

# SKYWRITERS IN HADES

## Mirror Neurons, Individuation Spellcraft, and the Art of Shamanic Writing

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(with thanks to Mrs. Kephias: the perfect listener)

### **PART ONE: LEARNING TO LISTEN**

“Don’t scorn the word:  
Poets, the world is noisy  
and silent, only God speaks.”  
—Antonio Machado

#### **Pornography and Shamanic Healing**

“Writing is a socially acceptable form of schizophrenia.”  
—E.L. Doctorow

In 1992, Giacomo Rizzolatti and a team of neuroscientists accidentally discovered mirror neurons while experimenting on monkeys. The monkeys had their brains wired up in order to observe how motor neurons related to hand movements, and when a monkey picked up a peanut, the neuron fired. But to the team’s surprise, the same motor neuron also fired when the monkey was watching a lab assistant pick up the peanut. Apparently, to the monkey’s brain, seeing someone grabbing a peanut was a similar experience to grabbing the peanut itself. Action and perception were “tightly linked.” The neuroscientist Vilayanur S. Ramachandran believes that the discovery of mirror neurons for neuroscience is equivalent to the discovery of DNA for biology, and that the “fifth revolution” is the neuroscience revolution (following Copernican, Darwinian, Freudian, and Crick and Watson’s discovery of DNA).

Before we look more closely at what mirror neurons are, I’d like to begin by citing an interesting demonstration of how they function, using for an example a subject we are all acquainted with—pornography. The following is from “Porn and Mirror Neurons,” by Jonah Lehrer.

([http://scienceblogs.com/cortex/2009/08/porn\\_and\\_mirror\\_neurons.php](http://scienceblogs.com/cortex/2009/08/porn_and_mirror_neurons.php))

“But how does porn work? Why do humans (especially men) get so excited by seeing someone else have sex? At first glance, the answer seems obvious: watching porn triggers an idea (we start thinking about sex), which then triggers a change in our behavior (we become sexually aroused). This is how most of us think about thinking: sensations cause thoughts which cause physical responses. Porn is a quintessential example of how such a thought process might work.

“But this straightforward answer is probably wrong. Porn does not cause us to think about sex. Rather, porn causes to think we are having sex. From the perspective of the brain, the act of arousal is not preceded by a separate idea, which we absorb via the television or computer screen. The act itself is the idea. In other words, porn works by convincing us that we are not watching porn. We think we are inside the screen, doing the deed.”

Now let's reframe this argument and apply it instead to a shamanic healing ritual.

How does shamanic ritual work? Why do humans get healed by seeing someone else perform a ritual? At first glance, the answer seems obvious: watching a ritual triggers an idea (we start thinking about healing), which then triggers a change (we are healed). This is how most of us think about thinking: sensations cause thoughts which cause physical responses. Shamanic ritual is a quintessential example of how such a thought process might work.

But this straightforward answer is probably wrong. Shamanic ritual does not cause us to think about being healed. Rather, shamanic ritual causes us to think we are *doing the healing*. From the perspective of the brain, the act of healing is not preceded by a separate idea, which we absorb via watching the shaman. The act itself is the healing. In other words, shamanic ritual works by convincing us that we are not watching a shamanic ritual. We think we are the shaman, doing the ritual.

This interpretative model can be applied to absolutely anything within the parameters of human experience; but what we are interested in applying it to here is writing, most specifically journal writing, which involves *the observation of behavioral patterns*. What are the ways in which writing can be used to hold a mirror to our psyches and develop empathy for *ourselves*, as well as for others? How is isolating ourselves from the input of others a means for self-examination and a way to become more integrated into the community? What is a group mind, how is it formed, what makes it hold upon us so complete, and how does writing help to break that hold? What is individuation, how does it pertain to finding our own unique "voice," as writer-programmers of our reality—and what does all this have to do with porno and shamanism?!

Stay tuned, all will be revealed.

## **Reality as a Language-Based Construct**

"The linking and relinking of objects by the Brain is actually a language, but not a language like ours (since it is addressing itself and not someone or something outside itself). We should be able to hear this information, or rather narrative, as a neutral voice inside us. But something has gone wrong. All creation is a language and nothing but a language, which for some inexplicable reason we can't read outside and can't hear inside. So I say, we have become idiots. Something has happened to our intelligence. My reasoning is this: arrangement of parts of the Brain is language. We are parts of the Brain; therefore we are language. Why, then, do we not know this? We do not even know what we are, let alone what the outer reality is of which we are parts. The origin of the word "idiot" is the word "private." Each of us has become private, and no longer shares the common thought of the Brain, except at a subliminal level. Thus our real life and purpose are conducted below our threshold of consciousness."  
—Philip Dick, *Valis*

As many of us have long known (or are beginning to suspect), writing is a lot more than just marks on a page or pixels on a computer screen. Computer programming and html code are helping us to conceptualize reality as *a language-based construct*, and however foreign, even revolutionary, this idea is, it is not without its precedents. In fact, biology's discovery of DNA and genetic code has already established this idea for several decades, but because DNA is something few of us have direct knowledge of, it remains a largely abstract hypothesis. With

computer programming, however, the idea that a series of letters could give rise to material reality—*image*—is something that we get to experience for ourselves every time we boot up our PC. We all know that code creates images, and images reflect (and can pass for) reality.

Once upon a time this idea—and most of all the possibility of applying it—was restricted to the few. Once upon a time only initiates were privy to the occult knowledge required to activate “junk DNA,” raise the “Kundalini,” and recalibrate consciousness from human to divine frequencies. In Gnostic tradition, this self-activation process was symbolically described as moving up the chain of planetary “Archons,” using certain key words of power to get past each Archon or gatekeeper, until individual freedom was attained. These days, kids who don’t know an archon from their elbow are playing video games which require certain clues and passwords to get past a series of obstacles, or “gatekeepers,” in order to make it to “the next level.” Without digressing any further into the sacred science of occultism, you might say there’s been a progression from the magical tradition of spellcraft once reserved to the priestly caste, to government-sponsored biologists and neuroscientists tinkering with DNA and monkey brains, until today, when the oldest and most arcane art and science is being taught to pre-schoolers, and anyone with the time and patience to master computer-programming can summon occult forces and shape reality—via *the power of words*.

All of these various disciplines and media have one thing in common: language. Language is a series of symbols which only become meaningful once their meaning is agreed upon and they can be used to *communicate*. DNA, html code, god-names and video games are all *metaphors*, because in a reality that’s interpreted (and therefore shaped) via language, *everything* is metaphor. So what are they all metaphors for? In simplest terms, they are metaphors for the human psyche, and the process being described is that of *individuation*, or, to use another metaphor, *the alchemical transmutation of consciousness*. This is the “real life and purpose” which (*writer*) Philip K. Dick intuited as being “conducted below our threshold of consciousness.” It is happening right here, right now, beneath the surface and between the lines of our everyday narratives.

### **The Listener: Developing a Dialogue with Self**

“In Genesis, Yahweh’s first instruction to Adam is not something practical such as how to make a fire or fashion a weapon. He teaches the first man to name all of His creatures. By this act, Yahweh emphasizes that naming is the most potent power He will confer on mortals. Through naming, Adam gains ‘dominion over all the earth.’ Naming confers meaning and order. To name is to know. To know is to control.”  
—Leonard Schlain, *The Alphabet Vs. the Goddess*

It is logical to presume that, before words were ever written down, they began as *sounds*. While we can only presume this about the species, we can observe it first hand when it comes to individuals. When a baby learns to speak it doesn’t build a vocabulary word by word (a process which begins later), it starts by making unintelligible sounds *in imitation* of what it hears. Gradually, these sounds begin to resemble recognizable language and verbal communication begins. Soon after this, the child learns to read and write and language becomes fixed, not only as sound but as *image*. It becomes script, code. Writing then introduces a new possibility, that of words *separate from direct communication*, and the corresponding possibility of communication

occurring, not only across space, but across time. As Leonard Schlain writes in *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*, “The written word is essentially immortal. To a hyper-conscious primate who had become aware that death was inevitable, the discovery of a method to project one’s self beyond a single life span seemed nothing less than miraculous.”

There is another possibility which Schlain does not discuss, another purpose for writing which has nothing to do with immortality or even communication in the ordinary sense. That is the possibility of writing without any intention of ever sharing it with another human being—such as for example when writing a journal. Thousand, perhaps millions, of people do this every day (admittedly less so now that blogs and Facebook have opened up the possibility of communicating with strangers), and the assumed wisdom is that keeping a journal is a therapeutic process. If this is really the case, how does it work? The obvious answer is that writing a journal is a way to *communicate with oneself*.

