

The background of the cover is a photograph of a woman's legs from the knees down, wearing dark tights and white high-heeled shoes with a black toe cap. She is standing on a red carpet. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and shadows.

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do you have
constant tactile
experience of
your feet in
your shoes?

Carole Brooks Platt

*Presence, Poetry and the
Collaborative Right
Hemisphere*

‘Let the mind be, along with countless other things, a landing strip for sacred visitations.’ — James Merrill, *A Different Person: A Memoir*

Persinger’s Presence

Neuropsychologist Michael Persinger has recently become a media curiosity using a wired helmet or ‘Octopus’ headband to induce a ‘God experience’ electromagnetically. While the results have been mixed, depending on the beliefs, mental practices and temporal lobe lability of the subjects tested, an earlier, less popularized study (Persinger and Makarec, 1992) showed an interesting correlation between intense verbal meaningfulness and a sense of presence, often conveying a ‘message’ of cosmic significance.

Since creative thinkers — whether artistic, literary, scientific or religious — have commonly attributed their inspirations to muses or other ‘presences’, Persinger and Makarec sought to show ‘that a feeling of a presence, particularly during periods of profound verbal creativity (reading or writing prose or poetry) is normal in “people who report significant emotionality” from these practices’ (p. 217). In their ‘Muse Factor’ experiment, they asked 900 college students to respond to questionnaires about Psi-like experiences, widened affect, depersonalization, limbic motor, visual, auditory and olfactory anomalies as well as a ‘preference for creative writing, the capacity to discern profound verbal meaning and the feeling of a presence’ (p. 219). The results of their study did indeed link these last three factors in both men and women, although the feeling of presence was stronger

Correspondence:
Email: carolebrooks.platt@gmail.com

for women and attributed to their 'stronger propensity to experience verbal meaningfulness' (p. 220).

To explain the pairing of verbal meaningfulness and presence neuroscientifically, Persinger and Makarec concluded that 'periods of intense meaningfulness (a likely correlate of enhanced burst-firing in the left hippocampal-amygdaloid complex and temporal lobe) allow access to nonverbal representations that are the right hemispheric equivalents of the sense of self ...' (p. 217). The creation of poetry and prose, then, because of 'their strong semantic affect and the novel and unusual combinations of words', would evoke the strong electrical firing in the left hemisphere necessary to engage the 'right amygdaloid-hippocampal complex and from here into other (homologous) right hemispheric structures' (p. 222), which would produce the sense of presence and a possible message of seemingly cosmic significance.

Persinger and Makarec considered their finding similar to Julian Jaynes' (1976) notion that the right or 'god-side' of the pre-literate bicameral mind re-emerged in the modern era '[d]uring periods when consciousness is significantly altered, such as during literary or musical creativity' (p. 223). Secular-minded individuals would say 'presence, entity, or force', where religious people would identify a 'spirit, angel, or culture-specific god' (ibid.). Persinger and Makarec further stated that 'people who have emphasized writing and the pursuit of the understanding of the self through verbal, ruminative processing, have been particularly prone to the feeling of a presence' (p. 223). The study's authors further hypothesized that a 'continuum of temporal lobe lability' exists, with sufferers of limbic (complete/partial) epilepsy at the extreme end, highly creative individuals in the middle, and average people graduated towards the extreme of not being able to express emotions at all.

However, they did not offer an explanation as to *why* their subjects became intensely emotional readers and writers of prose and poetry. Also, they neglected to note that strong emotion and the use of poetic devices already demonstrate increased right-hemispheric involvement in writers (see Kane, 2004). Highly emotional reactions to a text show increased right-hemispheric involvement in readers as well, perhaps reflecting either conscious or unconscious personal associations. Further, a hemispheric disequilibrium, caused by disease or injury, can either overcharge the right or release it from the inhibiting effects of the left's usual dominance for spoken language with a poetic result. V.S. Ramachandran (Ramachandran & Blakeslee, 1998) cites the case of a doctor in New York who became 'fascinated by poetry and started thinking in verse, producing a voluminous outflow of rhyme after his

right temporal lobe was afflicted by epileptic seizures' (p. 7). Julie Kane cites other examples of patients who began to write poetry 'after sustaining left-hemispheric damage' (p. 46).¹

While we cannot say that a supercharged left temporal lobe alone provokes the right-hemispheric reaction with its separate sense of self, I believe there is abundant evidence of the role of emotional reading, contemplation, meditation or even highly charged speech in provoking anything from a dissociative feeling of presence to alien voice to possession states showing increased right-hemispheric involvement. In this paper, I would like to first demonstrate non-verbal means of provoking an altered state with dissociative presence, before using biographical information and the words of famous male religious figures and poets to show how destabilization of the self through maternal deprivation plays a major role in the creation of divine presences. Finally, I will address the reasons for a more pronounced sense of presence in women, using the examples of famous poets, writers and mystics.

