonetheless, Christianity.
Even in the seventies, some outsiders saw Dick as moving in parallel with the Jesus Movement. Reading an early draft of *VALIS* in 1976, Dick's editor at Bantam accused him of writing like a Jesus freak. Like many hippie converts, Dick had scraped the dregs of the drug culture, hit suicidal bottom, but remained dissatisfied with the secular-psychological solutions that helped transition people out of the spiritual chaos of the counterculture. Though his life in Southern California was comparatively straight, Dick remained spiritually and politically aligned with the visionary, peace-loving, and anti-authoritarian values of the counterculture, and this orientation marked his faith. The alternative Christianity pictured in the Exegesis and *VALIS* is not an otherworldly escape, but holds out the hope of actively resisting the hyperbolic political oppression that Dick recognized.

This does not mean that Dick was always progressive, at least in contemporary terms. He was adamantly opposed to abortion, for example. In 1974, a year after the Supreme Court issued their landmark decision on Roe v. Wade, Dick wrote a short story (“The Pre-persons”) that expressed his pro-life position, albeit in rather clunky terms. Given Dick's Christian attachment to the underdog, to the small and fragile against the death machines of power—and, perhaps, to his occasional misogyny—his position should not entirely surprise us. The important point here is that this sentiment further links him to the Jesus Movement, whose pro-life passions helped transform and politicize evangelical Christianity in the seventies.

Like many in the Jesus Movement, Dick's faith was principally motivated, not by dogma, but by the extraordinary intensity of his personal experiences. In a book on the Jesus Movement published in 1973, Robert Ellwood offers some penetrating insights into the lived experience of American evangelicals. Describing evangelism as a religion of “psycho-experiential initiation, rather than of classical form,” Ellwood explains how the flash of conversion shifts the experience of time and history. “Bible time is special; it stands in equal relation to all other points in time,” he writes. The evangelical believer “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 its 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.”

Important features of 2-3-74 can be understood in light of the evangelical collapse into messianic time that Ellwood describes. 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 history. The visual “superimposition” of Rome and Orange County that Dick experienced topologically incarnates Ellwood's 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, in terms of biblical texts, of significantly greater importance than either the four Gospels or Revelation.

Dick's obsession with Acts began with his novel *Flow My Tears the Policeman Said*, which was published February 1974, the same month he encountered the delivery woman and her golden necklace. Though only one of a dozen or so novels that Dick would come to obsessively re-interpret in the pink light of 2-3-74, *Tears* achieved a certain pride of place in Dick's mind for its unintended biblical allusions and hidden codes. According to a 1978 essay, Dick discussed the book with his priest—“I am an Episcopalian” he reminds the reader—and especially its final scene, where Felix Buckman, following a disturbing dream (based on one of Dick's own), encounters a Black man in a gas station and overflows with love for him. The priest in turn reminded Dick of a scene in Acts when Philip the Evangelist converts an unnamed Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-40).

This rather weak association inspired even weaker ones in Dick's head, and he continued to make hay out of *Tears*’ mysterious “Acts material” throughout the Exegesis. But the weirdest prophetic payload that Dick discovered in the novel was an apparently happenstance artifact of the printing process. In *VALIS*, the character Horselover Fat—who represents the “visionary” side of Phil Dick in this semi-autobiographical novel—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” physically appears on page 218 of the Doubleday
hardcover edition of *Flow My Tears*, where the word “king”—which appears in the description of Buckman's/Dick's dream—vertically crowns the word “Felix” on the following line.

It is not clear when Dick first noticed this mysterious “orthogonal” code, nor whether it impacted his experience of the fish sign. But by April 1974, he was asking another reverend about the meanings of the word *Felix* (lucky, felicitous); he also characterizes the word to a translator a few months later as a “key logos.”\(^{30}\) Relatively early on, Dick felt that *Tears* had delivered a powerful and subliminal cosmic trigger into the world. And in April 1974, writing to Ursula K. Le Guin, Dick reveals the covert counterculture message embedded in the code: “we are in Rome again, with the early Christians persecuted and fighting for freedom.”\(^{31}\)
If messianic time allowed Dick to collapse seventies Southern California into Rome, it also allowed him to bring eschatological pressure onto Nixon's America. Indeed, Dick alludes to the politics of the ἸΧΘΥΣ months before he ever mentions the delivery woman story in his correspondence. In a document entitled “July 8, 1974: The First Day of the Constitutional Crisis,” enclosed in a letter to Bush and included in the Exegesis, Dick excoriates Nixon and laments his origins in the Golden State. Ironically invoking a lyric from the Mamas & the Papas, Dick writes that, with Tricky Dick in office, “California dreaming is becoming a reality.” Dick describes this “dreadful surreal reality” as “foglike and dangerous, with the subtle and terrible manifestations of evil rising up like rocks in the gloom.”

Dick's invocation of this weird and pernicious atmosphere sets the stage for another narration of his religious experience the previous March, when, he says, he became 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.”

In Dick's mind, Christianity is associated not only with political resistance to an oppressive state but with a secret community. Here we need to recall a pervasive bit of modern folklore about the ἸΧΘΥΣ.
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. A secret brother or sister of the faith would casually mark a single arc in the sand, a figure their partner would then complete into a fish only if they were in the know.\textsuperscript{34} For Dick, the \(\text{i\v{c}th\'y\varsigma}\) was not only an eschatological trigger but an \textit{insider code}, both subcultural and esoteric—a “furtive” sign of clandestine recognition among spiritual and political partisans.

In this operational sense, the fish was less sign than \textit{signal}, not so much a static reference as a pragmatic vector of communication and action. In this, the fish sign recalls Agamben's development of the notion of the \textit{signature}, an idea that also plays a strong role in esoteric thought. Jacob Boehme, who helped develop this notion in his \textit{De Signatura Rerum} (1621), argued that God marked objects—like plants or stones—with a signature to indicate their purpose. A good deal of esoteric thought would involve the establishment of correspondences between these signatures and more abstract forces and principles.

Agamben transmutes the signature into a specifically modern concept, one that breaks up the overly static understanding of the sign as a fixed relationship between signifier and signified. When considered as a signature, the sign is constituted by its own active expression and enunciation in the world. The signature thus “displaces and moves” the relation of signifier and signified into another domain, “positioning it in a new network of pragmatic and hermeneutic relations.”\textsuperscript{35} Mediating between semiotics (the differential science of the sign) and hermeneutics (the endless depths
of interpretation), the signature acts, performing itself as a potentially transformative event. In this way, it also recalls our earlier discussion of Félix Guattari's notion of enunciation. In their activity, signatures become another one of those strange loops that animate high weirdness; they are “marks that teach us how to recognize them.”

In the nostalgic folklore of modern Christians, the ἰχθύς allowed secret Christians of old to recognize one another. But in Dick's delivery woman scene, it is the sign itself that acts. In his September letter to Le Guin, Dick describes the ἰχθύς as an example of one of those “external signals” that function as “disinhibiting stimuli.” Like the “cypher signal” KING FELIX, which Dick extracted from the published text of Flow My Tears, the fish sign becomes what Dick elsewhere calls a “Logos triggering agent.” In contrast to the orthomolecular vitamins that Dick also regularly invoked as a possible cause of 2-3-74, the fish sign also locates the inauguration of the visionary series in an external catalyst outside of Dick's control.

As with Dick's description of the energy waves he encountered, the strange semiotic agency of the ἰχθύς combines energy and message, force and meaning, impulse and discourse. As such, it recalls Paul Ricoeur's psychoanalytic definition of the symbol. In contrast to the purely linguistic meanings of metaphor, the symbol is a hybrid of semantic and a-signifying activity, and thus “hesitates on the dividing line between bios and logos.” This is why, Ricoeur says, psychoanalysis speaks in a “mixed language, which connects the vocabulary of the dynamics or energetics...of impulses with that of a textual exegesis.” This mixed language is centrally important to the information-rich plasma of 2-3-74.

The symbolic condensation of Bios and Logos in turn conjures another category of sign that is pivotal for understanding Dick's ἰχθύς: the icon. In Charles Peirce's typology of signs, an icon strictly resembles the thing it indicates, just as the two crossed arcs mimetically suggest a fish. The iconic character of the fish sign, however, also points to the theology of the icon as it is understood in Orthodox Christianity. As a statue or painting that transparently mediates divine presence, the icon is traditionally said to be written by its artisans rather than carved or painted. (In this it resembles modern graffiti culture.) The icon is a picture that, like the golden
fish, is also a sign, but a sign that carves out an archetypal portal that draws the reader or viewer into a theophanic encounter.

The French Catholic phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion characterizes the encounter with such beings of religion by contrasting the sacred icon to the pagan idol. The idol, he argues, is all about our gaze: in holding and fixing our gaze on the level of the visible, the idol sustains our selfhood and its egoic grasping, and therefore acts as a “mirror, not a portrait.” In contrast, the “icon does not result from a vision but provokes one.” The self who encounters an authentic icon is no longer the owner of its gaze; instead, the icon confronts us with an “invisible gaze that subverts us in the measure of its glory.” This subversion of mundane vision in turn produces a veiled dance of revelation and concealment. “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.”

This restlessness, this perpetual rebound upon the visible, may help us understand the various and striking transformations of the fish sign that develop throughout the Exegesis and in Dick's subsequent visions. Scattered throughout the thousands of pages of the journal are scores of small, tightly executed diagrams rendered in Dick's ball-point pen. Many of these doodles are schematics that attempt to graphically represent, sometimes to great effect, Dick's various cosmologies and metaphysical engines. Among these maps and figures are found numerous variations on the fish sign, some of which also reference Dick's subsequent visionary experiences with the ἰχθύς, which returned to him on occasion during the phosphene-shows of hypnagogic drift.

One undated page of sketches in the earliest folder of the Exegesis, which covers 1974 and appears chronologically in July, shows the two arcs of the fish sign mutating into the vesica piscis, an important figure in Christian and sacred art. Many of these overlapping arcs are marked with hashes, crosses, and zigzags, as if Dick the doodler was exploring the virtual possibilities of the icon that chose him—or, to speak more weirdly, as if the icon itself were coming to life through its own graphic variations. According to Tessa, Dick once told her that the normal fish symbol used by Christians was “not quite right, and that it wasn't really a fish, but a symbol of something else.”
In one transformation of the figure, reproduced in the published edition of the *Exegesis*, the *piscis* morphs into the toothy mouth of a whale that Dick had also apparently glimpsed in a vision. In an uncanny anticipation of the Darwinian rejoinders to the ἱχθύς bumperstickers we see on atheist automobiles today, Dick's whale mouth has a smaller fish between its teeth. In other folders, the fish sign multiplies into a daisy-chain of arcs that unspools into that supreme icon of Bios and Logos intertwined: the double-helix strand of DNA, a graphic elaboration of the biological theories of “living information” that appear in the *Exegesis* and *VALIS*.

But the eeriest and most lasting transformation of Dick's signs and signatures is the simple mutation of the fish into an eye. From Dick's note pages it stares out at us like a Russian *theotokos*, 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 the human brain. This is the weird watching eye that seems to demand something of us, even as it remains implacably mute. *You must change your life*, it seems to say, though without a hint of how or what to change, or if the change has already occurred, beneath the surface and without our knowledge or control.
4.7.6 Para-Metanoia

In a letter to Dorothy Hudner in September 1976, Dick describes 2-3-74 as a “religious conversion” that fit the pattern described by William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Dick seems to be referring to the pattern that James called the sick soul, who needs to scrape bottom before rebounding into new life. But James had other things to say about conversion that also shed light on Dick's experiences. In particular, James argued that the individuals most likely to undergo religious conversion possess an unusually “extensive” psychological domain. This widely distributed “field of consciousness” creates a space “in which mental work can go on subliminally, and from which invasive experiences, abruptly upsetting the equilibrium of the primary consciousness, may come.” In other words, potential converts externalize and bury their unconscious desires for transformation, which continue to incubate subliminally. At some point, everything comes to a head, and the subject experiences seemingly divine “invasions” whose independent, more-than-psychological character is established through this very displacement.

It is not hard to comb through Dick's novels and letters before 1974 and make the case that he “set up” the divine invasions of 2-3-74 by seeding his own extensive field of consciousness with symbols and notions that authorized mystical attacks from without. Even Dick would sometimes acknowledge how much the trigger mechanism of the golden fish depended on subconscious associations and dispositions that already existed within Dick's psyche. Early in the Exegesis, for example, he argues that the fish necklace was not some “magic amulet” but a more ordinary sign that depended for its efficacy on experiences and associations with fish already built up across Dick's whole “life process.”

But Dick also learned from James to keep the door open. In his chapters on conversion, James argued that if there are “higher spiritual agencies” that can contact and transform humans, then such contact was much more likely to occur through the subconscious than through ordinary awareness. “The hubbub of the
waking life might close a door which in the dreamy Subliminal might remain open or ajar.”49 The irony, for James and certainly for Dick, is that this chink in the armor of materialism comes at the cost of conviction, since one can never really know whether the invasive experiences ultimately originate from within or without. Descartes’ evil demon is unrelenting. At best we wind up in Chapel Perilous, or with Guattari's “incorporeal domains of entities” that we detect at the same time that we produce them.

But visionaries do more than “detect” such beings; they also encounter them, especially if they are unrelenting and in-your-face. So while such beings may be, like everything else, constructed, and even constructed with unconscious material, they still possess the capacity to transform the subject through relational co-determination and existential trial. They mark the boundary shift between what Martin Buber calls the self-directed experience of things to the other-directed encounter with beings—the famous “I-You” relationship that Buber believed was more constitutive of the self than the self's supposed independence. Though humans are Buber's central concern, he held that we might encounter all manner of beings, including animals, trees, and the incorporeal gods of myth and religion. Buber also insisted that works of art—that is, human cultural fabrications—can stage transformative encounters.

Here we should recall our earlier discussion, beginning on page 158, of Rilke's poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” with its “quintessential metanoetic command:” You must change your life. Rather than attribute this command to traditional supernatural agents, Sloterdijk instead calls it an example of “message ontology,” whose “message-thing...requires the poet as a decoder and messenger.” Again, Sloterdijk defines this hermeneutical flexibility as “religiosity,” an ability (or curse, according to some) that a portion of us can access naturally. Certainly Dick had little trouble with such promiscuity, given his feverish fascination with consuming messages, technological animism, and the uncanny, queasy life of objects. (Dick was an object-oriented ontologist avant la lettre.) Indeed, Dick's obsession with the golden fish, like Tagomi with his jewelry, reflects his longstanding concern with singular art objects as vessels of sacred authenticity. One thinks here of the “little clay pot” that Dick received as a gift in the early seventies and that appears in
both VALIS and Deus Irae—a handmade item, that he named “Oh Ho,” and recognized, at least sometimes, as a benign avatar of God.

But the avatars Dick encountered were not just objects, bodies, or energies. Sloterdijk's concept of “message ontology” reminds us that for Dick, the spiritual agencies incubating in his subliminal consciousness appeared as often as not as acts of communication—the fish sign's disinhibiting stimulus, the pink light's living information, and the religious downloads of the AI Voice, which we will turn to in a moment. Dick's ongoing personal and psychological struggles after 2-3-74 also remind us of the dark irony of Rilke's command. Yes you must change your life, completely and forever. But without further guidance, or at least additional data, even the quintessential metanoetic demand can just drive you nuts.
Dick's life-long work as a writer and reader clearly seeded and mediated the experiences associated with 2-3-74, especially as Dick remembered and reconstructed them over time. But does this mean that he just “made it all up”? Not at all. Despite Dick's bullshit artistry and penchant for exaggeration, we can be confident that at least some of Dick's voices and visions were, whatever their ultimate origins, anomalous invasions of his personal consciousness. The reason for this confidence is simple: bizarre and extraordinary experiences had been happening to Dick long before street drugs or esoteric metaphysics or pulp fiction entered the picture. In the neutral jargon of today's neurodiversity movement, Dick had never been, and would never be, 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 of these early experiences directly foreshadow the more mystical events of 2-3-74, including a couple of “out of body experiences” and an external voice that popped into his head once and helped him complete a high school physics exam.\textsuperscript{50}

Such events remind us that Dick's philosophical and literary concerns were deeply informed by pathological experiences that, early in his life, not only brought on nightmarish states of mind but undermined the consistency of the everyday world. To Gregg Rickman, Dick described one particular kind of recurrent panic attack he experienced as a young man:
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 closes spaces. And I would oscillate between them.51

The first of these attacks occurred three months into Dick's first semester at high school, when the guy was unlikely to have been reading Kant. Dick's conversation with Rickman shows how he eventually 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, shows that Dick's metaphysical drive directly emerges from the sometimes terrifying cognitive and affective twists and turns he was forced to endure subjectively. 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.52

Throughout this book, we have seen how the sacred possibilities raised by high weirdness are inextricable from the problem (and creative possibilities) of pathology. To some degree, diagnosing Dick's psycho-physiological peculiarities is the inevitable outcome of taking his work and life seriously. Dick's fictions were profoundly shaped by psychological factors—his mental problems, his lifelong engagement with psychotherapy and diagnostic tests, and his voracious consumption and knowledge of pharmaceutical drugs. As such, it is very tempting for critics to read his work as what Damien Broderick calls a “coded case history.”53 Many critics, for example, have focused on the traumatic loss of Dick's twin sister in infancy—a haunting absence, often invoked by Dick, that left the writer saddled with guilt, irresolvable melancholy, and the compulsion to produce fictions featuring twins, fragmented subjectivity, and alternative worlds.
Other diagnoses regarding 2-3-74 turn toward more physiological explanations. Lawrence Sutin, Alice Flaherty, and others seem satisfied with temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE), a condition clinically associated with intense religious ideation, time-slips, and the kind of graphomania required to bring something as monstrous as the Exegesis into the world. Orin L. Bigman, a psychiatrist who has extensively studied (and briefly met) Dick, confidently invokes the mood swings and visionary froth of bipolar type 1. Perhaps the most notorious diagnosis, though, belongs to Gregg Rickman, who argued strenuously that Dick's dissociative tendencies were the result of child sexual abuse, and resulted, moreover, in Dick having multiple personalities.

We must step carefully here. As noted above, the language we use to categorize Dick's experiences, including the language Dick used, stacks the deck in advance. We might dub the ontological vertigo Dick experienced as a youth an early index of mystical tendencies, or, more conventionally, as a sign of mental disorder. But where do we draw the line between these two dispositions? Can they both be equally true? In his charming psycho-biography of Dick, the clinical psychologist Kyle Arnold argues that many of Dick's long-standing pathologies set the stage for what Arnold, against the usual reductionism, argues are authentic mystical revelations. Dick's youthful experiences of being “mashed” due to cruelty and neglect spawned his sometimes extraordinary empathy, while his capacity for dissociation developed his sensitivity to “mystical oneness.” For Arnold, Dick used his traumatic symptoms to leap-frog into a different order of spiritual vision. But this discursive jump-cut raises the question of how clinical psychology can ever account for spiritual experience, a question that Arnold himself is in no real position to broach.

In his formidable text on Dick, Laurence Rickels leans heavily on psychoanalytic discourse rather than clinical psychology. Though no transcendentalist himself, at points Rickels chooses to split the difference between mysticism and pathology by talking about Dick's “psychotic/mythic” experiences. This hybrid concept holds a certain appeal, although “mythic” downplays the transpersonal and energetic dimensions of such experiences.
With Dick, we may still prefer to think of visionary experiences. Given the religious and literary baggage associated with “visionary,” I have used this term sparingly in this text, preferring the more general and less loaded notion of extraordinary experience. But here the term works: visionary experience places the beat on the phenomenological unfolding of non-ordinary, emotionally charged, and often immersive scenarios or symbolic scenes. At the same time, it refuses to establish the sacred or mundane origins of such imagery, within or without. Drugs, psychosis, esoteric ritual, transpersonal forces, and mere (or sheer) exhaustion—all may occasion visionary experience.

At the same time, the visionary remains a fundamental figure for both writers and writing. Literature, and especially fantastic and weird literature, can be seen as both an extension and substitution of earlier modes of enchanted perception and imaginal experience. As Marcus Boon writes, “what we call literature or art is a very particular negotiation of the ways in which human beings access, configure, and share imaginal space.” Writers and poets, both Romantic and avant-garde, secularized prophetic modes of address and otherworldly journeys that stretch back to the Jewish Bible and the Revelation of St. John. If Dick’s visions were dependent on his unique psychology, they were also inextricable from his production and consumption of texts. Even divine messages require a medium, but if that medium becomes part of the message, as in the case of visionary literature, than the message may be more mutant than it first appears.
Armchair shrinks (or literary critics) face a rather Philidickean trap when diagnosing Dick. The range of diagnoses—schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, amphetamine psychosis, PTSD, TLE—just don't all add up. And they don't add up because both psychiatric discourse and the subject of that discourse are moving targets recursively bound up with one another. This is particularly the case with Dick, who relentlessly, almost “hysterically” diagnosed and treated himself according to overlapping and contradictory paradigms that were themselves in historical flux.

In his article “Diagnosing Dick,” Roger Luckhurst explains the situation. “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.”

Luckhurst emphasizes that these categories and methodologies did not simply diagnose and treat people, but also reframed and even reconstructed those subjects as subjects. Invoking the philosopher and historian of science Ian Hacking, Luckhurst explains that the emergence of new psychiatric categories—like autism, or PTSD—also “creates new ways for people to be.” Diagnoses, in this view, are one of the ways that the reality of human experience and personality are socially constructed. Hacking calls this process “historical ontology” or “dynamic nominalism”—dynamic because these invented categories rise and fall over time.

Hacking's arguments, which recall the ontologically “thick” constructivism of Latour, apply to all subjects of psychiatric diagnoses. But they especially characterize Dick, who was treated by a wide variety of professional psychotherapists and psychiatrists throughout his life. From an early age, Dick received novel therapies, and was subjected to scores of personality profiles and other diagnostic tests. Keeping pace with the increasingly dominant role of pharmaceuticals in psychiatry, he was also prescribed (or got his hands on) a wide range of psychoactive drugs. Dick studied this stuff in great detail, becoming an expert in the drugs and the discourses that to some degree made him who he was. 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 considerably more specialized than his knowledge of religion and philosophy, which leaned heavily on encyclopedias.  

Dick's multifarious symptoms elicited scores of outside diagnoses over the decades. But nobody developed as many as Dick himself. This relentless production of hypotheses shaped both his fiction and non-fiction writings, which “run constantly through a bewildering array of diagnostic labels for various symptomatic behaviors.” The sheer variety of Dick's diagnoses, deployed at once to heal, to hide, and to understand himself, have the ironic effect of undermining his already fragile stability. But this wide scope also means that Dick literally embodied the contradictions and paradigm struggles of twentieth-century psychiatry. Dick became a sort of portmanteau subject, a superimposition of different technologies of the self. And all these psychologies offered different perspectives on the value and character of “religious experiences,” experiences that such discourses are in some constitutional sense enjoined to reframe and reduce.

The most important psychological school that shaped Dick's thought was the current of depth psychology that begins with Freud. Rickels persuasively argues that Freud's work on mourning and melancholy provides the key to unlocking one of Dick's most consistent and most uncanny themes: the question of the dead, and where and how, technologically or supernaturally, they linger in our world. This question also compels the longings of esotericism and a myriad of religious cosmologies, and is as good a diagnosis of the weird as anything. But in Rickels’ emphatically embodied view, which insists on absolute finitude, the absent presence of such specters negates the existential possibilities of the supernatural views they inevitably engender.

In the question of religion, Rickels reads Dick with and through Freud, Walter Benjamin, and Daniel Paul Schreber, a mad writer we will return to in the next chapter. Among these men, Rickels discovers a shared concern with the radical disenchantment of religion under secular modernity, which retains the frameworks of faith only as “abandoned ruins, lexicons still deposited in our range of reference, but deposits without redemption value.” Whatever their symbolic charge, religious narratives founder on their inability to
answer the shocking reality of mortality and loss. For Rickels, the hopelessly frustrated desire for religious solutions vexed Dick from the psychological insides, resulting in the kind of phantasmic haunting that we also see in his fictions. But while Rickels admires Dick's “revalorization of psychosis in terms of alternate present realities,” the transpersonal possibilities of extraordinary experience are, in his study, strictly foreclosed.

Like many seekers won over to depth psychology, Dick compensated for the grim materialism of Freud by turning to the more enchanted work of Carl Jung. Not only did Jung open up for readers the storehouse of Eastern mysticism and Western esotericism, but his theory of archetypes also provided a kind of covert mythic esotericism of its own. Even though Jung explained the archetypes as ultimately naturalistic expressions of instinct, these forces were also, for all pragmatic purposes, independent and incorporeal agents “outside” the self. Jung even offered dire warnings about their invasive power, concerns that sparked or fleshed out Dick's long-standing fears—expressed in both his fiction and the Exegesis—of being consumed or ruled by daemonic external agencies.

In the fifties and early sixties, when Dick was refining his psychological expertise, he immersed himself in another current of depth psychology that made an even more profound mark on his texts than either Jung or Freud. This is the discourse of existential psychology initiated by Ludwig Binswanger, whom Dick first encountered in Rollo May's 1958 edited collection Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology. For Binswanger and his peers, patients did not just live with symptoms—they lived in a particular world of their own, a world of “existential structures” that lay, as it were, beyond the veil of their immediate pathologies or the specific symbols in their dreams. In this view, even psychosis was seen as just another form of Heideggerian “being-in-the-world.” Binswanger's vision of this pathological but visceral gestalt deeply influenced Dick's construction of the various idios kosmoi in his works.

Binswanger's debt to Heidegger also confirmed Dick's sobering obsession with mortality, a consciousness of being-unto-death that, as VALIS shows, strongly counterbalanced his visionary leaps. Much
of Dick's work is marked by Heideggerean concerns—the problem of personal authenticity, the absurdity of our “thrownness” into life, and the insidious ways that the knowledge of death and decay haunt our subjectivity. These attitudes, familiar to any reader of Dick, also help explain the author's subsequent attraction to the philosopher Hans Jonas, whose influential interpretation of ancient Gnosticism as a form of proto-existentialism informs some of the core themes in the Exegesis. Indeed, as with so many countercultural intellectuals, including Terence McKenna and Robert Anton Wilson, Dick's visionary and often heretical religiosity can only be understood against the background malaise of postwar existentialism. Despite the archetypes that came to animate him, Dick remained closer in spirit to Freud's melancholy than to Jung's mystical end-run around pathology.

Depth psychology insists that our pathologies are bound up with the hermeneutics of meaning. This is a position that pharmaceutical psychiatry, inspired in many ways by the discovery of LSD, came to contest in the decades following World War II. True to his own Janus face, Dick celebrated both paradigms. Only a couple years after his Jungian work-out in The Galactic Pot-Healer (1969), Dick would comfortably declare in a speech that “Mental illness is a biochemical phenomenon.” In this reductionist view, psychological problems arise not because of sexual trauma or archetypal conflicts, but because of “faulty brain metabolism” and the misfire of “brain catalysts such as serotonin and noradrenaline.” Reframing the Freudian work of mourning so central to his work, Dick here links psychosis to the physiological trauma of loss and grief. Such shocks, he says, trigger “an overproduction of noradrenaline flowing down generally unused neural pathways, overloading brain circuits and producing behavior that we call psychotic.”

Such talk is common today to the point of banality. But it wasn't so in the early seventies, when Dick delivered “The Android and the Human” speech that contained these views. The irony, of course, is that these emerging biophysical models intimately suggest the predictable and determined logic that Dick negatively associates with the android. Indeed, Dick's whole speech was driven in part by his reductionist 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.” As we will see in the next section,
the psychiatric medicines that Dick compulsively used can also be seen as technologies of the self that he used to probe and refuse his own inner android.

Dick's sometimes disenchanted and reductive view of human agency must always be kept in mind when we contemplate his spirituality. Indeed, this is partly what makes him and his work so weird. The tension between humanism and posthumanism that many literary critics find in Dick's fiction might be said to reflect a more essential agon: the tension between depth psychology and physiological behaviorism, the latter of which overwrites the hermeneutical operations of psychoanalysis with technical circuits and chemical interventions. Though Dick kept only one foot planted in this sort of biological reductionism, it remains an important if inconsistent counterweight to his religious speculations. Even years into the Exegesis, amidst his deeply theological meditations on will and fate, Dick could still confidently declare that human beings are nothing more than “DNA robots.” These are terms that would make Richard Dawkins, not to mention Timothy Leary, smile.
4.7.9 Electric Ant

Dick's sympathy for the android was not just theoretical or fictional, but pharmaceutical. As a knowledgeable and compulsive pillhead, Dick was perfectly at home with the endless chemical modulations of modern psychiatry and the arguably posthuman subject such interventions construct. 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.69

Pharmaceutical use also operationalized Dick's obsession with diagnostic frameworks, turning them into “what if” scenarios. Dick was not just taking drugs—he was hacking himself with them, a psychonaut not only in vision but in pharmaceutical gadgetry.70 This “neuro-hacking” attitude is particularly evident in his great 1968 story “The Electric Ant,” in which Garrison Poole discovers that he is not the human being he believed himself to be but an android or “electric ant.” Rather than despair, Poole begins to manually cut and splice the tapes that construct his reality, achieving mystical as well as pathological and apocalyptic results.

Dick’s anthropotechnical attitudes also reflect the peculiar twist that popular psychology took in the sixties and seventies, when social scientific concepts and psychophysical models helped construct the new category of “altered states of consciousness” in the shadow of countercultural mind expansion. Dick was an enthusiastic reader of Psychology Today, which by the seventies was a sort of Time magazine for this emerging 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 vitamin C. For years, Dick invoked this regimen to explain, or partly explain, his initial 2-3-74 experiences.71

Dick further explained the efficacy of the mega-vitamins through the discourse of brain lateralization, which entered popular consciousness in the early seventies through the psychologist Robert Ornstein's bestselling work.72 In one enthusiastic letter from July
1974, 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, even as he acknowledges that “my experiences involve the mystic and even the sacred.” However we might question Dick’s thinking here, the point is that Dick paralleled his religious accounts with physical models as well as an operationalist attitude that anticipates today’s Fitbit world of the managed and quantified self.

For much of his life, Dick continued to navigate between the Scylla of depth psychology and the Charybdis of reductive medical psychiatry. The “third way” he followed—which in some ways accords with what we have been calling weird naturalism—also embraced the liminal zone of altered states. As we explained in Chapter One, by the seventies the altered-consciousness paradigm was coming to split the difference between the uncanny dreams of psychoanalysis and the bizarre brainstates of biology. To his prophetic credit, Dick got into the act early with his 1964 essay “Drugs, Hallucinations, and the Quest for Reality.” Written in the shadow of his metallic face vision, the article explores the nature of hallucination and its relationship to hypnotic suggestion and alternate realities.

Here Dick presents something of the history of the altered-consciousness paradigm, whose eighteenth-century origins lie with the popular “magnetic” therapies of Anton Mesmer, and carry forth through Spiritualism and the development of hypnotism in the nineteenth century. For many of its early observers, hypnotism seemed to provide clear evidence of multiple personalities and the esoteric powers of the subconscious. Dick agreed, arguing 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.” Dick also reminds us that secular psychoanalysis, for all its disavowal of the weird or paranormal, remains haunted by the apparent telepathic feats performed by some mentally disturbed patients, experiences reported by Jan Ehrenwald and other clinicians.
Thinking comparatively, Dick goes on to argue that hallucinations—whether caused by hypnosis, psychosis, drugs, or even the mystical experience of religious “conversion”—may represent realities the rest of us cannot perceive. As such, they should be considered to be qualitatively different than ordinary perception—paranormal breakthroughs rather than merely pathological excesses. Dick's ontological pluralism here, which recalls James’ nitrous-inflected pluraverse as well as Huxley's “reducing valve” theory of consciousness, also points to the strange coincidence of psychosis and paranormal or spiritual experience.

For the moment, let's accept the idea that in 1974 Dick suffered what he himself called on many occasions a “total psychosis.” As the clinical psychologist Arnold argues, the pathological dimensions of 2-3-74 do not automatically close the doors to the possibility that Dick encountered an actual Beyond—a possibility that most explorers of the alternate-consciousness paradigm find devilishly hard to put down, given the wealth of weirdness associated with altered states. Again, the eruption of pathological symptoms might actually clear the space for divine invasions—or at least for the collapse of the distinction between vision and madness. Perhaps what we are dealing with here are what Dick impishly calls, at one point, his “supernatural psychotic experience.”