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“To start a dialogue,  
first ask:  
then... listen.”  
—Antonio Machado

Short of talking to oneself (which creates a very different effect), self-communication is only possible via *writing*. Writing down an account of one’s activities or thoughts creates a distance between oneself and the raw material of one’s existence, and potentially between one’s everyday “motor” self and one’s *consciousness*. As in good therapy, one is talking to an impartial, disinterested, but wholly attentive other, the difference being that, in this case, the “Listener” is oneself. This Listener is something we can all develop within ourselves, without which no real communication is possible. Before we can begin to listen to others, we have to learn to listen to ourselves. Only then can we find our true voice, because real speech can only come about as a response to *listening*, whether internally or externally.<sup>1</sup>

We are all familiar with the phrase “to get something off your chest,” the idea being that, by talking about something that is causing us stress or discomfort, we can let it go, or at least see it in a less stressful light. The reason this works is that, by talking about something with a second party, we can see it from a different perspective, *from the outside rather than the inside*, and reduce its power to affect us. This can work when we have a sympathetic ear to vent our frustration to, but it tends to work better when we have a *neutral* ear, such as in therapy. Therapy allows us to *re-experience* our problem from the perspective of an impartial but curious observer who is devoid of any strong emotional reaction. This presence is the Listener, being at once both interested and *disinterested*, sympathetic but impartial, uninvolved. When we communicate with *ourselves* in this way, via writing, creative expression, deep thought or meditation, we bring forth The Listener—the part of us that is equivalent to a sympathetic but disinterested friend or a therapist—and can then *reconceive* the problem from a new perspective. The benefits of this are two-fold: not only do we experience our problem in a less stressful light, we also gain access to a

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<sup>1</sup> If we are too busy criticizing ourselves we won’t really hear what we are trying to communicate. In the same way, when we pretend to listen to others, we are actually too busy figuring out what we want to say next, and simply waiting for our chance to do so. This is not dialogue.

part of ourselves that is able to rise above any problem because it is entirely uninvolved, while at the same time, privy to inside information about us. The Listener is our own *inner therapist*.

Whether by sharing with a neutral party or writing it down, what is occurring through the act of communicating is that we get to see *what's inside us* in a way that feels safe to “take on board.” In terms of the issue being reconceived, if we are angry, we may describe our anger and the reasons for it, thereby seeing the *shape* of it and coming to “grips” with it. We can then own the anger in such a way that confronting the original cause of our anger becomes much easier and more straightforward. Instead of acting in anger, we “take” our anger to the person or situation and express it in a more balanced, less emotive fashion. Writing a journal, like talking to a therapist, is a way of testing the contents of our minds, both conscious and unconscious (writing will bring unconscious matter to the surface just as much as therapy), making sure that we have got to grips with it before letting others see it. It is a psychological rehearsal space in which we can see exactly what we are capable of and what we’re not—“where we’re at”—before going on stage and performing in front of a live audience.

This sort of dialoguing with the self can have an accumulative effect: it creates a recursive feedback loop in which, the more we reveal the contents of our minds to ourselves and integrate them, the more we accept ourselves *as we are*, the more we can open up to others, and so on. Alchemically speaking, we are drawing the lead into the laboratory of our minds and transmuting it, via awareness, over a long painful process, into gold. By establishing a different way of relating to ourselves through on-going dialogue, we are establishing a kind of *private social identity* which, little by little, we can take with us into the world. By strengthening our individual sense of truth, meaning, and value, we are slowly “finding our feet” in reality.

## **PART TWO: SCRIPTING THE DREAM**

“Authors, the scene ends  
with a rule of theater:  
In the beginning was the mask.”  
—Antonio Machado

### **The Magikal Mirror**

“Writing, I think, is not apart from living. Writing is a kind of double living. The writer experiences everything twice. Once in reality and once in that mirror which waits always before or behind.”  
—Catherine Drinker Bowen

Keeping a journal and performing a magical ritual might seem worlds apart, but there may be a common intent to both these activities. In the same way as we can bring aspects of our psyche to consciousness through writing, a ritual magician assumes certain roles with a desired outcome, embodying the god Mars in preparation for conflict or the goddess Venus in anticipation of love. By such archaic practices, the ceremonial magician is awakening parts of his (or her) psyche

which he wishes to embody and integrate into his persona. In a similar way, a shaman dons animal skins as a means to summon “spirits” which “dwell” in his psyche and in that of his audience (or client): he or she is invoking (and evoking) the primordial forces by acting *out* a specific part of the group psyche, as a means to integrate it. This is analogous to group therapy also, when a ritual space is created within which normal social rules are suspended. This ritual space—be it the journal, the therapy room, the shaman’s hut or the magician’s circle—allows “the inexpressible to be expressed.” As already described, communicating with ourselves in this way develops our ability to communicate with the world. Then, as we begin to bring this new awareness and maturity into our interactions with others, so communicating with the world deepens our relationship to ourselves.

There is a well-known magical oath: “I pledge to treat every phenomenon as a particular dealing of God with my Soul.” While based on the metaphysical belief that the Universe is a “magical mirror” which constantly reflects back at us the internal conditions of our souls, this oath also sums up the tenets of existential psychology, as encapsulated by Carl Jung’s statement: “When an inner process cannot be integrated it is often projected outward.” On the individuation journey to self-knowledge, there are inevitably aspects of our consciousness which we are either unable to see or unwilling to look at in isolation. Just as there are gods which the magician is careful not to invoke until ready, there are subjects which we choose not to write about in our journal, often because we aren’t ready to even think about them. Once we enter into interaction with other people, however, these are the very aspects that get stirred up. They are the rough (and blind) spots which sooner or later are going to trip us as we begin to engage with our environment in new ways. It is this pressure of interacting with other people that brings home the discord in our psyches and allows us to work it out. This tension provided by “the other” is essential to individuation, and it is why, “beyond a certain point, the whole universe becomes a continuous process of initiation.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Between the Lines: Induced Trance States Via Reading & Writing**

“Telepathy, of course. It’s amusing when you stop to think about it—for years people have argued about whether or not such a thing exists, folks like J. B. Rhine have busted their brains trying to create a valid testing process to isolate it, and all the time it’s been right there, lying out in the open like Mr. Poe’s Purloined Letter. All the arts depend upon telepathy to some degree, but I believe that writing offers the purest distillation.”

—Stephen King, “What Writing Is.”

Increased self-awareness equals maturity, making individuation an exponential growth curve. Maturity and self-awareness increases our capacity to observe ourselves, not only in others but in isolation, and this capacity for self-observation further increases self-awareness. The tension created within us by the presence of the other then allows for a *new* seeing within ourselves, because the other is *always* reflecting something we can’t or won’t see about ourselves. That newly gained insight is what we bring to our next relationship, and so on. The paradox of individuation is that, as we deepen self-awareness, it is as if we are cleaning the universal mirror within which we are gazing, so life reflects back at us ever more sharply our internal condition. The result is seemingly counter-intuitive: we become not less but more (and more) sensitive and

vulnerable to both internal and external triggers the more we mature, because as we continue to integrate the contents of our unconscious, it begins to seem as though the whole world is happening inside of us. It also becomes harder and harder to distance ourselves from others, because we are taking responsibility not only for our own thoughts, feelings and actions, but for everyone else's too—though only in relation to ourselves—and so everything that happens lands at our doorstep. The closest parallel to this ongoing initiation would be that of a lucid dream state, because in dream states isolation and interrelationship co-exist: we are both alone in our “head-space” and interacting (telepathically, astrally, or by means not yet understood) with the world outside us. This is why it is possible to unravel psychic knots while dreaming, which provides a direct parallel once again with both reading and writing, since both activities (when immersive) recreate *a waking dream state*.

The following is from Stephen King's *On Writing*:

“My name is Stephen King. I'm writing the first draft of this part at my desk (the one under the eave) on a snowy morning in December of 1997. There are things on my mind. Some are worries (bad eyes, Christmas shopping not even started, wife under the weather with a virus), some are good things (our younger son made a surprise visit home from college, I got to play Vince Taylor's ‘Brand New Cadillac’ with The Wallflowers at a concert), but right now all that stuff is up top. I'm in another place, a basement place where there are lots of bright lights and clear images. This is a place I've built for myself over the years. It's a far-seeing place. . . . you are somewhere downstream on the timeline from me . . . but you're likely in your own far-seeing place, the one where you go to receive telepathic messages. . . . And here we go—actual telepathy in action. You'll notice I have nothing up my sleeves and that my lips never move. Neither, most likely, do yours. Look—here's a table covered with a red cloth. On it is a cage the size of a small fish aquarium. In the cage is a white rabbit with a pink nose and pink-rimmed eyes. In its front paws is a carrot-stub upon which it is contentedly munching. On its back, clearly marked in blue ink, is the numeral 8. Do we see the same thing? We'd have to get together and compare notes to make absolutely sure, but I think we do.

“This is what we're looking at, and we all see it. I didn't tell you. You didn't ask me. I never opened my mouth and you never opened yours. We're not even in the same year together, let alone the same room... except we are together. We're close. We're having a meeting of the minds.”

