

If I ever have occasion to write out my last words in blood, I'll write this 'Everything I lived, said, or wrote, everything I loved – I considered communication. How could I live my life otherwise?' – Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*

Karen

Thanks again for offering to be my correspondent. That has certainly got me out of the sticky place I was in. I have a great deal of trouble finding a reason to write without the idea of real, living human beings at the end of the line. Otherwise the lines would never come to an end.

But the basic idea for the form of this piece of writing has been hovering in my mind for some time since I had the insight that, to a large extent, and for several years now, my work has been, in some shape or form, driven by issues of death and bereavement. I realised that my pre-occupation with spiritualism and Instrumental Trans-Communication (or ITC, the technical name for mechanical devices designed to communicate with the dead) was itself a work of mourning; a technological-creative sublimation of the grieving process. So I had the idea to make a piece of writing whose construction would literally mimic the building of a machine for communicating with the dead. It would have sections that would to act like the conceptual components of this metaphorical machine. What better memorial to the dead than one that could open a channel of communication for them? What little commitment I have to the idea of art convinces me that it must, at the very least, be something that can affirm and engage the issue of human death. Especially for the faithless.

I suppose this gets at the core of what I want to write

at/about; the destiny of this urgent *need* to communicate when our intended communicant is no longer alive. Though I am not a believer in the survival of the soul, I recognise in the spiritualist quest something I am continually drawn to, something absolutely imperative, unavoidable and impossible in the creative urge. And there is a certain duplicity here too. I don't want to put the dead to work. On the contrary. But I have to confess a certain envy for the mediums who channel them. It seems to me that they have source of perpetual creative inspiration flowing through them, that they are able to give meaningful form the catastrophic force of irredeemable loss that is 'living-on'.

And of course this makes me a little nervous with regard to my request that you be the intended recipient of these letters. I want to write about, and to, the dead but it seems I must go through the agency of the living. The lifeline, as it were, of this grave issue.

But I don't want you to feel like you are having an unnecessary burden of responsibility placed on your shoulders. This is, after all, just a piece of writing. Is it not, in the end, only vanity that would make one wish to make a 'work' from such feelings?

And this too is a very important issue about which I want to write. How to reconcile the urgent need to communicate the experience of anguish, grief and mourning with the desire to make art? I'm really sure you understand the kind of duplicity and hypocrisy that lies in this question. And once again, please forgive me in advance if my presumptions in this respect are the distorted products of an over-dramatic juvenile memory.

I cannot help but feel the earliest understandings of this quandary in the time that we came together. Wasn't that at the base of some of the more intense events that happened between us? It was for me at least. I remember one particular occasion in your grandma's living

room. You were incredibly close to her and she was your protector at that time. She was a practicing spiritualist, was she not? I recall you telling me, around the time we first started sleeping together, that your dead uncle was always there looking over you. This was pretty disconcerting for the sexually immature youth that I was. But I took it in my stride. In retrospect I wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

We had been trying to break up. It was a deeply traumatic period. My first taste of what was to come at the end of 'relationships'. I can tell you it got a lot worse. But the gaps between one end and the next got increasingly large. (I think I may have reached the end now).

You were crying relentlessly and I had no idea how to deal with that. My mother was doing the same thing regularly at home. I didn't know what to do, how to stop it. I still don't. I wonder now if the art of ending relationships shares something fundamental with the art of communicating for/with the dead.

I have never experienced anything since then close to what happened to me in your grandma's living room. I think my frustration and confusion was beginning to overwhelm me. Had I started to punch the walls? I think so. I don't remember that too clearly. What I do remember is this massive and sudden upsurge of energy through my entire body. It rolled up and over me, from the ground up, like a violent, shuddering wave, some massive inverted orgasm that climaxed, literally, in my face, which began to shake spasmodically, beyond any voluntary control. I remember putting my hands to my face to feel the convulsions for myself. Sure enough, it was shaking out of control. There was a moment then, a very peculiar moment, when for an instant I was outside myself, an instant of utter bewilderment that removed me from my feelings of distress. A tiny instant of peace, perhaps, before the torrential collapse into terror that

followed. I was sure then that it was the beginning of the end for me. It was going to be Bootham all the way after that.