Non-literary Sources of Cosmic Presence

Both Persinger and Ramachandran agree that too much electrical firing in a person's temporal lobes leads to the 'temporal lobe personality' whose overcharged emotions find 'cosmic significance in trivial events' and who become 'obsessed with philosophical and theological issues' (Ramachandran & Blakeslee, 1998, p. 180). Ramachandran states further that temporal lobe epileptics (usually on the left) have ecstatic spiritual seizures (specifically in the limbic system) and often feel an emotional need to talk and write obsessively about what they consider to be their highly significant thoughts (hypergraphia). He cites the case of an epileptic store manager who, after sensing oneness with the divine, gave him hundreds of pages of personally written text; he also claimed an ability to recall, during seizure, every page of certain books he had read in the past. The existence of many famous writers and several religious figures considered to be epileptic also show a connection between overcharged temporal lobes and creative language with a poetic and spiritual content.² Dostoevsky, for one,

[1] In a personal example, a friend and colleague who suffered left hemispheric lesions after an intractable bout of fever while studying in Spain temporarily lost her capacity to speak except when using metaphors. Since she was a poet before the illness, her already highly developed capacity for right hemispheric-inspired language may have allowed her to communicate in this way.

[2] Kierkegaard, Pascal, Sir Isaac Newton, Dante, Molière, Sir Walter Scott, Jonathan Swift, Byron, Shelley, Tennyson, Dickens, Lewis Carroll, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Flaubert,

connected the nature of his own experiences to Muhammad's, saying they both had seen Paradise through their ecstatic seizures.

Intense verbal meaning may indeed have links with an anomalous sense of presence, but, even more interesting, is how presences, when verbal themselves, seem to speak poetically in religious terms. For instance, mathematician-philosopher Franklin Merrell-Wolff described his ecstatic states of 'bimodal consciousness' achieved through contemplation where 'a sense of power and authority literally of cosmic proportions' prevailed (quoted in Leonard, 1999, p. 64). He also described a surprising, to him, shift to poetic language: 'He who knows the Awakening becomes something of a poet, no matter how little he was a poet before' (p. 146).

Professor Benny Shanon (2002) of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem catalogued the physical effects and thematic content associated with the Ayahuasca brew, showing that language in this state contains 'intense metaphoricity', a 'pervasive metaphorical, and poetic perspective' (p. 243) and is, ultimately, a 'poetic stance' (p. 342). He even heard a man produce spontaneously a lengthy poem presented as though by an Egyptian pharaoh. Shanon calls the feat 'impressive', but not paranormal (p. 259). Elsewhere in his book, he attributes the *feeling* of his own and others' experience with enhanced creativity or performative skills while using Ayahuasca as a tapping into a 'cosmic source of plenty' (p. 177), the descent of Muses (p. 220) or the cooperation of superior forces (p. 221).

Generally, though, the Ayahuasca experience is visual, not verbal, and seemingly telepathic. The absence of heard speech, coupled with an accent on visual analogies, geometric patterns, art, dance, song, and the felt presence of guides, guardians and teachers (often behind the back), makes the case for increased right hemispheric activity. Similar visual themes and felt sensations are also found in Russell Shorto's book, *Saints and Madmen* (1999), where people having psychotic episodes experience universal interconnectedness, the cosmic significance of insignificant things, enhanced personal meaning and the presence of God and angels.

In his book *The Neuropsychological Bases of God Beliefs* (1987), Persinger categorically connected religion, poetry and the temporal lobes: 'Shorn of their poetic language, the descriptions of most religious leaders indicate temporal lobe abnormalities' (p.18). He believed that electrical activity in the temporal lobes caused

Agatha Christie and Truman Capote; Saint Paul, the Prophet Muhammad and Joan of Arc are cited in www.epilepsytoronto.org/vol9. In many of these cases, of course, the diagnosis is speculative.

hallucinations, déjà vu, altered body states, religiosity and reincarnation themes. However, non-verbal techniques or altered body states such as hypoxia, low-level breathing, hypoglycemia, musical stimulation, repetitive environmental sounds, swaying, dancing, bobbing and smell could also bring on the gods.³ These kinds of experiences, Persinger said, unleash memories stored in the temporal lobe since earliest infancy so that ‘old images of parental power blend with contemporary concepts of abstract gods in time and space. The potent affect of the child converges with the intellect of the adult thinker. The limits of infantile perceptions expand to the universe’s edge and the God-parent waits, somewhere, to bring intellectual warmth and to remove the anxiety of existence’ (1987, p. 112). Persinger also said that a separate sense of self exists in all of us, but that lefthanders, artistic and religious people (with a presumed increased right-hemispheric dominance) are more likely to sense it in times of personal crisis or biological stress.