Stephen King makes no mention of mirror neurons or brain states; back in 1997 no one was talking about such things. Yet he is essentially describing the same phenomenon: transference of thought via writing. It's interesting that King takes the time to describe his brain state (his mood), even though it has no apparent bearing on the scene which he goes on to transmit (the rabbit in the cage), telepathically, in order to literally illustrate his point. The reason it's interesting is that the science of mirror neurons argues that it is just such “between the lines” information that *is* transmitted via language—the writer's mood and current circumstances—even when they are in no way inferred by the written or spoken material itself.

What King is describing here is more than simply a shared visualization, because the act of visualizing—being obviously linked to dreaming—is one that entails at least *a minor trance state*. We all know what it is like to get sucked into a good book. We get lost in the writer's (and/or the characters') thoughts and feelings, immersed in another world being created by a combination of words on the page and our own ability to weave a surrogate dream reality inside our skulls (or bodies, if you want to be holistic about it). One thing is certain: when we are

carried away by a good book, fiction or non-fiction, we are only secondarily aware of reading words on a page; our primary awareness goes *where the words themselves take us*. And where they take us, as King points out, is not only into our own minds, but *into the mind of the author*. It is a matching of brains states, a shared trance. And (though this is trickier to prove) I'd wager that the closer the author was to deep dreaming when she or he wrote the book, the closer we can approach to such a state ourselves while reading it. This is what distinguishes great writing from not-so-great: the degree of immersion it induces in us is determined, at least in part, by the degree of immersion which the writer attained while writing it. This is what communicates—"between the lines."

Reading James Joyce is a very different experience to reading Elmore Leonard, and Jean Baudrillard requires an alternate sort of attention to Stephen King. Some prose is harder to get "our heads around," and while this may have to do with obvious factors such as dense vocabulary or labyrinthine phrases, it may also be dependent on how foreign or alien the brain state of the author is compared to our own. People who work hard to match Joyce's brain state "get" what he is doing and consider him a genius. For the rest of us, he is incomprehensible and overrated. (Ditto Baudrillard.) The same is true of our dreams: the ones that more closely match our waking brain state are easier to remember, understand, and describe. Others are so "out there" that just thinking about them causes us a mild form of distress due to cognitive dissonance. (The Surrealists were all about creating cognitive dissonance, and their aim was to try and match dream states through their use of word and image.)

If you read the following sentence, allowing that forensic science has a relative ownership of the sort of cheese waffles which your mother baked, for the sake of literary analysis you will take the next number 5 bus and wind up looking for missing punctuation marks. On the other hand if I say simply that this sort of playful writing has a pleasingly disorientating effect on the mind, you will be then relieved to be back on safe ground, and that matching the author's brain state does not entail coming *too* seriously unhinged from your own familiar worldview. Coherence is something we let go of only with a struggle. The point is, while you are reading this, you are going along with my own thoughts and as long as these seem to follow a linear sort of sequence common to waking logic, and to stick to ideas reasonably familiar to you, you can keep up and won't have too hard a time of it. The moment I bring in salivating leprous homunculi and suggest that your mother's panties are the secret to your wasted sex life, you will either laugh, become incensed, or try and figure out where exactly you lost the thread of my argument.

See what I mean?

### **Lucid Dreaming & Original Trauma**

"Learning to think without resorting to images is indispensable to alphabet literacy. 'Make no images' is a ban on right-brain pattern recognition. All who obey it will unconsciously begin to turn their backs on the art and imagery of the Great Mother and, re-orientated a full 180 degrees, will instead seek protection and instruction from the written words of an All-Powerful Father."

—Leonard Schlain, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*

Matching the author's brain state is something that happens automatically with "easy" prose, but which we become increasingly aware of having to do when the prose is more innovative and challenging, or conversely, sloppier and less cunningly structured. Yet the awareness of the reader is finally the determining factor in how efficient the conveyance of information is. If a tree falls and no one hears it, there's no sound, and a book that is never read does not exist as a form of literature, only an object on a shelf. Telepathy has not occurred: minds have not met. Compare this to our dream lives. How much of the material of our dreams ever makes it to our conscious minds? Yet it is there: book after book, story after story, just waiting to be tapped into and enjoyed.

In the common view, dreams are a way for our brains to "work off" excess stress or work out unresolved issues. In the jargon of our day, the dream state is a place where the unconscious "uploads" data—in *symbolic language*—about the condition of the "network," our total psyches. This can be transpersonal as well as personal because the unconscious is collective as well as individual. While sleeping, we are in *a relatively egoless state*, and because of this, information that would otherwise be threatening to, and hence repressed by, our waking consciousness can be addressed and integrated. When I say "relatively egoless," I mean that our everyday concerns no longer hold sway over our choices. Barring specific anxiety dreams, we aren't worried about the rent or what the neighbor thinks of us, but tend to get caught up in *symbolic enactments* that make little or no sense in the context of our waking lives.

If we think of ego in its pure sense, however—that of an individual perspective with its own focus and drive—it could be argued that, potentially at least, we are *more* in our ego while dreaming, because when we sleep our ego and id (conscious and unconscious minds) are functioning much more *as a unit*. This becomes particular apparent in lucid dreaming, and once again the parallel with writing is clear: lucid dreaming is a way of taking control of the components of our unconscious and *writing the dream*. Like a scenarist, a novelist, or a scriptwriter, our intent is to arrange specific elements of our unconscious in a conscious or semi-conscious fashion, in order to discover how best they fit together and create a meaningful narrative. This is the similarity; the difference, of course, is in the medium employed. When we sit at a desk and write, we are using words to describe internal states and are willingly entering into mild trance in order to best midwife that psychic material into the new form, that of literature. When we dream, on the other hand, something else happens, and words are only incidental to that mysterious process.

When we write we are creating an external vehicle for ourselves as consciousness: a book, a poem, a short story, an essay. This is called self-expression, and it's a process which most writers would say they have control over, if not total control then near enough. (Writers often say that when it's working, the story or piece takes over; but never, I assume, to the point they would forget to eat and starve to death.) When we dream, such control is drastically reduced, to the point that most of the time we forget that we are dreaming. The world we create becomes all-embracing. When we dream, we are "projecting" consciousness outside of the "self" and creating an image, then *stepping into the image and interacting with it*. Anyone who has ever fallen asleep and entered into dreaming consciously (the hypnopompic state) will have observed that critical moment when ordinary thoughts begin transform into and appear before us *as images*. This is the act of creation stripped down to its essence, and the essence of the creative act is that

(unlike writing) we have only a rudimentary kind of control over it. Falling asleep in this way can be extremely jarring (the trick is not waking ourselves up by reacting to the images we see); it is like tapping into a well of psychic energy that for the rest of our lives is turned off and unavailable to us. Writers—and all artists—attempt to tap into this wellspring consciously, while awake, and to direct it into a finished work which they can present to the world as “the product of their imagination.” Yet it may be that the product itself is almost incidental to the real mystery, that of the creative process itself. How does it happen and why does it take the form it does? What are these seemingly bipolar kinds of consciousness called waking and dreaming, and why is it so difficult (and so fascinating) a task to create—or locate—a working bridge between the two?

It’s been said that the original sin was projection<sup>ii</sup>: a split in consciousness between inner and outer by which we were cut off from the divine, expelled from Paradise. On the other hand, with no projection of consciousness outward, would there be anything for consciousness to interact with? Perhaps it wasn’t a sin until we mistook the projection for ourselves and got lost in the dream? Perhaps all of these practices—magic ritual, shamanic trance, lucid dreaming, meditation, psychotropic plant use, and *writing*—are ways to re-enact the original manifestation of consciousness into (and as) matter? Maybe they are tricks to remember how we tricked ourselves, as consciousness, into getting lost in a language-based reality construct? In which case, are they also ways to reverse “the Fall” by reenacting the primal trauma—what Philip K. Dick described as “a primordial split in the godhead”—and heal the rift between waking and dreams?

## **PART THREE: THE TROUBLE WITH BRAIN STATES**

“Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas’d,  
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,  
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,  
And with some sweet oblivious antidote  
Cleanse the stuff’d bosom of that perilous stuff  
Which weighs upon the heart?”  
—William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

### **Mirror Neurons & Unmediated Communication**

“Neuroscientists have discovered specialized cells in the brain, called mirror neurons, that spontaneously create brain-to-brain links between people. This means that our brain waves, chemistry and feelings can literally mirror the brain waves, chemistry and feelings of those who we are communicating with, reading stories about, watching on television, or people who we simply have in our thoughts. This is perfectly natural and has been happening all along. It allows us to instantly empathize with others and to know what they are feeling and experiencing.  
—Teka Luttrell, “Mirror Neurons: We Are Wired to Connect.”

The discovery of mirror neurons marks an Archimedean point (a God's eye view) from which all human knowledge can now be rethought and all our models of reality must be reformulated. The reason, in simple language, is that mirror neurons present us with a solid scientific basis for telepathy, and the existence of telepathy *changes everything*. The twist is that mirror neurons indicate telepathic communication isn't something that *can* happen, but that it's something that *is* happening *all the time*. We are already aware that "body language"—which includes not only tone of voice and gesture but scents and pheromones—means the greater percentage of human communication is nonverbal. Now it would seem as though body language must also take a back seat to direct, brain-to-brain interface. Whatever words and gestures may be happening on the surface, the primary transmission of meaning appears to be the result of *the matching of brain patterns*.