I remember it, perhaps unkindly, as a moment of reversal. As I recall the moment I began to convulse you immediately stopped crying. Isn't this what the passage of a spirit from one medium to another most feels like?

I am not at all trying to cast doubt over the depth of our emotions at this time. I was emotionally very naïve and very confused about sincerity, honesty, feelings etc. And it's clear that what happened to me was a very corporeal manifestation of inexpressible emotion. But whatever it was that took over my body in that room it could not have been preconceived and therefore exceeded any accusation of artifice.

It's probably not the best example of what I'm trying to get at. But that memory presented itself first. I was thinking more of the whole 'pretentious' and 'weirdness' culture of our youth. So much seemed to revolve around how much people were 'putting on', of telling the difference between what was real and what was a deception. It seems to me that you were the mistress of this art. Isn't the essence of seduction to draw one into the game of 'telling the difference' between sincerity and artifice?

Think of James Herbert's *The Survivor*. I remember you had been reading that when we started going out with each other. I was strongly impressed with the descriptions you gave of some of the chapters, and the memory of them is etched firmly in New Earswick, right outside the Folk Hall, another on the road that leads to the river behind the Museum Gardens. The first image is the medium at the séance who, having become possessed by a malevolent spirit, picks up the wine glass, smashes it, and plunges it into his/her (can't remember) face. What an image! Do you remember?

The second scene was the couple. The wife had been

slowly poisoning her husband until he was just like a living, emaciated corpse in the bed. Just when she thought he had finally, actually died, he came back to life, possessed by another of the malevolent dead, then raped and killed her. Is that right? What an exquisitely gruesome and seductive story that was. And did you not believe that your father was a werewolf and that his behaviour was subject to discernably weird alterations during full moons?

I wonder how surprising this is to you. It seems to me that our encounter all those years ago set the tone for the path I was to follow up until now. I'm not suggesting blame or anything, but I believe that we were drawn together by some shared fascination with the supernatural and intensely emotional. How emotionally unhealthy, in the long run, do you think such macabre youthful preoccupations are?

I awoke this morning with a familiar cloud of weighty despondency hanging over me, one that always accompanies the need to write. I often think that I deliberately cultivate these feeling in order to *have* to write. Perhaps that the only way I know of making things. Aggravate feelings of negativity until there is no other option but to *communicate* them.

I had intended to visit the Hackney Archive to do some research on Florence Cook, a notorious local medium who lived in the neighbourhood at the end of the 19th century. But was in such low spirits that I cannot bear the thought of ploughing my way through a year of *Hackney Gazettes* from the 1870's.

That was the year that Florence gained public notoriety for being the first medium in Britain to produce full-body materializations. I'm finding out as much about the story as possible. I was told a few years ago by an astrologer friend that my emotional problems at that time were due to unresolved issues in a past life. I asked

Theresa what that meant if I didn't believe in past lives. "Then", she said, "You'd better just get used to it". So when I heard about Florence I took it as an opportunity to explore the idea of unfinished past life business in Dalston.

I have great doubts about this aspect of the current work. It seems like another ill-advised digression into a territory I had much better stay out of, like Dalston in general. But that's partly why I need to find out more about Florie. Or do I? Radical ambivalence on this one. I go to her as one who has been called. But surely this is a ridiculous imposture. I go to find her as one who wishes to have been called, one desperately searching for a reason. A reason for being here, now, trying to write. How could Florence help me?

It seems fairly certain that Florence Cook was a charlatan. Perhaps we can take that for granted with theatrical mediums in general. Another core conundrum of this peculiar enterprise; to seek creative inspiration analogous to possession by spirits of the dead by pursuing the history of local charlatans and fraudsters.

I will tell you more about what I have discovered of Florence in the next letter.

John

I have tried to write this letter several times over and am experienced enough to know that this is because there is something that I want to say but cannot yet. Perhaps this is because I need to protect you, myself, the both of us from whatever it is. As I write it may emerge and, if I try hard not to think of other people reading this, it may serve the both of us well.