Presence, Poetry and Alien Voice

Some psychotic episodes can also be termed ‘spiritual emergencies’, often culminating in an audible, alien voice with an imperative to act, such as ‘Become a healer’ (Shorto, 1999). Persistent, delusional, derogatory voices are hallmarks of the schizophrenic mind; in the absence of psychosis, the right hemisphere can produce short, concrete nouns as well as simple, imperative verbs to positive effect.⁴ The command’s provenance and significance are necessarily conditioned by the cultural expectations and predispositions of the hearer. High emotion is a prerequisite.

St. Augustine, weeping in the throes of spiritual crisis, said he heard a child’s voice (male or female) from a neighbouring house chanting over and over again: ‘Tolle, lege (Pick up and read)’ (*Confessions*, 1992, p. 152). He interpreted this as a divine command to pick up the book of the apostle Paul and focus on the first passage he saw. In doing so, an order to abstain from lust resolved his conflict over spirituality and sexuality (Rom. 13.13–14). Precedents and predecessors played an important role and the effect was contagious. St. Paul’s conversion

[3] Newberg *et al.* (2001) have also shown how simultaneous operation of both the arousal and quiescent systems, ‘triggered by various kinds of intense physical or mental activity, including dancing, running, or prolonged concentration (p. 39)’ can bring on altered states. These states are also connected with emotional arousal in the limbic system and a resultant spiritual experience.

[4] See Kane (2004) for an excellent review of the psycholinguistic evidence of this as well as the broader notion of poetry as right hemispheric language.

pursuant to a divine command on the road to Damascus as well as St. Anthony's total transformation after hearing a gospel imperative to sell all and give to the poor were models for his conversion. Augustine's friend, Alypius, who was present at the event, continued the reading and was converted too (Cook and Herzman, 2004). In each case, high emotion and a definitive answer to an inner crisis found in a biblical text veered the hearer towards an intensely spiritual life.

In an even more dramatic conversion experience, Muhammad, after lengthy, isolated meditation, was 'torn from sleep and felt himself enveloped by a devastating divine presence', later described as 'an angel [that] had appeared to him and given him a curt command: 'Recite!' (Armstrong, 1993, p. 137), also translated as 'Read'. He was forced to 'recite' against his will, often 'struggling to make sense of a vision and significance that did not always come to him in a clear, verbal form' (p.139). 'Sometimes it comes to me like the reverberations of a bell, and that is the hardest upon me; the reverberations abate when I am aware of their message' (Bukhari, Hadith I.3, quoted in Armstrong, p.139). The non-verbal bell sound, normally processed by the right hemisphere, hints again at the message's conduit. Armstrong compares this creative process to poetry: it is 'rather as a poet describes the process of "listening" to a poem that is gradually surfacing from the hidden recesses of his mind, declaring itself with an authority and integrity that seem mysteriously separate from him' (p.139). Early converts to Islam also succumbed to the 'divine invasion' (p. 145) while listening to the sacred words.⁵

The great Sufi poet, Rumi, a learned scholar of Islam, the son of a visionary theologian and jurist, eventually repudiated scholarly discourse (Barks, 1997), whirling his way to illumination and dissociative poetic outpourings. His great inspiration, Shams of Tabriz, had been pointed in his direction by an alien voice; when Rumi encountered him, Shams asked a question, the emotional intensity of which so shocked him that he fainted. They spend months together in one, long, ecstatic, conversation. Shams disappears and Rumi's quest to find him ends in a sense of merged presence: 'Why should I seek? I am the same as / he. His essence speaks through me. / I have been looking for myself!' (quoted in Barks, 'On Rumi').