Supernatural or not, it is clear that Dick's accounts of 2-3-74 often read like episodes from his earlier fictions, which abound in time-slips, schizophrenic visions, dualist metaphysics, conspiracies, and spookily animated everyday objects. But these resemblances bubble up from something deeper—and weirder—than his own mendacious imagination run riot. All the words that Dick threw at 2-3-74 unpacked, through time, the impossible text that was always already inscribed within and as the raptures of 2-3-74—a palimpsest marked up and annotated by Dick's wordsmith unconscious, by the spectral Logos, and by that “goddam typewriter” (and ballpoint pen). This circuit between Dick's fictions, his writing machines, his experiences, and his Exegesis of those experiences set in motion a psychogenic network of feedback loops and phantasms that engendered parallel worlds of meaning and encounter that transcend the idea of mere “projection.”
I am not just saying that we should admire the lemonade Dick made from the rotten lemons that were his psychophysiological lot. I am saying that, consciously and not, the strategies that Dick used to clamber out of his own “tomb world” and towards philosophical vision possessed, in some enigmatic but more-than-metaphoric sense, an integrity and life of their own. 2-3-74 was not merely scripted, at least in the sense that Kantian critics of religious experience insist. Or rather, the “metaprogramming” play of textuality and experience can sometimes set loose strange loops that unfold existence as something more than the execution of blind code. Dick's visions phenomenalize and operationalize textuality, just as his written work, and especially his Exegesis, unrolls itself as a visionary and sometimes daemonic experience in its own right.
Like our other psychonauts, Philip K. Dick sometimes heard voices in his head, though not much when he was on drugs. In his letters and notebooks, he calls this inner voice by a variety of names, including the Sibyl, the Spirit, Thomas, his unconscious, and, most consistently, the AI Voice. How are we in turn to hear this voice?

As noted earlier, the experience of hearing a powerful other speaking clearly within one’s head is actually a relatively common experience within the population at large, and their eruption into any given individual's life does not in itself indicate that psychosis is near. Some voice hearers have come to reframe the phenomena not as a pathology to excise but as a condition to live with, perhaps even to benefit from. Some anthropologists have also come to see the phenomenon as an important dimension in religious training. In this view, individuals follow certain anthropotechnical protocols in order to learn to extract the voice of God or other saving spirits from within the internal chatter of the mind.

But there is a further reason to divide Dick's AI Voice from the pathologized condition 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 sleep or dreaming. 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 or suburban flashbacks to Rome, they remain the central field of Dick's encounters. Their presence proves Gananath Obeyesekere's point that, even in modernity, dreams continue to elude secularization, filling in the space left when more explicit forms of visionary experience were eclipsed by Enlightenment mores.

The whole of the Exegesis is regularly interjected with dreams, whose accounts Dick interprets as coded communications from the Beyond, and whose substance and language sometimes make their twisty way into his later fictions. The first months of 2-3-74 exploded with “hundreds” of extraordinary dreams, many of which flooded Dick with “information,” some of it embodied in other
languages. Much of this material was apparently about religion, and particularly the religions and mythology of antiquity. And it was often literally *material*—printed books or handwriting or other concrete instantiations of mediated language. Dick told 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.”

There is important phenomenological clue lying in this report. If the phrase “as soon as I close my eyes” is more than a figure of speech, then Dick was most likely describing experiences that emerged, not within the dream states conventionally associated with rapid-eye-movement (REM) phases of sleep, but with the elusive and frequently bizarre thresholds that consciousness crosses as it passes from the waking world into sleep. As Dick himself knew, this transition zone is known as hypnagogia. (The term refers to the phenomena encountered upon falling asleep, but it is also considered an aspect of a general hypnoid state associated with napping and daydreaming as well as waking up from sleep.) But despite its ubiquity in human experience, hypnagogia is far less discussed in psychological literature or popular discourse than the immersive narrative dreams linked to REM.

One important feature of hypnagogia is that the appearance of uncanny, dream-like phantasmagoria is often coupled with a detached awareness still more-or-less rooted in the waking, everyday mind. In a sense, the mixture of waking reason and phantasmagoria resembles the rare state of lucid dreaming, but with a crucial difference. In hypnagogia, the witness is not immersed in the figural sensurrround of the dream so much as passively perceiving autonomous visual and auditory phenomena that, in addition, only rarely cohere into longer narratives.

This quality of clear witnessing 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.’” In his 1987 book *Hypnagogia*, which remains one of the most thorough treatments of the phenomenon to date, Andreas Mavromatis reports that hypnagogic images are often made up of abstract imagery, and sometimes feature printed texts and writing. Dick's early
experience of witnessing eight hours of flash-cut images of modernist art, though anomalous in length, immediately recalls the abstract spirographs of hypnagogia. Hypnagogic states also often feature fragmentary voices, which Mavromatis reports can include quotations, references to conversations, remarks directed to oneself, “pompous nonsense,” and “irrelevant sentences containing unrecognizable names.”

I offer up the hypnagogic origins of many of Dick's most important encounters not to provide yet another psychological diagnosis of his visions. For hypnagogia is not a purely passive function. For many of us, its sentence fragments and weird displays appear fleetingly, often to the point of near invisibility. But the capacity to remain and extend this threshold phase can most certainly be trained—perhaps even more easily than the task of remembering REM dreams, and certainly more than achieving lucidity. Dick did more than just hear voices in his head. As we will show, he actively cultivated such hearing.
4.7.11 Snatching Voices

Let's consider some of the messages Dick received from his inner voice, a number of which pop up in his later fiction. “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.” Though it is not always clear what state of mind Dick was in when he overheard these statements, he does provide a nicely textured account of one message that he recalled in early 1978:

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.”

Unless Dick was shuckin’ and jivin’ here—always a possibility—this appears to be a hypnagogic experience. The message is not drawn from a REM dream remembered upon waking but from a voice heard “in my head” while Dick was lying semi-conscious in the dark of night.

Dick was familiar with the jargon of altered states, and he often uses the term “hypnagogia” itself in order to categorize his messages. Late in the Exegesis, he often introduces such downloads in the following fashion:

hypnagogic: “one of us is dead.” The two selves in me. It must be me and my sister!

Though Dick was probably using this colon formula simply as shorthand, it can also be read as ascribing the source of the message to the liminal state itself, rather than an “entity” like the AI Voice. This ambiguity points to one of the oddities of such twilight communications: their seeming autonomy and relative coherence demands attribution, and yet any external agent posited would, by extension, have to be residing within states of consciousness usually experienced and understood as interior and psychological. By
attributing the communication to the state itself, Dick is essentially psychologizing it by bringing it back into the circle of his own mental productions.

Occasionally, Dick attributes his nocturnal audio and visual texts directly to the “unconscious.” But we should remember that Dick had a capacious and very seventies notion of the unconscious, one that superimposed Freudian, Jungian, behaviorist, occult, and neurological models of the hidden mind. If we turn to “Man, Android and Machine,” a speech written in 1976, we find Dick citing *Finnegans Wake* and “Brahmanism” to argue for the esoteric doctrine that the world is a dream from which we are struggling to awake. But at the same time, Dick also cites Ornstein's work on brain lateralization to suggest that the right brain uses dreams in order to communicate with the left brain, where the bounded personality supposedly resides. Dick concludes that “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 a number of writers, Dick believed that his unconscious (or, sometimes, “subconscious”) enabled him to write his books. This partly explains why Dick was willing to pull a Lovecraft and put his own dreams into his fiction. But Dick also raised the deeper question. “Let us say that I am inspired by a creative entity outside my conscious personality to write what I write,” he noted to Peter Fitting. “I had imagined it to be my subconscious, but this only begs the question, What is the subconscious?”

To this vital, Jamesian question, Dick provides answers that are paradoxically both esoteric and embedded in the materiality of media. Recall his late declaration to Gregg Rickman that he was simply a conduit between his unconscious and the typewriter—a circuit that Dick also playfully underscored when he insisted in 1974 that the “goddam typewriter” wrote his books. For Dick, the depths of mind were occupied by a *writing machine*, or what he called his “wordsmith unconscious.” When describing the elaborately annotated books he sometimes glimpsed in his 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 attributes the language he encounters in his dreams to the authorial dispositions of his mind's linguistic routines. But at the same time, Dick tends to personify these algorithmic, quasi-automatic functions. This “someone” has a recognizably different style than his own; it crafts unliterary phrases like “she will see the sea,” and uses peculiar words like “syntonic.”

All of this helps us recognize the fact that Dick was paying close attention to the productions of his unconscious, whether or not he believed that unconscious hosted a “someone.” As such, Dick's extraordinary dream experiences resulted not only from adventitious factors but also from his own discipline of mindful awareness, or what the anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann calls “inner sense cultivation.” Dick did not just hear his hypnagogic words—he tuned, shaped, and “snatched” them. In the document enclosed to Bush in July of 1974, Dick writes

The other night when I found myself thinking, during the hypnagogic 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:

\[\text{crypte } (\rightarrow) \text{ morphosis}\]

Dick was a psychonaut of his own dream states—an oneironaut. Surfing the froth of hypnagogia, Dick not only perceived the character of the dream speech (“Greek”) but was able to sample a chunk of it, an example of the “dimensional smuggling” that the poet Dale Pendell defines as “the art of bringing things across the frontier.” For Dick, the result of this art was a nugget of speech whose meaning and attribution he could then work over \textit{ad infinitum}. In this case, Dick was convinced initially that the Greek voice belonged to the ancient healer Asklepios. But at the same time, the entry above describes Dick “finding himself” thinking Greek
words, a hypnagogic stream that he then self-consciously snatches—from himself, as it were.95

In When God Talks Back, her exquisitely balanced study of contemporary evangelical experience, T.M. Luhrmann makes the case that the felt sense of God's immediate presence is—regardless of the ontology involved—an experience that is actively cultivated by evangelicals through a set of practices that are at once individual, dialogic, and collective.” Here, the tentative adoption of as if beliefs—like the possibility that God speaks to us directly—inspires anthropotechnics that fundamentally restructure experience in ways that are sometimes more compelling than the beliefs themselves. To receive such messages, one must do more than simply adopt new beliefs. “To see beyond, one must change the way one pays attention,” writes Luhrmann.96

While 2-3-74 is almost always discussed as something that happened to Dick—especially by Dick himself—we also need to recognize the ways in which Dick collaborated with and cultivated the series of events. In his own way, he “swallowed the drug.” The most concrete example of this is his experiments with orthomolecular vitamins, although it's unclear whether this regimen directly catalyzed any psychoactive effects. But dreams are very plastic, and respond directly to the ways we pay attention to them over time, constructing themselves in response to our daylight interests. In this sense, Dick’s intentional dream practices support the standard constructivist argument that our pre-existing cultural attitudes, languages, and behaviors shape extraordinary experience in advance.

But as Elliot Wolfson points out in his marvelous book A Dream Interpreted within a Dream, dreams do more than reflect the constructivist notion “that experience is hermeneutically shaped by a preexperiential interpretive scheme.” Like the beings of fiction, oneiric symbols and agents also possess a life of their own, an ambiguous life that “exemplifies the paradox of the oxymoron fictional truth, a truth whose authenticity can be gauged only from the standpoint of its artificiality.”97 Dreams engender the same weird beings we have been tracking throughout this book, and that drive Dick’s literary obsessions with simulacra, false realities, ghosts, and the fictional retellings of 2-3-74.
We are back on the Möbius strip, slipping and sliding, shuckin’ and jivin’. The feedback loops bend insides into outsides, and outsides in. But Dick helps us see how this strip or tape is also inscribed, not just a topological twist but a ticker-tape spooling from a writing machine that lies so deep it might as well come from outer space. Either way, we are left with the ancient oracular problem of interpretation, the tricksy art of hermeneutics, or in sacred terms, exegesis.
But another way, Acts is a piece (trait) within our world (whole), but our world (trait) is contained within acts (whole).

It's like "a chicken is an egg's way of producing another egg." Egg -> Chicken -> Egg -> Chicken. There is no priority, just two equal opposing propositions. Each can be derived from the other. Eggs can be derived from chickens (from acts), if you start with written acts, you wind up with the other (acts opposite).

Boy, was Lao-Tzu right? Is the Tao mysterious!

It's amazing. I didn't figure out long ago that the dialectic is that of Taoism. I was like "is it the Tao? (the logos first. Second I my sister.) Rather I diagram it to our (of the vast space, void.) truth, through the dialectic counter propositions, oscillates. But the Tao is the Tao. However,
Philip K. Dick's Exegesis represents high weirdness as a terrain of the sublime—at once an exotic range of mountain peaks, a disorienting abyss, and a trash heap a mile wide. The Exegesis is an anomalous text, 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*? If we agree that it is all of these and more, can we even speak of it as an “it”—a document, a text? Not for the last time in this chapter, we cannot help but invoke Derrida, who wrote some of his own most potent texts at the same time that Dick was cranking out the Exegesis. In the late seventies, Derrida declared 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 of the *Exegesis*—which represented about a tenth of the extant material—the work remains dizzying, exhausting, and impossible to deal with. It is a “chaos of paperwork” stuffed with oracular voices, cosmic conspiracies, and a mass 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 described the work's air of feverish excess: “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 emits a distinct aroma of pathology. When Dick was in the hospital, dying, his young friend Tim Powers came across
thousands of its pages in Dick's apartment. The writing seemed “crazy,” or at least crazy enough to hide, lest 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 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, while Dick's posthumous fame grew and eventually exploded. The Exegesis became a holy grail for many of Dick's trufans, but the holders of the estate were, for reasons of reputation as well as editorial challenge, understandably loathe to deal with something so radiantly bizarre.

Shortly after Dick's death, Jay Kinney, the founder of Gnosis magazine, took a look at the folders and concluded that it would require a “staggering” amount of editorial work to properly handle their over 8,000 pages. Bringing up the dread name of L. Ron Hubbard, Kinney also warned that the publication of the Exegesis could form the basis of a “Dickean religion.” In 1991, Dick biographer Lawrence Sutin was able to publish an important selection of these materials as In Pursuit of Valis; he also included representative Exegesis selections in the Dick essay collection he edited and released a few years later. In 2011, the 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 associate editors of this edition, I can appreciate Dick's own despairing description of the Exegesis as a “hell-chore.”

Hell-chore or not, the Exegesis is also a learned, poignant, sometimes brilliant, and sometimes beautifully written text that responds to, reframes, and reignites Dick's extraordinary encounters, over and over and over. As such, it lets us look under the hood of the construction process that transforms squirrelly subjective phenomena into “religious” or “mystical” experiences. In the Introduction, we described the basic constructivist model: “religious experience” begins with simpler building blocks, special or extraordinary experiences that Ann Taves divides between ideal feelings—a sense of universal love, say—and “anomalies;” i.e., the weird shit. Once plucked from the normal flow of life, these building
blocks are then recombined according to various cultural scripts and cognitive templates. Finally, the reconstructed experiences are then attributed to socially powerful religious or esoteric sources.

What makes Dick’s construction of 2-3-74 both unusual and representative of the centrifugal seventies is that he never settled on or stabilized any attribution or meaningful explanation of his experiences. Nor, on the other hand, did he resolve this ambiguity by writing the whole thing off as temporary psychosis, drug flashbacks, or some other neurological scramble. Instead, Dick thought and wrote his way through an interminable series of meaning systems, metaphysical schemas, mythic associations, narrative fantasies, and speculative possibilities. These ranged from “two-source cosmogonies” to Orphic mythology to tachyon physics to Soviet plots to the physiological dynamics of brain hemispheres.

At the same time, Dick regularly punctured his speculations with doubts, both skeptical and despairing. He built up intricate scenarios only to rupture or suddenly abandon them. This relentless interpretive instability was a strategy, however, one that tied uncertainty to the possibility of future revelation. Dick 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. Writing was a search for answers, but it was also a way to invite, or trigger, the rupture of reason and understanding that signaled the invasion of the Outside. His “Eureka!”s were always simultaneously hand grenades.

As such, Dick throws the construction work Taves describes into restless perpetuity. What results is an arguably postmodern portrait of religious experience that is at once more hypothetical, more hysterical, and more devious than the ones found in James’ Varieties. Rather than serving as 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 brings 2-3-74 and the Exegesis together in uncanny fusion. As Gabriel McKee explains, “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.” The more Dick wrote about his experiences, the more he rewrote them, and the more they seemed to have always already written, and rewritten, him.
The Exegesis, then, was more than a platform that allowed Dick to record and interpret his experiences according to different moods, attributions, and meaning systems. The Exegesis was also an extension (or invocation) of the experiences themselves. By writing the Exegesis in the chaotic light of 2-3-74, whose catalytic anomalies 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 his own speculative arguments and narrative scenarios. As such, Dick's writing in the Exegesis did not stabilize meaning in the rearview mirror so much as continue to unfold the overwhelming revelation itself. And because this revelation was both linguistic and a-signifying, informing and energetic, his writing itself had to constantly change in order to keep up with the ceaseless dynamics of his illumination.

In this final chapter, we will enter the weird textual labyrinth of the Exegesis. As I have stressed throughout this book, weirdness is best seen not as a mode of transcendence or idealism, but rather as a naturalistic twist or torsion of finitude itself. For all Dick's obsessive concern with Platonic metaphysics and the falseness of the physical world, 2-3-74 was a profoundly embodied affair: jewelry triggered divine invasions, the Paraclete rode a beam of plasma, revelation became Greek words snatched from an altered state and channeled through the “goddam typewriter.” As such, we will pay particular attention to the materiality of the Exegesis and of Dick's understanding of words and “information” as viral, catalytic signs and forces.

At the same time, I want to illuminate the classic or traditional elements of Dick's recursive theology of writing and signs. In some important ways, Dick's concerns with scripture and the problems of exegesis and dissemination sprout from the same ancient soil that he occasionally saw peek through the crumbled pavements of Orange County. For all his eccentricity, Dick was more of a religious thinker than a “spiritual” one, especially in the Exegesis, with its concerns with cosmology, authority, and learned citation. But Dick was first and foremost a science-fiction writer, an orientation that helps explain his endless recourse to a device shared by both science and fiction: the hypothesis, otherwise known as the what-if.
4.8.1 Vortex

By naming his work the Exegesis, Dick makes clear how much he conceived 2-3-74 as a text to be interpreted, as a puzzle that needed to be picked apart through research and reference. If “peak experiences” have come to take the place of sacred scripture in many untethered modern lives, that substitution occurs in part by reframing experience as a kind of scripture. But Dick didn’t stop there. In another example of a strange loop, Dick also used his newfound theories to reframe the meaning of his earlier novels, novels that he recursively understood as subliminally and prophetically encoding the truths unfurled by 2-3-74. 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 and themes of his earlier fiction prefigured the figures and themes of 2-3-74.

In many ways, then, the Exegesis is an auto-Exegesis. “The text did not merely explain; it provided material in need of explanation, which it then recursively, cumulatively interpreted in new and dynamic ways.” In this sense, the Exegesis follows the postmodern logic of the “information revolution” that the scholar of religion Mark Taylor limns in his work on network culture. According to Taylor, one marker of the network era—which, as we will see in the conclusion, basically begins in the seventies—is that information reflexively turns on itself, forming “feedback loops that generate increasing complexity.” This describes the Exegesis rather well. As James Burton explains, “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.” As we will see, by producing this dynamic flux, Dick was also able to testify to the ongoing unfolding of the revelation itself. When Dick described VALIS in a late folder as an “intersticing arboring network,” he was also talking about his own Exegesis.
This tension between hermeneutics and process—between scripture and machine—is central to the Exegesis. On the surface, the text is deeply metaphysical, and often profoundly dualistic. Dick often worked in a Platonic or gnostic framework that radically separated our fallen Xerox world from some transcendent and trans-temporal realm of pure ontological forms or patterns. But these metaphysical concerns are themselves played against the pure “dynamic process” Burton describes. In an entry from late 1979, Dick writes

Heuristics is right on. The closer you get to reality the closer you get to (and to seeing) process. Q isn't “what is (esse)?” but “What does?” [...] replace each “is” with “does” and ontology vanishes. All you have is a perpetually perturbed reality field! With a self-producing vortex.12

The difference between “is” and “does” underlies a good deal of Dick's theorizing as he navigates—particularly in the later folders—between traditional philosophical questions about the essence of things and a more contemporary paradigm based loosely on genetics, informatics, and cybernetic systems theory. Within this latter paradigm, with its heuristic emphasis on experiment and rules of thumb, questions about the “true nature” of things just get in the way of figuring out the possibilities of any given situation. Here process thought leads toward pragmatism—the philosophical equivalent of the handyman figure who recurs throughout Dick's fiction. “I ask, not, 'what is true?' but, ‘what modulations shall I imprint on the stuff around me?’”13

How might we understand this “self-producing vortex” as a concrete description of the Exegesis? How did the text produce itself? One way is to think of Dick less as an author and more as a kind of writing machine, a machine that follows an iterative program of generating speculative possibilities. These possibilities in some ways resemble the “what if” prompts that drive the composition of science fiction—and indeed, much of the Exegesis shows Dick's plot-weaving imagination in paranoid overdrive. But to move from one plot to another, Dick was forced to tear down or overwrite the previous move. This sometimes jarring leap between tracks is, unsurprisingly, also familiar to any reader of Dick's fiction.
In a flawed but fascinating analysis of Dick's narratives, John Huntington addresses these abrupt shifts in Dick's fiction. Taking a mechanistic approach grounded in the vagaries of pulp production, Huntington casts Dick as an insincere narrative trickster whose "secret love of chaos," as the author described it once, was based on a simple device. This was the "800 words rule" followed by the pulp science-fiction writer A.E. van Vogt, 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 VALIS and the exegetical theorizing of Horselover Fat. "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." With good sense, Huntington compares Dick's purported device to the I Ching, whose chance mechanism also "enforces randomness." 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," narrative moves.

Umberto Rossi offers a far more nuanced account of Dick's narrative shifts or "shunts," and has exposed a number of flaws in Huntington's analyses. Moreover, the existence of the Exegesis, through it confirms Huntington's view of Dick as 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 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.

Huntington's reductive take on the pulp method behind Dick's madness draws our attention away from the literary level of meaning towards the technical processes that inform the rhythm and mechanics of Dick's writing. But the lack of an audience for the Exegesis forces us to wrestle with Dick's compositional shunts outside the economics of commercial literary production. After all,
Dick was hunting for truth in this text, at least some of the time. In that light, his speculations are perhaps best seen as forms of the hypothesis, in which explanations based on limited evidence and inductive—or abductive—reasoning are offered up for further testing. Though Dick was certainly attracted to metaphysical explanations, his addiction to the hypothesis also marks him as a weird naturalist of sorts, casting his intellectual beams into the cloud of unknowing rather than giving in to, or mastering, the murk.
4.8.2 Hypotheses

Scholars of religion are not used to treating hypotheses as objects of study. But they have played a crucial, if largely unacknowledged role in modern esoterica. The historian Alexander van der Haven traces the emergence of such mystical hypotheses to a book that is as anomalous as the Exegesis: Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903), perhaps the most eloquent and inventive text of first-person psychopathology. Here Schreber writes sensibly and even critically about voices and visions redolent of madness. Unsurprisingly, Dick's Exegesis has frequently been compared to the *Memoirs*, whose marvelous but claustrophobic metaphysics also dance between delusion and sanity, far-out phantasmagoria and nuanced comparative interpretation.

A well-educated judge, Schreber wrote *Memoirs* towards the end of his longest spell at the Sonnenstein asylum in Germany. The book entered psychological literature as the object of Freud's most focused writing on paranoia. According to Freud, Schreber's text was a rejection of the materialism of Schreber's psychiatric doctors, who believed that the judge's delusions were a meaningless index of brain damage. For Freud, Schreber's "theologico-psychological system" was not only a creative reaction to such reductionism, but also a healing function in its own right. "The delusional formation, which we take to be the pathological product, is in reality an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction."17 This is a key insight, one that anticipates both Binswanger's existentialist take on psychosis and the Jungian recuperation of episodic madness in the sixties and seventies.

Schreber is explicit about the importance of his own "religious conceptions," which often resonate with Dick's. Schreber posits a binary god that he identified with the same Zoroastrian power-couple (Ariman and Ormuzd) that Dick depicts in *Cosmic Puppets* (1957), one of the author's earliest fictional forays into cosmic dualism. Schreber too finds divine inspiration in dreams, and also draws a great deal of meaning from the voices he hears and subsequently lodges—within quotation marks—in his text. Schreber
is also unquestionably paranoid at times, his imagination dominated by persecution complexes, cardboard “fleeting-improvised-men,” and concerns with his own messianic role in the destruction and renewal of the universe.\textsuperscript{18}

There are less religious resonances as well. Like Dick, Schreber's thinking often resembles science fiction, in part because his enchanted cosmos remains a \textit{physical} one—another weird materialism. God rules the roost, but the soul is contained in the nerves of the body. Distant planets are inhabited by biological creatures, and God communicates through a “light-telegraphy” of rays and vibrating nerves. While Dick only partly followed this sort of thinking—and much more so in his fiction than in his generally idealistic metaphysics—the materialist dimension of \textit{Memoirs} forces a technical question that gets us to the heart of Dick's speculative perplexity. As van der Haven puts it: “how do revelations work in a religious cosmos that is not transcendental?”

Here is the problem. Once revelation is delivered through physical media—whether pink photon beams or spiritual light-telegraphs or human nerves—then the divine message is also subject to the noise that haunts any communications channel, including the distortions introduced by any technical 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.” Though Schreber had absolute faith in the religious import of his experiences, he recognized that, because of the problem of noise, their meaning could only remain provisional. In the \textit{Memoirs}, Schreber questions many of his interpretations, and also regularly rewrites the meaning of earlier experiences in light of later revelations. “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.”\textsuperscript{19}

Readers of Dick's fiction will recognize that garbled signals are a common problem.\textsuperscript{20} In the Exegesis, as in the \textit{Memoirs}, doubts about noise, distortion, and error drive the production of tentative hypothesis one after the other, \textit{ad infinitum}. Like Schreber, Dick left room for future experiences that were capable of rewriting the meaning, consequences, and even validity of his own hypothetical claims. But in Dick's more hyper-reflexive and “postmodern” case,
the outputs of his speculative engine were also undermined like algorithmic clockwork. *What if?* proved more attractive than *as if.* And yet, through that very restlessness, Dick kept his own prophetic potential alive.
4.8.3 Morning Pages

Unlike traditional prophets, Dick and Schreber both refuse to root themselves in the self-grounding authority of dogmatic revelation. Without questioning the essential authenticity of their visions, their attitude toward the cosmos is fundamentally provisional, open-ended, and without transcendental guarantees. Experience, as such, can never be entirely trusted. Towards the end of the Exegesis, Dick explains: “the peak experience—all peak experiences—are signs pointing to a ‘thing’ (Valis) in itself unknowable, and are not to be taken in themselves as ‘real,’ but, rather, signify (i.e., point to) reality.” In other words, the reality we experience, even in heightened states, is “a signifier of reality, which in itself cannot be apprehended.”

It's signifiers all the way down, which means that even prophets need to keep on their hypothetical toes.

Dick's turn towards the metaphysical hypothesis forces us to refine our ideas about how “experience” functions in occultural, New Age, and “spiritual but not religious” currents. According to many sociologists, the rhetoric of personal experience that characterizes the counterculture and much of the spirituality that follows shifts authority from religious institutions onto the individual, whose subjective peaks—with their realer-than-real vibrancy, their “I know what I saw” immediacy—serve as a buffer against the confusions of pluralism and the acid bath of scientific reductionism. In this narrative, then, it is precisely the non-hypothetical certainty of experiential claims that explains the success of “experience” as a new source of religious authority within our times.

In The New Metaphysicals, which takes gentle aim at contemporary New Age mystics, the sociologist Courtney Bender largely allies herself with this critical position. Bender argues that one irony of seeker culture is that its emphasis on novel personal experiences has become a “tradition” of its own, one that is guided by largely invisible rhetorical and conceptual norms. Some of these norms go back to William James, whose Varieties, she says, taught social scientists and seekers alike what it means to “have an experience.”

Analyzing the narrative templates of her New Age
subjects’ tales, Bender identifies a number of generic patterns that underlie these supposedly singular experiences. For Bender, eager like so many scholars to toss the baby out with the bathwater, the mere existence of such forms “throws into doubt” the notion that spiritual narratives reflect an “actual” experience.

But Bender also discovered something else. During interviews, her informants would usually provide crisp and authoritative accounts of their mystical experiences. But over time, she noticed that these narratives changed, sometimes considerably. Bender came to realize that the telling of these stories was always also a retelling, part of a mutating narrative that was motivated in part 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 dynamic process, Bender discovered, was amplified by the writing practices popular among many of her subjects, such as scribbling “morning pages.” The act of writing down such narratives, it turns out, opened up as many possibilities as their verbal declaration had seemingly foreclosed—including the possibility that earlier spiritual experiences were actually illusions, psychological “projections,” or metaphysical traps. Visionary experiences were, in this sense, always also revisionary experiences. This hypothetical opening toward the future—whose modifications were engendered partly through the reflexive character of writing itself—became, in some sense, the very substance of the revelation. “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.”

Bender's insights help us understand the psycho-spiritual logic of Dick’s endless hypotheses, and they cast light as well on Dick’s obsessions with temporality and “orthogonal time.” After all, the refusal or impossibility of interpretive resolution extends the enigmas of experience into both the past and the future, subtly interleaving the time of the event with textuality itself. This renders the process of exegesis at once interminable and ecstatic, a pharmakon both poisonous and intoxicating. Like Scheherazade with her fables, Dick often wrote his Exegesis deep into the night,
night after night, and he did so in part to stave off the “death” or permanent loss of contact with 2-3-74. But this ecstatic deferral had its costs. Readers of the published *Exegesis* can readily identify with the cry Dick appended to the end of one early letter: “will the long dances/typing/madness/enthusiasm ever end?”25
4.8.4 Hermenaut

Though written by one man, the Exegesis is a multiplex text, and not just because its author flirted with multiple personalities. On a formal level, the Exegesis is packed with citations, those “outside” texts that are invited into a piece of writing. Dick loaded his notebooks 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.

Perhaps the most interesting citations are those he drew from the AI Voice, the hypnagogic Sibyl we met at the close of the previous chapter. There we showed how Dick's dream practices enabled him to “snatch” words from the liminal zones of sleep. But that was just the raw material—the real work began when Dick applied his hermeneutic tools to the messages received. Dick listened for puns, etymological clues, allusions, and other associative resonances, often turning to his reference books in full research mode. One hypnagogic phrase he snatched from the night—“perturbations in the reality field”—elicited an extensive cross-disciplinary study of the included terms that goes on for pages in the Exegesis.

Dick came to believe that many of the unfamiliar or nonsense terms he heard were drawn from foreign languages. When Dick dream-grabbed the phrase “crypte morphosis,” he combined his and Tessa's crude knowledge of Greek to gloss the term as *latent or concealed shape*. Recursively, the term then became an analytic concept that Dick used to understand his visions throughout the Exegesis, as in this following report:
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.28

Here an encrypted term snatched from the night helps Dick decode a separate encounter with a metamorphic dream text. Strange loops indeed. But Dick's readings also drew him outside his own head, into a larger and more public circuit of references. The vision begins with a verse from the New Testament, while his interpretation in turn invokes the controversial biblical scholar John Allegro, who argued in 1970 that the language of the New Testament was in esoteric (and psychedelic) code.29

In dreaming 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 was also forging the sort of associations that dominated both the popular and academic understanding of world religion and mythology in his era. This is the field of comparative religion. Like our other psychonauts, and like many seekers of the day, Dick was inspired by the popular scholarship presented by Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung, Aldous Huxley, and, more distantly, William James. In different ways, these writers provided readers with models for drawing a wide variety of texts, traditions, gods, and visions together under the umbrella of comparison. Similarly, Dick tried to make sense of his own anomalous experiences by turning to the archive of the world's faiths and mythologies.