It is as difficult for me to write to you spontaneously as it is for me to live my life in the here and now. I have spent over half a lifetime trying to get to a place where I can simply experience things without analyzing them. I have largely failed and have only achieved that ecstatic freedom from the desire to understand the world when medicated. My drugs these days are respectable and accepted in a wide variety of situations. Alas this also means that the efficacy is somewhat reduced. I live in hope that age and the death of brain cells along the way will help me get some rest.

I have, however, a clear and linear mind these days. It is no longer haunted by dead relatives. I am nowadays not possessed of a desire to be different to everyone crossing my path. These days, my overall urge is to find the answer to the question to ease and smooth my own and other people's lives. I suspect it may not be so easy to do this with the questions that you have put forward for my consideration.

Still, I am freed from the desire to impress, seduce or bind you in anyway and therefore it is possible for me to take up your invitation to wander around the internal landscapes of our shared history without becoming lost. At least one of us will, at all times, need to be aware of the path we have taken in order to that we get out again safely. I am sufficiently practiced in the art of summoning both the dead and the past to know that doing so needs great skill, care and attention by all concerned.

I spent many years living with the dead. My family history is rooted in spiritualism and table rapping and séances were a feature of our Christmas celebrations. As children, whilst we danced to Slade in one room, in the other, shouts of 'stop pushing the table' and 'we know you're there' came through the walls. Those people, with their lined faces, blue eyes, heavy rimmed glasses, glasses of whisky in mottled hands, those people were

the flesh and blood of my childhood. All of those people are dead now. You would imagine, being the granddaughter of a spiritualist, that I have continued my relationships with each after their death. I have had no word from any one of them in all the years that have intervened between the last one dying and today. Not one word.

Mindst you John, I haven't exactly given them the opportunity to talk to me. Since the death of my grandmother I have actively blocked each and every effort that she and others have made to communicate with me. She died without allowing me the ritual and ceremony of goodbye and her leaving without my presence has bothered me ever since. I might worry that I have blocked the grieving process and am stuck in anger if I hadn't mapped for myself the path I have taken to mental health since her death. No, I am not stuck in anger, I have merely put away the past and decided to try and live in the present, with the living and let the dead get on with it by themselves. Now that I come to write it down I realize how much I sound like a sulky child who has been denied what she thought would be rightfully hers.

The depth to which we are wounded when we face death in our lives for the very first time does, I imagine, depend upon the preparation that we have had for the enormity of the event. What is very obvious to me is that the loss of someone on whom we are dependent has the same impact on our emotional, mental and spiritual selves as being run down by a lorry might have on our physical being. The first time I experienced it felt like being slashed open across my abdomen with a jagged sword. I bent double on and off for days, weeks and months afterwards as if trying to hold together the pieces of ripped and bloody flesh, clawing at myself over and over as if doing so would mend me. I have come to

understand that art can communicate the most unspeakable things and had I been capable I would have made art from the awfulness of that first encounter with loss. I had no other language and found that anyway the world that we live in today cannot hear grief and pain and suffering in any meaningful way. Perhaps it is not always vanity that propels an urge towards creativity.

You have asked me whether I think that our shared pre-occupation with the supernatural and intensely emotional was such a good thing at our young age. Now that I have a daughter who is the same age as we were then, I have the opportunity to compare. I can say honestly that if I take into account the influences on our individual lives then and calibrate the comparison with this in mind, that we were fairly normal teenagers. What wasn't normal for us was our shared experience of a mother who repeatedly intruded upon our self-development. I remember that my mother created utter havoc in my life with her inability to separate her own emotional distress from my emotional self-development and I remember your mother being pretty much the same with you. Having lived through the sexual development of my own daughter I realize now how tender and delicate sexuality is and what privacy is needed for its successful completion. Our shared sexual awakening was fraught with the dangers posed by emotionally unstable women who were, perhaps themselves, unable to properly reconcile themselves with their own sexuality. Little wonder that my endless tears at the end of our relationship created for you such a powerful physical reaction. The psychoanalysts would call it an abreaction which is when the ability of the mind to ward off powerful feelings is breached. I remember the time and I remember being awed by the power of your physical reaction. Within that incident lies my interest in the power of the mind and its relationship to the body

and my lifetime interest in psychoanalysis.