Outside of the laboratory, what are the ways in which we experience this? How many times do we say something "innocuous" which causes an inexplicable emotional reaction in someone? I would suggest that this is an example of the telepathy of mirror neurons in action, and that all our attempts to be "innocuous," humorous, or ingratiating don't amount to much if our brains are transmitting a different signal. If that's the communication that is really getting across, then the person on the receiving end of the transmission is going to *respond to our brain-state and not our words*. A large part of passive-aggressive behavior is unconscious: when we say one thing but mean another, it is as often as not without realizing it ourselves—until it's pointed out to us (often rudely). The fact that this happens over the Internet also is proof it's not merely body language that's conveying the hidden meanings. In fact, this sort of weird "misunderstanding" often happens even more dramatically via email and forum exchanges, and the reason may be that physical cues *mediate* between language and brain-state; when they are absent, it is that much easier for misunderstanding to occur. (As everyone knows, this is why the emoticon had to be invented.) However, there is an inherent contradiction here, because what we think of as misunderstanding, much of the time, is in fact clear understanding, since people use physical cues, facial expressions, and tone of voice (and emoticons) to conceal as much as to clarify.

Marshall McLuhan said the medium is the message. In our present case, the tool that underlies all human communication—the brain—is indeed the message as well as the medium. After all, what we all really want to communicate, with any given message, is *who we are and where we are "at."* And this is precisely what we do communicate, without even trying and even against our will. When two computers are networked together, they are making their entire databases available to each other; likewise when two atoms meet and exchange information it is *total entanglement* that occurs. Two dogs sniffing each other's backsides are about the same business, so it would seem that only human beings try to do things by halves, and that this half-measure may be a luxury of illusion. As Dick inferred in the earlier quote, privacy may be a valid concept only to "idiots" who have learned to shut down their communication centers, to the extent that all telepathic interface occurs *only at an unconscious level*. In other words, even while we are constantly swapping all our vital data, we don't actually know it. We stay focused on the ostensible message that is being conveyed, and upon all the "cues" and emoticons that are telling us how to read it, unaware that the media being engaged is also the lion's share of the message: *our total brain states*.

To understand this requires a whole new way of thinking about communication and empathy. When two people are talking to each other (or communicating by written media), their brains light up in matching patterns and meaning is transmitted. This is analogous to computer file-sharing: you “connect” and download a file that is the exact same pattern as the original, even while it is being sent from another location. As pointed out, this is actually easier to see without the mediation of other signals (physical cues mediate the message of the brain-state), which may be why “flame wars” are so common in forums, when what we transmit (literally our *state of mind*) gets reflected back *unmediated*. Passive-aggressive behavior—even or especially when unconscious—is met with an outwardly aggressive response, so our experience is akin to getting slapped in the face every time we try to be nice. The problem is that we are *trying* to be nice, and as often as not expressly to cover up all the ways in which we don’t *feel* nicely towards the other person. With the new media these old, outmoded social niceties—hypocritical at the best of times—no longer cut it. You can’t fake empathy with language or tone of voice because it’s physiological, a whole body-brain experience.

The irony of this is that the new media of the Internet, while seemingly a more remote form of human interaction, is actually bringing about *an increased level of intimacy between people*, and thereby giving rise to the corresponding need for *empathy*. This is because it is bringing to the surface the actual nature of communication: direct “telepathic” (brain-to-brain) interface, or “file-sharing.”

### **Dostoyevsky and Raskolnikov: Why *Affinity* Makes Great Writing**

“[M]irror neurons are multimodal—they are activated not just by watching actions, but also by hearing and reading about them. An effort led by Lisa Aziz-Zadeh, a neuroscientist at the University of Southern California, found that the brain’s premotor cortex shows the same activity when subjects observe an action as when they read words describing it. . . This indicates that in addition to execution, action observation, and the sounds of actions, these neurons may also be activated by abstract representations of actions, namely language. . . . ‘Research in the last few years seems to suggest that perception and action are tightly linked rather than separated,’ [Aziz-Zadeh] said.”

—“Mirror Neurons Also Respond to Language and Sound,” SEED magazine Sept 21, 2006

([http://seedmagazine.com/content/article/mirror\\_neurons\\_also\\_respond\\_to\\_language\\_and\\_sound/](http://seedmagazine.com/content/article/mirror_neurons_also_respond_to_language_and_sound/))

In one study, cited in *Up From Dragons: The Evolution of Human Intelligence*, a group of people imagining physical exercises increased their strength by twenty-two percent, as compared to a group performing actual exercises whose strength increased by thirty percent. Not a huge difference, then, and no wonder Jane Fonda’s workout video was such a success! The implications of this are startling, but also somewhat disturbing. If our muscles can improve simply by watching a fitness video, or even by reading about somebody working out, what about the countless acts of violence which we vicariously experience day after day in movies, novels, TV shows and rap songs? It is perhaps no wonder the military is among the leading researchers in video game technology: if mirror neurons exist, then a soldier in training doesn’t know the difference—at a physiological level—between simulated acts of war and the real thing. It’s an irony typical of our age that mirror neurons—nicknamed “Gandhi neurons” by Ramachandran because they are responsible for empathy—are currently being used to desensitize us to violence against our fellows. But that’s a subject for a whole other discussion, and for now I want to focus

on the efficiency of language to communicate (via mirror neurons), not only images (as in King's example) but moods and even altered states of consciousness, and how this occurs in tandem with physiological changes.

When we read *Crime and Punishment*, we find ourselves inside the mind—under the skin—of Raskolnikov: we identify with the character so much that, for the duration of the book, his thoughts become our thoughts and, to a lesser extent, his actions our actions. Yet since Raskolnikov is the creation of Dostoyevsky's mind—the child of his psyche—we are not so much being taken over by Raskolnikov but by his creator. A combination of good writing with good (attentive) reading creates a trance state in us which involves matching the brain state of the author *at the time of writing*. Besides the telepathic connection across space and time which King describes, this implies that, contained in the words themselves, there is a hidden information load, one that survives any number of translations or reprints yet remains invisible and undetectable in the text itself. What makes Dostoyevsky a great writer and a thousand others not so great, I suggest, is that Dostoyevsky immersed himself so thoroughly in the writing process, was so consumed by it, that his brain state effectively matched that of the characters he was imagining so there was very little distance between the creator and the creation. All good fiction achieves this to some extent: it creates in the reader a sense of authenticity, of immediacy, as if the events described were happening spontaneously, as we are reading them, rather than had been worked out over time (years, even centuries, ago) by someone sitting at a desk chewing his pencil. A writer who creates convincing characters and scenes does so by entering all the way into them: the written text then becomes a kind of brain-scan taken at that time, capturing the innermost thoughts and feelings of the writer every bit as much as a recording of a singer or a photograph of someone's face captures what was going on inside them at that moment—provided we are sensitive enough to tune into that information and “decode” it.

While Sherlock Holmes might be able to deduce a large part of such information by studying the text, recording, or photograph, for most of us this transference occurs unconsciously, with neither our understanding nor our awareness. Yet happen it does. We can no more avoid picking up this hidden information load (that snapshot of the author's brain) than the writer can avoid putting it into his writing. The opposite example to that of a consummate artist like Dostoyevsky, then, would be a writer who is unable or unwilling to close the gap between his conscious intent (in writing) and whatever is going on in his unconscious. He or she might be writing about a murderer but thinking about what they are going to have for lunch or whether they paid the water bill; the result will be a diluted, washed out portrait of a murderer, anemic, uninvolved, because the author clearly hasn't allowed him or herself to become fully possessed by the act of creation. The result is what is known as “contrived”: we can see the strings, that is, feel the discrepancy between the words on the page and the author's brain state. The words are unconvincing, because while we are trying to believe them or immerse ourselves in them, we are unconsciously matching the author's brain state—and thinking about what's for lunch.

### **A Personal Example**

“To me, the greatest pleasure of writing is not what it's about, but the inner music the words make.”  
—Truman Capote

I will now cite a personal example. In 2002 I wrote a book called *Matrix Warrior: Being the One*. It was a self-help-satire based on the 1999 movie *The Matrix* and it was intended to be a best seller. My original title for it was “How to Succeed in the Matrix Without Trying,” and my inspired idea was that the book would prove its own premise by making me rich. It took me two weeks to write and I had a publication deal two weeks after that. Everything seemed to be going according to plan. But then something started to go wrong. The first thing that went wrong was that the sequel to *The Matrix*, which came out the same time as my book, was crap and as an almost immediate result, interest in the movie franchise—and the ideas which my book was exploring—plummeted. The other thing that “happened”—and which pertains more to this current piece—was the reception my book got. While some embraced the book as a profound comment on our times, others took offense to it and derided it, using terms such as “Zen fascism,” “didactic,” “turgid,” “humorless,” bitter, self-centered, lacking in compassion or originality, and so forth. None of these were accurate descriptions of the book, but they may have got closer to describing the author’s brain state. And while there were many readers who found the book enlightening, and even entertaining, very few took it as a satire. The book was taken seriously by almost everyone (supporters and detractors), the reason being that, whatever my conscious design, I myself took the ideas in it (a mix of *Matrix* mythos with Carlos Castaneda and my own at the time post-Nietzschean philosophy) seriously. I hadn’t written it simply to get ahead in the matrix, I had written it to undermine the accepted values and meanings in the world. In short, I was Noam Chomsky (or Jean Baudrillard) pretending to be Douglas Adams. Nobody bought it.