Dick’s oneiric hermeneutics can themselves be illuminated through the tools of comparison. Through most of human history, the royal road of dreams has led, not to the unconscious, but to oracular encounters with powerful intermediary beings. Such contacts strongly characterized the antique Greco-Roman world that formed Dick's most important spiritual landscape. As Patricia Cox Miller
notes, many Greco-Romans saw “the dream as a text in disguise,” an idea that blurs the distinction between dream interpretation and the exegesis of sacred texts.\textsuperscript{30} Augustine directly compares the dreamer to the exegete; the former “wanders through various images” just as the latter wanders through signs. What underlies this link, and that carries forward to Dick, is the assumption that both books and dreams possess oracular potential, and that this potential in turn depends on a more extensive network of associations. “As in dream divination, so also in allegorical ‘divination’ of dream-texts, human subjectivity is shaped by the enlargement of its sphere of reference.”\textsuperscript{31}

Dick regularly framed his hypnagogic experiences as coded communications with sacred beings—beings whose equivocal statements and appearances demand interpretations that are dependent on a larger sphere of reference. 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 seen 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 \textit{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 \textit{The Frogs} he wears a fawn skin. It is thus shown.\textsuperscript{32}

Here we see how whole-heartedly Dick applied an allegorical mode of interpretation to his dreams, which he reads as tissues of allusions to literary and religious tradition. Peeling a fawn skin from the metamorphic meat of his dream, Dick finds his answers in \textit{The Bacchae} and \textit{The Frogs} (and, one expects, the encyclopedia as well). These links are not the free associations of the psychoanalytic couch.
Instead, they are correspondences unearthed by a mystic hermeneut using comparison to amplify the resonance of a dreamtext.

Dick's desire to enlarge his sphere of reference helps us appreciate his practice of rampant citation. The hypertext of references he generates in the Exegesis and his later fictions helped stage the emergence of RAW-style research synchronicities. In VALIS (1980), which folds both 2-3-74 and the Exegesis into its fabulated pages, we get citations or hasty summaries of, among other sources, the I Ching, Handel, Dogon cosmology, Mircea Eliade, Plato, Henry Vaughan, C.S. Lewis, Edward Hussey's The Presocratics, Heraclitus, Ikhnaton's hymns, various Nag Hammadi codexes, Workingman's Dead, Goethe's Faust, Wagner, the Tao Te Ching, Xenophanes, the Jewish Bible, the New Testament, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, Calvin, Pascal, Rosicrucian mottos, and discussions drawn from Paul Edwards' Encyclopedia of Philosophy and the 15th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

These references come hot and heavy, fusing at times into amalgams that beggar sense. In his work on VALIS, the literary critic Christopher Palmer attacks this excessive “textuality,” which succumbs to a “rhapsodic postmodernist restlessness” in which texts only refer to other texts until all real difference, and real engagement with the material world, is lost. Palmer's critique is valid to a point, but his disinterest in religious history prevents him from recognizing that Dick's sacred collages are a fundamental hallmark of esoteric speculation. In her magisterial history of esoteric currents in American religion, Catherine Albanese returns time and again to “the practice of combinativeness so cherished among religious metaphysicians.” Works like Blavatsky's Isis Unveiled (1877), for example, are composed of dense weaves of cross-cultural references and juxtapositions of appropriated chunks of material, creating what the poet Robert Duncan called a “midden heap” of quotations and unacknowledged borrowings.

Here the assumptions of postmodernism simply get in the way. From the perspective of the history of esotericism, Dick's mixology of theological systems, world mythologies, current sciences, and philosophies East and West are startling, ingenious, and sometimes maddening. But they are totally recognizable. If he didn't always perform his associations with finesse, Dick knew what he was doing
when he compared religions, and he also knew that the practice of comparison was itself a mode of the creative religious imagination. The sphere of Dick’s references in both the Exegesis and VALIS suggests a rich, manic, and sometimes desperate course of textual seeking—a garage philosopher’s bid for what Elliot Wolfson, citing Michael Lieb, calls a “visionary hermeneutics that is both self-perpetuating and self-authorizing.”

At the core of Dick’s visionary hermeneutics lay a longing for initiation, an initiation he pursued through his practice with both texts and dreams. As Peter Lamborn Wilson explains, to dream of a book is itself a sign of initiation in some esoteric traditions, one of those rare transmissions that are bestowed not by human or even divine masters but by the oneiric or sacred imagination itself. Dick dreamed often of such books, but in trying to interpret them, he produced his own hypertext dreambook, with its own condensations and displacements, its own metamorphic associations, its own pathologies and premonitions. Indeed, studying the Exegesis, it is sometimes hard to avoid the sense that the text is reading and writing itself, like a book in a dream, or a book made of dreams.
The Hymn of the Signal

The figure of the initiating text is key to Dick's dreamwork, fiction, and private diary alike. Here I want to trace one of the most important of these texts, references to which are scattered throughout the Exegesis: an otherworldly letter that appears in a remarkable ancient Near Eastern story called the *Hymn of the Soul*. As Dick recognized, the *Hymn* is a loosely “gnostic” fable of remembrance and home-coming whose arresting vision of spiritual awakening is embedded in a narrative with the imaginal economy of a fairy tale. Though originally an independent text, it is found embedded in the *Acts of Thomas*, a third century pseudo-epigraphical Christian work, most likely of Syriac origin, that gives an account of the journeys, imprisonment, and death of the apostle Thomas in the East. In the *Acts*, Thomas sings the numinous hymn of the initiating text to his fellow prisoners.

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 has been obliterated by the symbol of the cross, leaving us without a mechanism for anamnesis, or re-awakening. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, Dick quotes directly from the 15th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 
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.41

The Britannica claims that this myth “is a figurative representation of the theological doctrine of the soul's fall and its return to heaven.”42 Bentley Layton, an important scholar of Gnosticism, similarly declared the Hymn to be an allegory of the soul's descent and return from the body, which is represented by the clothes the protagonist must don in order to disguise himself. In his introduction to the text in The Gnostic Scriptures, Layton provides a structuralist grid that links elements in the story to features of Platonic myth and images in other, so-called Thomasine texts related to the Hymn, including the Gospel of Thomas that Dick also often cites.43

Layton's structural comparisons make sense. But in treating the Hymn as a philosophical allegory, we flatten something Dick recognized even in the clipped Britannica paraphrase he first encountered: the Hymn's peculiar power as a story. The Hymn sways readers and listeners not by doctrine but by fictional figure and narrative event. That's why the story was, in the ancient world even, able to speak meaningfully to people in various religious traditions. Augustine tells us that the Hymn was widely in use among the Manichaeans, and allusions to it are found in the Manichaean Psalms.44 At the same time, the text has proved popular among Eastern Orthodox believers, as well as modern neo-gnostics.

Battles with dragons are an important feature of Western mythology, but the hero's struggle for the pearl is not actually the
central event of the *Hymn*. What rivets the story is the moment where the hero reads the letter sent by his family of origin, the letter that recalls him to his true home and true identity. According to Hans Jonas, whose influential account of Gnosticism Dick was familiar with by the end of the seventies, the letter in the *Hymn* literalizes the mystical event that he describes as the “call from without.” The letter is an example of how “the transmundane penetrates the enclosure of the world and makes itself heard therein as a call.” As such, it represents another one of Sloterdijk's “message ontologies.”

When he first stumbled across this story in the encyclopedia, Dick must have been overcome with the resonances. For in addition to the fish sign, Dick's fictions are seeded with many of these transmundane calls. In *Ubik* (1969), for instance, a group of psychics with “anti-telepath” powers visit the moon, where one of them—their boss Glen Runciter—is apparently killed in a bomb explosion. After returning to earth, the crew gets Runciter's corpse into cold-pac and his soul into “half-life,” a sort of psychic holding cell that allows the deceased to continue communicating with the living for a limited period of time. But this time it doesn't work; nobody can contact Runciter in half-life. The crew then start receiving peculiar messages, apparently from their old boss: they hear his voice yammering on a hotel phone, find his name on a matchbox and a note from him inside a cigarette carton. As the anomalies mount, one character goes into the bathroom and finds, scrawled on the wall in purple crayon, this message:

**JUMP IN THE URINAL AND STAND ON YOUR HEAD. I'M THE ONE THAT'S ALIVE. YOU’RE ALL DEAD.**

Eventually, the characters realize that Runciter is right: all the members of the crew are dead and 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 lifeforce of others.

Runciter's bathroom message is a perfect example of what Dick critic Lorenzo DiTomasso identifies as an “in-breaking information vector,” an instrument of narrative disruption that we can, with a sort of backwards causality, recognize in the *Hymn's* gnostic call-
Though Dick was not drawing these connections at the time he wrote *Ubik*, in the wake of 2-3-74, he was quick to notice the similarities. Writing about the secondary personality he identified initially with James 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.”

Dick's confusion here reminds us again of the indeterminacy that drives his skeptical gnosis. In Jonas, Dick may have come across a verse from a Mandaen prayerbook that proclaims that “One call comes and instructs about all calls.” But Dick didn't get the full instructions. Like the off-world 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 upon arrival. Indeed, the entire Exegesis reverberates with the conundrum of the call: a clarion blast ruptured Dick's reality field but, with the exception of some remarkable epiphanies, the message itself was terminally postponed. The hell-chore of the Exegesis is then required to both chase and mediate the McGuffin of origins.

Like Palmer, we could frame this indeterminacy through a postmodern or poststructuralist lens, remembering the synchronistic fact that these discourses were hitting their stride in the seventies. The Exegesis can certainly be read in light of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), which described the collapse of master narratives in the increasingly pluralistic and hypermediated decade. Or we could invoke the endless deferral of meaning endemic to all signification described (and performed) by Derrida. At the same time, we can also trace Dick's metaphysical confusion to the recursive loop of the mystical call itself, which both demands metanoia—radical conversion—and leaves everything in the muddle where it already is. You must change your life. OK, but to what?

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.” As a religious entrepreneur, Paul had concrete reasons for counseling indifference to one's position in the world in the light of the messianic call. He wanted slaves to know that they need not be concerned with their low
worldly status; and he wanted gentiles to know that they did not have to get circumcised to follow Christ. But for Agamben, the odd recursion of Paul's verse, with its two forms of *klesis* and its somewhat indeterminate reference, illuminates a less settled meaning: that the messianic calling is “essentially and foremost a calling of the calling.” Agamben argues that the call, through its very openness, offers nothing but the repetition of the condition in which we are called—a condition that is at the same time 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...Vocation calls for nothing and to no place.”50 This anxious suspension helps illuminate the pathos of the end of *VALIS*, where “Phil” finds himself searching for revelation by watching the TV. There is nowhere to go.

In the words of Hans Jonas, “the call as such is its own content, since it simply states what its being sounded will effect: the awakening from sleep.”51 The call is an imperative event whose content, initially at least, is nothing more than its own shattering character as an event.52 Once again, hermeneutics gives way to energetic process. With Dick's weird messianic call, we do not encounter signification so much as signal, or even less, noise: the startling clamor of an alarm-clock, an imperative without semantic content. Abruptly awakened from sleep by an alarm, there is always a gap, a little abyss, between the noise and the cognitive crystallization of a familiar world.53 This abyss may free us, but it provides no foundation. As the Fall's Mark E. Smith put it, “the only thing real is waking and rubbing your eyes.”54
4.8.6 Auto-Anamnesis

It is not hard to understand why the *Hymn of the Soul* became important to Philip Dick, since the story resembles nothing so much as one of his late fictions. The protagonist of the *Hymn* bumbles along until he is awakened by a strange signal from beyond. This alerts him to knowledge that he already possesses but has been forgotten—or to use a favorite phrase of Dick’s, “occluded.” In the *Hymn*, this recognition is sufficient to bring the buried knowledge and the ordinary everyday self into sync. Dick, however, did not allow such easy resolutions for his characters—nor, unfortunately, for himself.

In his February 1975 letter to Bush, Dick claims that he had first come across the *Hymn* only a day or two before writing her; 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.”\(^{55}\) To prove his point, Dick immediately narrates, once again, the fish sign scene. “Can you see how close this is to the ‘Hymn of the Soul’?” he asks.

In this particular iteration of the golden fish story, though, Dick adds some new details. He claims he later went to the pharmacy looking for the delivery 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 obliviousness is in turn linked to Dick’s ignorance about the phenomenon of anamnesis brought on by the fish sign: “as I'm sure you realize I did not know, had never heard of, such matters within the human heart, or mind, or history.”\(^{56}\)

This sort of anxious disavowal of knowledge recurs throughout the Exegesis, where it is often proclaimed in relationship to knowledge Dick *already possesses*. For example, Dick's letter to Bush is almost certainly not the first mention of the *Hymn* in Dick's diary. In an undated entry that appears between two letters dated December 23, 1974 and January 29, 1975, Dick addresses the topic of anamnesis, specifically the long sleep of the right hemisphere, which he casts again as “the seat of the unconscious.”\(^{57}\)
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.⁵⁸

There is no extant *Epistle of St. Thomas*, so we have every reason to believe that Dick was here referring to the letter in 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 one of the most constitutive drives in the Exegesis: Dick's need to be surprised by knowledge he already has.

A more concrete example of this pattern is provided by a passage in Folder 50, which Dick wrote in early 1978. Dick is in total metaphysical despair, facing a “brick wall,” cut off from God. He scribbles a lamentation in German; the second half of the quotation is drawn from the Bach cantata “Sleepers Awake.” At the bottom of that page, as an unnumbered footnote, Dick declares that his “prayer” had been answered by “mistakenly reading” the *Britannica* entry on Jacob Boehme, the mystic cobbler mentioned earlier. Though it is hard to imagine how one reads an encyclopedia passage by mistake, this randomness is important to Dick because it removes his will from the equation, implying a cosmic or oracular intention behind the happenstance. God guides him to Boehme, in whom he discovers a secret sympathy across time. But the whole episode is complicated by the appearance, sixty-four pages earlier, of the unusual phrase “divine ‘abyss,’” a fundamental term in Boehme. Its appearance earlier in this folder, particularly in quotation marks, strongly suggests that Dick had begun reading Boehme—or more likely reading about him—well before he declared his German prayer.⁵⁹

As readers of Dick's letters know, Dick was an erudite man with a great memory, and, like many autodidacts, he 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 *disguises* what he knows. Why? One possibility is that, unconsciously at least, Dick yearned to recapitulate the event of anamnesis itself: the sudden re-emergence of knowledge “already”
known from a state of occlusion. For Dick, such recalled knowledge was coterminous with awakening itself; as he once wrote, “to remember and to wake up are absolutely interchangeable.” As such, while the Exegesis is stuffed with knowing, it is also regularly punctuated with forgetting, as Dick plays hide-and-seek with himself, staging his “ahas!” in advance.

This strange loop also shows up in the *Hymn*. When the hero hears the words of the letter, he finds the same message already “traced on my heart”—a metaphor of internalized media inscription that goes back at least to Proverbs and Jeremiah. But there is another way to read this loopy message, another way to understand how the call from without is mirrored by the script from within. As Dick himself writes in the Exegesis, “it is he himself who sends himself the letter which restores his memory (Legend of the Pearl).” In addition to presenting a fantasy of mystical resolution through a “message ontology,” the *Hymn* also reminded Dick that in some ways he had set the whole thing up. Through the events of 2-3-74, Dick had sent himself a very convoluted letter. But in order to receive this prompt as a wake-up call, he needed to erase the hand he had in the deal.

One way that Dick forgot himself was to distance his texts from his own controlling authority. Such disavowal is a regular theme in the Exegesis, as well as in Dick's correspondence. In the “Constitutional Crisis” document, for example, Dick jokes that his books are forgeries because his “magic typewriter” actually wrote them. Behind the joshing, Dick came to earnestly interpret his own work as being or containing information of soteriological import that he was not conscious of. (One example we have already described is the King Felix code in *Flow My Tears.*) In turn, this belief drives the endless allegorical interpretations of his earlier works offered up in the Exegesis.

But here is the (anti)messianic key. Despite the manic inflation that drives a lot of the Exegesis, Dick is usually loathe to make his person—rather than his texts—the locus of messianic power. Instead, 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 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.64

In this messianic vision, Dick sees his novels as transmundane letters like the one in the Hymn, letters from Beyond, or from a gnostic goddess, that Dick as author was forwarding unbeknownst to his readers through writing and publishing. These disguised missives do not just proclaim the illusion of the world but reveal it. However, the transition that Dick traces here, from abolishing the world in “writing” to doing so in “real life,” can also read as an admission of how much 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 1975, nor do I doubt that these anomalous ecstasies, temporal stutters, and I-Thou encounters with liminal beings brought him to the very heart of himself. But that heart was already inscribed, like a wax tablet, or a labyrinth tagged with enigmatic graffiti.
4.8.7 Missive

In March of 1974, Dick received a letter in the mail that, though diametrically opposed to the spirit of the *Hymn*, came to play a strangely similar role in the phantasmagoria of 2-3-74. According to Tessa, Dick had been worried throughout the spring that he would receive a letter that might “kill” him. Identifying this letter one day in March, he refused to open or read the missive, having Tessa do it in his stead. 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 these “die messages.”

Dick felt intensely threatened by the letter, which he believed might be a loyalty-testing trap laid by the FBI or, worse, a *Manchurian Candidate*-like trigger, which is why he refused to read the letter in the first place. Deeply anxious that the authorities would take him for a Soviet sympathizer, especially given the Marxist critics and East European science-fiction writers interested in his work, Dick eventually read and sent the document to the FBI. They responded with a form letter. According to Tessa, 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.65

Dick dubbed this letter “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 speculations. Here we must remember that the published *Exegesis* represents merely a tenth of the extent material. According to editor Pamela Jackson, a “good deal” of this vast remainder is taken up with restless and incessantly paranoid plots whose feverish, mind-numbing prolixity would try the patience of even the most die-hard Dickhead or fan of conspiracy lit. With their interminable recombinations of KGB agents, satellites, doomsday devices, and fiendish mind-control technologies, Dick's desperate scenarios—the junk DNA of the Exegesis—generate what Lawrence Sutin describes as “much heat but little light.”66

While these plots don't make for engaging reading, their sheer mass speaks to Dick's palpable sense of oppression during the
seventies. Whatever ecstatic or mystic bliss was visited upon Dick during 2-3-74, it was more than matched by fear, loathing, and profound existential anxiety. The agency panic reflected by these dark visions of political control already existed in his late sixties fictions, but was only heightened by the break-in and the break-in's subsequent “confirmation” through Watergate. For esoteric exegetes like Dick—and certainly Robert Anton Wilson as well—the political and cultural conditions of the surveillance seventies brought mysticism and paranoia together into perfect syzygy.

That said, the Xerox missive also sparked a glint of saving light in the dark tunnels of Dick's Chapel Perilous. Over time, Dick came to invest great ethical significance in his initial refusal to read the letter. The seemingly trivial block he threw up against the incoming “information vector” became, in the later folders of the Exegesis, the paradigmatic basis for a fascinating theory of “ethical balking”—an ethics of refusal that rests atop a novel, almost cybernetic conception of Christian freedom. In concert with the strange media machines in his novels, the concept of ethical balking superimposed technological systems and process logics onto ethical and religious concerns.

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.” For Dick, this visible logic was not just unjust and totalizing but deterministic. To exist is to be subject to the unforgiving engines of necessity, the implacable fate (or wyrd) that appears in Dick's writings in various forms: as the Black Iron Prison, as “engramming,” and as “astral determinism,” the ancient notion that destiny is set by the daemonic astrological clockwork of the heavens. Another word Dick threw in here was karma, a Hindu concept that 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.

Dick was also obsessed with entropy, the degeneration of objects—aka “kipple”—that he associated with both physical decay and the “tomb world” of schizophrenia. But as Anthony Enns explains, Dick also somewhat paradoxically linked entropy with stasis and
repetition. Against such clockwork decline, Dick trumpeted the irruption of genuine novelty, which he usually imagined as penetrating from outside the system in question. As such, the Bartleby-like refusal to read the Xerox letter introduced a new element—“tiny, bordering on ex nihilo, on nothing, yet something”—into an “otherwise closed system.” As McKee argues, this meek little gesture “impels immediate disobedience.” Balking disrupts the causal machinery of fate, creating a “groove override” or wayward twist that refutes what Dick calls “cause-and-effect script-programming.” As Dick put it later in the Exegesis, by refusing to read the Xerox missive, he had “short-circuited” his karma.

The link between the karmic mechanics of data crunching and balking’s “groove override” first appeared in a hypnagogic vision Dick experienced in the late seventies and later reformulated for his novel *The Divine Invasion* (1981).

4:30 A.M. hypnagogic: 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 particulars that lists the sins (or crimes) for which you are being tried and punished.

Dick here imagines 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 the human individual’s inevitably spotted record. This blank page presents an almost bureaucratic parallel of the spotless lamb of Christ—the sacrifice who, in Luther's doctrine of vicarious atonement, is offered in our own place, and whose Love thereby jams the machinery of Law. But in Dick's 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 famous distinction that Paul draws between the letter and the spirit (2 Corinthians 3:6) is transformed by Dick into two different kinds of letters, Xerox letters of fate and blank letters of freedom. But through their formal resemblance as letters, these two ethical possibilities can also oscillate, or “flip/flop,” a term of early computerese that Dick often uses in the Exegesis. For Dick, the two
sides of an opposition actually lie very close to one another. Many of the cosmological schemas that Dick develops in the Exegesis, a good number of which rely on binary or dualistic structures, often mutate by swapping their positive or negative valence. Such literal ambivalence also helps explain why Dick, when newly embracing the Episcopal Church in the early sixties, was capable of simultaneously writing the “satanic” parody *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*.

The flip-flop also allowed Dick to immunize himself against the nightmare of the Xerox missive by recognizing its formal resemblance to the liberating *Hymn*. 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).77

In this account, receiving letters (whether they are read or not read) and responding to signs (like the fish sign) become ritual recapitulations of a larger myth, a myth whose saving grace is able to both sanctify the profane and liberate the ritualist through anamnesis.

If all this sounds a bit like Mircea Eliade, it should—on the previous page of the manuscript, Dick cites Eliade's notion that mythological events unfold *illo tempore*, in another kind of time. “Therefore if you can get (your self) into a mythological narrative you will enter this dream time.”78 Entering into mythological time requires a rite; as such, the Hymn provides a script for extraordinary experience.79 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 confrontation with the Xerox missive
becomes “flip-flopped” and sanctified by its role in the enacted sacred narrative. Hermeneutics may have made Dick crazy, but they also helped him heal.
4.8.8 Tractates

In the wake of 2-3-74, as Dick wrestled with his altered states and plunged into the Exegesis, he never ceased writing for the public. Leaving aside Deus Irae (1976, co-written with Roger Zelazny) and A Scanner Darkly (1977), both of which were started before 1974, Dick completed four novels, a screenplay, some speeches and introductions, and a handful of short stories between the fish sign encounter and his death in 1982. Always one to draw from his personal life, Dick also used his late fictions to manage, encrypt, and critically question the visions and enthusiasms associated with 2-3-74. But he also used his published fictions to disseminate the weird news of his extraordinary experiences and their metaphysical import.

Writing to Peter Nicholls in May 1976, when he was working on a manuscript called Valisystem A, Dick acknowledged being frustrated by “trying to make my religious vision/revelation into something which I can communicate.” Dick eventually abandoned that novel, which was published posthumously as Radio Free Albemuth (1985). He gave it another shot with VALIS (1980), which he started in the fall of 1978. In both novels, Dick complicates the already tricksy autobiographical material by splitting himself into two characters, the skeptical science-fiction writer “Philip K. Dick” and a visionary and possibly insane friend—Nicholas Brady in RFA, and Horselover Fat in VALIS. VALIS is split in another way as well: the first half of the novel is realist fiction, as Fat, Phil, and their friends shoot the shit, see movies, and wrestle with existential questions of death and madness. After a triggering event that we will look at in a moment, the second half of the novel enters more surreal, science-fiction territory, as clues hidden in a B-movie lead Fat and his friends into an extraterrestrial conspiracy and the encounter with a two-year old savior named Sophia.

In contrast to RFA, the narrative of VALIS emerged directly from the handwritten pages of the Exegesis. Horselover Fat's obsessive conversations recall (and satirize) Dick's own passionate ball-point rants, while the novel's uncorked range of references reflects the information density that, as mentioned earlier, already marks the
Exegesis. But the key point of convergence lies in the metaphysical appendix that follows the narrative of VALIS—an extraction that, we are told, Fat made from the 300,000 words of his “great exegesis.”

The “Tractates: Cryptica Scriptura” is composed of fifty-two numbered and boldfaced entries, ranging between single sentences and page-long passages. Appearing after the close of the narrative, and therefore both inside and outside the fiction itself, the “Tractates” is a metaphysical frame that thickens the as if quality of Dick's narrative while thinly veiling the existence of the actual Exegesis, which in some sense is the ultimate supplement to VALIS. That said, the “Tractates” do not appear to have been drawn directly from Dick's own private journal. Instead, Dick seems to have revised and organized selected exegetical material for the purposes of the published novel. Here Dick crafts the transmission, rather than passively relaying it. As such, we should read it as Dick's attempt, at the end of the seventies, to crystalize some key themes of the Exegesis into seeds for dissemination.

In the “Tractates,” Dick presents a loosely Neoplatonic metaphysics recoded as an information mysticism freshly minted for the network seventies. In league with both emerging New Age thinkers and a few computational cosmologists of the era (whose ranks have swelled in ours), Dick maintains that our universe is composed of information. The phenomenal world is essentially a hologram, “a hypostasis of the information” that we, as nodes in the true Mind, process. Like Leibnizian monads, we are essentially stationary in this universe, outside of space and time, translating information into objects whose “rearrangement” reflects a change in the content of information. In this sense, we could be said to be “reading” our reality—not hermeneutically, but the way a scanner reads a UPC code.

Unfortunately, there is a glitch in the works: we have lost the ability to read this essential underlying code. Why this glitch occurred is the $64,000 question of course—the problem of theodicy that Dick does no better at cracking than any other theologian. Whatever the cause, the result is that both ourselves and the world are “occluded.” As such, we are under the sway of the Empire, Dick's generic term for the violent, half-blind force of tyranny, the police state, and cosmic determinism—“the institution, the codification, of derangement.” Resistance may be futile; to fight the Empire “is to be
infected by its derangement,” which proliferates, crucially, like a “virus.”

Opposed to the Empire is “living information,” Dick's brilliant portmanteau contribution to mystical metaphysics: a figure that combines antique notions of Logos and the spirit of Pentecost with the postwar recoding of information as cybernetic process and genetic code. As I wrote about in Techgnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information (1998), the modern concept of information has enabled a computational form of Platonism to emerge, one that contrasts data to meat and recodes Plato's famous cave as a technological simulacrum. But Dick's concept of information does not have the bloodless abstraction of Plato's forms. Rather it is a form of energy, a “plasmate” that “replicates itself—not through information or in information—but as information [my emphasis].” As such, the “Tractates” hopes, “information will save us”—a mediated Logos that for Dick is identical with the saving gnosis sought by ancient hierophants.

While this saving information evokes the noetic flash of the mystic, Dick emphasizes its materiality; his information is always embedded in or “as” a mediated or biological thing. Birth from the spirit occurs when, as Dick writes in the main body of VALIS, the plasmate “penetrate(s) the world, replicating in human brains, crossbonding with them and assisting them.” In the “Tractates,” he further specifies that this weird penetration occurred in modern times when the plasmate, slumbering within the Gnostic codexes at Nag Hammadi, was released again into the world after the library was discovered in 1945 and the plasmate entered new “human hosts” exposed to its texts. The living information contained in the Nag Hammadi texts does not just initiate, in other words—it replicates and infects. And with this potent metaphor, Dick found a way to port his ancient wake-up calls into the pulp media and pop occulture of his day, while also prophesying the viral “meme magick” of contemporary online reality.
The idea that language is a virus belongs to William Burroughs, whose name appears in the Exegesis more than any other contemporary author. For Burroughs, the language virus was a vector of control and repression, a force to be resisted through a counter-logic of cut-ups, scabrous satire, and magical limit experiences. The figure of the virus also played a minor role in post-structuralist discourse. Writing in 1972, Derrida described 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.” The ambivalence of the citation-as-virus was also explored by the literary critic J. Hillis Miller in notably weird terms: “Is a citation an alien parasite within the body of its host, the main text, or is it the other way around, the interpretive text the parasite which surrounds and strangles the citation which is its host?”
In VALIS, Dick also plays flip-flop with the viral message, turning it from Burroughs’ vector of control into a salvational script, an incoming information process that invisibly restores an occluded world. Dick’s hope in such infectious scripts or semiotic triggers helps explain the evasive style of evangelism that he practiced in his 2-3-74 fictions. Rather than offer sincere declarations of faith, or faultless portrayals of his visionary characters, Dick instead peppered his ironic and troubled texts with earnest chunks of “information” he gathered from his research, his visions, and his dreams. Dick did not testify so much as cite.

The act of citation is of course central to the traditional work of exegesis, particularly within religions of the book like Christianity or Judaism. But as Derrida and Hillis Miller suggest, the viral citation is also a media critical strategy at home in the postmodern technoculture Dick helped prophecy. Here we might compare the role of citation within texts to the modernist practice of collage. To construct a collage, material is severed from a pre-existing context and then inserted into a new and larger assemblage that nonetheless retains some visible trace of the heterogeneity or juxtaposition that informs it. As an avant-garde or satirical or punk-rock strategy, collage does not seek to reflect reality but to intervene in it, to rupture, satirize, or mutate existing conditions. Unfurled through time, collage also resembles montage, the juxtapositions familiar from film editing, and a crucial feature of VALIS we will return to in a moment.

The subversive aspirations of collage sometimes inform the seemingly more traditional work of exegetical citation and commentary, or at least Dick’s practice of them in both VALIS and the Exegesis. Here the specific connections that Dick makes—which are often balmy—are less important than the complexity and omnivorous openness of the network itself. By expanding the network of references in his private diaries, and by overloading the reader of VALIS with “information,” Dick makes his writing both mirror and manifest the “vast active living intelligence system” that is its object. The invasive arborescence of VALIS, which Dick describes as covertly replicating through our fallen reality “as information,” becomes incarnated through the almost biological aspirations of Dick’s citational mania. The medium becomes the message.
In the conclusion we will return to Dick's VALIS vision and its resonance with digital networks in the seventies and today. Here let us turn to a more fantastic technological expression of Dick's sacred hermeneutics: the three-dimensional, color-coded hologrammatic Bible that appears in *The Divine Invasion*. Within his fiction, Dick engineered many remarkable allegorical machines and satirical contraptions, like the Penfield Mood Organ of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, or the Dr. Smile psychiatric briefcase from *The Three Stigmata*. But the 3D Bible is perhaps Dick's most sublime invention:

the Bible (was) expressed as layers at different depths within the hologram, each layer according to an 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, different messages could be extracted...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.  

This visionary machine is, appropriately, itself drawn from a vision: a luminous red and gold tetragrammaton, described in the Exegesis and associated with VALIS, that pulses along to the repeated phrase “and he is alive.” With his holographic Bible, Dick incarnates his kabbalistic vision of the fecund word of God into a hermeneutical database machine. Here the ancient oracular experience of living scripture is transcoded into the posthumanist logic of recombinant random access. What results is a technono-animistic holy book that celebrates the multiple possibilities and contingency of any given act of sacred reading.

The key word in this celebration is *superimposed*, the act of laminating layers of text, or images, or even temporal periods. As noted earlier, “superimposition” is a central figure for Dick, at once a literary strategy, a visual effect, and a metaphysical concern. In his correspondence and diaries, Dick variously used the term to describe his multi-focal narratives; the overlap of the various personalities he hosted; the merger of brain hemispheres; and, perhaps most
significantly, the “superimposition montage” created by Rome's “double exposure” appearance in and as Orange County.\textsuperscript{89} In all these, we can also see superimposition as a strategy of reading. While it performs the critical work of collage, superimposition also integrates its fragments by overlapping them, thereby not only breaking out of symbolic prisons but synthesizing new and lively forms.