Rainer Maria Rilke, while standing on a bridge in Toledo, Spain, described how a star fell from boundless outer space into his equally boundless inner space. He termed this sensed merger and

[5] Similarly, Stevan L. Davies (1995) suggests that Jesus' followers suffered from hysterical conversion disorders or demonic possession states making them succumb to altered states of consciousness while listening to his ambiguously worded, open-ended parables.

undifferentiated state a 'divine visitation'. Later, Rilke was 'given' the initial line the *Duino Elegies* by the voice of an angel, the sound of a violent storm converted into poetic speech: 'Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the Angel's orders?' He had been contemplating 'an important letter he had to write', according to a biographer, when this 'inspirational conversion' took place (Freedman, 1996, p. 323). The next line of 'The First Elegy' [1922] speaks in terms gleaned from his spiritual and poetic predecessors: 'Even if one of them suddenly held me to his heart, I'd vanish in his overwhelming presence'. Rilke compared 'the Angel of the elegies with ... the angelic figures of Islam' (quoted in Freedman, p. 324). Freedman says, 'Rilke spoke through the voice of the Angel he had created (ibid.)'. Rilke himself proclaimed: 'The voice that uses me is greater than I', comparing his angelic dictation to the Revelation of St. John on Patmos; 'I rustle like a bush in which the wind is stirring and I must let it happen to me' (quoted in Freedman, p. 325).

The Role of the Mother in Dissociative Poetic Voice

Here is the moment to ask a fundamental question: why all voracious readers, prolific writers and spiritual meditators do not have epiphanic moments tossing them into the bright light of cosmic consciousness with sensations, imagery and words surpassing the usual limits of the self?

Rilke once said in a letter: 'Ultimately there is only one poet, that infinite one who makes himself felt, here and there through the ages, in a mind that can surrender to him' (quoted in Gass, 1999, p. 183). Is this true, as Rilke suggests, or is there some universal experience behind divinely inspired poetic speech? Here I would suggest that genetic predisposition plus a dissociative response to early childhood trauma, particularly maternal loss or an overbearing mother, preconditions the right hemisphere's subsequent lability to poetic, artistic and religious creative thought.

Ellen Dissanayake (2000) says that art springs from the intimacy of mothers relating to their babies using singsong speech and rhythmic movements. In early societies, she claims, creative adults instinctively replicated in dance, music, and poetic language maternal relational activity. Adopting 'rhythmic-modal ceremonial elaborations' created positive emotional states, uniting the group and fostering behavioural control. Dissanayake explains how healing songs learned through invisible spirit guides are used to diagnose and treat illness in a present day primitive society's rituals as well. Shanon reports the same

phenomenon in the Amazonian Indian tribes that use Ayahuasca. The 'intonation (speech melody), rhythm, stress, tempo, amplitude, pauses, and voice quality' of the mother-to-infant communicative style also resurface in emotion-laden adult expression (Dissanayake, p. 43). These melodic speech qualities are governed by the right hemisphere and are especially evident in poetic expression. On the other hand, injury to the right hemisphere can produce monotone speech patterns, devoid of emotion.

Dr. Allan Schore (1994) of UCLA has also shown how the infant's relationship to the mother between the critical period of ten to eighteen months of age is essential to developing a stable sense of self. He claims that the mother's right hemisphere communicates directly with the right hemisphere of the infant, regulating its endocrine and nervous systems through her affirming gaze and facial expressions. Growing toddlers learn to control their own emotions by evoking in memory the feeling of the mother's touch and the image of her face, developmentally followed by prosodic memories of her voice. In quoting Putnam's research (1992, p. 102), Schore underscores the self-soothing benefit obtained by the child's 'naturally divided psychological organization as one "part" comforts another "part"' (Shore, p. 488). Failures in nurturing, an overbearing mother or loss of the mother will cause a dysfunctional sense of self to develop, one that lacks emotional stability and is prone to dissociate in order to protect itself under stressful conditions.

Schore pinpoints the right orbito-frontal cortex as the site of the damaging effect of insufficient or overbearing mothering during the first two years of life. Studies also show that the mother's anterior temporal limbic cortex serves as a template for the infant's developing temporal cortex (Schore, p. 77). Indeed, the right hemisphere has been shown to be the locus of negative emotions, split-off parts of the self, hidden memories, as well as altered states of consciousness and dissociative identities (cited in Schore, pp. 447, 485, 493, 495). During psychotherapy sessions, 'increased right hemispheric activation accompanies the emergence of strong affect' (Schore, p. 451). The right hemisphere also processes the child's early recognition of its name, the most important coherent identifier of his or her sense of self, and generates single words and commands typical of early child rearing.

Joining Dissanayake to Schore, we can see how the stressed mind might generate poetic language, the hallucinatory calling of one's name or a command to act to palliate anxiety. If maternal speech and movement produce art, spirituality and healing, then loss of the mother lays claim to the lost object through art. I would suggest that

through the cloven psyche of the wounded child sprouts adult dissociative poetic discourse.