I have done a great deal of work in psychotherapy to free me from past terrors and some of this work was about my relationship with you. I have said to you recently that I have carried you with me for many years and I know that I constructed my self identity in conjunction with yours. What is a shock to me is that the same appears to be true for you.

I have known for years that I was your muse. Not your first perhaps but your first important one. Perhaps the power of that relationship has lasted all these years on some transpersonal level. Certainly the transference that we built between us created bonds that could not easily be broken. I believe that it is this degree of mutual possession that enables communication between living people who are apart and perhaps too between the living and the dead.

Will look forward to hearing about Florence and it is not lost on me that you are seeking inspiration in the work of charlatans. Life presents us with mirrors and it is up to us whether to look at ourselves in them or not. I am not sure about unresolved issues in your past lives at all, in my experience it is always more fruitful to look for the unresolved in the life we are living.

Karen

Very tricky thoughts which make me I feel like I'm splitting in two. Can't quite explain. Something to do with a tension between writing towards you and writing towards something else. Something to do with the ethics of this.

Too much to go into here. I'm rambling. But I realised

that I had to write something immediately rather than letting it wait. The urgency is here.

And then it stops.

So you have to move with it when you can. But there is always this hesitation, right at the end of the sentence in which one feels the current beginning to flow, as if at the end, the spirit will flow through, one's hands will be taken from oneself and the writing will make itself. Or, rather, that I could write about those things that are only vaguely formed in the periphery of my imagination, a periphery which is almost always somewhere in York, and I realise now, that the zone on Poppleton Road – where I have been kept being returned of late, as I think about what to write in this letter – is the same place that I imagined *Kronsepor* in the last piece I wrote for John. It is also where certain sections from a book called (*Vampyres*) by Jalal Toufic are remembered, the sections about distraction, peripheral vision, the movement of vampires through celluloid time and the writing of intimate letters to lovers made public. It's all the unformed material, the stuff that is virtual (in the sense of potentially actualisable). I have learned that the locations of the inner landscape upon which these potentialities of reading/writing are mapped have no direct significance in themselves. But even now, as I write, I find that hard to believe. And this is no doubt why the task I have found myself undertaking for a long time now has the character, and sometimes the name of "chasing ghosts". I do this not only in the work, but in love and life too. It has become something of a curse.

So before leaving Poppleton Road here's a quote from an essay about Hysteria, Freud, Lacan, Telepathy, Dracula, and Love (among many other things) by a writer whose work, like Toufic's, is very current for me – Friedrich Kittler. I made a note of this section travelling on a train from Leeds to London on New Years Eve. I

was thinking about how I might explain what I am doing to you. (And coincidentally I have also just recovered some writing which was made during a particularly dark period approximately a year earlier, when your memory came to me again, on a train, again to York, relating back to the scene at your grandmother's house that I mentioned in the last letter. I named the experience of that memory *Karen Ripple*.

"A scene [from Stoker's novel *Dracula*, where the count teaches Mina to suck blood from his chest] that has set the typewriters of specialists on cross-sexual sadism, especially those forms focused on the mother's breast, into motion. But it too is nothing more than a flow of information. After the count has connected a living woman to his blood stream, there exists one more source of information for the hunters. The steno-typist has become an hysterical woman, who, much to *Dracula's* future misfortune, has just as much hypnotic rapport with him as he has with her. Then hunters simply need to tap into her neurotic source, just have they have already tapped into Renfield's psychotic source. But what can only be accomplished neurophysiologically by trepanation of the brain, can be accomplished through hypnosis, in female patients who can still be healed. Once again Van Helsing swings from the scientific to the analytical discourse, from Broca to his great model Charcot."

I've been researching Florence Cook's life in the British Library. Tomorrow I will note some material that fits in here somewhere. In *Mystic London or, Phases of Occult Life in the Metropolis*, the sceptical Reverend Charles Davies recounts his visits to a number of spiritualist séances in the capital. In one chapter he gives an account of Direct Writing by Spirits: a certain Mrs. Everitt was able, in a trance state, to write 936 words in 6 seconds. Perhaps, like Mina Harker, she was a stenog-

rapher. However, Davies' informant writes, "the mental difficulty is that the medium has not a logical mind. Like most females, she takes a short cut by jumping to conclusions. She does not, indeed cannot, argue out any proposition by the ordinary rules of logic". Which reminded me of the Kittler quote and of trying to write this letter and make the correspondence into a 'work'.