Two years after I wrote the book, and a year after it came out (by which time all hopes had been finally crushed), here’s what I said:

“The ingenuity which inspired me to write *Matrix Warrior*—to use a cultural phenomenon of potentially revolutionary proportions as a way *in* to the mainstream—this cunning bit of coat-tailing by a writer/artist tired of thriving in obscurity—back-fired on me. . . . The conscious and unconscious minds run on separate tracks. They work wholly different agendas, and as often as not, those agendas are at odds. Because I really believed in my book and its premise—that this world is an illusion and we are all slaves to it—I couldn’t believe in its ‘supposed’ selling point, its gimmick, that of exploiting the situation for personal gain. *Matrix Warrior* isn’t *really* about getting ahead in the matrix; it’s about getting the hell *out*. And if its message could be boiled down to purest essence (an essence that makes it so unpalatable to most folk), then it would have all of nothing to do with personal gain. . . . The book’s deepest plea is for us to surrender the obsessions and trappings of our self-serving egomania and hook into a deeper, wider, unimaginably vaster agenda outside of the merely personal, that of the Universe beyond. But since I was determined to conceal such a grandiose and presumptuous plea whatever the cost, I concealed it even from myself. I really thought I was writing *Matrix Warrior* to make an easy buck!”

Epic fail.

In our present, simpler terms: my text did not match my brain state, and it was this latter which communicated to my audience. Considering the kind of audience which a book of this *apparent* nature would attract, it’s understandable that they wanted nothing to do with the author’s brain state. They smelled a rat and stayed away from my buffet. Those who *were* willing to match the author’s brain state (at the time of writing his book) were far less in number, but more importantly, they weren’t the audience the book had been shaped and packaged to attract (fans of the movie). This discrepancy between packaging and content mirrored a deeper and more

fundamental discrepancy *in the book itself*, between the text and subtext, the conscious message being communicated and the medium (brain state) by which it was being communicated. The medium and the message were at odds with one another, and so the message, as must always be the case, was lost.

As G.K. Chesterton said, “A good novel tells us the truth about its hero; but a bad novel tells us the truth about its author.” *Matrix Warrior* did both, because the hero of the “novel”—*was* its author.

## PART FOUR: EMPATHY & INDIVIDUATION

“ESP . . . You know how you do it? You listen to the other person instead of thinking of what you’re gonna say next. That’s all, and you learn things.”

—Elmore Leonard, *Touch*

### The Transmission: Empathy in Action

“The mirror neuron network is like the WiFi hardware system that connects and intertwines all the brains of all the people in the human family. This hardware network allows for the transmission and reception of holograph content between people. The holographic content is the very thoughts, images and feelings that we are seeing and interacting with, inside ourselves. Hence, each person’s inner world is intimately connected to, shared, and supported by other like-minded and like-feeling people—who can be anywhere on the planet.”

—Teka Luttrell, “Mirror Neurons: We Are Wired to Connect.”

The principal of sympathetic magic is that all things are interconnected—*but not equally*. Wooden objects are more “sympathetic” (i.e., in subatomic “entanglement” and constant communication) with each other than with plastic or glass, and so on. So it is with empathy: we can empathize more easily with people we identify with, and vice versa. If their experience is too foreign to us, we lack the necessary “database” of prior experience (not necessarily our own, but of people we have known, most especially loved ones) to draw upon, and we come up blank. On the other hand, somewhat paradoxically, if the condition of the person we are relating to is *too* familiar, we may find it too close for comfort and be *less* likely to empathize. This is because their emotional “imprints” (wounds) get tangled up with our own and we *literally* feel their suffering as our own, not empathically but as an intrusion (because of our own lack of boundaries). When there is *insufficient distance* between ourselves and the other, we are unable to function as the Listener, and are of no help to them. In order to create that distance, we will drop out of empathetic connection—rather like going into a room and closing the door for some alone time.

Empathy is a mysterious phenomenon in itself. Unlike similar qualities such as kindness, consideration, sympathy, or compassion, empathy isn’t something we *do* so much as something that *happens*. We cannot *choose* to be empathic, but only whether or not we (try and) express empathy when it does happen (assuming we are capable of it, which not everybody is). The

problem seems to be that being empathic and expressing empathy often don't go together that well. While empathy is a seemingly passive state, expressions such as kindness and consideration require a more active and outgoing one. It would seem that empathy *happens* when we choose to suspend all our prejudgments and just *listen* to the other person; just as empathy allows us to listen, listening allows us to empathize. Both are receptive states, and it may be that, far from being passive, such receptivity allows for a kind of holographic communication: a form of *transmission* that has a magical quality to it. Empathy depends on allowing two or more brain states to match completely, without attempting to add any extra, surface "noise" to that fundamental link-up.

Apparently such empathic transmission only happens when we are being sufficiently receptive to *allow* it to happen. This entails clearing our awareness of the clutter of prejudgments, emptying out all the patterns of our conditioning, and coming fully into the present moment. This "clearing out" (which generally doesn't happen all at once but over a lifetime) is also known as *individuation*, and as we've already seen, it's a process that can accumulate its own momentum. The more we clear out the old programs of our conditioning, the more space we create within us for real listening, the stronger the empathic transmission grows, and the more that *collective* (telepathic) signal helps to uninstall the old programs by running them through the new program, that of the Listener.

The advantage of empathy in communication is that it allows us to stay connected to the other person without reactively returning their "data packet." Instead of returning a snark for a snark, empathy brings us constantly back to the moment, back to an "empty," receptive, *clear* state in which we are responding not merely to what the person is saying but to what they *are*. Empathy is the highest form of respect, because while it allows the other to *be* an other, it also allows us to experience their brain state (suffering, confusion, etc.) as being as real, as valid, as our own. Empathy doesn't simply mean taking the other person's feelings seriously, however (that's closer to *sympathy* and it can often do more harm than good by merely strengthening those feelings). Empathy involves tapping into a larger data base than feelings, which are highly subjective and constantly shifting. Empathy is transpersonal. It extends beyond the merely personal yet at the same time *includes* the personal. To have real empathy for another means attuning not only to that person but to *everyone we have ever seen in a similar state or circumstances in the past*.

Everything has memory. Even inorganic objects store data, because the whole Universe is an information system. Sympathetic magic is a primitive description of the same phenomena mapped by quantum mechanics, related to the way in which atoms exchange data across space, and even across time, "telepathically," via entanglement. Every atom of our bodies stores information about our past, but neurons are specifically designed for transmission of information and so have garnered our special attention. So what do our mirror neurons remember? Presumably the information they are storing pertains to all the previous times we have witnessed others doing things, not just grabbing peanuts but everything, and not just actions but thoughts and feelings also, everything in short that's been transmitted to our brains from other people, starting in the womb and with our first interactions with our mother and father. If this is the case then we all have a "backlog" of *empathic memory* which we can tap into at any time—and not only can tap into but do tap into, whether we like it or not

This would be why empathy is so difficult for most people, why it can be so overwhelming for those of us who are capable of it, and also why it can sometimes *look* like its opposite. (There's some evidence that autistics are highly empathic, but unable to express it, even facially.) As well as an empathic state being somewhat passive in itself, tuning into another person's distress may be more than we *can* actually express, not least because of all the past associations which such distress would hold for us. Opening empathically to the other would be like opening the flood gates to the past, as well as the present. For a non-individuated being—which is the same as one with no boundaries or clear sense of self—it would be potentially annihilating.

## The Group Mind

“The role of a writer is not to say what we all can say, but what we are unable to say.”  
—Anaïs Nin

There is a paradox to all of this, as follows. Only those who have learned to separate themselves off from the collective, and establish their own boundaries and sense of self, would be able to open to the transmission and empathically merge with others. For those of us who have not cleared out the programs of our conditioning, empathy or any real connection to others would simply be too threatening, and so isolation and emotional disconnection would be necessary to psychic survival. Yet, again paradoxically, such non-individuated beings would be very much like extensions of a group mind, having little or no authentic self—hence their fierce desire to protect what little self they do have.