Augustine's is the one example here of the overbearing mother. Monica is ever present in his *Confessions*, where in tears and moaning she constantly attempts to turn her pagan son towards Catholicism: 'For my mother, your faithful servant, wept for me before you more than mothers weep when lamenting their dead children' (*Confessions*, p. 49). She is told in a dream that where her son is, there she must be also. She pressures him to marry and his mistress of fifteen years and mother of his child is wrenched away from him for the sake of this marriage, which wounds him deeply. Monica follows him to Milan when he is thirty years old and is always close to him and his circle of friends. After he and Alypius have their reading-inspired conversions, they go immediately to Monica to tell her how it happened. Just prior to Monica's death, she and Augustine engage in a conversation so intense that they sense they are lifted in a joint mystical union, where joy and eternal wisdom in God's presence overpowers and informs them in a 'flash of mental energy' (*Confessions*, p. 172).

On the other hand, Muhammad's father died a few weeks before his birth; for several years, he was entrusted to a Bedouin foster-mother in the desert. His mother died suddenly after taking him to visit his father's grave. Next his beloved grandfather died. At the age of eight, he was placed in the care of a penurious uncle (Hamidullah, 1969). The ever-wise poet Rumi, who himself had experienced threat of Mongol invasion, flight and loss of his mother in early childhood, said: 'Don't turn your head. Keep looking / at the bandaged place. That's where / the light enters you' (Barks, 'Childhood Friends', p. 142).

Rilke also bears witness to the wounded child who begets the poet. Born weak and premature a year after a sister who died shortly after birth, he was at first closely guarded by a mother who feared losing him — yet was seemingly replacing her lost daughter by dressing him as a girl until he was five years old — then abandoned to a maid after his parents' separation. He only managed to attract his mother's attention when dressing as a girl, when ill, or when dedicating himself to poetry and religiosity. Placating his mother's female fantasy contrasted sharply with his father's masculine, military ideals. Rilke was sent to a military boarding school at ten years old, where he again felt abandoned; only recurrent bouts of illness brought his mother, his 'saving angel', habitually back to his side (see Freedman, 1996, pp. 9–20).

Similarly, French poet Victor Hugo entered the world in a time when conflicting politico-social realities would be the norm for most of his life. Another sickly newborn, he moved with his family to

Marseille from Paris, six weeks after his birth. When he was eight months old, Hugo's mother left for Paris, not returning until he was seventeen months old. Abandonment, humiliation, parental separation, and exposure to the horrors of war marked his entire childhood. His first flood of poetry began when his father forcibly separated him from his mother, sending him to a Parisian pension. During the time of his political exile on the Isles of Jersey and Guernsey, he wrote thousands of verses, while working intermittently on *Les Misérables* (see Robb, 1997). His mother and father were already dead by this time and his beloved daughter, Léopoldine, had died in a tragic boat incident ten years earlier. Raised essentially without religion, Hugo nonetheless infused his poetry with references to God. During his spiritualistic table-tapping sessions, he repeatedly asked questions, answered almost exclusively by the great male poets, scientists, and prophets of the past, about the workings of the universe and the nature of God. The dissociative answers he receives from these talkative 'presences' tell him to pose his questions in poetic form, compel him to write, and inform him that he is to found a new religion based on the table's revelations about reincarnation.

Irish poet W.B. Yeats' mother was a 'silent, undemonstrative, expressionless' depressive (Maddox, 1999). After losing a baby sister and brother, Yeats, the oldest child, was sent to live in England with his father while his mother remained in Ireland with the younger children. He veered early into a world of dreams, myth and poetry (Ellman, 1948/1979), not surprisingly, given both the home environment and a history of manic-depression on his mother's side of the family (Maddox) and a reaction against his domineering, rationalist father (Ellman). He was a voracious reader and had an intense identification with his poetic predecessor, Blake. Yeats admitted having a voice that came to him in moments of crisis to reprove him (Weissman, 1993). He also attended spiritualist séances and famously channelled Leo Africanus and other 'communicators' through his wife's automatisms, who came, they said, to 'give [him] metaphors for poetry' (Yeats, 1937/1973, p. 8).