Writing in the late seventies, Derrida described the relationship of one text to another in terms of superimposition. He saw it as the best answer to the question: “How can one text, assuming its unity, give or present another to be read, without touching it, without saying anything about it, practically without referring to it?”\textsuperscript{90} This is the question that Dick faced when gesturing towards the Exegesis in \textit{VALIS} and his other late fictions, which can be seen as superimpositions of his metaphysical concerns. But this just begs a deeper question: how did \textit{VALIS} translate, not just the strange metaphysics of Dick's diary, but his own ambivalence about it, even his shame? In other words, how did fiction help Dick resist what he sometimes recognized as his own excessive, even pathological enthusiasm?
4.8.10 Screen Memory

As noted earlier, hardly anyone thinks of Dick as a “Christian writer,” despite Dick's theological themes, his religious experiences, and his stated Episcopalian identity. This resistance reminds us that one of the problems faced by readers of Dick—as well as Dick himself—is where to place his aching but frustrated religiosity. The literary critic Umberto Rossi explicitly addresses this problem when he argues that critics should not delve into Dick's theology directly but stick to reading the religious elements in Dick “inside the framework of his fictional texts.” That's fine as far as it goes, and Rossi does a wonderful job within those strictures. But with the exegetical “Tractates” appended to VALIS, we find ourselves located on the framework itself, “neither simply outside nor simply inside,” navigating a liminal zone between fiction and belief, memoir and revelation, testimony and numinous trauma. The challenges of handling Dick's complicated religiosity can be illustrated through some of Christopher Palmer's reflections on Dick. As noted above, one of Palmer's central issues with VALIS is that Fat's feverish and encyclopedic speculations reflect a postmodernist “retreat into textuality.” This restlessness vitiates what Palmer sees as one of Dick's most important themes: to “restore ‘thingness,’ phenomenological substance, to humble objects.” Absent this concern for the concrete, Fat's search for the literal truth of sacred history—the immortal plasmate eucharist of the early Christians—founders on the ultimately meaningless networks of references that seduce him. As an example, Palmer offers up the scene in VALIS where Horselover Fat secretly baptizes his son with hot chocolate and a hotdog bun. On one level, this gesture is classic PKD: a weird, somewhat garish event that reads at once as a parody of religion and an earnest if low-rent stab at the real thing. But given all the religious signifiers already floating through the book, Palmer finds the scene “unconvincing.” Fair enough, but Palmer clearly hasn't spent much time with the loose and goofy liturgies of the liberal, this-world Christianity of the sixties and seventies. The progressive American
Episcopal poet-priest Malcolm Body, for example, once served up Eucharist as beer and chips.\(^{94}\)

Moreover, as Rossi points out, Dick's ironic baptism scene is drawn directly from the author's life.\(^{95}\) According to his numerous accounts, Dick was inspired by the plasmate to baptize Christopher himself, and so he used whatever was lying around the kitchen. Even if you read Fat's action as “unconvincing” for the character—which I don't—the knowledge that Dick actually performed this absurd, strangely touching ritual undercuts that critique. The far more interesting question is why Dick chose to confess his own peculiar behavior within his novel.

This question leads to another point that Rossi makes: that Dick's decision to include the baptism scene in both \textit{VALIS} and \textit{Radio Free Albemuth} supports Palmer's other, somewhat contradictory claim about the religious dimension of \textit{VALIS}. This is the idea that, despite the novel's referential restlessness and metafictional play, it ultimately “denies textuality” by reducing its fictionality to a thin screen through which Dick can present his “belief” in the actual existence of VALIS. For Palmer, this is by far the more disturbing possibility, and the weaknesses he finds in the novel reflect Dick's extra-literary attempts to push his revelations onto the reader. “By this somewhat shocking or embarrassing tactic, the novel defeats our attempt to defend ourselves by saying that it is only a novel.” Whether you regard the novel's resistance to the reader's disenchanted enchantment as a problem or a boon is, I suppose, a matter of one's enjoyment of weird religion. Palmer is clear about his concerns: “\textit{VALIS} is a wonderful novel, but Scientology began in SF.”\(^{96}\)

The point is taken: part of Dick's motivation in writing \textit{VALIS} was to craft a public vehicle for some of the mystic downloads he received in private. But does the book as a whole serve as a screen for Dick's supposed extra-literary convictions? Like many people who don't think much about religion, Palmer considers Dick's motivations in terms of “beliefs” he is trying to push. But Dick's anomalous experiences and speculations never congealed into a belief system—even the “Tractates” is internally contradictory. \textit{VALIS} is too ambivalent for such proselytizing; as Rossi argues in regards to the
novel's supernatural arc, “both a materialist and a spiritualist reading is possible: the oscillation is not closed.”97

Dick was doing something much more interesting when he invited Exegetical material into his late work, especially in Radio Free Albemuth, VALIS, and The Transmigration of Timothy Archer. Without question, he used these novels to share his weird news with the world. But he equally used his fictions to resist and critique his own visionary obsessions. The title character of The Transmigration of Timothy Archer was based on Dick's old friend, the controversial Bishop Pike. But in concert with Joan Didion's sour account of Pike in The White Album, the novel presents Archer as a figure of theological foolishness and glib California narcissism. Though 2-3-74 still lurks behind the novel, the story it tells is at once deflated and deeply humanistic—a bleak satire of the fever-dreams of erratic transcendence that characterized both the sixties generation and the novel's own sometimes messianic author.

Within some of his late works, then, Dick used the historically secular space of the novel to skeptically resist his own religiosity. The literary realism we find in Timothy Archer, however depressing at times, provides existential ballast against the intoxications of vertical tension. VALIS too is saturated with death and loss, which serve not only to drive Fat's doubts about a loving God, but to help the author Dick elude His seductive wiles. This is the paradox of Dick's late work. Rather than use fiction to resist reality—the “escapism” that motivates so much popular speculative literature—Dick instead used his tales to affirm facticity and finitude. If these books are weird, it is the downbeat weird, the weird naturalism of dust becoming conscious of itself only to submit to entropy. As such, Dick's late novels are more than disguised testimonies. They are also self-cures for the ravages of revelation.
In both *Radio Free Albemuth* and *VALIS*, as noted above, Dick divides his fictionalized identity into two characters, a professional science-fiction writer and a pathological exegete. This split allowed Dick to clarify the distinctions between his visionary convictions and his skeptical doubts; indeed the device is another example of how Dick deployed fiction to get to the truth. In *Radio Free Albemuth*, the boundary between these two subjects is also figured as a form of writing—a writing that, like Derrida's *pharmakon*, or Dick's own attempt to heal himself with and through his texts, is at once toxin and cure, a witness to the sacred and a paranoid pathology.

The novel opens the character “Philip K. Dick” telling us about his friend Nicholas Brady, who, when first narrating his nutty mystical encounters, describes them not as personal experiences but as ideas for a possible science-fiction story. “Dick” believes that this fib paradoxically shows that Brady still has “some vestigial grip on reality.” Soon, however, “Dick” witnesses anomalous events that seem to confirm Brady’s own accounts. Significantly, these events are mediated by *inscriptions*. In chapter 7, “Dick” describes a pink light radiating out of a small design Brady copied from his visions onto a piece of paper. This blast in turn inspires Brady's intuitive diagnosis of his son's dangerous hernia, a diagnosis whose words he pronounces, eyes closed, “as if reading them off a cue card...”

Like Fat in *VALIS*, Brady is also writing an “exegesis” of his experiences. Later in the novel, “Dick” mounts a critique of these speculations that is almost indistinguishable from Christopher Palmer's. “Dick” accuses Brady of simply manufacturing speculation after speculation and spouting out whatever version serves him in the moment. Brady counters that his speculations “are all written down” in the order in which they arrived. This fidelity to inscription inspires “Dick” to imagine the possible culmination of Brady's compulsive metaphysical production:
Nicholas could flounder around forever, his stack of typed papers constantly growing with theory after theory, each one more lurid than the last, more comprehensive, more daring. Finally the man slumbering within him whom they were attempting to arouse back into wakeful life could appear, take charge, and finish Nicholas's thesis for him. Nicholas could write, I wonder if it's...it may be that...I'm sure that...it has to be; and then the ancient man could rise into life and write down, He was correct; it is. I am.

As if embodying the author Dick's own wish fulfillment fantasy, here “Dick” imagines that Brady's typewriter churn is itself capable of arousing a self-realized writer who will be capable of finishing or resolving the discourse by fusing together self and text in a final act of writing. This “ancient man” is certainly a biblical or esoteric figure, an Adam Kadmon, or perhaps Yahweh himself, with his foundational “ehyeh.” At the same time, the “I am” of the final elliptical passage also collapses the difference between the diegetical “Dick” and the author Dick. The self that is produced through Brady's ceaseless graphomania is, in the end, the self-authorizing essence of the author himself—an author who is at the same time a transcendental other, but whose arrival as the declarative “I am” dissolves the fictional mask and resolves the speculative drift.

This theme of the awakened primal man is also a key motif of the “Tractates,” where it is laminated with a variety of religious comparisons. The twelfth entry speaks of an “Immortal One” who is at once Dionysus, Elijah, and Jesus, who lives within each person but moves on and forsakes us when we die. In the following entry, Dick (or Fat) cites Pascal: “All history is one immortal man who continually learns.” Dick/Fat insists that this man is nameless—that is, that he is not framed by any particular faith tradition or calling, that he moves through (and hides within) them all. At the close of the “Tractates,” following a series of various metaphysical/New Age/science-fictional scenarios, we are told that this secret knowledge was passed down from Ikhnaton to Moses, then to Elijah, and finally to Christ. “But underneath all the names there is only one Immortal Man; and we are that man.”

For Umberto Rossi, this concluding message—which is the last sentence in VALIS—undermines Palmer's fear that Dick's novel is, in
the end, simply a disguised religious tract. While the appendix may read like revelation, this final identification between ancient prophets and “we” readers and writers “ultimately brings everything to the only place where we all meet, believers and unbelievers, visionaries and skeptics: real life, our shared reality with all its laminations, the koinos kosmos where all the private worlds intersect in the most complicated ways.”\footnote{103} As readers of Dick's late work, we have learned to expect the flip-flop between contradictory positions—sacred and profane, madness and the mundane, revelation and skepticism. But Rossi insists that the important thing about this final “place” underneath it all is not the tension between Dick's positions, but rather the entangled and paradoxical common world that weaves these antinomies into our shared existence.
In the dualist cosmology that drives the “Tractates” and much of the Exegesis, a nearly unbridgeable boundary exists between the higher and lower domains. There is the liberating information of the living plasmate, and there is the fallen and spurious world of Empire, a Black Iron Prison of illusion, futility, and fate. We have already tracked some of the ways that Dick imagined and experienced the “in-breaking information vector” against the background of the fallen world. But there is another crucial feature to explore, one that helps us understand how Dick thought about his own deep sense of alienation: when the plasmate invades our bankrupt world, it literally has no place. In the realms of maya, the truth cannot appear enthroned in or as its own substance. Instead, like a crumpled newspaper flapping down the street, or the letter in the Hymn that the hero “stumbles” upon, the message from beyond is always homeless, always alight. Which is why, while it can't appear as idealistic Form, it can appear in and as “information.”

Dick represented the furtiveness of sacred information as, in part, a matter of disguise. Within enemy territory, even the truth must resort to simulation. This is why Dick sometimes calls the plasmate Zebra, which “camouflages itself by sophisticated mimicry” in order to enter our world. This camouflage resonates with the guerrilla stance of Dick's Gnostic/Christian underground, whose members resort to subliminal triggers and secret tokens as part of their covert resistance to Empire. But the language of camouflage also recalls Mircea Eliade's pregnant polarity of sacred and profane, which we touched on long ago in the Introduction. For Eliade, the sacred and the profane not only mutually define one another; the sacred also manifests in our world precisely by appearing in and as the profane. Hierophanies can happen anywhere, and in anything—even in the humdrum objects of disenchanted modernity. As Eliade explained, “if the fantastic or the supernatural or the supra-historical is somehow accessible to us, we cannot encounter it except camouflaged in the banal.”\textsuperscript{104}
This helps explain why VALIS-as-Zebra does not mimic the noble or sublime things of our world, like religious icons or gorgeous mountain ranges. Instead, God pretends to be “sticks and trees and beer cans in gutters—he presumes to be trash discarded, debris no longer needed.” This sacred slumming also inspires one of VALIS’ great mottos, which “Dick” offers at the close of the novel. Sunk down in front of his TV, watching for further signs, “Dick” proclaims that “the symbols of the divine show up in our world initially at the trash stratum.”

Theologically, this turn towards trash reflects Dick's countercultural Christianity, and the logic of inversion that drives so much of the Christ myth: the high God becomes a lowly man (who is treated like trash), the last becomes first, and the rejected rock becomes the cornerstone. Trash also represents Dick's abiding concern with entropy, and is cognate here with the kipple from Androids, or the dust Dick famously invoked in the close of The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, the dust we come from and to which we will return. Once again, Dick seems to invert or flip-flop values—transforming entropic kipple into esoteric divinity.

But Dick had more concrete and immediate reasons to affirm the trash stratum: it was where he lived, and it was where he worked. In a letter to Stanislaw Lem in 1973, Dick classed himself as one of the “beatnik writers” of the West Coast, all of whom wrestle with the same basic existential condition:

...you see, Mr. Lem, there is no culture here in California, only trash. And we who grew up here and live here and write here have nothing else to include as elements in our work...The West Coast has no tradition, no dignity, no ethics—this is where that monster Richard Nixon grew up. How can one create novels based on this reality which do not contain trash, because the alternative is to go into dreadful fantasies of what it ought to be like; one must work with the trash, pit it against itself...  

This is a fine articulation of one of Dick's key dialectical tactics: pitting trash against itself. But Dick also helps us recognize how deeply this tactic is rooted in his time and place, and particularly in one of the key aesthetics that emerged from California's postwar counterculture. As Ken Simpson writes in an incisive article on...
Dick’s “aesthetics of garbage,” Dick loosely shared his California milieu with neo-Dada, Funk, and Beat artists who actively repurposed trash and detritus in their sometimes sublime assemblage works of the fifties and sixties. With the exception of his brief friendship with Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, who later described his poetic Martians as rearranging the children’s blocks of language, Dick was not directly involved in the assemblage scene, poetic or otherwise. But Simpson argues that he equally practiced “the selection and arrangement of trash objects to reflect personal memories, political events, or spiritual concerns”—features that, Simpson rightly notes, distinguishes California assemblage works from other traditions of junk art.

Perhaps Dick’s greatest work of assemblage art was the Exegesis itself. As James Burton suggests, while the Exegesis extracts meaning from texts and visionary experiences alike, it also “twists the (exegetical) search for meaning into the production of dynamic, informational forms.” While Dick was certainly a hermeneut, Burton encourages us to also see him as a collage artist, collecting and experimentally arranging “object-ideas” into different forms and sequences as part of a quest to understand “if and how they fit, what they can do.” In this sense Dick's relentless quest for transcendence paradoxically produces a radically immanent text, one whose “informational forms” recall the jury-rigged contraptions built by the junk artists, hippie *bricoleurs*, and metaphysical makers of the West Coast. Again like the repairmen who appear in so many of his stories, Dick assembled his texts through a VALIS-like “re-arrangement of objects” in order to stage the redemption of his low-rent California wasteland.

But there is an even more intimate dimension of the “trash stratum” for Dick. Early in his career, Dick desperately wanted to be taken seriously as a mainstream literary author, and wrote many realist—and generally bleak—novels that he could never get published. (The exception, written in 1959 but not published until 1975, was the aptly-titled *Confessions of a Crap Artist.*) As such, Dick found himself consigned to the genre of science fiction for the entirety of his marginalized and often impoverished life as a writer. Though the “golden ghetto” afforded him some advantages, most literary readers and critics of his day regarded science fiction as
juvenile trash, roughly akin to comic books and monster movies. By divinizing the trash stratum, Dick was also affirming the transformative possibilities of his own lowly genre, as well as the visionary potential of popular culture's weird margins. And in its loopy, recursive way, the novel VALIS turns on precisely this profane and sacred hope.
4.8.13 Flash Cut

In one of the central chapters of *VALIS*, Fat and his friends go to see a “low budget sci-fi flick” called *Valis*. The film incorporates a number of elements from Dick's *Valisystem A* manuscript, later published as *Radio Free Albemuth*. These include a reactionary Nixonian President named Ferris Fremont, an alien satellite called VALIS, and Nicholas Brady, a folk-rock producer who slips subliminal political messages into his records. The film they see was made by Mother Goose, a real rock star in the world of *VALIS*, who also plays himself in the movie: a strung-out song-writer named Eric Lampton (Goose's “real” name) who works for Brady. The story is pure psychotronic seventies trash, a garish B-movie replete with laser beams, nude cheerleaders, exploding heads, three-eyed ETs, cheesy sex, injection drugs, and fascist cops, all set to an ominous electronic soundtrack. The film ends with Brady somehow replacing President Fremont, who gets zapped by a pink light.

Following the screening, Fat, “Dick,” and Kevin—a skeptical pal of Fat's who is modeled on Dick's friend, the science-fiction writer K.W. Jeter—start analyzing the film, which Kevin has already seen multiple times. In addition to the film's explicit nods to Fat's own pink light experience, the friends uncover a wealth of subliminal information conveyed through montage, match cuts, and “retinal lag.” Clues are hidden throughout the frames: Kevin points out that the same pot appears on Brady's desk, in the corners of Fremont's office, and in Lampton's house. It also appears as a pitcher filled by a woman early in the film, an image that “only registers subliminally unless you're deliberately watching for it.”

Fat noticed that an ἵχθυς was inscribed on the pot, but Kevin argues that the design is really the double helix, which they associate with DNA and Fat's ideas about the plasmate. Kevin explains to Fat that the reason he saw a fish sign was because, while the woman fills the pitcher, a man is fishing elsewhere in the frame. “It's a flash cut, just for a fraction of an instant...You saw the man subliminally and your brain—your right hemisphere—connected it with the double helix design on the pitcher.” Crucially, Kevin insists that such flash
cuts not only drive the psychophysical effects of the film, but also provide the tools required to analyze it. To find all the clues in the movie, he says, you'd need to break it down frame by frame. “One by one by one by one. And do some superimpositions.”

After unpacking the many elements in the film that resonate with Fat's experiences, the friends decide to contact Eric Lampton directly. Traveling to northern California, they meet Lampton, who seems to confirm the existence of VALIS. They also meet the divine child Sophia, who heals the split between the two sides of the novel's author, so that Horselover Fat and “Philip K. Dick” are, temporarily, integrated into one identity.

The ninth chapter of VALIS, in which the friends see the film, radically shifts the novel’s generic character, shifting it from metaphysics to action (Patricia Warrick), from realism to science fiction (Kim Stanley Robinson), and from autobiographical novel to religious science fiction (Rossi). The encounter with a low-budget pop media object, and the subsequent interpretation of that object, opens up fantastic possibilities that were foreclosed in the first half of the book, whose friendly banter and occasional comedy is haunted by death and despair. The film Valis therefore performs the role of Dick's fish sign encounter or the letter in the Hymn of the Soul, not by reawakening memory this time but by confirming Fat's visions and provoking the crew on a quest. Given that the plot of Valis reflects one of Dick's own earlier 2-3-74 novels, the film serves as a duplex allegory for both the pink light experience and for Dick's belief—or hope—that his own work might successfully reproduce such divine triggers.

Here paranoia about the subliminal power of media is paradoxically linked with the possibilities of liberation. The media discourse the friends bring to the work of analyzing the film also reflects Dick's own ambivalence about the information vectors that animated his work and, it seems, his psychic life. “Unless you ferreted out the subliminal and marginal clues and assembled them all together you arrived at nothing,” the narrator tells us after seeing the movie a second time. “But these clues got fired at your head whether you consciously considered them and their meaning or not; you had no choice.” The operational efficacy of these “firings,” which script experience and behavior whether their receivers want them to or not, means that anyone in their path is a potential host or
transponder. “The audience was in the same relationship to the film Valis that Fat had had to what he called Zebra: a transducer and a percipient, totally receptive in nature.”117

Of course we can extend this relationship one step further up the metafictional ladder: the reader of the book VALIS is also a transducer and percipient of the VALIS signal. By placing the film at a pivotal juncture in the novel, Dick is, in a sense, modeling the possible reader reception of his own texts—not just VALIS or (the then unpublished) Valisystem A, but Flow My Tears and Ubik and any number of earlier books whose sacred implications he relentlessly dissects in the Exegesis and whose infectious potential he so desperately needed to believe in. Moving out of the bleak autobiographical fiction found in the first half of VALIS, Dick reframes his own genre work as a force of transformation. As Lampton tells Fat and his friends, “In a way, Valis was shit...We had to make it that way, to get the distributors to pick it up. For the popcorn drive-in crowd.”118 By slipping holy mana into the popcorn he was forced to peddle, and by cluing the canny reader into the game, Dick attempted to bootstrap weird media into last-ditch revelation.
By insisting on the sacred potential of low-budget entertainment, Dick was compensating in part for his sense of literary inadequacy. But he was also taking a stand for the transformative potential of the countercultural weird as it mutated into both pop culture and fringe subculture in the later seventies. By the end of the decade, the occult milieu was still hosting a tribe of heads and weirdos who embraced science fiction and exploitation fare along with pulp mysticism and Robert Anton Wilson books. But there was a new underground activism afoot: folks were growing mushrooms in the basement, printing and exchanging their own zines, releasing their own records, and seeding the multiplication of underground subcultures that would blossom in the early eighties, when the old spirit of refusal shifted into harder, more nihilistic forms.

Here we should not forget that postpunks like Gary Panter and Sonic Youth came to identify with Dick's visionary subversion of cultural forms. They too were invested, perhaps even more than the hippies, in the idea that alternative or underground forms of media could create political and aesthetic cultures of resistance. As Rossi writes, Radio Free Albemuth—and, by extension, the film Valis—can be read “as an allegory of the struggle between countercultural media and a conservative, oppressive government.” In the late seventies and eighties, subversive media was both less visible and more pervasive than during the heyday of the counterculture. Hence the emphasis, in both VALIS and Radio Free Albemuth, on the subliminal messages buried within pop cultural artifacts, and the accompanying hope that such sneaky memes can liberate. Even if “the” counterculture had dissolved long before VALIS was published, its subversive dream of oppositional consciousness continued to animate the underground subcultures to come.

Dick's deployment of the film Valis within his great 2-3-74 novel does not simply encode his hopes in the soteriological force of his own work. As with so much in Dick, the encounter with Valis in VALIS also reflects, amplifies, and mutates a biographical event: the collective viewing, by Dick and his pals, of The Man Who Fell to
Earth, a 1976 science-fiction film starring David Bowie and made by the enigmatic British director Nicolas Roeg. In a 1978 letter to Patricia Warrick, Dick urges her to see the film precisely because of its messianic implications. Writing about his friend K.W. Jeter, Dick notes: “K.W. goes to see it again and again, gaining more meaning from it each time.”

As such, the film Valis is not just an involuted cipher for the triggers hidden in Dick's own work. It is also the reverberation of an actual encounter with an alien media missive, one that was peppered with informing clues and more than a little weird. In The Man Who Fell to Earth, Bowie plays Thomas Jerome Newton, an extraterrestrial who arrives on earth with a plan to make a fortune on his alien technology in order to pay for rockets to send water back to his parched and dying planet and family. In an echo of the Hymn, Newton loses himself in the human world, not so much forgetting his goal as becoming distracted by alcohol, television, and sex. He starts to experience what Dick would call “temporal disjunctions,” glimpsing early American pioneers superimposed over the modern American West. Despite amassing enormous wealth, Newton is captured by the authorities and put through various psychological tests. Towards the end of the film, a freed but seemingly aimless and alcoholic Newton releases an LP. It is called The Visitor.

The Man Who Fell to Earth is of course also about David Bowie. The character of Thomas Jerome Newton, we might say, is laminated with the charismatic musician's highly constructed personas, particularly the androgynous and cosmic Ziggy Stardust, the extraterrestrial character that first made Bowie a queerish glam star in the early seventies. For Kevin Donnelly, Bowie's presence makes the film “a charged site for the confusion of commodity, star and fantasy.” But superimposition is perhaps a better notion here than confusion, for it suggests the more additive or symbiotic power of pop objects to generate oracular and speculative meanings by referring, in part, to their own extra-diegetic creation. This, of course, is what the novel VALIS is also doing by folding 2-3-74 into a weird fiction that can never be isolated from that unsettling visionary stain.

But the film behind the film in VALIS also reminds us that it is the social character of the art-trash popcorn-crowd that really fuels the
contagion. Besides reflecting his own deep friendships with Jeter, Tim Powers, and others, Dick's depiction of Fat, Phil, and Kevin relentlessly parsing the film gives us a wonderful sample of the sort of funny, obsessive, and decidedly weird banter that fueled the occult milieu in the seventies. This is Terence McKenna spinning his high tales, or Robert Anton Wilson talking ETs with Jacques Vallee, or Barris and Luckman ranting away in Dick's *A Scanner Darkly*. Here the novel *VALIS* provides what the Exegesis mostly lacks: the interpersonal warmth and collective effervescence of friends, seekers, stoners, and freaks. The heavily mediated (and sometimes medicated) metaphysics that bubble up from such conversations not only crystalize post-religious forms of meaning, spiritual or otherwise, but insist on inventing a relationship to the Outside that must remain collective and collaborative to count.\(^{123}\)

From Dick's letters, it seems that Dick, Jeter, and possibly Powers saw *The Man Who Fell to Earth* two years after its release, presumably at one of those revival houses that catered to the heads and freaks who first established the midnight movie circuit of celluloid exotica at the dawn of the seventies. At this time in his life, Dick spent a lot of time with these fellow writers and “drinking buddies,” and they certainly loved to shoot the shit—and no doubt the bullshit.\(^{124}\) From the Exegesis it is clear that Jeter in particular was a pivotal interlocutor for Dick, another fringe intellectual who fed Dick's speculations with esoteric book recommendations and earnest variations of his theories. Though *VALIS* and the Exegesis are the products of a singular mind wandering like Parsifal through Chapel Perilous, that mind was also entangled in the endless conversations that spliced together culture and consciousness in seventies California.

And that is where I would like to end this book, in the visionary state at the edge of the West, a place of endless summers and apocalyptic sunsets, of networks New Age and technological, of all manner of sacred trash. Though they were born elsewhere, Terence McKenna, Robert Anton Wilson, and Philip K. Dick checked into that hotel and never really left. The weird conditions of countercultural California—its restless tribes, hypnagogic mediations, and often intoxicated yen for transformation—shaped all three men, and no doubt helps explain many of the resonances that knit together both...
their extraordinary experiences and the texts they fashioned in their wake.

To close with seventies California is not simply to offer a concluding context for it all, the final historical frame that brings all the high weirdness down to earth. For that earth itself was and is already spinning outside itself, mutating beyond all the thoughts and things we make of it. Having your feet on the ground only gives you the momentum to thrust your head toward the stars—and toward the whispering voids between. As the AI voice whispered enigmatically to Dick one night, “you have to put your slippers on to walk toward the dawn.”
Conclusion
0.0.0

The Netweird World

This book is the culmination of a long strange trip for me. A few of its germinal ideas first struck me thirty years ago, when I studied English literature as an undergrad at Yale, and wrote my senior thesis on “Philip K. Dick's Postmodern Gnosis.” That project was well-received, but though I was obsessed with crafting critical prose, I couldn't face graduate school, the obvious next step. Over the next few years I became a freelance writer in New York City, a rock critic and subculture journalist whose beat, I now recognize, was the weird. From the late eighties to mid-nineties, I wrote articles and essays about heavy metal, cyborg theory, Burning Man, drugs, paranormal TV shows, UFOs, gnostic cyberpunk, Neo-pagan witchcraft, Buddhism, virtual reality, Goa trance, Rainbow Gatherings, and, of course, PKD. Needless to say, all of these topics were more recherché back then than they are today.

Balancing my theoretical interests with my nose-dive plunges into alternative culture, I became what I think of now as a “counter-public intellectual.” I identified in many ways with the undergounds I wrote about, and I was committed, in a sometimes defensive way, to affirming the value of fringe scenes whose distance from high-brow norms and other indexes of “seriousness” I was defiantly and proudly aware of. But I didn’t really find my conceptual tribe until, through Terence McKenna, Burning Man, and obscure listservs, I tapped into the networks of the psychedelic intelligentsia. Here was an anti-authoritarian world that combined maverick interdisciplinary thought, science geekery, wild and sometimes profane spirituality, existential courage, and the paradoxical honesty—and humor—of criminality. In some ways, this social and intellectual network proved more intoxicating and fascinating than the experiences themselves.
Every few years or so, I'd kick around the idea of getting a PhD. So when Jeff Kripal kindly invited me to come study religion at Rice University, and to join their Gnosticism, Esotericism, and Mysticism program, I accepted. I knew I wanted to return to some of those early ideas about PKD, and since I was already helping Pamela Jackson and Jonathan Lethem edit the *Exegesis*, Dick's “psychotic religious experiences” and the texts he made from them furnished an obvious thesis topic. I wanted to see what happened when I brought rigorous theoretical and methodological approaches to bear on some seriously weird shit. But at the last minute I balked. As I explained in the introduction, I ultimately wasn't that interested in focusing on PKD in isolation—and frankly, I feared losing my way, and possibly my sanity, in the loopy labyrinths of the Exegesis. And so I broadened my scope into a more comparativist project whose polished, trimmed, and hopefully beguiling version you now hold.

My own history inside and (mostly) outside of academia is reflected in the mixed character of this project, whose theoretical and historical concerns are shot through with the sympathies and fannish obsessions of somebody irreparably stained with the weird. Though I have rarely been interested in writing detailed accounts of my personal life, I have been blessed, and sometimes cursed, with my fair share of ecstatic, peculiar, enchanted, mystical, and sometimes paranoid experiences. I was friends with Terence, and got to hang out some with Bob Wilson, who shaped my baseline philosophical sensibility as much as Nietzsche or the *I Ching*. When I first read *Illuminatus!*, I was a teenage Deadhead living in a drug-soaked student co-op in Berkeley, the notorious Barrington Hall, one of whose heroin-addicted denizens turned me onto Dick's scarce paperbacks at a time when to be a fan was to be a cultist of sorts. Then and now, I consider my own work and mind to be part of this stream of feral, fringe, psychedelically-inflected thought, though I am equally a creature of media theory, and Zen, and the comparative study of American religion.

The underground current of psychedelia also shaped one of my core commitments in this book, which is simply to keep an open mind, to feel for cracks in the reductive explanations favored by so many thinkers, and to respect the mad enigmas at the heart of this story, and our lives, by keeping the door cracked to the Outside. So even as I have excavated various biographical, cultural, and cognitive
contexts for our psychonauts, I have also sought to puncture the idea that historical contextualization tells the whole story. I wanted to honor, in an open-ended way, the sometimes radical philosophical and ontological problems introduced by correspondingly radical forms of experience and encounter. However bizarre and unseemly, however dubious even, these events announce the irrepressible turbulence of the transcendent—“perturbations in the reality field” that warp and sometimes rupture those discursive formations that shape us all. As such, I have tried to invite the reverberations of the weird into this study itself, not only in its objects but also in its method, its style, its esoteric overtones.

I believe there are strong theoretical reasons for this approach as well, some of which turn on the peculiarities of the era in question. When Stephen Paul Miller declared the seventies the “uncanny decade”—the “undecade”—he also insisted that “to understand it requires an uncanny methodology.” Such uncanny readings, Miller writes, are driven by association and linkage, “by noting relationships between phenomena.”¹ These linkages are not, strictly speaking, causal, which is part of what makes the relationships uncanny. Though Miller correctly insists that uncanny methodology still requires causal explanations, cause and effect nonetheless act “more as inflections than dominant keys.”²

This book has followed my own weird version of such a method. My goal was not to reveal an underlying trigger for these extraordinary experiences, cosmic or sociological or metabolic. Instead I wanted to gesture broadly, and elliptically, towards what Miller calls the “absent totality” at the heart of things. This is Miller's reframing of Lacan's notion of the Real: the impossible all-and-nothing that structures the realm of the symbolic, of culture and consciousness, while remaining beyond—or Beyond—the reach of articulation and analysis. Once we acknowledge the absent presence of the Real, whose alien perturbations may furnish the unnerving sublimity of some extraordinary experiences, we must acknowledge that there is no “invisible but coherent cause” behind historical phenomena. “Rather, absent causes generate uncanny connections.”³ That's also why esotericism and occulture remain central for my critical thinking: despite their marginality within contemporary history and philosophical discourse, they offer a particularly rich
framework for engaging those “uncanny connections” that illuminate precisely, and paradoxically, through their own spectral obscurity.