Jean Cocteau once said, “If it has to choose who is to be crucified, the crowd will always save Barabbas.” Without individuation, we remain “of the crowd,” and so *always get it wrong*. The reason the crowd always gets it wrong is that the crowd *does not have a genuine point of view*, because a crowd, by definition, is made up of many different points of view. The crowd-viewpoint (which is that of the non-individuated psyche) is a mash-up in which the “lowest common denominator” rules. All the forms of individual creative and/or ritual expression which we've been discussing are designed—consciously or not—to dissolve this spell, using a *counter-spell* intended to establish (or reclaim) the individual's *unique point of view*.

When we are not anchored in a strong sense of self, the contagious mind of the crowd will inevitably possess us, like in the 1950s movie *The Blob*. Possession by the blob is not merely common, it is *everywhere*, and because it is everywhere, we don't register its existence.<sup>2</sup> Studies

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<sup>2</sup> We observe it in extreme cases, such as Nazism or Beatlemania. In the latter case, the young girls who became hysterical about the Beatles infected each other with their mind-virus, and the Beatles themselves were really incidental to that process. The resulting “mass hysteria” demonstrated how one perspective is forged out of many perspectives—those girls became a mob, indistinguishable from one another. In fact, it is not one perspective at all, because however they are behaving, those hysterical girls are all *positioned at different points in space*. None of those girls would behave in this manner if they were alone or if *no one else was acting that way*. Yet together, they feel “safe” to express *the collective experience*. This perspective actually has little to do with the Beatles, because the girls aren't responding to the group, or even the music, so much as to *their own collective patterns*. Hence the apparently unified perspective (Beatlemania) is false, because it is a perspective that takes the finger for the moon,

have shown that the “intelligence of the crowd” is determined by *difference*: a crowd gets smarter—behaves in more intelligent, less blob-like ways—when the people that constitute it have *less* in common rather than more. Such differences prevent the individuals within the group from being taken over by the group mind, because we do not imitate people we perceive as different from ourselves. Stupid crowds happen when everyone agrees with each other: to dress the same, talk the same, act the same. A mob is formed by a gathering of people who are open to persuasion, who have in fact gathered together to *be* persuaded, unconsciously seeking refuge in the group mind. Such a group consists of people who are lacking a strong sense of reality or identity: in a word, non-individuated beings. Such non-individuated beings (who needless to say are the vast majority) *experience* themselves as distinct individuals, and band together precisely to reaffirm this experience. By forming a group identity, they validate each other’s reality, usually by using a focal point (whether Hitler or the Beatles) to do so. There is then no room for a more objective voice to challenge that false reality, because collectively, the group has the power to shout down or expel anyone who tries. That is what creates a mob, and why every mob has a natural propensity towards violence.<sup>3</sup>

Joining a group-mind provides a sense of belonging. Yet ironically, when we join a group, we are unconsciously seeking after *the original patterns of family life* which short-circuited our sense of reality to begin with. The same patterns which have prevented the formation of healthy boundaries and made any kind of autonomous action—individuation—impossible, mean that we can’t even conceive of reality being an internal state rather than a set of external social rules. This is a negative recursive feedback loop: non-individuated people seek groups to feel secure within and taking refuge in a group-mind prevents individuation. This is why most of us move from one “matrix” to another, without taking a breath. We go from family life to college, to a job, to a relationship, to raising our own family, without ever discovering a sense of meaning

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the longing and hysteria for the object being projected onto. It is really *the group mind* triggering all that energy, and not the Beatles; once the feelings have been stirred, it may as well be the Monkees. (This is why parodies so often become what they parody.)

<sup>3</sup> See the article “When We’re Cowed by the Crowd,” from May 28<sup>th</sup> 2011: “The wisdom of crowds turns out to be an incredibly fragile phenomenon. It doesn’t take much for the smart group to become a dumb herd. Worse, a new study by Swiss scientists suggests that the interconnectedness of modern life might be making it even harder to benefit from our collective intelligence. The experiment was straightforward. The researchers gathered 144 Swiss college students, sat them in isolated cubicles, and then asked them to answer various questions, such as the number of new immigrants living in Zurich. In many instances, the crowd proved correct. When asked about those immigrants, for instance, the median guess of the students was 10,000. The answer was 10,067. The scientists then gave their subjects access to the guesses of the other members of the group. As a result, they were able to adjust their subsequent estimates based on the feedback of the crowd. The results were depressing. All of a sudden, the range of guesses dramatically narrowed; people were mindlessly imitating each other. Instead of canceling out their errors, they ended up magnifying their biases, which is why each round led to worse guesses. Although these subjects were far more confident that they were right—it’s reassuring to know what other people think—this confidence was misplaced. The scientists refer to this as the ‘social influence effect.’ In their paper, they argue that the effect has grown more pervasive in recent years. We live, after all, in an age of opinion polls and Facebook, cable news and Twitter. We are constantly being confronted with the beliefs of others, as the crowd tells itself what to think [so] while the Web has enabled new forms of collective action, it has also enabled new kinds of collective stupidity. Groupthink is now more widespread, as we cope with the excess of available information by outsourcing our beliefs to celebrities, pundits and Facebook friends. Instead of thinking for ourselves, we simply cite what’s already been cited. We should be wary of such influences. The only way to preserve the wisdom of the crowd is to protect the independence of the individual.”

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304066504576341280447107102.html>

outside of those “patterns.” On the other hand, it is only through group interaction that those patterns become obvious to us and we can recognize how inescapable they are. So solitude can be as compulsive as joining, because both are ways to avoid seeing just how compulsive we are.

All groups end up in line with the “family patterns” (early imprints) which the individual members have in common, because these are the patterns which brought the group together in the first place. They are also the patterns which made us crazy, i.e., unable to function as individuals outside of a collective. Mirror neurons add a new, more physiological twist to the idea of family patterns. If our brains match whatever behavior (including moods) we witness while growing up, then our brains (and bodies) must also remember all the times we have *matched* such behavior. As when an athlete or martial artist remembers oft-repeated muscle movements, such behavior eventually becomes *second nature*. Primates learn how to act largely via imitation, which also includes language. What we communicate and the way we communicate, therefore, is to a large extent *in-formed* by people around us. As adults, we then unconsciously seek out individuals who have adopted similar moods and behavioral patterns to our own (due to similar early imprints), so that we can *recreate our formative environment*. However threatening and distorting it may have been to us as children, it is now what we *know*; and familiarity, for the non-individuated person, equals safety.

This is why all group activities tend to become cultish, and it may also be why there is so much paranoia about “cults” in today’s climate, because they are unwelcome reminders, reflections, of our collective dispensation. The more we despise and condemn “cults,” the more we can tell ourselves that we are not susceptible to such behavior. But we are all susceptible. Society itself (and even consensus reality) is a form of group-think so widespread that it is undetectable to its members. It is the ultimate mind control cult, one which *no one* is ever permitted to leave.<sup>4</sup>

So how does this relate to writing? A collective mindset is maintained by constant reinforcement *via words*: the group tells its members what to think and then their thoughts tell them the same thing they are being told to think. That’s the way programming works, via a self-perpetuating *command*. Reality becomes what we tell ourselves is real, and what to tell ourselves is real is what we are told to tell ourselves. Writing is a means to take back this power by beginning to *compose our own internal dialogue*, thereby writing our own program. By writing down our thoughts, about ourselves and our lives, we get to see, from the third person perspective (that of the Listener), the ways in which our perceptions have been compromised by external influences. Writing is a way to develop our voices, and to develop one’s voice means to identify and then eradicate any elements that are *not* our voice, those external influences that distort our ability to express ourselves and leave us parroting other people’s ideas and telling them what they want to

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<sup>4</sup> “For more than a generation now, we in the West have aggressively spread our modern knowledge of mental illness around the world. We have done this in the name of science, believing that our approaches reveal the biological basis of psychic suffering and dispel prescientific myths and harmful stigma. There is now good evidence to suggest that in the process of teaching the rest of the world to think like us, we’ve been exporting our Western “symptom repertoire” as well. That is, we’ve been changing not only the treatments but also the expression of mental illness in other cultures. Indeed, a handful of mental-health disorders — depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and anorexia among them — now appear to be spreading across cultures with the speed of contagious diseases. These symptom clusters are becoming the lingua franca of human suffering, replacing indigenous forms of mental illness.” <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/10/magazine/10psyche-t.html?em>

hear—and telling ourselves what we think *we* want to hear—instead of simply speaking the truth. Within the context of groupthink, however, speaking the truth can be—and inevitably *will* be—the most ostracizing thing a person can do. Individuation—which is finding one’s true voice—can only come about via exiting the group mind, and since the group mind is maintained by the “loyalty” of its members, individuation will always be perceived as a *threat* to other members of the group. Thus, by standing up for our own truth and individuality, we invariably risk not only being ostracized by the group, but—by speaking what the other members cannot afford to admit to themselves—being turned into a sacrificial victim by which the group identity is reinforced. In a word: a scapegoat.<sup>5</sup>

## PART FIVE: CROSSING THE BORDER

“Writers are not just people who sit down and write. They hazard themselves. Every time you compose a book your composition of yourself is at stake.”  
—E.L. Doctorow