Loss of the mother at an early age often occasions a dissociative response, but the loss can occur later or be triggered by other disquieting events. Alice Flaherty (2004) is a doctor who experienced compulsive writing after the death of her twin baby boys. Drawing on both her own experience and that of many famous writers, she notes that hypergraphia may arise from suffering, unhappy love, exile, social upheaval or war as well as from temporal lobe epilepsy or injury to the right frontal cortex. Other researchers have indicated the same or

similar circumstances that trigger dissociation in those predisposed genetically: a lonely, fantasy-prone personality since childhood, including imaginary companions (Murphy, 1992; Ross, 1989; Storr, 1996); latent homosexuality, fear of loss of control, sensitivity to humiliation (Baker, 1996); war, divorce and intentional exile (Brown, 1997). In all of these instances, we see high emotion coupled with actual or feared loss and abandonment.

American poet James Merrill, scion of the founder of Merrill Lynch, wrote in his memoir that between the ages of nine and ten, when his mother had little time for him, he transferred his love to his beloved governess, 'Mademoiselle'. At eleven, he was separated from her as well, 'when [he] needed her most' (Merrill, 1994, p. 130); his parents had divorced and felt 'masculine supervision' was necessary (p. 131). He noted that most of his friends in boarding school had no fathers and that 'the trauma seemed in every case to have quickened the child's imagination' (p. 9). His poetry writing began in prep school and continued in university, where both Rilke's and Yeats' work influenced him. His 560-page poem, *Changing Light at Sandover* (1996), was inspired by Ouija board messages from dead poets, lost loved ones, and a 'familiar spirit' from a broken home like him. The emerging reincarnation scheme promoted a new religion where science, music and poetry rule. 'God Biology' is the earth itself, a force that needs plague, war, suicide and natural disasters to supply new souls for the breed of higher souls cloned for its benefit. Proust is a prophet. Mental weight and poetry, not spirituality and piety, determine rebirth. Creative homosexuals trump mere reproducers. Merrill is even instructed to read science books to help take down the messages.

Merrill's 'unusual religiosity and altered sexuality', a pairing that Flaherty makes with regard to writers with temporal lobe epilepsy and manic-depression (p. 30), can be ascribed to many dissociative poets and prophets. Hugo comes to see himself as the messiah of a new religion while maintaining a life-long mistress and many other extramarital dalliances. Rilke effectively deserts his wife and child while remaining in thrall to the approving glance of women he admires for their intellect or social status. For him, distance remains *de rigueur*, domesticity and commitment a death knoll to his romantic ardour. His preference for expansive space, inner and outer, expresses, perhaps, his fear of female engulfment — the antithesis of the craved, but necessarily absent, mother he replicated in both his relationships and his poetry. The distant mother, need for ever-renewed female collaboration and a fear of engulfment bring to mind the English poet Ted

Hughes.⁶ He also fancied himself a shaman, and was particularly in thrall to the notion of goddesses, like his mentor, the poet Robert Graves.⁷ Yeats, although a lover of women, was shy and afraid of sex (Maddox, 1999); he allowed his married sex life to be dictated by his wife's spiritualist automatism.

Even Jung fits the paradigm of the wounded child who spawns a dissociative discourse meant to heal. His mother was a depressive with a penchant for the occult who saw ghosts and freely talked about her dual self with her son. She was absent during extended stays in a rest home in his early childhood and then sent him to live with an aunt. His divided self, starting in childhood, is evident in his memoirs. A culminating mystical conversion experience occurred during the time of Jung's professional conflict with Freud, the approach of war, and the additional stressor of his relationship with Toni Wolff, both professional colleague and lover. His entire family was captured in the stifling tension that permeated his house, when, suddenly, the doorbell rang repeatedly although no one was there. Jung sensed that the house was filled with ghosts; simultaneous presences chanted in unison that they were 'back from Jerusalem, where they found not what they sought' (Jung, 1961, p. 308). Like Rilke, Jung had been 'given' the initial line for his *Seven Sermons to the Dead*, which he continued to write madly for several days until the ghosts were gone.⁸ The language of the text was religious, poetic and sexual, encapsulating the ideas that would become the core of his analytical psychology. Not uncharacteristically, he had blended the ideas and style of a book that he had been reading into the text (Bair, 2003, pp. 295–6). Compelled to write in a dissociative state, he declared his objective stance with regard to the material, rejecting it, disagreeing with it, even as he wrote it.⁹