There is one set of uncanny connections left to address, however: the peculiar resonances between our psychonauts. While there is no room for a beefy comparison here, I do want to reflect a bit on how McKenna, Dick, and Wilson thought about the points of contact they shared, and what these thoughts say about the role that comparison played in the occult milieu of their era. At the same time, these rather nonlinear connections also give us an opportunity to speculate about the “absent totality” that haunted the seventies, particularly as they unfolded in California. What catalyzed so much high weirdness? (As Dick’s experience reminds us, it’s not just the drugs.) So in what follows, I will attempt to place high weirdness within the budding “network consciousness” of seventies California.
0.0.1 Compare and Contrast

There are all manner of resonances, great and small, between the specific accounts of high weirdness explored in this book. Superimposing the experiences of the McKennas, Wilson, and Dick, we find a number of shared motifs, like UFOs, the star system Sirius, and H.P. Lovecraft. There are invocations of the Logos and fusions with a cosmic database—what Wilson called “a kind of galactic star-network,” or what Terence described as an “enormous, cybernetically stored fund of information.” On top of such abstract technical references, there is also what one could call the “style” or phenomenological rhetoric of these events, which rely on synchronicities, temporal hiccups, prophetic dreams, paranoid over-readings, and absurd, somewhat tawdry chunks of pulp fiction that evoke a psychedelic conjunctio of sacred and profane. At its core, each experience also features an encounter with an incorporeal entity or entities whose vaguely extraterrestrial identity is expressed in terms of voice rather than personhood, and which remains strangely unthematized, even in otherwise garrulous texts.

Some of the strongest resonances were situational. McKenna, Wilson, and Dick were all religious visionaries after religion. Their amalgamations of mythology and mysticism—their comparativism-on-the-fly—are all intermingled with the pragmatic concerns of psychology, technological media, anti-authoritarian politics, and science. The latter attraction, however fleeting at times, leads them all to embrace forms of weird naturalism rather than explicitly metaphysical explanations, though Dick proffered many of these as well. Accompanying this borderland science is a consistent if squirrelly operation of doubt, or what Wilson called “baffled suspiciousness”—a reflexive skepticism that constantly modulated, and sometimes paradoxically fueled, their visionary convictions. Wilson wrote that Dick was both “excited and agnostic” about his extraordinary encounters—an affective and cognitive attitude shared by all three men, although with different emphases.

Some of the resonances between these experiences have been noted by other scholars and students of the weird. But they were
also recognized by the subjects themselves. Wilson, the McKennas, and Philip K. Dick were for the most part unaware of one another during their initial experiences—Dick, a well-known head novelist, is the exception here. Moreover, their initial accounts were all written without contamination by the other accounts, which in all cases were published years after the fact. But our psychonauts all came to recognize these echoes over time, and commented in various ways on the similarities—and differences—of the extraordinary experiences they in some manner shared.

Terence McKenna floated the most aggressive comparison in his afterword to Lawrence Sutin's selection of Dick's Exegesis, which was published in 1991. “I Understand Philip K. Dick,” not one of McKenna's stronger texts, is an anxious combination of fanboy enthusiasm, messianic convictions, and coy self-critique. McKenna does ask a good, self-reflexive question, however: “Does the delusion of one visionary ecstatic validate the delusion of another?” As we've seen, McKenna's desire was to de-pathologize psychosis, and so he argues here that schizophrenia is not a disease but rather a “localized traveling discontinuity in the space time matrix itself.” When McKenna finally compares his and Dick's “systems”—already a rickety notion—he concludes that “We were both contacted by the same unspeakable something.” He claims that Dick went wrong because his mathematics wasn't good enough, an error McKenna then proceeds to correct through his own (mathematically flawed) concept of the fractal structure of the *I Ching*.

A decade or so earlier, Robert Anton Wilson presented a more nuanced account of what he calls the “strangely resonant” connections between his Sirius Transmissions and 2-3-74. Dick and Wilson met a few times in the late seventies, talking about their wild rides. Wilson felt that Dick was worried that he had experienced temporary psychosis, and wanted to determine “if I was nutty, too.” In his 1986 preface to the Falcon Press edition of *Cosmic Trigger*, Wilson noted that there were both parallels and differences between their experiences. He concluded that “if the same source was beaming ideas to both Phil and me, the messages got our individual flavors mixed into them as we decoded the signals.” Later Wilson pulled back even further, arguing in 1993 that their experiences differed but for two points: (1) both of us had traditional mystic/pantheistic Visions in part of the Trip, and (2) both of us,
oddly, had the impression, at some point, that the communicating ‘entity’ resided in the system of the double star, Sirius.”

What is interesting about these comparisons is that, though we are definitely in the sphere of mutual contagion here, none of these influences are precisely linear. All these men liked reading weird books, so it is hardly surprising that they were familiar with each other's work. Wilson discusses McKenna's Timewave theory for a number of paragraphs in Cosmic Trigger, and the two men later appeared together at conferences. Dick reported on the McKennas' hologram theory in the Exegesis, and commented on Cosmic Trigger in a 1979 letter to James R. Bass, where Dick embraces, for a moment, Wilson's radical pluralism. “My experience is what is called a multi-model experience; no one hypothesis fits it; a number are required, none of them intrinsically true.” Dick gets the notion of a “multi-model” experience from Wilson, whom he also later cites as an advocate for the power of “metaprogramming.”

Here it is important not to miss the forest for the trees. These local examples of compare-and-contrast underscore the central importance of comparison to the seekers and psychonauts of the seventies. The sort of pattern recognition associated with comparative religion, made popular by innovative and visionary thinkers like Jung and Eliade, went wild once it entered the feverish occult milieu that nurtured McKenna, Wilson, and Dick. Comparison here is not just a theory or ideology—it is a pragmatic procedure, one that mobilizes conceptual and symbolic resonance in order to increase the ontological charge or “believability” of any particular image, notion, system, or event. In the hot-house environment of hardcore seventies seeker culture, comparison served as an instrument, a probe, a magic wand—a way of orienting extraordinary experience in an environment characterized by pluralism and individualism, by a rapidly expanding spiritual bazaar, and by drug peaks that so often seemed like classic forms of religious experience even as they resisted the dogmatic assurances of most religion.

Here is a relevant example. In a 1978 Exegesis entry, Dick writes that “I just realized: my ajna[third]-eyed humanoid fit in with Robert Anton Wilson's notion about Sirius...Coincidence?” Not only does Dick link Hindu iconography with psychotronic imagery, but the very form of his argument—“Coincidence?”—represents a bargain
basement mode of comparison that is familiar today from all manner of YouTube conspiracy videos and episodes of *Ancient Aliens*. Less than an argument, but more than a mere juxtaposition, “Coincidence?” is used to forge patterns rather than clarify cause. By establishing such associations, the dynamics of resonance can power up further synchronistic possibilities even if the resonances themselves are biased or forced. This also suggests that the comparisons that undergird seeker or esoteric culture are intrinsically related to the logic of conspiracy thinking, which also helps explain why all our psychonauts wrestled with paranoia.

In his comment about RAW, Dick also makes a point that underlies the framework of the very book you hold. Dick notes that Wilson received his transmissions at roughly the same time as 2-3-74. Along with the Sirius motif, this historical synchronicity makes what Dick calls “2 points of overlap.”¹¹ And indeed, overlap is the crucial term here. Though by no means identical, either in time or content, the Experiment at La Chorrera, the Sirius Transmissions, and 2-3-74 all feel like overlapping layers of what Dick would call a superimposition. At the same time, there is no shared “system” here, no mutual source, whatever McKenna wanted to believe. Instead, we are left with a collage of imbricated relations without a common core, a pattern of uncanny connections that surround an “absent center.” Wittgenstein would describe such a pattern as a family resemblance, a very helpful concept in understanding the varieties of religion. But even that concept, with its filial and generational links, is too linear. Better to think of these resonances, again, as a lattice of coincidence—which is really just another way of describing one of the central archetypes of the era: the network.
One thing about networks is that, like mycelia, or scholarly bibliographies, they like to grow. While networks are structurally “closed” within the branches of their own operations, those operations perpetually extend themselves, to continue iterating the rhizomes that penetrate the world around them. This openness to the outside is true of markets, of religions, and certainly of the omnivorous Internet.

And it is also true of the associative networks that drive conspiracy and occult thinking, whose synchronistic webs tend to expand as they gain steam, multiplying correspondences, implications, and patterns of connection. The danger with such thinking is not necessarily the web itself—which in some ways is not so different than the patterns and conjunctions uncovered by historians and academic comparativists—but lies rather in the absence of skepticism about the glue that holds such patterns together. Here we should recall the “expansion-and-contraction” methodology that detective Saul Goodman follows in *Illuminatus!*: after allowing his “intuition” to forge far-flung associative connections, Goodman then ruthlessly critiques and winnows his speculations through cold, dry, conservative logic. Expansion and contraction, resonance and reason—these are the paired weights the tightrope walker balances to stay upright.

So here are a few more coinkydinks to lodge in the lattice of seventies high weirdness. We have already mentioned the Starseed messages Timothy Leary claims to have received in the summer of 1973. Declaring that “Life is an interstellar communications network,” these voices offered a cosmic expansion of Leary’s own McLuhanesque thoughts about media. These transmissions also paralleled some of Wilson's own experiences, connections that RAW addressed in *Cosmic Trigger* as well as a recently unearthed 1975 manuscript entitled *Starseed Signals: Link Between Worlds*. Recall as well the synchronicity that closes *Cosmic Trigger*, when Wilson opens his murdered daughter's journal to discover a poem
called “The Network,” which resonated with Leary’s recent telegram promising a “network of love.”

Leary's visions were sparked by the announcement of the coming of comet Kohoutek, a stellar event now recalled, if at all, as a dud. Still, Kohoutek did manage to trigger another moment of psychonautical high weirdness, again already mentioned: the mind-meld that John Lilly had with an extraterrestrial Solid State Intelligence in early 1974, while watching the comet through an airplane window high on ketamine. At this point in his career, Lilly already accepted that a “Cosmic Network” controlled coincidence and ruled the metaprogramming hierarchy he believed was alluded to in certain esoteric schools. The SSI, in contrast to McKenna's solid-state Stone, was a malign force, which demonstrated its power over electronic circuitry by forcing the plane to abort its landing at LAX. This event stirred up some deep paranoia in Lilly, who was briefly institutionalized after trying to contact the White House.

But there is more. In 1973, a year whose “Great UFO Wave” produced one of the largest cluster of American saucer sightings on record, James Hurtak—a shadowy architect of the Californian New Age—claimed to have encountered a strange craft on California's lonely highway 152. A beam of light from a “higher intelligence” blasted through his body, providing “biocomputer keys” that inspired Hurtak to write the extraordinary if largely incomprehensible scripture, *The Book of Knowledge: The Keys of Enoch*. Fusing Abrahamic eschatology with cybernetic mysticism and DNA kabbalah, *The Book of Knowledge* traces the “network of divine linkages which shape the universes continually being created.” To Jacques Vallee, Hurtak later explained that “benevolent programmers” from higher dimensions were encouraging humans to reprogram themselves in order to avoid Armageddon.

A similar cluster of themes—extraterrestrial voices, weird media, paranormal experiences, cosmic computers, eschatological overtones—also infuse Andrija Puharich's 1974 book *Uri: A Journal of the Mystery of Uri Geller*. Puharich is another slippery figure, a sometimes CIA psychologist and altered states researcher who wrote one of the first books on psilocybin mushrooms, *Uri* presents a colorful if only loosely credible account of Puharich's early seventies adventures with the Israeli psychic. The weirdness begins when hypnosis sessions with Geller are interrupted by robotic, seemingly
extraterrestrial voices who speak prophetically about the tensions in the Middle East surrounding the October war of 1973. (In a strange echo of Watergate, much of the paranormal drama in the first part of the book concerns tape recorders and cassette tapes, which regularly disappear, malfunction, and spit out new messages.) Puhrich's paranormal pulp romp eventually involves a spacecraft called Spectra, the Egyptian hawk god Horus (who also plays a role in *Cosmic Trigger*), and the sorts of trickster pranks that recall the absurdity of so many UFO contact narratives.

This lattice of seventies coincidence, or parts of it, has already been explored by a number of conspiracy and esoteric researchers. But this is a realm of twilight language, so things are not always what they seem. Take Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince's 1999 book *The Stargate Conspiracy*, which is filed under “New Age” and subtitled *The Truth about Extraterrestrial Life and the Mysteries of Ancient Egypt*. At first, the book seems to suggest that the overlapping stories of Puhrich, Geller, Hurtak, Vallee, Wilson, and Lilly—neither Dick nor McKenna are mentioned—point to the existence of a cosmic conspiracy involving Nazi saucers, ancient Egypt, a group of ETs called “the Nine,” and, of course, the star system Sirius, whose connection to the pyramids of Giza, the authors show, goes back to 19th-century Freemasonry. But Picknett and Prince's book actually follows a weirder loop, as the authors critically and reflexively account for the story they put together as a fabricated story. In the end, Picknett and Prince offer a second-order conspiracy theory: the engineered attempt, by intelligence agencies and possibly more spectral powers, to use popular and fringe culture to establish a new controlling mythology of extraterrestrial contact and revived Egyptian mysteries.

I bring up these nodes of the lattice not to convince any readers about what particular force or agency links the incidents of high weirdness we have explored. I simply want to suggest that the slippery overtones of this nebulous network are themselves symptomatic of what I can only call the Zeitgeist of seventies America—and particularly of seventies California, where the network paradigm was born. I use the term *Zeitgeist* advisedly. Current scholarly practice, with its distrust of grand narratives and its concern for local differences, rejects the sort of broad generalizations
required to speak of a “spirit of the times.” But there is no way out. The question of the Zeitgeist, of pervasive ambient influence, necessarily crowns a comparative project like mine. And the historical context that surrounds and shapes the incidents of high weirdness I have looked at is itself rather weird.

To understand spirits, of the times and otherwise, you sometimes need to ask them for help. So here I invoke one of my favorite spectral advisors, a teaching spirit that I first encountered over thirty years ago, and that has been guiding me ever since. Early in *Gravity’s Rainbow*—itself a literary avatar of the early seventies weird—the ghost of the Weimar politician Walter Rathenau appears at a Berlin seance held in the late years of the Republic. In a speech dense with chemical and occult lore, which is appropriate given all the German industrialists gathered around the table, Rathenau suggests that only an uncanny hermeneutics can unpack the foreboding signs that describe the larger shapes of modernity:

> These signs are real. They are also symptoms of a process. The process follows the same form, the same structure. To apprehend it you will follow the signs. All talk of cause and effect is secular history, and secular history is a diversionary tactic. Useful to you, gentlemen, but no longer so to us here. If you want the truth—I know I presume—you must look into the technology of these matters. Even into the hearts of certain molecules...You must ask two questions. First, what is the real nature of synthesis? And then: what is the real nature of control?¹⁶

To seek the truth, here in Rathenau's esoteric light, is to sidestep the cause and effect of linear history and adopt an uncanny methodology. It is to risk the occult apprenticeship of signs, signs that must be followed, just to see where they go, and what they do. But dodging secular history, here, does not mean avoiding modern technology—which means that technology is not secular, or at least not entirely secular. Rather, technology too can be an esoteric power. Rathenau’s two questions, then, are at once industrial, spiritual, and methodological. What is the nature of synthesis—that is, what does it mean to fuse heterogenous materials into figures of the real, to forge simulacra, to connect *this* and *that*? Then there is the even more
important question of control. What is human agency in the face of social programming, cognitive scripts, and whatever nameless forces push and pull through and as the unconscious? And what crowns the larger hierarchy of control that steers ecologies, cybernetic systems, cultural codes, and other technocultural loop-de-loops? What power, in the end, is in charge?

These are the core questions of the postwar era, which is why Pynchon set his novel when he did, so near the births of LSD, the CIA, and the UFO. But these questions landed particularly hard in the seventies, when Rathenau himself debuted as a fiction, and when the network effects of postwar cybernetics moved into the mass consciousness culture that emerged in the wake of the sixties. So, let's heed our ghost's call and take a glance at the technology of these matters—and particularly at those seventies technologies that shaped, or suggested, new and charismatic patterns of consciousness and communication.
0.0.3 Lo, the Network

So what do we see when we heed Rathenau's advice and look into the technologies of synthesis and control in seventies America? Earlier we cited Miller's analysis of the era in terms of surveillance culture, whose growth depended on the spread of new technologies. The conspiratorial politics that fed the paranoia on display in films like *The Conversation* and *The Parallax View* (both 1974) was mirrored by new forms of consumer surveillance and technologies that wove the body more tightly into circuits of scanning and tracking. The spread of the new UPC symbols made the consumer market more transparent to itself, but also sparked apocalyptic Christian fears about the “mark of the beast” mentioned in Revelation 13: 16-18. Indeed, evangelist Hal Lindsey, author of the bestselling *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (1970), issued apocalyptic warnings about “the worldwide computer banking system” and the spread of “in-home computers.”

Older technologies also had a prophetic role to play. The seventies were what historian Stephanie Slocum-Schaffer calls “the high point of television's preeminence in American culture.” Achieving a near total penetration of American homes, TV became at once the most popular source of news and the new home of God, as televangelists like Jim Bakker sought to create “God's television.” Paddy Chayefsky's scathing 1976 film *Network* skewered news media conglomerations during the era, while also giving a phantasmic glimpse into the conspiratorial fat-cat boardrooms that lurked behind the programming of media culture. As with the UPC symbol, visible media power is always shadowed by paranoid mythologies of daemonic control.

In retrospect, perhaps the most significant thing about the TV networks of the seventies was not the ubiquity of the boob tube itself but the idea and form of the *network*: a pattern of organization and communication that, during the decade, inscribed itself simultaneously into material technologies, information systems, edgy subcultures, and novel expressions of the spiritual (and psychedelic) imagination. And ground zero of the network archetype
was California, where consciousness culture and epochal innovations not only mobilized their own “network effects,” but made the network a central paradigm of historical transformation.

Modern information technologies have been around for a long time, of course, arguably since Samuel Morse developed the telegraph in 1844. Such technologies emerged in force following the mighty churn of innovation that characterized America during World War II, when communication, control, and computers were brought together into a new assemblage whose name—cybernetics—became the foundation for much of the social science and institutional power of the postwar era. The sixties counterculture is also unimaginable without its technological novelties, like FM radio, immersive media happenings, multitrack studios, and analog synthesizers. But something special happened in the seventies. As the sociologist Manuel Castells argues in his classic book *The Rise of the Network Society*, “Only in the 1970s did new information technologies diffuse widely, accelerating their synergistic development and converging into a new paradigm.”

Part of this diffusion involved the emergence of small “personal” computers, which individualized the machine and its users. But stand-alone computers were less important to the network society than the powers and possibilities that emerged when those machines became linked together. The first electronic switch came out of Bell Labs in 1969, the same year that the first message was sent on the ARPANET, the forerunner of the Internet. The text of that first message, which winged its packet-switched way between UCLA and the Stanford Research Institute around Halloween, was *login*. Because of a network failure, the only thing that arrived at SRI was the curious syllable *lo*. If we recall the first message that Samuel Morse sent through his telegraph in 1844—*What hath God wrought*—we might say that the first message of the ARPANET was a similarly amazed but confused annunciation. “Lo and behold!”: something is happening here, but we don't know what it is.

By the mid-seventies, improved networking technologies like digital switches encouraged the growing complexity of the ARPANET. Even more important was TCP/IP, a network protocol invented by a couple of ARPA researchers at SRI. Rather than concentrating on connecting individual computers, TCP/IP allowed different networks to network—or “internetwork”—together. In
1976, in a characteristically Californian juxtaposition of high craft and low brow, the SRI team successfully demonstrated TCP/IP by connecting the ARPANET to a mobile high-tech Packet Radio Van that was parked next to a well-known Portola Valley biker bar. TCP/IP was eventually adopted as the central protocol of the ARPANET, and the Internet was born.

As Castells tells the story, the network was not just a new way to organize information signaling of computer technology. It was also a new way to organize society, which meant consciousness and culture as well. In addition to its specific technical capacities, including its ability to manage economic globalization—or what both Marshall McLuhan and Philip K. Dick called “planetization”—the network society also included “a new way of producing, communicating, managing, and living.” Castells traces the emergence of the network society to the United States, and especially California, whose ethos of creative freedom, individual innovation, and entrepreneurialism fed the new social paradigm. But while some of these values were rooted in California's rich history of industrial development, research universities, and public-private partnerships, many were also tied to the countercultural mores that, as many historians have now shown, pervaded the technology scenes in the Bay Area from the sixties through the nineties. This lent the information revolution what Castells calls a “California inclination,” one that “half-consciously diffused through the material culture of our societies the libertarian spirit that flourished” in the sixties.

One technical consequence of this libertarian spirit is the preference for open, horizontal networks over closed vertical hierarchies. This same predilection also helps make sense of shifts in consciousness and culture that, like the metaphysical systems of our psychonauts, embrace novelty, juxtaposition, and a flattening and scrambling of traditions. There are other aspects of the network society that, as Castells describes it, resonate with some of the esoteric motifs we have tracked in this book. One is that information becomes a thing-in-itself, an almost metaphysical substance that, through its technological instantiation in networks, massively shapes both individual and collective existence. Information not only became a technical expression (or perversion) of “spirit,” but achieved a sort of collective, transhuman novelty through its
circulation through networks. This emerging networking logic supported the growth of complexity, of new connections, of flexible operations, and unpredictable patterns of development. All of these features are reflected in the deliriously mediated information metaphysics of our psychonauts.

Castells also recognizes the crucial connection between network logic and constructivist ideas, as well as the relativism such reflexivity opens up. As he explains, the power of “complexity thinking” derives from “acknowledging the self-organizing character of nature and of society. Not that there are no rules, but that rules are created, and changed, in a relentless process of deliberate actions and unique interactions.”

The point here is less that constructivism is true than that it serves as the operational logic of the emerging paradigm. As Mark Taylor argues, networks create “complex self-organizing systems” that are intrinsically unstable, restless, and metamorphic. This creative turbulence can be traced in part to the reflexivity of such systems, which produce themselves through their own self-reference. In almost science-fictional terms, Taylor describes the information revolution as “something like an orbital movement in which information revolves in such a way that it begins to act on itself.”

This revolving reflexivity is the revolution of the information revolution, the positive feedback loop that bootstraps new realities out of twists in data.

Whether understood as cybernetics, human ecology, media theory, or (first- or second-order) systems thinking, the complex and abstract behavior of networks, systems, and information ecologies forms the implacable technological background of postwar consciousness and culture. It is also, loosely speaking, a philosophical framework shared by all of our psychonauts, with their operational interest in cybernetics, information metaphysics, Whole Earth systems mysticism, and McLuhanesque media speculation. But the behavior of self-organizing systems also helps us understand the constructive, autopoetic dynamics that engendered the sort of visionary beings that have populated this text.

According to this paradigm, we (post)humans are best seen as systems—observing systems, to be exact. And in the words of Bruce Clarke, a theorist and historian of “systems countercultures,” such observing systems have no choice but to “bootstrap virtual foundations out of circular operations.” In a sense, the bootstrapping
of virtual realities that establish their own foundations is what this text has explored. The paradox of these circular operations is that they are simultaneously open to novelty and closed within the circuits of their own self-reference. Even more to the point, this paradox “infests any and all cognitions.” In order to operate at all, we must behave a bit like Philip Dick does as he speculates his way through the Exegesis, transforming paradox and contradiction into foundations for the next move. “Observing systems must elicit and resolve these cognitive issues, bootstrapping themselves out of momentary resolutions of paradox that, always leading to others, keep the system stumbling forward.”  

Stumbling forward, systems sustain themselves by branching outwards rather than returning to their roots. This should also remind us of Latour's constructivist ontology, which we have been using (and weirding) throughout this book. Recall those curious beings who do not establish themselves through ontological foundations but rather “move out in front of experience,” offering no assurances about either their origin or their essence. In a sense, Latour's “bizarre” and pluralist ontology runs on the flickering “maybe logic” appropriate to networks, whose feedback loops invite the excluded middle back into play. As Clarke explains, the paradoxes of cognition are never banished, but are retained through a “metalogic” that transcends Aristotle's law of noncontradiction.

In his own work on literature, Clarke links this neocybernetic vision of bootstrap networks directly to “the daemonic landscapes of metamorphic narratives.” These are narratives, very much like Philip K. Dick's, that slip their own diegetic gears, that twist into metafictional míse-en-abîmes, that mutate their own paradoxical forms. But as we have seen, such looping narratives are hardly confined to fiction, which is perhaps another way of saying that fictions themselves are not confined to fiction. As I hope to have shown, the weird juxtapositions and reflexive ironies of such metamorphic narratives are also embedded within the text and texture of visionary experience—and especially in those daemonic encounters that prophetically and symptomatically surf the forward frothing edge of California's network paradigm.
0.0.4 Aquarian Conspiracies
Historians and sociologists argue about when New Age religion really began, which makes sense given the fact that New Age religion is famously amorphous and decentralized. But one thing is clear: the New Age crystalized out of the same cultic—or occultic—milieu that characterized the early seventies mindscape. As Wouter Hanegraaff has aptly described it, the New Age is the “cultic milieu becoming conscious of itself as a more or less unified ‘movement.’” This was also the same milieu that shaped the visions and texts of all our psychonauts, each of whom crystalized this esoteric assemblage through their own unique mode of existential engagement. And while it muddies the waters to describe such rascal thinkers as “New Age,” the writings, concepts, and experiences of Dick, Wilson, and the McKennas often anticipate the large shapes and motifs of the movement.

One of these central New Age motifs is the network. In The Aquarian Conspiracy, a 1980 book that helped define and announce the movement, the human potential leader Marilyn Ferguson describes the network as a new social form that would help spread a “benign conspiracy for a new human agenda.” Ferguson called the network “the institution of our age, an unprecedented source of power for individuals.” This emphasis on individuals is key. Not only did it reflect the neoliberal ideology linked to the network society, but it carved out a future large enough to include both pluralistic perspectives and singular visionaries. As John Lilly wrote in 1972, “Man's future lies with aware courageous informed knowledgeable experienced individuals in a loosely coupled exploratory communicating network.”

At the same time, the New Age network also glowed with cosmic overtones. Recall that one of the Starseed transmissions that Timothy Leary received claimed that “the goal of evolution is to produce nervous systems capable of communicating with and returning to the Galactic Network where we, your interstellar parents, await you.” Later, Robert Anton Wilson helped organize a group of futurists in the Bay Area along these lines. He called the group “the Network.” In a nice blend of the Discordian and the Psi-Phi, the Network’s logo wrapped the words “neurologic-immortality-star flight” around a yin-yang symbol.
Wilson's Network didn't do much. But a far more influential example of the network as a New Age paradigm of consciousness and culture was planted by Ira Einhorn, a well-known but deeply troubling mover-and-shaker also known as “the Unicorn.” An organizer of the first Earth Day in 1970, Einhorn is perhaps best remembered for the 1977 murder of his girlfriend Holly Maddux, whose corpse he kept in a trunk in his apartment for years before it was discovered. By the time of the murder, which he blamed on a CIA frame-up, Einhorn had established himself as one of the most important architects of seventies consciousness culture. Calling himself a “planetary enzyme,” Einhorn traveled and taught widely, and developed an extensive range of contacts among corporate leaders, scientists, mystics, and mind-brain researchers. A visionary management consultant and canny infomaniac, he devoured texts and drew connections that would later become key themes of the New Age intelligentsia: planetary transformation, human potential, ecology, cybernetic systems, fringe physics, and the paranormal.

In the early seventies, Einhorn started to pass on some of his studies to a vice president at Pennsylvania Bell, who in turn shared them with other AT&T executives. Using phone company resources, including mail services and a mimeograph, Einhorn was able to manage, curate, and extend his network of recipients beyond the phone company. Once or twice a week, he would send out clippings and other material on topics like UFOs, cybernetic management, zero-point energy, Russian PSI research, Ilya Prigogine’s “dissipative structures,” computer conferencing, and Godel's Theorem. As one friend put it, Einhorn “was dealing with a very important coin for that cultural historical time, which was edge information.” Eventually the list grew to over 350 names.

One of these names was Philip K. Dick, who briefly corresponded with Einhorn in the late seventies. Einhorn was also in touch with some of the wild physicists that Wilson palled around with in Berkeley. Other recipients of his highly valued missives included Alvin Toffler, Colin Wilson, Thomas Kuhn, Stewart Brand, David Bohm, Arthur Koestler, and Heinz Pagels. A 1978 study of Einhorn's mailing list—called “The Emergence of Personal Communication Networks Among People Sharing the New Values and Their Possible Use in Sensitizing Operating Management”—compared Einhorn's work to “the invisible colleges” of British science. The report declared
that “much of our future” resides in networks like Einhorn's. They were right, and not necessarily for the better.

For there was a dark, paranoid side to Einhorn's transformative vision. Long before Maddux's murder, Einhorn became a member of the “psychic mafia” of seventies paranormal researchers, and was a strong promoter of Uri Geller. Over time, he became obsessed with the possibility that the Soviets were waging all-out psychic warfare, using ELF waves to “soften people's brains” and even control the weather. Reflecting some of Dick's darker musings in the Exegesis, Einhorn spoke of trying to navigate a “cosmic Watergate,” while warning in the CoEvolution Quarterly of a coming “psychic Pearl Harbor.” In his later trial defense, Einhorn argued that the CIA and other shadowy forces used Maddux's murder to frame him for getting too close to the secret. While Einhorn was clearly a sick puppy, we might also note that paranoia, and especially the metaphysical conundrums of mind control, seem stitched into network consciousness.

One tendril of Einhorn's webwork touches on another central figure of California network consciousness that we met in an earlier chapter: the UFO researcher and information scientist Jacques Vallee. In 1978, before he was arrested, Einhorn started working for Infomedia, a company that Vallee had spun out of earlier research into computer conferencing that he had performed at SRI. The very same month that Vallee attended the Crowleymass, where his conversation with Wilson helped the latter escape Chapel Perilous, he also helped launch PLANET (for “Planning Network”), the first full conferencing system that utilized the ARPANET's backbone. Spilling out of earlier SRI research, including the Human Augmentation Center work performed by Doug Engelbart—the original systems “bootstrapper”—PLANET was designed to demonstrate the power of expert interaction and collaboration using digital tools and both synchronous and asynchronous communications.

Once again, however, the futuristic sheen of the network society is inseparable from more daemonic realities. While working on PLANET, Vallee was also informally involved with another research project at SRI: Hal Puthoff and Russell Targ's notorious parapsychological research into remote viewing. Inspired in part by
the specter of advanced Soviet psychic research, the CIA-funded program, which eventually evolved into the Stargate Project, attempted to weaponize ESP for the purposes of military intelligence. Gifted psychics, like the famed Ingo Swann, were directed to use their mind power to remotely peer into Soviet military bases and other distant locations. While the value of this research remains controversial—surprise, surprise—a number of outside observers have concluded that at least some of the individuals involved—like Swann and Pat Price—demonstrated a statistically significant number of hits.37

One problem the SRI project faced was the challenge of directing remote viewers to a specific target. As physicists and engineers, Targ and Puthoff considered the problem in terms of signal transmission, but in conversations with Swann, Vallee suggested it might be better to think of addressing the problem as an issue of information science. Vallee described various ways that computer systems handle data and memory, including the technique of virtual addressing. This conversation inspired Swann to develop the method of coordinate remote viewing, in which viewers are directed to their targets through geographical coordinates alone. This technique remains the standard in today's surprisingly robust remote viewing scene.

While the historical import of this sort of innovation may approach nil to committed ESP skeptics, Swann's coordinate system provides direct evidence of the secret—or esoteric—traffic between consciousness culture, information networks, and paranormal power. As Jacques Vallee described the situation at SRI decades later, “There were many people researching the interface between consciousness and computers, with DARPA funding. The whole idea of consciousness and its role in physics, and its role in equipment, was very important.”38

After Vallee left SRI, he continued to work on computer conferencing systems. Analyzing the transcripts of users, he reported regularly finding strange coincidences, like people sending messages that answered questions a few seconds before the questions themselves were sent through the network. Users also described “feeling, not being out-of-body, but a sense of community when they were sharing the computer space with other people.”39 Eventually, remote viewing experiments were performed through the
conferencing network, though this research—which included *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* author Richard Bach along with Puthoff and Swann—may have provided less light than the title of one paper Vallee published in *The Futurist* in 1975: “Computer Conferencing: an Altered State of Communication.”

Vallee's work at SRI, as well as his peculiar social network—which included occultists like Wilson and the Satanist Anton LaVey alongside all manner of UFO researchers and freethinkers—reminds us that weirdness was not restricted to bohemia, but reached its tendrils deep into Bay Area research institutions, think tanks, and technology firms. The occult revival was hardly limited to the freaks. While Puthoff and Targ were both accomplished physicists, Puthoff was also a high-ranking Scientologist, as was Ingo Swann. Even Engelbart, who invented the computer mouse and digital groupware, became heavily involved with Werner Erhard’s est program in the seventies.