There is this recurrent relation of women patients-mediums being tested and observed by men who assume their mental inferiority and their propensity for deception. And, following suite with Mrs. Everett, I will put the cart before the temporal horse and mention something that makes sense to me now but will probably only make sense within the letter later. Pierre Janet, the pioneering French psychologist whose work was seriously eclipsed by Freud, first used automatic writing as a method for the discovery of the cause and meaning of certain hysterical symptoms in the 1880's. His mediumistic, hysterical test subject – Lucie – had a 'successive existence' (Janet's favoured term for 'alternative personality') who was prone to terror fits. In a hypnotic trance state she explained how as a child two men had jumped from behind a curtain and frightened the wits out of her. Janet developed a technique of assisting the patient in overcoming these burdensome memories. My own grandmother, herself a sometime spiritualist, often told the story of how she once hid behind the well in Merton, draped in a white sheet, waiting for the local girl who would always collect water at the same time each night. Grandma jumped up from behind the well with ghostly wail and the girl was so terrified she went cross-eyed for the rest of her life.

I suppose what I'm getting at is the issue of channelling, the fantasy of entering an automatic communication-creation mode. It's a Modern theme that can be traced back to the Surrealist's experimenting

with hypnosis and automatic writing in the 1920's, methods directly inspired by psychotherapeutic techniques that had been in regular use since the late 19th century. There is something Faustian about it too. Psychoanalysis itself was a product of the hypnotic treatment of hysteria at in the 19th century. This is well documented. In fact the entire history of dynamic psychiatry is inextricably linked to the history of spiritualism, Mysticism and Occultism. Freud was still claiming to have experienced cases of telepathy in dreams and transference as late as 1925. And, in private correspondences, Freud often likened the practice of psychoanalysis to medieval exorcisms.

However the surrealists, and the automatist tradition they perpetuated, were attempting to circumvent the censorial role of the super-ego in the creation of literary and visual works. It was a continuation of the avant-garde impulse to be done at last with the authority of tradition, reason and morality in art. Which brings me back to the issue of freedom and the hand of the master. Ink flows, blood flows, words flow. Such flows are imagined as traces of unmediated currents of raw unconscious being. The dream of unmonitored flows is of course present in the very idea of free-association. The expression of spontaneous, unmonitored, untutored thought has been assumed to deliver a truer representation of the soul, has it not?

No need to try and prove the case here. There's enough been written on this. The point being that the desire to find a way of spontaneously creating art is related fundamentally to the desire to communicate with the dead. And this points towards a moral and philosophical dilemma at the core of both enterprises. I will write more about this, in relation to the Florence Cook story, later.

I cannot speak from experience but I imagine that

mediums do channel the dead in some fashion. I think the energetic stuff of the séance, the binding force, is directly related to the anxiety we have about losing our loved ones, and ultimately ourselves, to nothingness. And in some way I do believe in the 'survival of the soul', but only in and through the living. Souls can therefore manifest through the mediumistic art. They exist as objects of a collective faith, like everything human, fuelled by an inhuman and unthinkable immensity.

John

Today is the anniversary of my grandmother's death. It is nine years since I last spoke to her. She died on the operating table after suffering an aneurism. The surgeon had repaired the artery and was waiting for a blood match to give her a life saving transfusion, she had an unusual blood group and a match couldn't be found. They had to let her die.

That night I sat in her living room with my grandfather, father and uncle. All three men were completely confident in the surgeon's ability to save her life. I knew with absolute certainty that she was going to die that night and so did she. As they took her to theatre she had said goodbye to my father and grandfather and told them to say goodbye to me and tell me that she loved me. As we sat waiting for the surgeon to ring I watched those men's faces and wondered how they would survive when he told them she was dead.