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- [6] According to Alice Miller (1987), the adult man's relationship to women reacts to his early absent mothering with 'a compulsion first to conquer and then to desert' (p. 20).
- [7] Interestingly, Hughes very poetically described the creation of metaphor as a synchronous hemispheric event: 'The balanced and sudden perfect co-operation of both sides of the brain is a momentary restoration of 'perfect consciousness' — felt as a convulsive expansion of awareness, of heightened reality, of the real truth revealed, of obscure joy, of crowding, indefinite marvels, a sudden feeling of solidarity with existence, with oneself, with others, with all the possibilities of being — a momentary effect, which is the 'poetic effect' (Hughes, 1992, p. 158).
- [8] The incident resembles George Sand's (1945/2004) loss of her ambiguously gendered inner figure, Corambé, after writing her first novel in a dissociative state. She also had had a conversion experience in a convent church and heard the 'Tolle, lege' of Augustine murmured to her.
- [9] Bair quotes him as saying 'I always said: there is talk, but it isn't I who is talking. I only hear it, and I perceive it as regrettably poor. I was simply swept up by this stream and felt as

Jung's churning intellect and habit of exhaustive reading coupled with the intensity of his emotional upheaval and history of inner division were able to fill his house with ghostly presences that everyone could sense. Hugo's table tapping with family and friends, Yeats' séances and his wife's automatism, Hughes' Ouija board sessions with Plath and Merrill's with his partner, David Jackson, showed the need for the collaboration of loved ones and a spiritualist technique to bring on a dissociative flow of words.¹⁰

In the religious realm as well, we see how Augustine had his connections to Paul, Anthony, his mother and his circle of friends; Muhammad and Jesus had their followers; Rumi, his friend. Jungian analyst Michael Conforti (1999) details in his book *Field, Form, and Fate* how interrelating people can experience an increased neuronal charge and synchronization leading to the creation of form. As an example, in one of his own emotionally charged psychiatric relationships, a patient gleaned a memory from Conforti's mind to fill his own maternal void. With the addition of Conforti's theory, we can see how an intensely verbal poet with an internal wound might ask a question within the charged space of a concentrating couple or group, scanning his memories and those of his partner(s) in a relational right-to-right mode to find dissociative answers and affirmation. Because of the right hemisphere's responsibility for moving the body through space and interpreting environmental cues, the search extends to the immediate environment as well. In Merrill's cosmic scheme, for example, a set of bat characters appears, obviously derived from the wallpaper design in the room where he and his partner spoke to the dead. The power of group synchronization is particularly evident in the case of the Canadian Psychical Society's ability to conjure 'Philip', an entity whose spurious biography they had invented, yet with whom the group managed to elicit 'spirit' contact with physical manifestations and verbal retorts (Owen, 1976).

if I were in it. But throughout that process I always preserved my critical view. I gnashed my teeth, so to speak, because I didn't agree with it at all' (p. 295).

[10] Hughes' poem, 'Song', did come to him as a voice in the air while on night duty in the RAF. His mother was said to be a psychic and he believed that he had inherited her abilities. He received some paranormal intrusions in his dreams, but he also cultivated outpourings through hypnosis, trance, and meditative exercises. He said that some of his poems had come from a different part of his brain that converted repressed trauma into the images of his poetic art. Middlebrook wisely recalls his 'legacy of family dynamics: his mother's emotional absences and absorption in the unseen, his brother's mastery in hunting, his father's traumatized silence about the war' (Middlebrook, *passim* and p. 150 for the quote).

The right brains of poets, then, preconditioned by genetic predisposition, early childhood and later traumas, become hotbeds for dissociation and a creative response to the stress of living, especially when they have followers or someone with whom they can collaborate. Some male authors use their dissociative tendencies to create an overarching system which maintains the core self in the face of fragmentation.¹¹ The mental system, carefully constructed out of metaphors, hierarchies of invisible beings, geometric visual-spatial concepts, myths of origins and returns, confirm their self-worth, corroborate long-held but unarticulated theories, while spinning off ever more fanciful renditions. The collaborative partner or partners are a social support system, like Jaynes' collective cognitive imperative (1976), which was necessary to maintain the voices of the gods in pre-literate days, and could also substitute for the lacking infant/maternal dyad or a subsequent loss. The affirming voices of the exalted dead poets and prophets not only prove the poet's self-worth, but also assure his immortality through the reincarnation themes that so often underpin a discourse reliant on invisible, dead or angelic beings. The assurance of immortality becomes the ultimate defence against the original catastrophic fear of annihilation.

Presence in Women Poets and Mediums

Persinger said that women exhibit a stronger sense of presence. Martin Teichler, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, has discovered that boys are more sensitive to neglect and girls are more vulnerable to sexual abuse, with both genders in these instances exhibiting a smaller corpus callosum, hence less connectivity between the hemispheres (Cromie, 2003). Patients with dissociative identity disorder, whose etiology is usually childhood abuse, report more paranormal experiences than patients with any other type of disorders. Voices are constantly present; patients enter trance states instantly and have spontaneous past life intrusions; conflict about sexuality and sexual orientation is universal. A very high percentage of people with dissociative disorder are women (Ross, 1989).