### Full Circle: Profaning the Sacred, Sacralizing the Profane

“I will conclude with a metaphysical question that cannot be answered by science. I cannot decide whether the question is utterly trivial or profound. I call it the ‘vantage point’ problem foreshadowed by the Upanishads, ancient Indian philosophical texts composed in the second millennium BC, and by Erwin Schrödinger. I am referring to the fundamental asymmetry in the universe between the ‘subjective’ private worldview vs. the objective world of physics. Physics depends on the elimination of the subjective: there are no colors, only wavelengths; no frequency, only pitch; no warmth or cold, only kinetic activity of molecules; no subjective ‘self’ or I, only neural activity. Physics doesn’t need, and indeed doesn’t acknowledge, the subjective ‘here and now,’ or the ‘I’ who experiences the world. Yet to me, my ‘I’ is everything. It’s as if only one tiny corner of the space-time manifold is ‘illuminated’ by the searchlight of my consciousness. Humankind, it would seem, is forever condemned to accept this schizophrenic view of reality; the ‘first person’ account and the third person account.”  
—V.S. Ramachandran

Returning to the opening example (that of pornography and shamanic ritual), what the shaman represents in our present context—and why identification with a shaman is potentially so powerfully healing—is *the other*, the outsider. Traditionally, shamans were not part of the community which they served, the reason being that they quite literally belonged to another world: the world of the spirits. A shaman is a soul rescuer, an astral traveler, a dreamer, a psychopomp (as Christ was a psychopomp when he travelled to Hades, after the crucifixion). The shaman journeys, not physically but as awareness, into subatomic matter and into the inner

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<sup>5</sup> Cultivated roses are made by grafting the desired flowering type onto the roots of an indigenous wild rose species (they also do it with apple trees), and this allows varieties not adapted to the local climate to survive. But the roots can throw up suckers that, if they are not pruned back, can replace the grafted bush or tree. So in an orchard or in a rose farm, that’s the one that’s separating from the crowd and individuating.

worlds of DNA, and there has congress with the intelligences (accesses the information) concealed within. In simple terms, a shaman is another word for *a fully individuated being*—one who has died and been reborn in life. Hence, “individuated being” is another word for a shaman. To match a shaman’s brain state, then, as in our opening example of mirror neurons, is to experience temporary “exile” from the group mind, but also *an empathic connection to the collective unconscious*. It might be argued that we all have a connection to the collective unconscious, since that is what makes it collective. The difference is that the shaman, or individuated being, makes conscious that connection, via empathy, and so shifts allegiance from the group mind (which is something like a crust that has formed on top of the organic body of humanity) and to the collective psyche. The shaman thereby moves from a “first person account”—that of the isolate individual—to a third person account of the universe at large. By this means, the shaman moves from subjective to objective reality.

Returning to the subject of empathy. A shaman’s healing powers come from his or her own wounds. Whatever a shaman has suffered in life is what gives the shaman the understanding needed to assist others with similar patterns of wounding. In simple terms, if as a child a shaman was sexually abused or bullied, and suffered the resulting psychological imprinting, those experiences become the knots that must be unraveled for the shaman to individuate and heal his or her own psyche. By healing himself in this way, the shaman develops an ability for healing, specific to those original wounds which required healing. That shaman will then attract people with similar or matching wounds, magnetically (the universe as well as our brains being a mirror), and thereby develop those powers and complete the healing process. It will quickly be seen how all of this relates to empathy and mirror neurons. The “backlog” of empathic memory already discussed becomes as it were the shaman’s qualification *as* a shaman. When a shaman encounters someone with similar patterns—a similar program which they want uninstalled—the shaman *matches the brain state* of the patient and empathically accesses his or her own experiences of that same or similar program. The shaman then remembers and/or reenacts (ritually, and through dialogue with the patient) his own deprogramming, and the patient, in turn, matches the shaman’s brain state and is freed from their conditioning. In a word, healed. The healing is not so much the end as the means of this ritual: the end being that of individuation. Otherwise simply to heal a person would only be a temporary measure, because if the conditioning remains, the program is still running, then the system will sooner or later malfunction as before, or even in new, more advanced ways. A shaman isn’t really in the business of healing, but of deprogramming people: fishing them out of the group mind and introducing them to the spirit realms of the collective unconscious, also known as Hades. The old English word *hele* means “unconscious,” and is the source word for the Christian *Hell*, but also the root of “heal.” That’s the whole equation in a nutshell—or pomegranate.

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“This Narcissus of yours  
doesn’t see himself if the mirror  
because he is the mirror itself.”  
—Antonio Machado

If shamanism is the third person (transpersonal) perspective, pornography is the first person perspective, as writ large and lurid on the psychic mirror of the species. Pornography is all about the “money shot”: what’s in it for *me*? There is one single end which porn moves towards and

that is release, the gratification of desire. And desire—most especially sexual desire—is what binds the group mind together. It is both the current and the signal that keeps the program running. Sex is what we all have in common; it is what everyone wants. We all agree (openly or not) that sex is good, and therefore desirable. So of course everybody does it, and if we can't do it, then there's porn to make us feel like we *are* doing it. This program of sexual desire includes all the things required to *get* sex: wealth, status, success, image, beauty, fitness, confidence, social graces, and so forth. All these things are desirable to us as the means to a single end: sex. Advertising is as constant a reminder of this as porn. Nowadays the two have almost seamlessly merged: advertising is often pornographic, and pornography (as well as dating) sites and their advertisements have literally flooded the Internet. Pornographic imagery reinforces sexual desire and creates an energy feedback loop: by capturing our attention and triggering sexual responses within us, the energy of our attention and desire is "siphoned" off and *fed into the group mind* (of which the internet is a kind of concretized representation). This keeps the "grid" charged and humming with all of that attention and desire. It magnetizes the group mind and prevents its "members" (actually inmates) from ever leaving, from individuating. In simple terms, the promise of sex keeps us coming back for more, no matter how suffocating living in Hotel Californication is.

This is why celibacy is so common to spiritual disciplines: inhibiting sexual response is a way to reduce sexual desire, over time, and allows us to put our attention elsewhere than on what everyone else is doing—inward rather than outward. We then discover the extent to which our sexual desire has been hard-wired into us by our conditioning, and how our hormones (which are really the least of our problems) have been hijacked by the soul-sucking apparatus of society. At the other end of the spectrum, shamans traditionally are often polygamous, having many wives, which is presumably an alternate way to swim against the current. Our present culture preaches monogamy, on the one hand, while subtly encouraging promiscuity on the other, and the result is that most modern individuals practice serial monogamy. By having many wives, a shaman solves this dichotomy, but also (perhaps) avoids the real issue, that of emotional as well as sexual dependency. (A celibate also avoids this issue, unless he or she were to practice celibacy *within* a marriage, which would be a whole other kettle of fish.) Shamans, unlike celibates, tend to be earthy beings, but while they may be fully engaged with the lusts of the flesh, everything a shaman does is directed towards individuation, and to strengthening his or her connection to *the other side*—existence outside the group mind. So for the shaman, sex is a means to a transpersonal or collective end, and not an end in itself.

### **Eros and Thanatos: The Two Faces of Love**

"Seek the you that is not yours  
and never can be."

—Antonio Machado

Sex and death are the twin forces of existence. Yet to the shaman—and to anyone who has begun to see beyond their social conditioning—the two are strangely reversed: everything appears as backwards once you pass through the looking glass. For the average person, being a slave to biology, it is the death instinct that constantly fuels sexual desire. We are programmed to want sex because we are programmed to die, and without sex the species would not continue. On the

other hand, it can also be said that we die *because* we procreate. Adam and Eve were immortal and innocent before the Serpent opened their eyes, so death is the price we pay for sex. In a curious reversal of this biological law, for the individuating being, sex is the price we pay for “death.” Sexual addiction and indulgence—of which pornography is a symptom but not a cause—is a way for people to stave off death, not physically but *emotionally and psychologically*. This is the deeper context for understanding diseases such as AIDS (whatever it actually is): that the collective sex drive is really *a sublimated desire for death* (through *le petit mort* of orgasm, we get to die to ourselves for a moment or two). In more Freudian terms, and for men at least, sexual desire is all tangled up with an unconscious desire to get back to the womb, literally as well as symbolically; as such it is the only real alternative to individuation, the only one that will *satisfy* us (temporally at least). If we cannot go forwards, we must go backwards. Those afraid to face the reality of death will do *whatever they can* to get back to their birth.