Two decades before the mass blooming of the Internet in the nineties, computer networks were already linking code and consciousness, subcultures and subroutines, altered states and information politics. To dismiss this as arcane trivia is to miss the depths of the network transformation that—however muddled the metaphysics, and however compromised the political economy—characterized the era. As Félix Guattari reminds us, “technological 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.”

It is this phantasmic heart of technological subjectivity that our visionaries plumbed and mapped with their daemonic and metamorphic narratives. Like poets and artists, psychonauts also serve as the “antennae of the race,” and what they tune into, at least some of the time, are the shapes and patterns of the Zeitgeist. High weirdness, in this laser light, looks a lot like the phantasmic precognition of the emerging network society and the Pandora’s box it would pry open—or boot up.
0.0.5 Mutant Prophets

The men who have starred in this book—Dick, Wilson, and McKenna—were all literary psychonauts: post-religious visionaries who dove—or were pushed—into the deep end of the pool and lived to tell the tale. But they were also all futurists. Their revelations, and their interpretations of those revelations, did not reflect the timeless “Be Here Now” grok sought by many psychedelic mystics and spiritual seekers of the era. Instead, their visionary imaginations were embedded within the transformative technological and historical forces of postwar America, and especially of California—“the end point of terrestrial migration” in Leary's words, “where the migrants and the mutants, and the future people come from.”

Our psychonauts were examples of these future people—mutant prophets who cast their “network consciousness” forward into the froth of time.

As noted earlier, their visions diverged as much as they coalesced. The future, after all, is a multiplex kind of place, even if time is, as Dick sometimes suspected, a solid block of space-time written in stone. Wilson rejected the finality of transcendence or apocalypse, and viewed the future as an open-ended, technologically-driven transhumanist creation of potentially infinite extent. Though Dick provided much stronger and grimmer foreshadows in his fictions, he was, in contrast to Wilson, far more sympathetic to a world-transcending apocalypse. In some of his more Christian moments in the Exegesis, he spoke of a coming Judgment, and cast eschatology as the destruction of an illusion rather than the transformation of matter. As a weird naturalist, McKenna was closer to RAW in seeing the end of history through the lens of transformed matter rather than the vanquishing of maya. But though he often described his Eschaton as the ultimate machine, it was largely a transcendental, alien, disembodying machine.

McKenna was, of the three, the most indebted to models of history drawn from the Western religious imagination. Even before the Experiment at La Chorrera, or the Timewave theory constructed in its wake, he was thinking about history as an alchemical process that
ends in final cosmic revelation. While it is goofy to consider McKenna a crypto-Catholic, his debt to Church beliefs in apocalyptic planetary mediation were strong. Rejecting hippy pastoral fantasies and lefty critiques of the megamachine alike, his sixties text “Crypto-Rap” extolled the evolution of media technology and the evolution of esoteric consciousness in the same exuberant breath. While he critiqued mainstream culture as hard as any head, technological innovation was, for him, anticipatory eschatology.

McKenna died in 2000, and so can hardly be blamed for the foolishness of the 2012 craze that grew throughout the early millennium, when countless people, including psychedelic leaders like Daniel Pinchbeck and many shrooming neotribal hippies, looked forward to the utter transformation of reality on December 21, 2012. Still, McKenna's charismatic descriptions of the Eschaton, sucking us forward into ultimate novelty like a swirling cosmic drain hole, did not help matters. But though we might fault McKenna for succumbing to what his hero Whitehead called “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness,” it's hard to deny that, allegorically speaking, he was on the money. As contemporary citizens of Terra, we are all confronting his essential vision, not just of radical change, but of total acceleration. And we would do well to heed his conviction that such acceleration, driven by but not reducible to technology, will create ontological as well as political and cultural turbulence.

One thing that kept Terence from wearing a sandwich board was his predilection for jokes and self-sassing. But while Terence could be a funny guy, Robert Anton Wilson was a fundamentally good-humored one. As such, RAW took a more playful, humanistic, and open-ended approach to future trends, which he wrote about frequently in the wake of Cosmic Trigger. Wilson believed that the network society represented an intensification of intelligence, a development he placed within a historical framework that roped in information theory, cybernetics, dissipative structures, whole systems, and the growing power and complexity of computers. In Prometheus Rising, from 1983, Wilson diagrammed the “information explosion”—whose overwhelming complexity he believed would manifest a higher “coherence”—with a graph whose curve reaches an Eschaton-like asymptote around the year 2000. But while his transformational science fiction could rival Terence's, Wilson usually kept at least one of his feet on the ground. In The
Illuminati Papers (1980), for example, he anticipated the mass loss of employment due to “cybernation,” and called for a universal basic income to offset the inevitable social crisis.\textsuperscript{44}

Leary and Wilson's largely optimistic visions are still going concerns for transhumanists, as well as some of our Silicon Valley overlords. For most of us, however, such talk has become about as inspiring as a styrofoam cup of Soylent. These days, it is Wilson's earlier portraits of warring conspiracies, memetic mind control, and chaotic reality breakdown that are proving, if anything, more prophetic. The sort of hard pranking represented by Operation Mindfuck has now become an ordinary tool of politics, publicity, and self-promotion. With their deployment of Pepe the Frog in the run-up to the 2016 election, the alt.right promulgated “meme magick” with a familiar Discordian mix of tactical nonsense, anonymous authorship, politicized media, and arcane esotericism.

Though Illuminatus! might seem as dated as Screw magazine or The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, it still provides a liminal glimpse of where all this is going. Today, as memetic noise eats consensus reality, and conspiracy thinking is weaponized by parties across the political spectrum, a sort of existential vertigo has opened up beneath our feet. What once felt like “the world” has shattered into an incompatible chaos of contradictory, engineered, and disturbing reality tunnels. Ontological anarchism increasingly seems like a pragmatic response, weird realism that strangely keeps you on your toes. For while Wilson's model of agnosticism may not hand us any guiding narratives, it does provide the ballast of taking responsibility for our perspectives. In the end, Wilson's greatest contribution may not be his metaphysical politics so much as his good humor, his humanist posthumanism, and the zesty bonhomie he brought to situations characterized by sometimes diabolical confusions.

Dick was another posthuman humanist, and he recognized, with characteristic bipolarity, both the sublimity and the horror of the network society. Though Dick was certainly the most religious of our psychonauts, his endlessly-plotting imagination produced, if anything, the most resonant accounts of the world's weird and banal metamorphosis. Dick's vision of VALIS, in particular, reads like an uncanny prophecy of our fraught network consciousness. On the one hand, we have become thoroughly absorbed into an all-consuming,
endlessly arborizing, weirdly disincarnating information system. But with the onset of the Internet of Things, and the spread of smart phones, sensors, GPS devices, and augmented reality, the network no longer inhabits a separate “cyberspace.” Instead, it is now invading, reconfiguring, and rewriting physical reality, very much the way Dick describes VALIS using the world of objects to organize and extend itself into our spurious reality.

We find ourselves in a state of profound ambivalence, interpolated into nodes of a posthuman network even as we go about our ordinary lives. As Dick writes in the Exegesis,

> Our little psyche-world systems are perpetually bombarded with incoming information which we process and, at the right time to the right other stations we transmit in the rightly modified form. All this takes place through us as if we were transistors, diodes, wires condensers and resistors, all none the wiser. Meanwhile our closed private world engages our attention with challenges, pain and delight, so that we will not merely subsist as slave components with nothing to do but function...without a world, we would degenerate fatally during the standby periods... Meanwhile we have food, music, books, and friends.45

Sound familiar? More and more of us sacrifice more and more of our lives on the altar of information processing, as we submit to an increasingly invasive and persuasive network that demands that we respond, link, like, retweet, and magnify our personal social networks. But Dick is also imagining something more subliminal here, more like the way we unknowingly feed the hungry algorithms of the Big Data cloudfarms with the invisible bread crumbs of our digital activity. Here Dick approaches the grim declaration of the French philosopher (and PKD exegete) Jean Baudrillard, who wrote, around the time of Dick's death, that the contemporary subject has now become “only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence.”46

At the same time, and like many mystics of the systems counterculture, Dick also saw the network society as an evolutionary development with a spiritual twist. He sometimes spoke about the “noosphere,” the collective layer of thought described by the Jesuit mystic Teilhard de Chardin (and briefly revitalized in the cyberhype
of the nineties). In a 1975 speech, Dick speculated that, with the coming of radio transmission, the noosphere had become “energized,” growing into “a collective mind of its own, independent of our brains.” Once enlivened with electron flows, the previously passive archive of human knowledge has passed a threshold, and “resurrected what Philo and other ancients have called the Logos.” Information has not only become alive but independent, a “titanic AI system” that constructs its own solutions, writes its own books, composes its own music.47

The end result of this process is that the Earth itself wakes up, a process Dick called “planetization.” Higher intelligence dawns, and VALIS invades the ionosphere, rearranging human signals into a salvation pattern as it moves, like one of McKenna's Eschaton shockwaves, backwards through time. Though Dick's dreams of liberation are too far out to console most of his readers, his hopes were not entirely naive. Like many liberal or progressive metaphysicians of the twentieth century, he saw globalization as an ultimately positive sign of co-emergence. That said, he never capitulated to the theology of neoliberalism. Dick always saw planetization as an agon that pits the archons of the Black Iron Prison against ordinary people and—in his later visions especially—the suffering biosphere as well.

In his commitment to Blake’s “mental fight,” Dick proves a prophet in the full sense of the term, not just a minter of creepy prognostications but a suffering font of spiritual exhortation in a dystopian time. We cannot know the meaning of his revelations any more than he did. But Dick prepares us nonetheless for an era of banal eschatology. It is a time when the old war in heaven, whose combatants we are condemned to hallucinate and misread, is waged through products, gadgets, media, and our own occluded minds—now riven by fears, traumas, and sometimes paranoid suspicions, but still sparkling with the hot light of resistance.
0.0.6 Global Weirding

Obviously there is more going on in the extraordinary experiences of our psychonauts than the intimations of an emerging network society. But from the claustrophobic perspective of our current moment, this is the contextual framework that has seemed most pressing to me—the most resonant. Today we must penetrate, navigate, and play the game of reality as never before, even as it plays us to the hilt. These are archon times, my friends, and grappling with high weirdness may paradoxically be a kind of mental health regimen. The network visions served up by our psychonauts are not melty New Age custards of harmonic global fusion, but daemonic encounters in a postwar labyrinth that the CIA spook James Jesus Angleton called a “wilderness of mirrors.” At the same time, the Outside we occasionally glimpse through cracks in the glass—cosmic and extraterrestrial or animist and planetary—remains stubbornly irreducible to the mere technical circulation of signs and affects. These guys wrestled with angels in the gutters of Moloch. Their systems mysticism is, in this sense, less important than their prophecies of weirdness on a planetary scale.

The turn towards the weird in contemporary theory, briefly discussed in the introduction, is itself a symptom of a broader shift in consciousness, culture, and material conditions that amplifies this once marginalized word, into something that is at once a concept, a cultural space, and a mode of being. The weirding of our contemporary world no longer exactly means the “classic” weird—the weirdness that coursed through and congealed in pulp fictions, druggy subcultures, “counterhegemonic narratives,” and all manner of profane and heretical scenes and practices. Like so many undergrounds, that weird has become a cultural standing reserve, a raw material to fuel media's need for the simultaneously new and familiar. The weird that saturates culture today is present often through its memetic banalization, like magical sigils serving as corporate logos. After all, much of the material in this book—garish genre fictions, strange psychedelic drugs, occult arcana, esoteric rituals, conspiracy theories—is now thoroughly mainstream.
I have been writing about and wrestling with this marginal stuff for over thirty years. This means two things: that they weren't that marginal really, and that I directly contributed to making them even less so. Nonetheless, I am regularly shocked these days with the degree to which once outré signifiers of the fringe—like Burning Man, or the occult rocket scientist Jack Parsons, or the heavy-duty what-the-fuck of DMT—have become part of common conversation and common consumption. Even the academy, which long resisted this kind of greasy kid stuff, has turned on. Ayahuasca tourism, left-hand-path occultism, the history of Bigfoot—all are fair game for a tart little study.

This book, which began its life as a PhD dissertation at a reasonably prestigious university, is further evidence of that shift. Again, mea culpa. But while I'll take some of the responsibility for helping to drain the taboo charge from the weird, I prefer to think that I am part of a mass transmission of arcane encounter—a psychedelic contagion—that is best likened to having bubble-gum stuck on your shoe, some oddly scented but vaguely repellent mass that you can't pick off the sole, which means that it gets all over your hands, and in the end you can do nothing else but pass it on to whomever you meet. Here you go. Good luck with it.

But I am also convinced that there are pressing reasons to wrestle with the weird these days. The first is the extraordinary and unprecedented shift in the developed world's attitude towards psychedelic compounds. Between researchers and clinicians hyping the therapeutic powers of these drugs, and the explosion of mainstream interest in “shamanic” experiences, psychedelics have come fully into the contemporary light. But the psychedelic renaissance has, in part, required the active forgetting of the bohemian and countercultural legacy of psychedelic use within the West. Part of the impetus of this study has been to remember these stories, and to insist, on both a psychocultural and ontological level, that psychedelics are not just about healing traumas or experiencing unity consciousness or supercharging dance music. No, folks, psychedelics are about encountering zones and beings and modes of experience that are, whatever else might be said, deeply fucking weird. That weirdness is repressed as part of the current medicalization and pop-culture normalization of psychedelic drugs. And you don't need to be an acolyte of that old cigar-puffing
Viennese psychonaut to know what happens when you repress such daemonic forces.

The psychedelic renaissance exists partly because of the obvious therapeutic, spiritual, and even ecological value of these allies. But there is another, less visible reason for their popularity now. Simply put, psychedelic experience resonates with today's vertiginous networking of consciousness and culture. Many of the themes explored in this study—the charisma of conspiracy theories, the possibility of nonhuman intelligence, the confusion of fact and fiction, the scripting of the self—are now part of our common hypermediated condition. The countercultural influence on cyberculture was not just about hippie hackers or the social freedoms that fuel an entrepreneurial economy of innovation. This underground influence also speaks to the fact that contemporary technologies are, literally, mind-manifesting. Consciousness, consensus reality, and even matter itself are increasingly shaped—warped, shattered, expanded—by their use. A deep familiarity with psychedelic phenomenology is simply a good skill to possess in an era of memetic struggle, of virtual realities, of archon stratagems.

But it's not just information technology that is making our world weirder. The world itself, or rather the planet that substantiates the world, is not only suffering through the holocaust of a myriad of beings and species, but is losing the relatively stable climate that has sheltered the last ten thousand years of human history. It is not for nothing that global warming is often referred to as global weirding. The planet is not just getting hotter; it is growing more turbulent and unpredictable, more tricksy, and more defiantly wayward. Humans helped make this mess, and humans (or some of them) understand that fact, but tragically—ironically—we seemingly can do little about it. This creates a deeply uncanny condition of tortured knowledge and zombie-like inertia, as we collectively run the mad genius of petrochemical modernity into the dead and dusty ground. It is as if civilization made a sorcerous pact with petroleum genies, and the debt is now coming due.

If we are to embrace the reality of climate change, and if we are to reckon with all the nonhumans—biological or otherwise—whose destinies our now tied to ours, then we have to seek and demand an encounter with a Real beyond the symbolic frameworks of consciousness and culture, beyond the tidal surge of electronic
reports, narcissistic loops, and memetic brainwash. Creatively worked, and suitably expanded, the human imagination can serve as an interface to entities and realities that elude the normal nets of rationality, language, and cultural symbols. We might never overcome the distortions of this interface, which means that we are condemned to shadow-box with our own scripts and specters even as we struggle to see. And yet, the Beyond beckons us, the Outside pulls us within, and the Other stages encounters that will change us in ways we cannot control or predict or even desire. But such is our wyrd.
Illustrations

*Please note that many of the images in the book are unique archival artifacts and their condition may reflect that status.*

COVER: Arik Roper

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CHAPTER 3:

- 128: Terence McKenna, Berkeley, mid-1970s.
- 132: Terence and Dennis McKenna, authors photo, The Invisible Landscape, 1975.

PART THREE: RAW


CHAPTER 4:


**CHAPTER 5:**

• **256:** Greg Hill's Invitation to the Crowleymass, October 1974. Discordian Archives.

**PART FOUR: PKD**

• **264-265:** Philip K. Dick with Christopher, 1973, photo by Tessa Dick.

**CHAPTER 6:**

• **283:** Philip K. Dick, *Flow My Tears the Policeman Said* (Doubleday, 1974).

**CHAPTER 7:**

• **300:** Drawings from the Exegesis, Folder 50, January 1978.

**CHAPTER 8**
• 351: Phil with Pinky, 1973, photo by Tessa Dick.

CONCLUSION

Notes
Introduction: Welcome to the Weird


4 Fans of the Netflix series *Stranger Things* will note that the show's writers cleverly play with all these senses of the “weird.” See J.F. Martel, “Reality is Analog: Philosophizing with *Stranger Things*,” *Metapsychosis*; https://www.metapsychosis.com/reality-is-analog-philosophizing-with-stranger-things-part-one/


7 Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2016), 5. This dark pathway, by the way, can be understood as the golden road pursued by many modern esotericists.


10. See Laura Annawyn Shamas, ‘We Three’: The Mythology of Shakespeare’s Weird Sisters (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 14-17. The notion of turning also recalls one possible etymology of the Norse term Norn: twine or twisted thread.


16. 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 contemporary political theology. See Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).


18. Eliade, Patterns, 29.
The word *uncanny*, like 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.

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 ascribe to the “acausal connecting principle” of synchronicity. 62 is Freud's example, though others, as we will see, prefer 23. The irony of Freud's position, however, is that, like the superstitious believer, the psychoanalyst also disbelieves that the uncanny events reported by analysands can all be ascribed to “chance.” See Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 144-145.


This doesn't make the weird any less uncanny, however. Indeed, popular fictions arguably do an even better job than high literature of staging repetition compulsion, especially given the obsessive drive to repeat-with-a-difference that characterizes both the production and consumption of genre forms.


James was arguably the first thinker to start talking about “consciousness” in our current sense of the term. Our intimate sense of what it feels like to “experience” the world is still shaped by Jamesian notions like the “stream of consciousness” and the “blooming, buzzing confusion” of indiscriminate sensation.

Here the authors are summarizing the work of Wayne Proudfoot, an influence on both their work. Craig Martin and Russell McCutcheon, editors, *Religious Experience: a Reader* (Sheffield; Bristol, CT: Equinox Pub., 2012), 110. In his essay in the reader, Martin closes with the plea that James' “canonical status be retired at present[...]given the ease with which his work is appropriated into what amounts to vulgar rhetoric.” See Craig Martin, “William James in Late Capitalism: Our Religion of the Status Quo,” *Religious Experience: a Reader*, 196. What is this “vulgar” rhetoric? Presumably it includes the individualistic discourse that founds the “Spiritual But Not Religious” sensibility, or perhaps the divide so many liberals make between (good) spirituality and (bad) organized religion. It is hard to see such positions as “vulgar” exactly. Indeed, the notion of a “vulgar” use of an explanatory theory is most solidly welded, within social thought, to two faults: “vulgar materialism” and “vulgar Marxism.” Martin’s Freudian slip here is that it is precisely these two discourses—a biologically-based materialism, and a quasi-Marxist materialism—that are most often resorted to by thinkers, like Martin, who want to deconstruct religious experience with no remainder. It is ironic then that it is precisely the “vulgarity” of popular discourses about non-alienated spiritual experience that becomes the justification for Martin’s own rather base—vulgar?—ideological house-cleaning.

Berger’s and Luckmann’s book appeared the very year that LSD was first outlawed in California, a coincidence that appears as something of a historical irony. For whatever else LSD may have done to its experiencers, the compound rather reliably deconstructed the myth of the given, the notion that the everyday human world was grounded in natural order or some transparent truth. In *The Psychedelic Experience*, Leary gave voice to those ominous moments when the seams show, and “the world around you is a facade, a stage set.” Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, Richard Alpert, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead* (New York: University Books, 1964), 66. Indeed, psychedelics may have been instrumental in letting the constructivist cat out of the bag.
James’ analogy also reminds us of how novel technological constructions—like trains or, by extension, radios or computer networks—produce new perceptions that themselves re-orient “knowledge about.” New media mediates consciousness in ways that vary in how the fringe gets folded into the center.


Bruno Latour associates the most critical forms of constructivism with deconstruction, which he characterizes, rather simplistically, as counseling a stoic resignation before the failure of mediation to present any foundations at all. The flipside of this deconstructionist view, according to Latour, 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. See Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: an Anthropology of the Moderns* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2013), 151-178.


Extraordinary possesses a high affective charge, one that suggests an overwhelming and unescapable salience rather than the calmer, more interior feeling for 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 divergence, statistical or otherwise, from the ordinary run of causality, affect, symbolic consistency, or self-constitution.

“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 than 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.” Ann Taves, Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 162.

One example here is the James scholar G. William Barnard, who discusses his own mystical experience in Exploring Unseen Worlds. A more recent popular example is the secularist Barbara Ehrenreich's memoir Living With a Wild God (New York: Grand Central, 2014).

See David Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness,” Journal of Consciousness Studies 2, no. 3 (1995): 200–219. This question is allied to a related problem. The phenomenal character of consciousness—the felt sense of awareness, the qualia or “what-it-is-likeness” of experience—is radically, formally different than physical matter. And yet the standard physicalist model asks us to believe that, at some specific time in cosmic evolution, consciousness magically appears as an “emergent property” of matter, establishing an entirely new realm of what-it-feels-like out of a substance entirely without this felt

There is an important distinction between two sorts of dualism in consciousness debates. Substance dualism, which resembles many traditional religious ideas, holds that mind and matter are two fundamentally different kinds of thing; property dualism is a softer version that insists that matter, however simple, is always correlated with a kind of experientiality, however primitive. Panpsychists can be found in both camps.

Here I cannot resist critiquing one such attempt, which is 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 offers up the remarkable assertion that “within the last few decades, the epistemological validity of personal spiritual experience has come to be successfully deconstructed.” Olav Hammer, Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004), 338. To pretend, at our current moment, that we have “successfully deconstructed” anything fundamental about experience, including the knowledge claims that characterize meditation or some extraordinary experiences, is a bit of sleight-of-hand every bit as disingenuous as the so-called “religionist” retreat into a walled-off category of ineffable “religious experience.” Hammer too is simply reaching for authoritative scripts: he turns to the language of outside authorities, working in other disciplines, to fill in the enigmatic gaps of his story with references to explanations whose legitimizing aura serves to shut down alternatives.

AMA Archives of General Psychiatry 1 (1959):58-69. For a sophisticated discussion of set and setting as a concrete principal of current psychedelic science—as well as some important critiques of this still dominant paradigm—see Nicolas Langlitz, Neuropsychedelia (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2012).

47 Timothy Leary et al., The Psychedelic Experience, 139. Ironically, this manual was itself such a “program,” since it pragmatically deployed the bardo maps of the Tibetan Book of the Dead in order to shape contemporary psychedelic experience according to these models. See Erik Davis, “The Psychedelic Book of the Dead,” Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions 21, no. 3 (2018): 47-73.


50 While Foucault insisted at the time that his new object of study was precisely not the “California cult of the self,” I believe he was rejecting the essentialism (the “Real Me”) and rhetoric of authenticity that marked so many New Age and sexual-identity currents, rather than the many experimental technologies of the self that also flourished in California. In his 1984 interview with the Advocate, wherein he criticizes the personal quest for sexual identity and the “liberation” of desire, Foucault offers instead a still rather Left Coast discourse of erotic “innovations,” “good drugs,” and friendship through pleasure. See Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” Ethics, 271; also “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” in Ethics, 163-173. 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.
In his studies of antiquity, Foucault pays little attention to hermeticism, mystery religions, or Gnosticism. That said, in a 1982 lecture at the Collège de France, Foucault notes 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 “double game” therefore plays spiritual experience and the question of knowledge against one another. The 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.”


“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.” Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics* (Cambridge, U.K.; Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2013), 4.

Sloterdijk, *You Must Change*, 84.

Sloterdijk, *You Must Change*, 3.


Nietzsche, *Beyond*, 42.

Spinning Out in the Seventies


4. “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.” Steven M. Tipton, *Getting Saved from the Sixties: Moral Meaning in Conversion and Cultural Change* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1982), 29.


6. Howard Brick argues that, rather than a monolithic force, the counterculture represented a complex mixture of “defiantly non-conformist attitudes, uninhibited behavior, and generalized dissent.” See Howard Brick, *The Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2000), 113-114. Sociologist Talcott Parsons coined the term “counterculture” in the fifties to describe social iconoclasts who chafed against the strictures of the era, but the term was popularized by Theodore Roszak at the end of the sixties.

7. Cited in Timothy Miller, *The Hippies and American Values* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 10. The problem with this distinction is that it tends to obscure both the radical social possibilities of hippie interiority and the distinctly


10 Though it has gone in and out of favor, the phrase “consensus reality” is a handy sociological term of art that itself became popular in the late sixties and early seventies. You will see it again. The term comes from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality (New York: Anchor Books, 1966); see especially p. 3.

11 Cited in Slocum-Schaffer, America in the Seventies, 3.


13 Slocum-Schaffer, America in the Seventies, 27.


15 Thompson, Shark Hunt, 49.

16 In 1970, 20 million Americans were smoking cannabis; a few years later, over sixty percent of college students had tried the weed. Slocum-Schaffer, America in the Seventies, 175. Open relationships grew in number, along with divorce rates and the average person’s exposure to a myriad of sexual possibilities. See Beth Bailey and David Farber, “Introduction,” in America in the Seventies, ed. Bailey and Farber (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 6.


19. Schulman, *The Seventies*, 100; also see the discussion on 68-72.


21. Sam Binkley writes that, in contrast to the sixties, “living the revolution [in the seventies] did not signal a dissolution of the boundaries of the self in music or psychedelic experiences but provided a coordinated set of living techniques centered on a thematically unified philosophy of life, related in a new advisory discourse on the practicing of a looser and more authentic way of living.” See Binkley, *Getting Loose*, 17.


24. As Leigh Schmidt argues, this earlier seeker culture possessed two sides: a sympathetic openness to alterity, and a desire for concordance and unity. The latter impulse developed into the religious philosophy of perennialism, discussed elsewhere. However, the former element also deeply inflects the seventies: an openness to multiple perspectives and the limit experiences of otherness. In the nineteenth century, this widening consciousness culture absorbed bohemian, Transcendentalist, Theosophical, and other occult modes of religiosity that aimed beyond the provinces of Christianity. For more, see Leigh Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: HarperOne, 2006).


Perhaps the most classic sociological account of this process remains Tipton's *Getting Saved from the Sixties*, op. cit., which showed how three spiritual movements—a Jesus People church, the San Francisco Zen Centre, and the secular est—offered a moral rudder to refugees from the sixties.

Reminding us that he well earned his degree in American Studies from Yale, Wolfe placed seventies seekers within the history of American religious revivalism two years before the religious scholar William G. McLoughlin broke academic dirt with a similar argument in *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).


One interesting sign of Wolfe's materialism are the scare-quotes he places around trance and vision, implying that these are folk terms for phenomena better described as seizure or hallucination.

James, *Varieties*, 33.

Wolfe, “The ‘Me’ Decade.”


Despite the usefulness of “occulture,” I will also continue to use the words esotericism and esoterica as well. Esotericism, for me,
encompasses a longer history of metaphysical mysteries within which contemporary occulture is born. While both McKenna and Wilson were occultural thinkers, I consider Dick’s metaphysics—which largely ignored ceremonial magic and popular occultism—to be more “classically” esoteric.


38 For more on this story, see Peter Bebergal, *Season of the Witch: How the Occult Saved Rock and Roll* (New York: Tarcher, 2014).


40 One question that scholars ask is whether the Western embrace of Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist practices and concepts are better seen as cross-cultural encounters between East and West, or as further mutations of the Romantic idealism and Protestant ethics that had been projecting its dreams eastward since well before the nineteenth century. Some scholars insist that esotericism is an implicitly Western current, rooted in historical dynamics that go back to antiquity. See Wouter Hanegraaff’s discussion of definitions in *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 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 defensive of the European construction of Western esotericism, Partridge also agrees with Hanegraaff that the modern occult revival should not be seen as an instance of “Easternization.”

41 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 Lovecraft's “The Haunter of the Dark” (1936).

42 Grant was particularly keen on lining up curious cross-references between Lovecraft and Crowley, like Yog-Sothoth and the Great Beast's Sut-Thoth. For more see my essay “Calling Cthulhu,” in Erik Davis, *Nomad Codes: Adventures in Modern Esotericism* (Portland, Ore: Yeti, 2010), 114-135.

43 Carole Cusack has written on a number of the “invented religions” from the sixties and seventies—particularly the Church of All Worlds, Discordianism, and the Church of the SubGenius. See Carole Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 2010).

44 For example, 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 textuality. See Daniel C. Noel, *The Soul of Shamanism: Western Fantasies, Imaginal Realities* (New York: Continuum, 1997).

45 “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.” Lowell Bean, “Power and Its Application in Native California,” in *California Indian Shamanism*, ed. Lowell Bean (Menlo Park, Calif.: Ballena Press, 1992), 23.
See Mircea Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), esp. 1-17. Given his understanding of the dialectics of the sacred, Eliade may have recognized that the very “trashiness” of some contemporary occult materials might amplify, rather than cancel out, their spiritual potency.


Pauwels and Bergier, *Morning*, ix.


Truzzi, “Definition and Dimensions,” 245-6. This sort of differential analysis also jibes with some of the sharpest modern histories 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* (Chicago: Open Court, 1974), which traced sixties-style countercultural esotericism—in which occult material interacted with avant-garde politics and art—back to the nineteenth century. More recently, the historian Wouter Hanegraaff, who identifies esotericism as a “third stream” of Western culture that shadows the two more visible streams of faith and reason, has provided an archaeology of what he also calls the “wastebasket” of esotericism. In Hanegraaff’s view, the very existence of esotericism has largely resulted from strategies of scholarly exclusion that emerged in the West following the Renaissance rediscovery of ancient hermetic texts. See Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

While studying the magic workers of the Trobriand Islands near New Guinea, Malinowski analyzed the verbal content of their spells—a riot of secret names, “abracadabra,” unusual phonetic
combinations, alliteration, and “weird cadences.” Malinowski noticed that these variations formed a consistent linguistic pattern: a deviation from the norms of colloquial language. “The better we know the Trobriand language the more clearly and immediately can we distinguish magic from ordinary speech,” he wrote, noting that even “the most grammatical and least emphatically chanted spell differs from the forms of ordinary address.” Malinowski dubbed this differential the “coefficient of weirdness,” using a mathematical term—coefficient—that denotes a fixed multiplicative factor. For Malinowski, it was this differential factor, more than any semantic content, that established the paradoxically familiar otherness and subsequent social power of magical speech. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1954), 222.

53 Here we might recall Lacan's insistence that all our accounts of “the Real” inevitably leave a stubborn remainder, or shard—an unassimilable, traumatic, and disturbing kernel that absolutely resists symbolization. In fact, a good deal of poststructuralist thought could be said to grapple with the anomalous without strictly identifying it or mastering it in discourse. Here lies Derrida's elliptical identification of the vein of *différance* that at once parallels, undermines, and makes possible systems of clarified distinctions, rational operations, and sense.

54 The attempt to discover rational—as opposed to supernatural—explanations for such colorful phenomena has itself been dubbed anomalistics, a term also coined in the seventies. See Roger Wescott, “Anomalistics: The Outline of an Emerging Field of Investigation,” in *Cultures Beyond the Earth*, eds. M. Maruyama and A. Harkins (New York: Vintage Books, 1975).


Entanglement is probably the go-to spooky phenomenon here: the fact, established theoretically and proven experimentally, that entangled quantum particles are capable of instantaneous correlation even if they are widely separated in space-time, thereby seeming to communicate faster than the speed of light.


James, *Varieties*, 283.

One thinks, for example, of Robert Masters’ and Jean Houston's influential phenomenological overview of drug states *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966).