While women have more of a tendency to dissociate, what they have historically lacked is respect, a voice of authority and their own literary and/or mystical tradition. Rather than create a harmonizing

[11] Anthony Storr (1996) shows how lonely, loveless childhoods paved the way for authoritarian, power-mad, narcissistic gurus. In half of the cases cited, he notes high promiscuity along with delusions of divinity. In all cases, he sees a troubled mind constructing a generalized problem-solving system to make sense of its own chaos.

presence, dissociating women poets break down in this lack, criticizing both their worth and their femininity — *unless* they have a collaborator. Trapped in societal gender expectations or the very real difficulties of combining mothering and creative projects, their voices and visions become tormentors (Weissman, 1993), not protectors. Without a defensive narrative web and social support (from this world or beyond), women may succumb to suicide, rather than seek assurances of immortality. Virginia Woolf, who was abused by her half-brothers and lost a neglectful mother as well as a brother, said that '[her] pen seemed to stumble after [her] own voice, or, almost after some sort of speaker, as when [she] was mad' (quoted in Claridge *et al.*, 1990, p. 190). Anne Sexton, another abuse victim, had full-fledged dissociative identity disorder. She claimed that *she* was not a poet; her poetic alter did the writing; she just sold it (Ross, 1994). Both committed suicide.

If not overpowered by the torment of sexual abuse, women may turn to poetry when they lose an important male figure. Sylvia Plath's poetic genius had sprung from the loss of her father who she sought in her Ouija board sessions with her husband and in her poetry. However, when Hughes abandoned her, she ended her life. Emily Dickinson began writing poetry after a beloved minister friend moved away, but continued to produce highly unusual imagistic verse bolstered by a literary critic with whom she corresponded in her remaining years of life.

In the mystical world, the Seeress of Prevorst, who was sent to live with her grandparents at five years old and, most likely, was sexually abused, fell ill after the death of a minister friend, with whom she conversed regularly, and a forced marriage to someone else. Subsequent to a dream in which the corpse of the minister lay next to her in bed 'healing' her, nightly trance states began with paranormal prescriptions for healing 'based upon the magical power of words and numbers' (Hanegraaff, 2001, pp. 217–18). Coming from a folk tradition steeped in magic and the occult, her reaction to abuse and loss could be foreseen, but it was intensified by a doctor who took her into his home and encouraged her dissociative outpourings (Hanegraaff, 2001).

While male poets like Rilke, Yeats, Hugo and Merrill sought primarily the advice of dead poets and prophets through their spiritualist techniques, spirit *mediums* of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were mostly women transmitting the advice and texts of dead male poets and novelists who possessed them (Sword, 2000). The most famous channellers of the New Age movement were also women whose possessors were highly verbal males, such as Jane Roberts'

Seth and Helen Schucman's voice of Jesus (Hanegraaff, 1998). Both of them created a religious discourse, despite their own agnostic beliefs. Roberts (1981), whose parents divorced before she was three, spent two years in an orphanage returning to a bedridden tyrannical mother who abused her verbally, blaming her for ruining her life and killing her grandmother and housekeeper. Roberts had been writing poetry since childhood and continued to write poetry, in and out of altered states, along with transmitting Seth's philosophical, scientific, religious discourse. She had an intelligent, questioning mind and received answers through her poetry and trance states. The focus on especially meaningful verbal information can be seen in her ability to visualize a psychic library, where her double would read books whose explanatory 'codicils' appeared in her mind as she transcribed them. Schucman, a PhD psychologist, created her *Course in Miracles* over a seven-year period to answer a fundamental question about discord amongst coworkers, taking dictation in what was later discovered to be Shakespearean iambic pentameter (Hanegraaff, 1998). These women also had collaborators: Roberts' husband Rob and Schucman's colleague Bill.

Conclusion

Persinger's 'Muse Factor' experiment holds up in the study of mystics and poets with the added caveats of enhanced temporal lobe lability being preconditioned by adverse childhood circumstances, especially maternal deprivation, and the sexual abuse factor or loss of a significant male figure, in women. The wounded mind searches for enhanced personal meaning and the stabilization of the self through a restorative dialogic with conjured Others and real collaborators. Whether aroused by intense verbal meaningfulness, meditation, pathologies, drug usage, ritualistic behaviours or electromagnetically, the creative output can provide healing perceptions, a change of course and, often, an inspired poetic voice.

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