A writer, true to his or her calling, is a shaman: their job is to explore the “netherworlds” of the collective unconscious, congress with the spirits, and bring forth healing and transformative knowledge for the community to which they belong. Like shamans, true writers are beings devoted solely to individuation, and as such have no *personal affiliation* with the community which they serve. From the point of view of the community—tending its crops and taking care of its daily living needs—a shaman (just like the gunslinger in Western films) is an agent of death. In a sense, this is accurate: a shaman’s loyalty is not to the world of the living but to the world of the dead. As Paul Bowles described it, “he’s merely a machine for the transmission of ideas. In reality he doesn’t exist—he’s a cipher, a blank. A spy sent into life by the forces of death. His main objective is to get the information across the border, back into death.” The reason shamans appear to the group mind to be loyal to death is that, from a shamanistic point of view, there is *only* life after death, that is, only once complete individuation has allowed all our ties to the group mind to be severed can we begin to really live.

From a shaman’s point of view, what ordinary people are engaged in maintaining their livelihoods is not at all what it seems. Socially programmed reality is all part of a great, messy, millennia long factory process, by which “souls” are recycled in order to keep the group mind replenished, fixed, and unchanging—just like the computer generated reality in *The Matrix*. What shamans do is to reverse the polarity of life/death, Eros/Thanatos, *and use their sex drive as energy or fuel to enter into the realms beyond death*. Their aim is to cross over to “the border” and enter into “third person” existence, outside the false idea of the individual self, *as defined by the group mind*. This is the ultimate paradox of earthly existence: that individuality is an illusion which only true individuation can dispel, and that only by dying to the self can we begin to live *as* our selves. In the same way, the first person perspective of “I, me, mine,” which we are all trapped inside, is actually being generated by the group mind; as such, it is anything but autonomous. The self we identify with is actually a fictional construct very much like a character in a novel. On the other hand, the third person identity, since it allows our individual selves to be what they are—momentary arrangements of molecules within a vast, infinite and eternal tapestry of cosmic awareness—is the only true “I” that exists. And so the dreamer awakes and becomes the dreamed, and what we once dreamed as “the other” becomes the dreamer, dreaming us. Leaving the group mind is the true “little death” for which the greatest orgasm in the universe is no substitute. But it *can* be the means.

When shamans enter into the subatomic realms of DNA, it is in order (like Neo) to read the code and access the true, fundamental text of existence. This furnishes them with the option, now they have reduced themselves to nothing and entered into the everything, of *changing that script and rewriting the program of creation*. Shamans then become the authors not only of their own reality but of everyone else's too, by means of that empathic transmission sourced in a full body merging with the collective, for the good of all. Lucid dreamers inside the waking dream of the group mind are in the world but not of the world. These shamans are not merely skywalkers but *skywriters*.

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“In the beginning was the Word.”  
—John 1:1

We have now come full circle and back to *the word*. I referred above to the Internet as a reflection of the group mind, but it is also more than that—or perhaps more accurately, as a reflection of the group mind, the Internet is also possessed of its own unconscious. Potentially—and in small pockets this is already happening—the Net is a subculture that has formed *within* the larger matrix of consensus thought, one in which the rules, mores, and forms have yet to be fully established or “written in stone.” Within this new-forming virtual/ritual environment, learning the art and science of invocation and spellcasting—communication via text—and of empathetic magik is more essential than ever before. Writing is key, because it is via written (as well as verbal) expression that we establish our own individual truth *within ourselves*, and eventually in the world.

At present there are several primary kinds of text-based ritual spaces on the Net, most of which we are all familiar with. There are blogs, usually journal-style updates for public consumption (including video logs), which usually allow for feedback via the comments section. There is IRC (internet relay chat) and instant messaging (Skype, Gmail, etc), micro-blogging on Twitter (massively influential in the recent Middle East uprisings), and comments sections on news sites, YouTube, Amazon, and any number of commercial websites. Then of course there is Facebook, which is the ruling online community and which has much to answer for, and answer *to*. Facebook has a rule of identity and there is a limit to how many Facebook accounts you can have, as well as warnings about using false names. Participation both requires and inspires identity-reinforcement, as is common to most groups. At the other end of the spectrum, as obscure and mysterious as Facebook is promiscuous, there is the 4chan, where identity is erased (the virtual activist group Anonymous was probably spawned at 4chan). 4chan is the opposite of Facebook, an anti-social social network where anyone who tries too hard to establish an identity is likely to be derided as a “name fag.”<sup>6</sup> If Facebook is for people who want to be part of a community while remaining within the comfort and safety of their homes (and identity tunnels), 4chan is like the id of the Internet: a buzzing hive of activity and a mosh pit of thrashing bodies. Channers self-identify as a “Stand Alone Complex” or “herd of cats,” signifying that they do not make up a group mind but are just a collection of units who *happen to be going in the same direction*. While made up of individuals who mostly reject the established social values—starting

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<sup>6</sup> Between these extremes are discussion forums, where members use IDs and avatars to create an alternate identity, often without providing clues as to their sex, age, or race. At some forums, it is verboten to change IDs without making it known, so while self-created, these surrogate identities are in some ways as restricting as given identities.

with identity—and who appear to abhor group-think, paradoxically it is a space that frequently hatches real-world activism—albeit usually in the name of “lulz.”<sup>7</sup>

All these virtual ritual spaces are the means by which we both observe ourselves and allow ourselves to be observed, as a collective “mental” body, via language and image (and since everything is being mediated via computer code, it is all language). The Net provides invaluable clues as to the nature and rate of the transmutation of consciousness currently underway in the collective organism. Yet since the medium is the message, the media, means and forms being employed are secondary to *the end that is being mediated*, namely: that same transmutation of consciousness. But since the observation affects the outcome of the experiment, the more attention that is given to the transformation underway, the more rapidly it will occur.

The Internet is a stand-in for the collective unconscious as it becomes conscious. One of its hidden functions, maybe even its primary function, is for developing the tools by which we may slowly disengage from the group-mind, and begin to *navigate greater awareness*. The internet then serves as both a testing ground and a launch pad for that definitive leap into the unknown. As a culture created entirely out of words, sounds, and images, it offers up a ritual space for *interactive dreaming and shamanic healing*, and for group projects with no external focal point but with an ever-changing blend of internal directives, sourced in individuals drawn together by their differences as much as their similarities. What’s forming, just below the surface of the collective’s awareness or group mind, is an intelligent crowd whose intelligence grows as it increases in numbers. What this *spells* is an opportunity for accelerated individuation and shamanic initiation on a mass scale.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cydeweys.com/blog/2008/01/28/scientology-sac/> Wikipedia describes 4chan as follows: “4chan was started in 2003 in the bedroom of a 15-year old student from New York City who posts as ‘moot’. . . . Unlike most web forums, 4chan does not have a registration system, allowing users to post anonymously. Any nickname may be used when posting, even one that has been previously adopted, such as ‘Anonymous’ or ‘moot.’ In place of registration, 4chan has provided tripcodes as an optional form of authenticating a poster’s identity. As making a post without filling in the ‘Name’ field causes posts to be attributed to ‘Anonymous,’ general understanding on 4chan holds that Anonymous is not a single person but a collective (hive) of users. . . . The site’s ‘Random’ board is by far its most popular and notorious feature. Known as ‘/b/,’ there are very minimal rules on posted content. Gawker once jokingly claimed that ‘reading /b/ will melt your brain.’ The site’s Anonymous community and culture have often provoked media attention. For media planners, this enterprise is ‘further proof that creativity is everywhere and new media is less accessible’ to advertisement agencies. . . . *The Guardian* once summarized the 4chan community as ‘lunatic, juvenile . . . brilliant, ridiculous and alarming.’ Fred Leal of the Brazilian newspaper *Estadão* said his inclusion in the conference ‘indicates that something extraordinary is happening . . . [4chan] challenges every Internet convention: it is, alone, the antithesis of Google, social networking sites, and blogs.’ The New York Observer has described posters as ‘immature pranksters whose bad behavior is encouraged by the site’s total anonymity and the absence of an archive.’ Internet memes are catchphrases or images that spread quickly, peer to peer, across the Internet. Many Internet memes have originated on 4chan, usually /b/, as its fast moving, crowd psychology nature enables content to quickly be passed on to large numbers of viewers. The most noteworthy of these memes are lolcats, rickrolling, and ‘Chocolate Rain.’” As if to underscore 4chan’s antipathy to groupthink or cultism, Project Chanology (in tandem with Anonymous) is a worldwide protest against the Church of Scientology. Besides this, according to *The Washington Post*, “the site’s users have managed to pull off some of the highest-profile collective actions in the history of the Internet.” See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4chan#Internet\\_attacks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4chan#Internet_attacks) for more information. Also worth a closer look is *The Cluetrain Manifesto*—a treatise on the Net as a human marketplace, written by some of those involved in creating it. (<http://www.cluetrain.com/book/95-theses.html>) Reddit is a hot new discussion model that aspires to collective intelligence, though it could go the other way: <http://www.reddit.com/r/todayilearned/>.

Read the writing on the sky.

“The real secret of magic is that the world is made of words, and that if you know the words that the world is made of you can make of it whatever you wish.”

—Terence McKenna

Aeolus Kephias © 2011

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<sup>i</sup> Robert Anton Wilson, after Aleister Crowley.

<sup>ii</sup> Lyn Birkbeck to author.