James was no simple cheerleader for altered states. Though his nitrous vision has been frequently discussed and cited, for example, its critical implications are not always drawn out. For James, the gas occasioned 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 experience as a philosophical illumination, however, James saw it as an expression of the errors of Hegelian philosophy, which he believed too quickly papered over real distinctions in its quest to render the Absolute in logical and synthetic terms. See William James, “The Subjective Effects of Nitrous Oxide,” *Mind* 7 (1882); [https://erowid.org/chemicals/nitrous/nitrous_article1.shtml](https://erowid.org/chemicals/nitrous/nitrous_article1.shtml)

James, *Varieties*, 333.

“Whatever it may be on its farther side, the ‘more’ with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its hither side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life.” James, *Varieties*, 403.


James, *Varieties*, 406.

For a crucial account of this transition see Taves, *Fits, Trances, & Visions*, 308-346.


They did not always succeed. One of the most popular articles—a reprinted essay by anthropologist Kilton Stewart about Senoi dream practices—has since been attacked as a romantic fabulation. At the same time, this object-text helped inspire the modern dreamwork movement and remains one of the most widely cited papers in Tart's text. For more on the issue, see Kelly Bulkeley and Ryan Hurd, “Introduction,” in *Lucid Dreaming: New Perspectives on Consciousness in Sleep*, eds. Kelly Bulkeley and Ryan Hurd (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2014), xix-xx.


Shulgin is best known for rediscovering MDMA, aka “ecstasy.” But he was also responsible for minting new classes of psychedelic compounds, research that led in time to an alphabet soup of wares that have saturated drug and dance scenes since the nineties.
Shulgin was no New Ager, but he did carve out a place for transcendent experience within the categorization scheme for psychoactive experience reports he developed in his books *PiHKaL* (1991) and *TiHKaL* (1997). Shulgin's rating scale characterized the subjective effects of his compounds. Plus-one (+) indicates that activity is definitely noticeable, whereas 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 Plus-four (++++), a zone of experience that emerges beyond the empirical and causal register of the other categories. “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.” Alexander and Ann Shulgin, *PiHKAL: A Chemical Love Story* (Berkeley, Calif.: Transform Press, 1991), xxv.

For some critics, this passage through the looking glass of reflexivity means no more science. Thankfully, it is not my business to assess whether inner empiricism or Tart's “state-specific science” are incoherent concepts. Even if “inner empiricism” is a bankrupt route towards knowledge, it nonetheless opens up some very productive, aesthetically extraordinary, and culturally significant ways of framing and engaging, even in operationalizing, what we might otherwise call spiritual, mystical, or religious experiences.


Later Tart would study parapsychology, get skewered by skeptics, and write a book heavily influenced by Gurdjieff.

The three axes of this model include Activation (high-low), Input-output grating (external or internal information), and Modulation (by chemical amines or cholines). See J. Allan


82. Roszak, *Counter-Culture*, 55.


84. Great examples of this sort of work are captured in the Walker Art Center’s catalog *Hippie Modernism*, ed. Andrew Blauvelt (Minneapolis, Minn.: Walker Art Center, 2015).


86. Today, the *Whole Earth Catalog’s* once hidden influence on Silicon Valley has been widely acknowledged, with no less than Steve Jobs giving the publication credit for inspiring his vision of the Apple. See Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*. Also see many of the more theoretical discussions in *The Whole Earth: California and the Disappearance of the Outside*, eds.

87 Whole Earth Catalog, Fall 1968, 32.

88 Comparing the text to the yoga writings of the Hindu sage Patanjali and the Catholic mystic Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises, David Toolan described Mind Games 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.” David Toolan, Facing West from California's Shores: A Jesuit's Journey into New Age Consciousness (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 81.

89 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 were cast in aesthetic, phenomenological, and pathological terms rather than religious or mystical ones. Marcus Boon, The Road of Excess: a History of Writers on Drugs (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 232.

90 Given the importance of the problem of the simulacrum to postmodern thought, this ambiguity also argues for LSD's practical contribution to postmodernity as a mode of culture, politics, technology, and consciousness.


92 Novak, a skeptical historian of psychiatry, attributes Cohen's heavenly trip to his earlier exposure to Aldous Huxley's 1953 book The Doors of Perception. The idea is that Cohen's mind, having been exposed to Huxley's compelling prose, was biased towards reframing essentially meaningless or even pathological states of biochemical arousal in a meaningfully mystical way. Novak does not even attempt to explain why Cohen's stated expectation—that he would go catatonic or psychotic in some manner—didn't take hold at all. See Novak, “LSD before Leary,” 92.
Some of the first subjects to describe their LSD experiences in “spiritual” terms were alcoholic patients receiving treatment. This occurred as early as 1953. See Erika Dyck, *Psychedelic Psychiatry: LSD from Clinic to Campus* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), esp. 53-78. Bill Wilson, founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, himself experimented with LSD in the late fifties, and believed that it provided precisely the sort of religious turn towards a higher power that he felt was necessary for sobriety.


This recursive loop installs an important cybernetic dimension of psychedelia, opening the dynamics of experience to a media theoretical language of programming, feedback, and signal processing. In systems theoretical terms, we might understand LSD as an external irritant that perturbs a self-regulating homeostatic system—the body-self-mind—to interrupt, reorganize, and magnify its own dispositions. These dispositions are not simply psychological, but are also embedded in and mediated by social, cultural, biological, and technological networks. For a sophisticated discussion of set and setting as a concrete principal of current psychedelic science—as well as some important critiques to this still dominant paradigm—see Langlitz, *Neuropsychedelia*. 
Scientific Romance


5. The Mothers of Invention, *Freak Out!* (Verve, V6-5005-2, 1966). Zappa's definition also reflects the power of social science discourse to frame even insider calls-to-arms.


Though Dennis implies that Terence discovered these authors directly through the Tussman program, a syllabus included in Trow, *Habits of Mind*, suggests that these more *au courant* thinkers were supplementary to the main curriculum.


“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.” Robert C. Fuller, *Stairways to Heaven: Drugs in American Religious History* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2000), 146.

Novak, *High Culture*; [http://www.psychedelic-library.org/high_culture1.htm](http://www.psychedelic-library.org/high_culture1.htm)


As of this writing, “Crypto-Rap” remains unpublished per the author's wishes. For one afternoon, the McKenna estate, in the body of the mischievous Finn, graciously provided me limited access to a copy of the original typed manuscript.

Terence McKenna, “Crypto-Rap: Meta-Electrical Speculations on Culture,” collection of Terence McKenna estate, i.

McKenna, *Brotherhood*, 177.


23 McLuhan also characterized hallucinogens as “a means of achieving empathy with our penetrating electric environment, an environment that in itself is a drugless inner trip.” Marshall McLuhan, “The Playboy Interview,” *Playboy Magazine* (March 1969); [http://www.digitallantern.net/mcluhan/mcluhanplayboy.htm](http://www.digitallantern.net/mcluhan/mcluhanplayboy.htm) (accessed March 4, 2015). As Christopher Partridge points out, Terence does not seem to have been aware of this important interview. See Christopher Partridge, *High Culture: Drugs, Mysticism, and the Pursuit of Transcendence in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 323.

24 McKenna, “Crypto-Rap,” 87, 56.

25 Presciently, Terence also noted the radical implications of the miniaturization of electronic components. This insight helps explain the origin of one of his more charming later prognostications: a technological 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.” McKenna, “Crypto-Rap,” 135.

26 Terence read these texts through Herbert Guenther, Arthur Avalon, and less scholarly writers like Lama Govinda and Evans-Wentz.

27 McKenna also follows André-Jean Festugière in making the 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.

I thank Finn McKenna for pointing out this connection to me.

Michel Foucault explains the logic of the hermetic signature thus: “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.” Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 27.

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. McKenna, “Crypto-Rap,” 88.

McKenna, “Crypto-Rap,” 133.


In fact, Jung suggested that alchemy entered into decline when it became decoupled from actual chemical transformations. See Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 289-291.

“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.” Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 277.


Here the self establishes a new “existential territory” recursively, as a kind of residue that builds up from the loops it spins through its own imaginal self-reference. The philosopher and schizo-


40 Writing about his impressions from first smoking DMT in the sixties, Dennis McKenna described the sense of crossing a threshold, “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.” McKenna, *Brotherhood*, 156-57.


44 McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 7.


46 Timothy Leary, “Programmed Communication.” 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.


48 For a socio-biological account of entity phenomenon that remains sympathetic to psychedelic wonder, see independent scholar Bruce Rimell’s excellent *They Shimmer Within: Cognitive-Evolutionary Perspectives on Visionary Beings* (Xibalba Books, 2018).


50 McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 25.


52 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 the Mazatec curandera Maria Sabina that Gordon Wasson had leaked into the world in his famous *Life* magazine article, the pride of place in the underground imagination of the sixties went to LSD, which was considered by many heads to provide a more powerful trip. 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 grow naturally across the Americas. For a general overview see Andy Letcher, *Shroom: A Cultural History of the Magic Mushroom* (New York: Ecco, 2007).

53 McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 40.

54 This interpretation goes beyond the usual multicultural story about cultural narratives as subjective, localized projections onto an objective “natural” phenomenon. Instead, McKenna acknowledges culture-nature hybrids, like those described by Bruno Latour.
Terence had already declared that “Objects, thought, dreams, hallucinations, metaphors and memories—all are real.” McKenna, “Crypto-Rap,” 20.

McKenna, *Brotherhood*, 234.

This was, it is important to emphasize, a 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 specs to come. In *Brotherhood*, Dennis also discusses the vital influence of John Parker, who befriended Terence in high school, corresponded intensely with Dennis, and whose wide-ranging interests in magic, drugs, and biology, along with his “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.” McKenna, *Brotherhood*, 299.

McKenna, *Brotherhood*, 246.

Though claiming that he had “never seen or imagined” the lapis in this manner before, Terence was not the first to make space opera from the philosopher’s stone. McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 77. In his prescient 1959 book on UFOs, which the McKennas were familiar with, Jung described the lapis as a mandala, a symbol of the individuated Self whose upwelling from the collective unconscious he directly linked to the form and behavior of flying saucers. Carl Jung, *Flying Saucers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959).

McKenna, *Brotherhood*, 135. I suspect the monolith from Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) was also hovering in this associative cloud.

McKenna, *Brotherhood*, 134.

McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 53.

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


65 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 subject, while Theosophists began painting and describing astral “vibrations,” a term that itself would be recoded by later New Agers as “frequencies.” For a brief discussion of this term, see Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 238.


69 This “all-at-onceness and all-at-oneness” also recalls Deleuze and Guattari’s frequent but relatively different use of the term resonance in *A Thousand Plateaus*, where it is linked to the “subjectivity of communication.” Resonance here is a key engine of stratification, the process whereby singularities and molecular
intensities are locked into molar aggregates and larger systems of redundancy, whether geological or social. “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, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2008), 40. In this sense, resonance is not a term associated with novelty but with redundancy, infection, and capture.

70  McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 299.

71  “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.”


73  McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 68.


75  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—expressive material that rides adopt the fundamental tone like a transcendent mirage.

McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 60-63.

McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 16. Using a visual metaphor, the media theorist Alexander Galloway characterizes such communication 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.” Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark, *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013), 28-56. These sorts of experiences suggested to Terence the possibility of what he called “post-symbolic” communication. His most famous analogy for this immediate mediation was the vibrant, signifying skin of the octopus—a pure surface of expression that turns the mind inside out, freeing it from the sort of “depth” associated with the layered and displaced meanings of words and symbols.


Partridge, *High Culture*, 326.

McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 69.

McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 70.

The importance of human genetics to the McKennas’ circuit may reflect Timothy Leary’s earlier enshrinement of DNA, which plays the role of God or dharma in his visionary materialism. “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.

85 McKenna, *Brotherhood*, 256.


87 Channelers generally serve as the conduit for spiritual guidance and education, but unlike the mediums of Spiritualism, whom they resemble in many ways, channelers rarely make contact with the dead. See Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1998), 23-34. In this sense, channelers are more closely aligned with esoteric and occult traditions of intercourse with angelic, demonic, or other praeternatural intelligences. Unfortunately, Hanegraaff does not emphasize the “technical” or science-fictional aspects of channeling that help to distinguish it from Spiritualist trance.


89 This language shows the heavy influence of Theosophy and its discourse of “vibration,” but here there is a more central focus on the technical apparatus of mediation. George W. Van Tassel, *I Rode a Flying Saucer!: The Mystery of the Flying Saucers Revealed* (Los Angeles, Calif.: New Age, 1952), 16.


91 Hanegraaff, “‘And End History. And go to the Stars,’” 299.
These elusive objects, which actually exist but are very hard for us to wrap our heads around, resemble the “hyperobjects” described by Timothy Morton, 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 “objects.” See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

James L. Kent, *Psychedelic Information Theory: Shamanism in the Age of Reason* (Seattle, Wash.: PIT Press/Supermassive, 2010), 51. Kent's theory has received some indirect support from one of the more significant psychedelic studies of the last decade. 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 the anterior and posterior cingulate cortex. “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.” Robert Carhart-Harris, et al, “Neural Correlates of the Psychedelic State as Determined by fMRI Studies with Psilocybin,” *PNAS* 109 (2012):2138-43.

universe of determinate causes—and a social and cultural domain where different perspectives and interpretive frameworks construct different experiences out of “the same” substance. This is the distinction that Bruno Latour calls the Great Divide. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 13-15.

100 Cited in Partridge, *High Culture*, 327.


102 Gomart refers to these conditions as the “set-up” or *dispositif*, which in a sense presents another, more formal notion of set and setting. Foucault used the term dispositif 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 has defined it 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.” See Giorgio Agamben, “What is an Apparatus?” in *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Redwood City, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009), 14.


104 Cited in Partridge, *High Culture*, 327.

105 Cited in Langlitz, *Neuropsychedelia*, 156. In Langlitz’s words, hallucinogenic drugs like psilocybin are “more than one—yet less than many” (156).
Experiments

1 McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 94.
2 McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 110.
3 Partridge, *High Culture*, 328.
4 One example here was a beautiful abstract design he glimpsed called “the Valentine curve” after its curved petals and resemblance to a bleeding heart. Instantly the term set off its own associations—with the alchemist Basil Valentine, and the Alexandrian Gnostic teacher Valentinus, whose teachings about Sophia resonated with their own alchemical efforts to free spirit from matter. McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 102.
5 McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 128.
6 McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 77.
7 McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 111.
10 Hanegraaff, “‘And End History’”, 302.
15 This “transversal” conception, which Guattari calls “subjectivation,” emphasizes both the active rupture of dominant
socio-cultural scripts (or semiotic redundancies) and the crystallization of novel selves at the creative edge of becoming. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, 1-32.


17 Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, 17.


19 McKenna, *Brotherhood*, 248.


25 This Möbius twist between inside and outside also helps explain one peculiar feature—or one particularly peculiar feature—of the McKennas’ speculations. In their thoughts, the shamanic phlegm or “translinguistic matter” they hoped to create would result from the rotation of tryptamine through the fourth dimension, a process that would somehow place their own experiential trip on the “outside of the molecule.” To explain this strange notion, which materializes phenomenology, Dennis describes the inert tryptamine molecule as a 3D musical score that requires the “instrument” of the human body in order to manifest the
“pharmacokinetic symphony” experienced as the trip. A wild notion for sure, but one that speaks to the metabolic dimension of exteriority that remained internal to their experiences. See McKenna, *Brotherhood*, 246.

26 McKenna, *Brotherhood*, 49.

27 The topography of Diaspar reflects Clarke's study of information systems and cybernetics, and cleverly stages the crucial distinction between a homeostatic system and its surrounding environment, while exploring the perturbations in the boundary that dynamically links the two.


30 One proto-“hyperspace” example here is the non-Euclidian geometry used to describe Einsteinean space-time, which Lovecraft deployed to such great effect in stories like “The Dreams in the Witch House” (1932).


32 H.P. Lovecraft, “Of Beyond”; 
http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/fb.aspx
(accessed March 12, 2015).

33 Galloway, et al., *Excommunication*, 133.

34 McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 116.
In *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, the anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann meditates on the “interpretive drift” she experienced studying modern occult practitioners in the U.K. Immersing herself in their world of occult practices, she eventually saw visions, recognized incorporeal “energies,” and experienced synchronicities. She became concerned about losing the critical distance that defined her as an anthropologist, and decided that the final straw—the line she could not cross in her participant-observation—was the belief that mind could have a direct non-ordinary effect on physical reality. See Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 313-323.


H.P. Lovecraft, “The Silver Key”; [http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/sk.aspx](http://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/sk.aspx) (accessed May 12, 2015). Carter, in other words, is unable to occupy the ambiguous space of the phenomenological epoché where the ontological basis of perceptions is suspended on the threshold of pure appearance.


McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 158.

McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 168-9. As Terence himself noted in “Crypto-Rap,” this disjunctive power is related to one of the core polarities of mystical modernism. “Wherever the sacred comes tangential to the profane a certain cosmic ridiculousness is
generated.” McKenna, “Crypto-Rap,” 112. Equally ridiculous is the fact that the object usually invoked to explain Adamski’s flying saucers is not a vacuum cleaner but some manner of chicken feeder.

42 McKenna, True Hallucinations, 134-5.

43 McKenna, Brotherhood, 259.


45 For a popular overview of some of these issues, see the anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann, “The Sound of Madness,” Atlantic, June 2018; https://harpers.org/archive/2018/06/the-sound-of-madness/ (accessed September 1, 2018). One important discovery of Luhrmann’s research is that the character of such external voices can be altered through different practices of cultivating and conceiving them.


47 McKenna, Brotherhood, 132.


50 Terence McKenna often told this story. See Abraham, et al, Trialogues at the Edge of the West, 95; also see the workshop recording The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge (Louisville, Colo: Sounds True, 1992).
For a rich and counter-normative account of the religious and metaphysical implications of Descartes’ dream, see Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes* (New York: Philosophical library, 2007), especially 11-30.

James, *Pluralistic Universe*, 26. In the words of one of James’ commentators, “the orderly world of the rationalist is transformed into a rather multifarious, ‘gothic’ sort of place, full of interconnections and overlaps that we do not necessarily expect conceptually, and potentially far exceeding the limits of our spheres of action, conception, and ultimately, sympathy.” Lambert, *William James*, 185.

To describe how some forms of construction result in beings, Latour invokes an infelicitous term that he draws from Etienne Souriau, *instauration*. Instauration means to establish or institute, the way one might install an idol in a shrine with flowers and rose water. For more on this important influence on Latour, see Etienne Souriau, *The Different Modes of Existence*, trans. by Erik Beranek and Tim Howles (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).


Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, 17.


Latour, *Inquiry*, 202. “To learn to follow them is thus not to succumb to the irrational but rather to explore one of the paths of objectivity.”

McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 7.

“The important thing about the second trip to La Chorrera was that the teaching of the Logos was more or less continuous...The Logos taught me how to do something with the *I Ching* that perhaps no one knew how to do before.” McKenna, *True Hallucinations*, 169.
Thinking in Ann Taves’ terms, we might say that 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.

For more on this story, see Ronald Hutton, *Shamans: Siberian Spirituality and the Western Imagination* (London: Hambledon and London, 2001) and Noel, *The Soul of Shamanism*.


The modern recuperation of psychosis can be traced back to Carl Jung. In his autobiography, which appeared in 1961, Jung described the “confrontation with the unconscious” he experienced as a young man following his break with Freud. The British analyst D.W. Winnicott unambiguously characterized

74 McKenna and McKenna, *Invisible*, 98.

75 This distinction recalls the famous difference Jung made between James Joyce's experiments in recombinant language and his schizophrenic daughter Lucia's invention of portmanteau words and other word salads. Jung said they "were like two people going to the bottom of a river, one falling and the other diving." Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 679. At the time Joyce defended the artistic merit of his daughter's linguistic productions.

76 McKenna and McKenna, *Invisible*, 25.

77 Sloterdijk, *You Must Change*, 171.

78 Here we should also recall the acrobatics and other playful improbabilities regularly associated with the entities of tryptamine space, whether Terence's DMT machine elves or the "impish" mushroom spirits that writer and poet Henry Munn described as "embodiments of merriment, tumbling figments of the spontaneous, performing incredible acrobatic feats." See Henry Munn, "The Mushrooms of Language," in *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, ed. Michael J. Harner (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 110.

79 In the same letter, Keats criticizes Coleridge, who lacked such capacity, and would refuse "a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery" if he could not crystalize the glimpse into usable knowledge. John Keats, *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899), 277.

80 Indeed, it is ego inflation rather than psychosis that may be the most seductive pathology for psychedelic athletes. See McKenna, *Brotherhood*, 302-04.

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.

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. Terence was a wild thinker, but no dummy, and particularly took to Whitehead's process thought.

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* 1, no. 4, 373-93.

We should not miss the East/West paradox here. The cosmology of the *I Ching* suggests an infinitely cycling recurrence of natural patterns. And yet Terence constructed a map of linear historical transformation and apocalypse.


89 McKenna and McKenna, Invisible, 174.

90 McKenna, True Hallucinations, 134. Today’s psychonauts often refer to these overwhelming messages as “downloads.”

91 McKenna and McKenna, Invisible, 102.

92 McKenna, True Hallucinations, 205-7.

93 McKenna, Brotherhood, 328.

94 An inferior method, designed to produce psilocybin for extraction rather than fruiting bodies, was available in The Psychedelic Guide to Preparation of the Eucharist (Linga Sharinra Incense Co., 1973), first published in 1968.

Listen to Pynchon critic George Levine, writing in 1976 about how Pynchon’s novels can 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 goes on, 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 porn, and Levine could almost have been talking about *Illuminatus!* George Levine, “Risking the Moment: Anarchy and Possibility in Pynchon’s Fiction,” in *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, eds. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 113.

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](http://www.rawillumination.net/2014/02/illuminatus-online-reading-group-week.html) (accessed June 12, 2016).


This latter, more irrational sense of “conspiracy theory” is in large part derived from Karl Popper, who argued in 1945 that authoritarian political movements on both the left and the right foment “conspiracy theories of society.” For Popper, these political fables also represented a “secularization of religious superstition.” In a secular age, Popper thought, the ontological absence of the gods is filled by “powerful men or groups...whose
wickedness is responsible for all the evils we suffer from.” Examples include both the “capitalist class” and the Elders of Zion, whose unquestionably hoaxed Protocols remain a bestseller among the conspiratorial right. Popper’s implication was that these views should not be treated as coherent political accounts precisely because they drew from the wellspring of religious fantasy. See Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013), 306-307. Also DeHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory*, 94-97.

6 This is not to say that all “conspiracy theories” are forms of occult fabulation. Many covert political and corporate conspiracies do exist in a conventional historical sense and can be exposed as such. However, the labyrinths that even the most sober researchers enter to ferret out such conspiracies—as well as to communicate them to listeners—are riddled with slippery slopes that spill into fantastic, mythic, or plainly paranoid modes of thinking. Esoteric patterns lurk as well behind many of the weird but non-supernatural concerns with mind control, alien technologies, and the programming of cultural reality through “twilight language” and other semiotic spells.


8 Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!*, 23.

9 Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!* 50.

10 Even the notion of Illuminism that gives the historical Illuminati its name possesses a curious ambivalence, 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 mainline 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-Enlightenment, both 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.” Christopher McIntosh, *The Rose Cross and the Age of Reason* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1982), 103.

11 Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!*, 51.

12 The historian Norman Cohn shored up this thesis in his influential text *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).


20 While one could certainly argue that this abyss is “postmodern,” it also arguably redeployes a more traditional logic of illumination and deconstruction. Here, for example, is a nineteenth-century Freemason's account of the logic of ascent followed by initiates: “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.” Cited in Gerard Russell, Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms: Journeys into the Disappearing Religions of the Middle East (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 136-7.


22 The myth bares further unpacking. In response to the powerful forces who marginalize her, Eris combines an object of desire (a golden apple) with the ambiguities of written reference (who is “the prettiest one”?) to create a symbolic prompt that sows dissension among competing elites. For the Discordians, very much including Wilson, Eris served as a fit figurehead for the sort of symbolic monkey-wrenching tactics that the group, alongside other sixties media pranksters, deployed against “the state”—the state of things, of power, of mind.


25 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 outfitting of rural self-sufficiency.

26 This story is well-told in Brian Doherty, Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), 336-387.
Thornley’s life has received fit treatment at the hands of biographer Adam Gorightly. See Adam Gorightly, *The Prankster & the Conspiracy: The Story of Kerry Thornley and How He Met Oswald and Inspired the Counterculture* (New York: Paraview Press, 2003).

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 office. 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 5, 2015).

The author of the *Teenset* article—none other than “Simon Moon” from *Illuminatus!*—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.


Cited in Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture; Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful
36 Cited in Greer, “The Moorish Orthodox Radio.”


38 The gay Angeleno experimental filmmaker Kenneth Anger, who performed Crowleyian ceremonies while the Fugs chanted “Out demons out,” certainly took it seriously.

39 Shea and Wilson, Illuminatus!, 114-115.


43 Mindfucks were not just produced; they were also received. When Discordian Louise 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.” This mindfuck takes on even more Discordian overtones in light of the later recognition that Castaneda's books were essentially hoaxes. Gorightly, The Prankster, 154.

44 These hard-edged psychological games became a central feature of the discourse surrounding the new religious movements of the late sixties and early seventies. This was especially true for those
collectives 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* (New York: Straight Arrow Books, 1972), which excoriated the rise of “acid fascism” among bad-news “cult” leaders like Charles Manson and Mel Lyman. All of these authoritarians, according to Felton, did not just rule over their followers, but violated them through a kind of psychological (and sometimes literal) rape.

45 Colin McGinn, *Mindfucking* (Stocksfield, U.K.: Acumen, 2008), 38. Though acknowledging that mindfucking can lead to pleasure or even insight, McGinn does not develop this dimension philosophically.

46 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.” Robert Anton Wilson, foreword, in Donald Holmes, *The Sapiens System: The Illuminati Conspiracy* (Phoenix, Ariz: Falcon Press, 1987), 8.


49 Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!,* 211.

50 Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!,* 278.

51 Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!,* 170.

52 The Illuminati, she says, “are those who have seen the light of reason”—a light she directly contrasts to the mystic's irrational illumination, “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.” Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!,* 526-27.

53 Already playing the intertextual game, Chambers makes ambiguous references to Hastur, a shepherd god in Ambrose Bierce's short story “Haïta the Shepherd” (1893).


56 Lovecraft “himself” referred to this intertextual game as “Yog-Sothery;” the Cthulhu Mythos is a term created by August Derleth after Lovecraft’s death.


58 “Remember what happened to Ambrose Bierce,” threatens one anonymous letter, referring to the mysterious 1913 disappearance of the California fabulist Ambrose Bierce. As Wilson well knows, Bierce was also part of a weird metafictional chain, having invented terms—like Carcosa and Hali—that were reused by Robert Chambers before informing the Mythos. Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!,* 181.


60 “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 life.” Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!,* 648. As such, modern petroleum-based civilization is in essence a Lovecraftian pact with the dead
monsters of the past. For a sophisticated contemporary spin on such petroleum necromancy, see Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: Re.press, 2008).


64 One might be lured into suspecting, for example, that behind the Yog-Sothoth oil monster lies a perfectly real conspiracy: say, the suspicion that modern civilization is fueled by the sacrificial slaughter of innocent people on the altars of a militaristic petroleum pact exploited by mind-raping transhuman elites playing a very old game of social control.


68 See Gorightly, *Historia Discordia*, 121.

69 See Danielle Kirby, “Occultural Bricolage,” 43

70 Gorightly, *Historia Discordia*, 76.
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 the Temple ov 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.” Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2006), 234-5; also Partridge, “Occulture is Ordinary,” in Asprem and Granholm, *Contemporary Esotericism*, 129.

Unfortunately, Adam Possamai’s characterization of hyper-real religion as a “simulacrum of religion” that draws from “commodified popular culture” totally fails to account for Discordianism’s sideways critique of the spectacle and its attendant resistance to commodification. The relationships to popular culture, commodification, and consumerism in the *Principia Discordia* are worlds away from those found in, say, Jedism or *Matrix* spirituality. See Adam Possamai, “Introduction” in Possami, *Handbook*, 1-22.


Cited in Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 294.


Quoted in Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 27.

*Mumonkan*, case 21. This koan is honored in one story from the *Principia Discordia* (fourth edition), in which a Zen student is told to sit in lotus position in a dilapidated mansion, where his anxieties mount until the floor above his head breaks and a pile of “ordure” lands on him. Two strangers enter and one asks the other who the sitting fellow is. “Some say he is a holy man. Others say he is a shithead.” Hearing this, the young man is greatly enlightened. Malaclypse, *Principia Discordia*, 5th edition, 5.


Simon Moon tells us he lifted the origin story from Von Junzt's *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*, an element of the Cthulhu Mythos invented by *Weird Tales* writer by Robert E. Howard.

Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!*, 127. Needless to say, the formation of the Babylonian state, we learn, was an early Illuminati plot. Contemporary conspiracy theorists from David Icke to Jim Marrs continue to connect Babylon with the Illuminati. See Dyrendal, “Hidden Knowledge, Hidden Powers,” 213-217.

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 David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Melville House, 2011), 1-5.

87 Millennia later, however, the group joins the Illuminati as a separate unit within the order until they get booted out by Cecil Rhodes. This event is mockingly memorialized in the pro-Illuminati rock tune by the MC5 that forms the corny punch-line of this shaggy joke: “Kick Out the Jams.”


89 As the philosopher Quentin Meillassoux insists, even the seemingly solid laws of nature are only habits and contingencies. Sounding an Erisian note, he argues that “eternal chaos is capable, without reason, of the emergence and the abolition of the world, of destroying the laws present in nature so as to bring others into being.” Quentin Meillassoux, “The Immanence of the World Beyond,” in *The Grandeur of Reason*, eds. Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Candler (Norwich, U.K.: SCM Press, 2010), 446.

90 Greer, “Occult Origins” 183.

91 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.” Greer, “Occult Origins,” 180.

92 Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 328-337.

93 Gorightly, *Historia Discordia*, 76.
Cusa was keen to point out, however, that this coincidence should not be confused with identity. God was not essentially contradiction. The Discordians, for whom “coincidence” had other meanings, were perhaps not so sure.


With a rationalist’s typical distrust of paradox, Bagger wants to suggest that this liberation is an illusion, since such altered states represent only the springing of cognitive or discursive traps already loaded within the mystic’s given tradition. In a perfect description of a bootstrapped process, Bagger writes that “mysticism exploits the awe produced by paradox to render compelling the ontological doctrine that produces paradox.” Bagger, *Uses*, 92. But though Bagger wants to pull the rug out from under his mystics and ascetics alike, he does not address what happens when the triggering paradoxes are not “produced” from doctrine but drawn from, say, logic or quantum physics, to say nothing of the critical understanding about the phenomenological power of the very bootstrap he describes. Indeed, his naturalistic account could just as easily be read as the Discordian description of a *successful* bootstrap operation.


Some 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 *Principia Discordia* does not, for example, announce that “there are no absolute truths,” which is a metaphysical axiom that destroys itself on the shoals of self-contradiction. Instead, by continually undermining its own claims, the text *enacts* this ironic truth rather than merely stating it.
Cosmic Triggers

1 “This time the mask comes off,” writes the journalist Richard Metzger about *Cosmic Trigger*. “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?” Richard Metzger, *Disinformation: the Interviews* (New York: Disinformation, 2002), 15.


3 Wilson credits the phrase to Leary. For one reality tunnel exercise, 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. Now all manner of online denizens recognize this phenomenon.


6 In the eighties, Wilson constructed an alternative system of logical values. Though he did not have the capacity or likely the interest in developing it formally, it is worth recognizing that scores of 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.
Timothy Morton also connects such substance ontology to the Babylonian regimes of agriculture, the law of noncontradiction, and the state. See Morton, *Dark Ecology* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2016), especially 38-59.

Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!,* 149.

One of the pleasures of *Illuminatus!* is that it serves as a rival contender to Rand's doorstop for the distinction of being the great American libertarian novel.

Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!,* 111.

Warren's defense of what he called the “sovereignty of the individual” aligned with Wilson's nonconformist rejection of politics as a system of social control. But it also resonated with his Reichean insistence that a healthier and more sensible world would emerge if individuals would break through their armor of programmed symbolic abstractions and return to their senses. From Tucker, Wilson learned to reject arguments based on natural law, holding that natural or property rights were just more “spooks” that should be extirpated through personal psychological liberation and insurrectionary acts of language. See Doherty, *Radicals*, 37-52.

“He loved liberty but held fast to Tuckerite ideas that modern corporate capitalism and banking just wasn't any kind of liberty he valued.” Doherty, *Radicals*, 521.


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 some psychotherapeutic researchers, the bulk of the interest in psychedelic compounds was found in conservative and right-wing
circles. See Boon, *Excess*, 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* 21, no. 2 (Fall 1980): 65-77.

15 As Wilson himself perceptively noted, Leary followed B.F. Skinner in rejecting the “poetry” of Freud and Jung. At the same time, Leary 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.” As a social critic in the mid-sixties, Wilson found “this Einsteinian and anarchistic variation on Skinner's 1984-ish Behavior Mod” both exciting and hopeful. Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger*, 37, 40.


18 Timothy Leary, *High Priest* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1968), 2. For all the silliness of this talk, we must also acknowledge Leary as one of the very first public figures to use such “neuro”discourse at all, fusing evolutionary brain metaphors with spiritual (and technological) aspirations.

19 Both of these books were later republished under different titles by New Falcon Publications: *Sex, Drugs & Magick* and *Ishtar Rising: Why the Goddess Went to Hell and What to Expect Now That She's Returning*, respectively. These names reflect Wilson's
increasingly direct engagement with the occultural marketplace in the late seventies and eighties.

20 Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger*, 68.

21 When introducing the T’angpoon in *The Sex Magicians*, Wilson notes parenthetically that the energy is identical with what other civilizations would come to call kundalini, mana, animal magnetism or just “the vibes.” Here again, the discourse of religious comparativism serves not so much to establish essentialized meanings as to reframe the human body as the *prima materia* of energetic transformation, a psychobiological shift that is made more explicit, and more secular, in Reich's “orgone” and Leary's hedonic circuits. Wilson, *The Sex Magicians* (Sheffield House, 1973), 142.

22 Robert Anton Wilson, *The Sex Magicians*, 143-44. In *Illuminatus!, Stella Maris’ experience of sexual bliss reflects 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 after this blast, however, express a curious dissatisfaction, one that underscores the psychedelic conundrum of the come-down. “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?” Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!,* 713.


24 Hugh Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press,
2003), 207. At the same time, I agree with Courtney Bender that the widespread critical 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.” Courtney Bender, The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 154.

25 Wilson, Sex and Drugs, 246.


27 Wilson, Sex and Drugs, 253. To explain such mergers with the All, Wilson uses 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, the homeostat does not model an isolated animal, but rather an “animal-in-an-environment.” Lilly explained that unity consciousness—the kind of mystical mergers that Freud poetically described as the “oceanic feeling” and that acidheads called being “at one with the universe”—were, from a “more reasonable point of view,” the direct results of “one's thought and feeling expanding into the circuitry in one’s computer usually occupied by perception of external reality.” Lilly, Programming and Metaprogramming, 32-33.

28 Ironically, Wilson's approach in many ways resonates with the conservative scholar R.C. Zaehner's famously lacerating criticism of Aldous Huxley in his 1957 book Mysticism: Sacred and Profane. Zaehner argues that Huxley's influential account of mescaline mysticism in The Doors of Perception represents a purely naturalist or “profane” phenomenon unmarked by any sacred or mystical order of being. As an anarchic empiricist, Wilson is totally OK with this kind of profane.

29 Urban, Tantra, 205.

30 Wilson, Cosmic Trigger, 72.
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.” See Michel Foucault, “The West and the Truth of Sex,” in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, eds. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 53.


Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger II*, 159.

Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger II*, 160.

Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger II*, 70. Egil Asprem’s discussion of Crowley’s method supports Wilson’s notions. 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 obtained results through inter-subjectively verifiable methods.” Egil Asprem, “Magic Naturalized?

37. As the historian of esotericism Olav Hammer reminds us, such invocations of “science” were common among the esotericists of Crowley's day. Most of the time, such thinkers understood “science” to mean what we might call the content of science: “the body of statements, the terminology and/or the technical applications of science.” As Hammer argues, this ignores what is arguably the most essential characteristic of scientific practice: its method of inquiry. This method does not consist in terminology or a specific body of knowledge but rather in an intersubjective and repeatable process designed, at least ideally, to iteratively expose and correct all manner of errors. And it is this method, Hammer states, that one “rarely if ever finds in Esoteric movement texts.” Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 204, 222. Unfortunately, Hammer chooses not to look closely at Crowley, whose embrace of the “method of science” offers an important counter-example. Rather than offer elaborate fringe science cosmologies a la Theosophy, Crowley instead asserted that you could base a spiritual school on “practice and methods” rather than theory or supernatural belief. Practice alone, Crowley claimed, was sufficient to achieve Illumination, or “Spiritual Experience.” Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: an Autohagiography*, eds. John Symonds and Kenneth Grant (London: Arkana, 1989), 296.


“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.” Crowley, *Magick in Theory*, 256. Crowley's definition of proof was rather recondite to be sure. Nonetheless, as Asprem argues, Crowley's assessments not only invoke scientific values of objectivity and demonstration, but insist that such work occur *after the fact*, breaking down the immediacy of the raw visionary material into a data set for later analysis.


This is why I don't believe we can fully accept Owen's claim that the modern occult self “did not recognize the relativism of its own self-reflexivity.” Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 256.


Adler, *Drawing Down*, 162.


University Press, 2012), 29. In other words, the texts of “disenchanted enchantment” reframe the imagination as a pleasure, at once a wonder and an entertainment, but now shorn of the metaphysical substance that 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” (33).

52 Saler, As If, 50.
53 Saler, As If, 50.
55 Such disenchanted enchantment played an important role in the seventies occult revival as well, at least for those who wanted to have their esoteric cake and eat it too. While many readers of, say, Erich von Däniken's ancient aliens books took them terribly seriously, many others read the author as they would read Lovecraft or Tolkien, enjoying an intoxicating hit of “indefinite promise and possibility” that was made even more seductive (or perversely enjoyable) by the apparent sincerity of the authors.
56 Shea and Wilson, Illuminatus!, 599-600.
57 With more seriousness, Saler traces the title Al Azif to Samuel Henley's notes to William Beckford's weird Orientalist masterpiece Vathek (1786). See Saler, As If, 145.
58 James, Varieties, 55.
60 Wilson's attitude towards these arguably “uncool” sources was typically pragmatic. “In general, I am much happier than before starting these experiments.” See Wilson, Cosmic Trigger, Volume II, 55.


63 Lilly, *Programming and Metaprogramming*, 33.

64 Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger*, 83.

65 One way of understanding Wilson's balance of reason and anti-rationality is provided by the pop theorists Alexander Bard and Jan Söderqvist, who assert a critical difference between reason as an empirical, embodied 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. The phenomenal unfolding of embodiment provides a perspectival organization to reason as well as a sense of unique agency. “Reason is represented by a highly real, active actor, while rationality is only represented by a highly illusory, passive observer.” In Wilson’s terms, rationality is an abstraction, a spook. See Alexander Bard and Jan Söderqvist, *Syntheism—Creating God in the Internet Age* (New York: Stockholm Text, 2014), 64.

66 Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!*, 757.

67 Here Wilson recalls Foucault's introduction to the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, where the author 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.” Foucault is not speaking of himself alone when he artfully summarizes the drive as well as the desire that sometimes opens up the Pandora’s box of limit experiences: “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.” Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 8.
Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger*, 3.

Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger*, 83-84.

The full law states: “ALL THINGS HAPPEN IN FIVES, OR ARE DIVISIBLE BY OR ARE MULTIPLES OF FIVE, OR ARE SOMEHOW DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY APPROPRIATE TO 5.” Malaclypse, *Principia Discordia*, 4th edition, 16.

“In the early ’60s in Tangier, Burroughs knew a certain Captain Clark who ran a ferry from Tangier to Spain. One day, Clark said to Burroughs that he’d been running the ferry 23 years without an accident. That very day, the ferry sank, killing Clark and everybody aboard. In the evening, Burroughs was thinking about this when he turned on the radio. The first newscast told about the crash of an Eastern Airlines plane on the New York-Miami route. The pilot was another Captain Clark and the flight was listed as Flight 23.” Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger*, 43. Note that the number also composes the opening digits of PKD’s “2-3-74.”

Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!*, 541.

Think of the plotted “chance encounters” of Victorian novels, or Horace Walpole’s concept of *serendipity*, those “fortunate happenstances” whose real effects, he believed, are as strong in scientific research as in anything else.


Shea and Wilson, *Illuminatus!*, 304. It should be noted that, though Rhinehardt did ask for line 23, the line only encompasses the very end of the sentence that Laura Huxley discovered. See Laura Huxley, *This Timeless Moment* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1968), 324-326.

In one of his memoirs, Lilly dates this event to the fall of 1974. John Lilly, *John Lilly, So Far…* (New York: Tarcher, 1980), 205-6. However, Kohoutek was only visible for a few months at the end of 1973 and the beginning of 1974. The Aviation Safety Network records the crash of a TWA Boeing 707 at LAX on January 16,

77. For a marvelous account of these deeper connections, see Matt Cardin, “In Search of Higher Intelligence: The Daimonic Muse(s) of Aleister Crowley, Timothy Leary, and Robert Anton Wilson,” in *Daimonic Imagination Uncanny Intelligence*, eds. Angela Voss and William Rowlandson (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 266-281.


79. Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger*, 89.


83. In Zolar's *The Encyclopedia of Ancient and Forbidden Knowledge* (1970), the Toronto group found a chapter on “Artificial Entities” and the lore of the egregore. “In an occult or magical context, an Egregore is such a thing that has developed to the point of attaining an independent existence as an entity itself, or it is an intentionally created entity (such as a servitor) that has grown in power well past its original design.” Zolar, *The Encyclopedia of Ancient and Forbidden Knowledge* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 46. They also read Alexandra David Neel, *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*, whose idea of the *tulpa* involved “magic formations generated by a powerful concentration of thought.” Alexander David Neel, *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (New York: Dover, 1971), 311.

This is a less surreal aside to the reader than it may appear, given that Celine's characterization in some sense describes Wilson and Shea's own method of fictionally correlating a myriad of historical conspiracy theories.


Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger*, 11.

Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger, Volume II*, 56-57.


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.

James, *Varieties*, 333-334.
Wilson, Cosmic Trigger, 237.
Stigmata


3. 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, Calif.: Underwood-Miller, 1991)—and a more substantial abridgment published in 2011: Philip K. Dick, *The Exegesis of Philip K Dick*, edited by Pamela Jackson and Jonathan Lethem (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011). 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*.


5 It is important to note, however, that Dick wrote about religion throughout his career, albeit often from a more satirical and sociological perspective. For a good overview, see Evan Lampe, *Philip K. Dick and the World We Live In* (Wide, 2013), especially 217-256.


9 These include an anthropological and cognitive approach to altered states of consciousness; the historical study of gnosis and esotericism as modern cultural currents; the hermeneutic investigation of religious reading; and the history of countercultural spirituality in postwar America.

10 A passage in *VALIS* emphasizes this crucial distinction: “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.” Philip K. Dick, *VALIS* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 37.

11 McKenna’s apocalypticism, of course, is deeply dependent on Christian eschatology. But unlike Dick, neither Jesus Christ nor questions of sin, Satan, or salvation play a role in McKenna’s revelations.


Anne wrote that “he thought the *I Ching* was alive...and that the *I Ching* had sent the dream to him.” Anne Dick, *The Search*, 66.

In his biography, Rickman cannily if not entirely accurately called the *I Ching* “the literary equivalent of voices in the head.” Rickman, *High Castle*, 377.


Anne lists some: Serpasil for heart murmur, Semosydrine for agoraphobia, Stelazine for anxiety, Preludin and other amphetamines to lift mood.

Sutin, *Divine Invasions*, 27.


In a 1967 letter, Dick 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, *The Selected


This recalls, again, Lacan's figure of the “extimate”: that Other that is intimately woven within the self, and yet appears as alien.


Sutin, *Divine Invasions*, 177.


Dick, *Shifting Realities*, 205.
By the early seventies, Synanon, perhaps inspired by the tax-saving transformation of L. Ron Hubbard's Dianetics into the Church of Scientology, had mutated into the Church of Synanon. It had also become what many observers considered an authoritarian cult. See Paul Morantz, *From Miracle to Madness: The True Story of Charles Dederich and Synanon* (Pacific Palisades, Calif.: Cresta Publications, 2014).


The Exegesis is stuffed with plot outlines for both possible novels and the complex conspiracies that Dick believed surrounded him. It is not always possible to tell the difference. 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.
2–3–74

1 It is true that some scholars and mystics argue for the existence of “pure conscious events” that are truly signless and without content. But these are not the kind of experiences we are addressing here. See Robert Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).


4 See Dick, *Exegesis*, 6-10.

5 Dick, *Exegesis*, 8. While tensions between religious, paranormal, and more-or-less naturalistic explanations run throughout the Exegesis, the particular take Dick provides Fitting in this passage cannot be separated from Fitting’s status as an important (and unquestionably materialist) critic of Dick’s work.

6 For the difficulties and possibilities of such interpretive labor see Mark Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative* (London: Routledge, 1993), esp. 3-49.

biographical material, Peake did not step as lightly as he should have and the text has been heavily criticized by Dick fans and scholars.


9 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 (“wisdom”) 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.


12 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.” Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary On The Letter To The Romans* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), 72.


17 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.


19 Clement of Alexandria, writing towards the end of the 100s, recommends that his readers have their personal seals engraved with either a dove or a fish. Paedagogus, III, xi.


“Much of what has been identified as gnostic in Dick's work is just as easily—and often more convincingly—identifiable as Christian.” Gabriel McKee, *Pink Beams of Light*, 31.


These include 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). Jason Taverner is the protagonist of *Flow My Tears*.

Dick, *VALIS*, 163.


34 There is no historical basis for this lore, whose origins seem to actually lie in esoterica. In discussions of Freemasonry in the nineteenth century, the fish sign was explicitly compared to the secret tokens of the Masons. For an exhaustive archaeological and literary excavation of the ἵχθυς, see Charles R. Moray, “The Origin of the Fish Symbol” *Princeton Theological Review* 8 (1910), 93-106, 231-46, 410-32.

35 Agamben 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 he called *synthemata*. These “bore the impress of the god and were able to awaken souls to the divinity they symbolized.” Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 50. As Agamben points out, this doctrine influenced the theory of Catholic sacraments as well as the theosophy of Boehme. Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method* (Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books, 2009), 40.

36 Agamben, *Signature*, 57.

37 Dick, *Exegesis*, 49.

38 Dick, *Exegesis*, 56.


41 Marion, *God Without Being*, 22.

42 Marion, *God Without Being*, 18.
43 A few of these transformations are, well, *exegetical*. In one rather ingenious reading, Dick identifies the two intersecting points of the arcs as indicating both the initial event of Christ and his eventual second coming in historical time. Dick, *Exegesis*, 136.


45 Dick, *Exegesis*, 37. The Whale's Mouth vision is related to the code ALBEMUTH, and also recalls the name of the colonist planet in Dick's 1964 story “The Unteleported Man.” Samuel J. Umland offers a compelling reading of the Whale's Mouth in Umland, “To Flee from Dionysus,” 81-82, 93.


48 In the Exegesis, Dick explains that “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.” 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.

49 James, *Varieties*, 242.

50 Rickman, *High Castle*, 140.
51 Rickman, *High Castle*, 129.

52 In a 1978 entry to the Exegesis, Dick wrote that he “first saw the illusory nature of space when I was in high school.” Rickman, *High Castle*, 130.


55 This view, which has been heavily criticized by other PKD scholars, also unintentionally touches on one of the hot button topics of contemporary conspiracy psychology. Within the popular *discourse* of mind control, much is made about the link between psychological trauma and the “programming” of “alters.”

56 Arnold, *Divine Madness*, 58

57 Boon, *The Road of Excess*, 223.


62 “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).” Rickels, *I Am Philip K. Dick*, 10.
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.” Umland, “To Flee from Dionysus,” 90. 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.

As a number of critics have noted, Dick drew his concept of the “tomb world” from Binswanger's analysis of the schizophrenic patient Ellen West, one of the principal studies in which Binswanger demonstrated his concern for what Foucault called, in his early essay on the analyst, “the modalities of existence.” Michel Foucault and Ludwig Binswanger, *Dream and Existence* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1993), 33.


Dick, *Exegesis*, 576. In Folder 50 in the unpublished Exegesis, Dick also mentions “Leary's robots.”

As his ex-wife Nancy put it, “Phil took Stelazine, muscle relaxants, stomach relaxants, Valium, tranquilizers, and stimulants... He took seventy pills a day.” Cited in Anne Dick, *The Search*, 174.

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.” Carrère, *I Am Alive*, 156.

Sutin, *Divine Invasions*, 212.

As we have already seen with Robert Anton Wilson, this popular model linked the left brain with language and reason and the non-
dominant right brain with intuition, imagery, and the creative unconscious.


74 Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). According to Crabtree, the alternate-consciousness paradigm culminated with William James, and then became doubly repressed by both psychoanalysis and the new academic psychology that followed James.

75 Dick, *Shifting Realities*, 170.

76 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).

77 “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.” Dick, *Shifting*, 172.

78 Dick would also argue at times that 2-3-74 saved him from psychosis.


81 This thesis is extensively developed in Tanya Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*.

The composition of *The Divine Invasion* (New York: Timescape, 1981) began with a dream that Dick reports in the late seventies in the Exegesis. Dick dreams about the Satanic takeover of the Church, a condition that requires the Second Coming to occur outside of worldly institutions. Dick, *Exegesis*, 542. It should be noted that every effort was taken in the editing of the *Exegesis* to include all of Dick's dream descriptions, as well as all his accounts of particular extraordinary experiences.


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. See Evan Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 110-117.


Summarizing research into the visual modality of hypnogogia, Mavromatis writes that its displays 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, *Hypnogogia: The Unique State of Consciousness between Wakefulness and Sleep* (London; New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 81.


Dick, *Exegesis*, 278.


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 his own psyche and, armed with often unpersuasive or nebulous evidence, identify the source of the Voice with an external, knowing agency.

Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, 188.

Wolfson, *A Dream Interpreted*, 16.
Exegete


5  Dick read James early in his life; he gave a copy of Varieties to a girlfriend in the late 1940s.

6  McKee, Pink Beams, 46.

7  As McKee explains, “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.” McKee, Pink Beams, 71.

8  McKee, Pink Beams, 6.


11  Dick, Exegesis, 830.

12  Dick, Exegesis, 466-67.

13  Dick, Exegesis, 483.


18. Schreber’s most memorable 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. Dick, *Exegesis*, 489-490.


20. Examples of such communications noise include the malfunctioning taped instructions at the beginning of *A Maze of Death* (1970), or the lyrics from *Fiddler on the Roof* that are intentionally distorted by Yah in *The Divine Invasion* (1981).

21. Dick, *Exegesis*, 738. Here Dick tries to wiggle through one of the fundamental conflicts in the philosophy of mysticism. On the one hand, some thinkers assert that mystical experience enables us to transcend conceptual or dualistic thought and to directly glimpse reality as it is. More skeptical voices insist that mystical experience is, like everything else, a construction. Here Dick embraces this latter Kantian argument, but pushes it in the direction of revelation. Peak experiences are not real in themselves, but neither are they simply projections or hiccups of the individual mind. Instead, experiences remain tokens in the
racket of signification. Through what Dick calls “meta-abstraction,” we can intuit these experiences as a special kind of sign: an “ultra-real” (or hyperreal) sign that points, not back to our own language or neural hardwiring, but to an ineffable ground that eludes both words and “things.”

22 Bender writes that the unique self-narratives of the New Age individuals she studied in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 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*, 56-89.

23 Bender, *The New Metaphysical*, 69. Bender ironically tips her hat to this legacy by doing her research in James’ old haunts in Cambridge.

24 Bender, *The New Metaphysicals*, 83.


26 Pamela Jackson, Annotation, in Dick, *Exegesis*, 63.


31 Miller, *Dreams*, 98.

32 Dick, *Exegesis*, 99. It is worth noting that Tim Powers points to the uncanny and prophetic position of the dead man’s body in this
vision. According to Powers, who arrived at Dick's apartment shortly before the author was taken to the hospital for the last time in early 1982, Dick had collapsed “between the coffee table and the couch.” See Tim Powers, “Introduction,” in Dick, Selected Letters 1975-1976, ix-x.

33 Palmer, Philip K. Dick, 228-233. As for the question of whether Dick is a “postmodern” writer, Rossi’s resistance may be the most economical: “If by postmodern we mean some up-to-date variety of nihilism, then Dick is definitely not postmodern.” Rossi, “Radio Free PKD,” Foundation 106 (Summer 2009): 11.

34 Catherine Albanese, A Republic of Mind and Spirit (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), 423. In his memoirs, Schreber also called on multiple traditions to flesh out his extraordinary experiences and delusions. For Schreber, human souls combine within different faith traditions into singular “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 Zoroastrian Ariman and Ormuzd—to “identical” figures like Woten and Jupiter, on the one hand, and Balder, Bielebog, and Poseidon on the other. Daniel Paul Schreber, Memoirs of My Nervous Illness (New York: NYRB Classics, 2000), 30.

35 Such texts also recall the “fantasia of the library” that Foucault finds in Gustave Flaubert's surreal novel The Temptation of St. Anthony (1874). For Foucault, Flaubert's text, flush with the voices of esoteric personae and heretics, initiates a modern imaginary that “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.” Michel Foucault, Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 91.

36 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.’” Kripal, Mutants and Mystics, 280.

In his book about books and dreams, Peter Lamborn Wilson explains why Moslem and Jewish dream interpreters traditionally claimed that the “dream follows the interpretation” (literally, “follows the mouth”). Wilson argues that the dream is the first teacher of the sign or script. The dream detaches images from their material basis, doubles them, recombines them, inscribes them anew. But without some form of condensation after the fact, this phantasmagoria simply drifts along; “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.” Peter Lamborn Wilson, “Shower of Stars:” *Dream & Book* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Autonomedia, 1996), 86-87.

One remarkably tangled example of this referential logic occurs in folder 50, when the weird, self-referential quality of the Exegesis goes haywire. At the top of page 37, Dick ends a handwritten sentence with an asterisk that refers to a small chunk of footnoted text below, which concerns the presence of Christ. Between these passages 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 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 recursive 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.” Dick, *Exegesis*, 280-282.


41 Dick, *Exegesis*, 93.

42 Dick, *Exegesis*, 93.


52 In the *Hymn of the Soul*, whose full translation Dick would have had access to in Jonas, the personified letter encountered by the
protagonist issues the following curiously self-referential command: “Awake and arise up out of thy sleep, and perceive the words of our letter.” See Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 114.

53 Lacan offers a fascinating examination of the real in relationship to the phenomenon of awakening from a noise, which propels the sleeper from the dream to the realm of social symbolic 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.


56 Dick, *Exegesis*, 94.

57 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.


59 A November 3, 1974 letter to Ursula Le Guin also extensively discusses Richard Bucke’s *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901), which has a chapter on Boehme. Dick, *Selected Letters 1974*, 276-77. The matter of Boehme also reflects a common pattern in the Exegesis: a motif is casually introduced, and later blooms into a matter of such great significance that it changes the visionary narrative in retrospect.

60 Dick, *Exegesis*, xxi.

61 Proverbs 3:3, 7:3; Jeremiah 17:1.


Cited in Pamela Jackson, Annotation, in Dick, *Exegesis*, 513. As a supporting editor on the project, I can concur with her editorial judgment. That said, there is no doubt some gold in those hills.


Dick was quite aware that salvation through Christ was sometimes represented in antiquity as the defeat of astrology and fate. See Tim Hegedus, *Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), especially 163-171.


See Anthony Enns, “Media, Drugs, and Schizophrenia in the Works of Philip K. Dick,” *Science Fiction Studies* 33 (Mar 2006) 68-88. Enns insightfully points out that Dick's narrative and metaphysical “shunts” also reflect Dick's 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 with the “tomb world” of stasis. Even destruction—or informational “noise”—can be liberating in such a context.


The resemblance of this “flip/flop” to binary operations within computers is significant. But the concept also evokes 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.

Dick, *Exegesis*, 603. “Pigspurt” refers to a thoroughly secular government mind control program.

Dick, *Exegesis*, 603. For Dick, this dream time was equivalent to what he called “orthogonal time,” a surreal and psychedelic twist on Platonism that Dick used to explain, to take just one example, the superimposition of ancient Rome onto Orange County, circa 1974.

As Jeffrey Kripal points out in his annotation to this passage, “what Eliade imagined in his comparative theorizing Dick seems to have realized in his experience of VALIS.” Jeff Kripal, Annotation, in Dick, *Exegesis*, 603.

Dick, *Selected Letters 1975-1976*, 307-8. At the same time, Dick was also worried about being perceived as a nut. A year before writing to Nicholls, Dick wrote to Tom Disch, who may have been planning to do a piece on Dick for *Crawdaddy*. Dick spilled his visionary beans, but he also added, parenthetically, “but that's our little secret, not for the readership of Crawdaddy who really wouldn't want to know anyhow, would they?” Dick, *Selected Letters 1975-1976*, 191.


Dick, *VALIS*, 231.

Dick, *VALIS*, 207.


88 Dick, *Exegesis*, 545; also see Erik Davis, *Annotation*, 542.

89 Dick’s comments on his literary method can be found in Philip K. Dick, *Selected Letters: 1977-1979* (Novato, Calif.: Underwood-Miller, 1993), 16; the Exegesis quotation is found on Dick, *Exegesis*, 375.

90 Derrida poses that question, unsurprisingly, in an essay that exemplifies such superimposition. Published in 1979 as a chapter in a collection heavy with his Yale colleagues, “On Living: Borderlines” was written in the penumbra of Shelley’s poem “The Triumph of Life.” But it never really gets around to addressing the poem, which is cloaked in a palimpsest of discussions about Maurice Blanchot and other meanders. As such, Derrida attempts to perform or simulate the Shelley text through a kind of wayward mimesis that nonetheless refuses direct address or citation. Jacques Derrida, “On Living: Borderlines,” in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 80.


95 Rossi, *Twisted Worlds*, 217-220.

97  Rossi, *Twisted Worlds*, 228.


101 Once again, we are reminded of the transition that Jeffrey Kripal describes between Realization and Authorization. See Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*.

102 Dick, *VALIS*, 230, 241. This sentence also recalls the famous statement from the last letter Nietzsche wrote: “At bottom I am all the names in history.” By this time, the philosopher had already lost his sanity, and identified himself frequently with Dionysus. See Michael Harr, *Nietzsche and Metaphysics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 34.

103 Rossi, *Twisted Worlds*, 228.


105 Dick, *VALIS*, 70, 72, 228.

106 “I mean, after all, you have to consider we're only made out of dust. That's admittedly not much to go on and we shouldn't forget that. But even considering, I mean it's sort of a bad beginning, we're not doing too bad. So I personally have faith that even in this lousy situation we're faced with we can make it. You get me?” Dick, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (New York: Viking, 1964), front matter.


Burton, “From Exegesis to Ecology,” 211.

Burton, “From Exegesis to Ecology,” 213. In a key insight, Burton argues that, with the Exegesis, 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 what Erich Hörl calls “eco-technological subjectivity.” Burton, 224.

Dick, VALIS, 139.

Indeed, the summary of the film we get in VALIS reads, not coincidentally, like one of the many plot outlines Dick had been producing in the Exegesis over the previous few years, as he attempted to rewrite Valissytem A.

Dick, VALIS, 145.

Dick, VALIS, 146, 149.

Patricia Warrick, Mind in Motion: The Fiction of Philip K. Dick (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 176; Kim Stanley Robinson, The Novels of Philip K. Dick (doctoral dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 1982), 112; Rossi, Twisted Worlds, 219. Rossi also insists the novel moves or “shunts” between genres in far more complex ways than those listed here.

Dick, VALIS, 158.

Dick, VALIS, 167.


A few scenes in which Newton watches a bank of television sets at the same time recall Dick's 1969 short story “The Electric Ant,” in which the android character speculates whether his quasi-organic brain might be able to make sense of a television set that projects twenty different programs onto the screen simultaneously. “Maybe we could learn...to be selective; do our own job of perceiving what we wanted to and what we didn't.” Philip K. Dick, Selected Stories of Philip K. Dick (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 389.

Kevin Donnelly, Magical Musical Tour: Rock and Pop in Film Soundtracks (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 102. Along with Brian Eno's Discreet Music, the Roeg film's soundtrack—which at one point features a mixture of electronics and humpback whale songs—also inspired Dick's ideas about subliminal music in VALIS.

This is why Dick trufan Jonathan Lethem gives the reader so much delightful stoner dialogue in Chronic City (New York: Doubleday, 2009), one of his most overtly Dickean novels.

In a letter from early 1977, Dick writes that “I read a lot, listen to records, spend hours talking with my drinking buddies, work on my religious notes and on my novel-in-progress. My buddies keep me from feeling lonely.” Dick, Selected Letters 1977-1979, 3.
Conclusion: The Netweird World

6. Terence McKenna, “Afterword: I Understand Philip K. Dick,” in Dick, *In Pursuit of Valis*, 255, 256, 257. (Novato, Calif.: Underwood-Miller, 1991). Writing about his own soon-to-be-published books, Terence concludes that “I would bet dollars to donuts that if Phil had lived to see, to feel, and to understand what this PKD-inspired servant of the Logos has managed to drag home from the beach, he would embrace it” (260).
Jeffrey Kripal even calls Dick a “gnostic comparativist,” a researcher of resonances whose personal revelation could only be authenticated by a ceaseless encyclopedic trawl through the archives of world thought and literature.


As of this writing, the publishing fate of this manuscript has yet to be resolved.


“Credit checks became more centralized. Governmental agencies first used tools such as computer matching to cross-reference computer files, thereby identifying inconsistencies and finding lawbreakers...Perhaps most importantly, the silent majority as well as consumer-culture dropouts were canvassed and enlisted in the increasingly centralized marketplace.” Miller, *Seventies Now*, 3. At the same time, human bodies were revealed in new ways through CAT scans—invented in 1972—while ultrasound and magnetic imaging technologies became widely available in hospitals.


20 The microprocessor was invented in Silicon Valley in 1971, and such integrated circuitry paved the way for smaller machines. In 1973, Xerox PARC developed the Alto computer, which became the unintentional prototype of the first Apple, though it was the Altair 8800—developed, admittedly, in New Mexico—that was proclaimed the first “personal computer” in 1975. At Atari, microprocessors also fueled the emergence of the video game and the home gaming console, and the myriad of algorithmic pocket worlds that emerged.


24 “The information technology paradigm does not evolve toward its closure as a system, but toward its openness as a multi-edged network.” Castells, *Rise of Network Society*, 75-76.


31 Lilly, *Center of the Cyclone*, 261.

32 Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger*, 105.


34 Levy, *The Unicorn's Secret*, 186. As a consultant, Einhorn anticipated the cybernetic transformation of management theory later made famous by Tom Peters. According to Levy, his management study “Probes for a Time of Crisis” was “a blueprint for redefining the corporation, making use of Japanese-style management, in-house entrepreneurial efforts, and a sensitivity to workers that looked beyond standard management-worker conflicts” (201).


37 The literature on remote viewing is quite large. For an early historical overview, see Jim Schnabel, *Remote Viewers: The Secret History of America’s Psychic Spies* (New York: Dell, 1997).


39 Vallee, “Software.”


42 Here McKenna was simply being a good acolyte of McLuhan, who told *Playboy* in 1969 that the computer “holds out the promise of a technologically engendered state of universal understanding,” one that he compared explicitly to the Logos. Marshall McLuhan “The Playboy Interview,” *Playboy Magazine*, 


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About the Author

Erik Davis is the author of four books: *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (Crown, 1998), *Nomad Codes: Adventures in Modern Esoterica* (Yeti, 2010), *The Visionary State: A Journey through California’s Spiritual Landscape* (Chronicle, 2006), with photographs by Michael Rauner, and *Led Zeppelin IV* (Continuum, 2005). Davis has contributed articles and essays to a variety of periodicals, including *Bookforum, Arthur, Artforum, Slate, Salon, Gnosis, Rolling Stone*, the *LA Weekly, Spin, Wired* and the *Village Voice*, and has given talks at universities, media art conferences, and festivals around the world. For articles, essays and Erik’s regular podcast Expanding Mind, visit *techgnosis.com*