On the day after her death I was sitting in that room again with Hannah who was at the time only six years old. Hannah was the light of my grandmother and

grandfather's later lives and she too had known that her grandma was going to die. She had told us so four days earlier when I last saw my grandmother alive. Hannah had insisted on that day that grandmother should not be left on her own at any time in the coming days. My grandmother laughed as she cuddled her for the last time and said to me

“this little one thinks I am going to die... and she's probably right... the lights have been turning themselves on and off for days now which means there's someone going over.”

On this day after her death I sat, still too stunned to cry, completely frozen inside as people are when death interrupts life. I looked at the birthday presents she had opened a few days before, still half wrapped by her chair.

As the light changed towards the mid afternoon I let myself begin to remember the things that she had told me about dying. I let myself wonder where she might be. I was startled out of this half conscious state by a loud rap in the room next door and went to find out what it was. Hannah continued to watch children's TV and I stood in the doorway to the kitchen uncertain whether someone had come in without my hearing. I continued to stand and look at the empty space when she came and stood right beside me and with all the effort that she could muster my grandmother said to me, “go and get the letter you know where it is.” And left me again in the empty room.

I went to find the letter which she had written to Hannah the year before so that I could give it to her when she was older. It was a letter that told Hannah how much she had loved her and how she would watch her and guide her if she could. I found it in an old handbag in the room that I used to sleep in. When I read it I began the journey into madness that is truly mourning the death of a loved one and it broke me open.

In the intervening years I have experienced her at the edges of my consciousness and once, when sitting in a room with a medium, I experienced her in the room again with me. I have never visited a medium again after that time because she ruined the contact with ridiculous interpretations of whatever it was she was hearing. I decided then to let the dead get on with it and make my life with the living.

OK, here is the issue that I have been weaving around since the first time that I wrote to you. This contact with you has possibly, not certainly, brought me into contact with her again. In entering into this correspondence I am opening myself up to the possibility of reassessing my willingness to hear the dead speak again. I can feel their excitement at this possibility all around me. They send signs in small, nondescript ways.

Before my grandmother's death I was trained to hear 'voices' by a woman who had herself heard voices all her life. I lost a lot of my physical hearing after a viral infection in 1995 and almost immediately began to 'hear' in a different dimension. Sometimes I still 'hear' the most heavenly music, music that cannot ever be recreated in a physical way. Someone told me once that I was hearing the music of the spheres, you may know more about it than I.

Sybil. That book has remained a fascination for me throughout the years. It was of course over identification on my part, I couldn't decide whether to be the psychiatrist or whether to be Sybil. What was very definite was that I had an empathic understanding of how the personality can split into several different persona. I had a fantasy that there was not one but several of us at that time and it has taken a long time to integrate these hived off fantasy parts of myself into a whole person. I used psychoanalysis to help me to understand the world and my place in it for many years, I still do, it protects me

from the noisiness of the other world. It wasn't easy having dead relatives wandering around my internal landscape. It has been a relief not to have them bother me for many years.

I said in my email to you that the unconscious is the road to contacting the dead or some such. It is true that those things that hover on the periphery of our vision are the very things that will lead us through the veil. Now I am writing without consciousness of who might read this and the flow that you describe has begun. The flow feels physical and yet at the same time it is connected to my mind and a part of my brain that I can almost feel is starting to work again. I have never written of this before but there is an energy to the flow, it is creative and positive and at the same time it has immense negative possibilities.

My family has been involved in spiritualism since the turn of the last century. It wasn't a New Earswick thing at all. It was based around my grandmother's family who were bargees. They travelled all over the north on canals taking goods to and from container ships. They were extremely poor and uneducated people and my grandmother's family was always slightly ashamed of their origins. They were persecuted by many people for being ungodly and without belief, but their spiritual lives were richer than many.

What is happening to me is that I am starting to allow an ability to come back to me that I have kept at arm's length for a very long time. It isn't so much the writing to you that has created this as the loops and links to the past that I am bringing into my conscious awareness by doing so. It isn't so much the loops and links coming into consciousness as the exercising of the ability to let the unconscious speak.

Two speeds of writing/ splitting in two/ writing towards two things/ spontaneous versus considered/

automatic writing/ writing with the non-dominant hand/
psychoanalysis/ self understanding/ self awareness/ art/
free association/ flow/ peripheral vision/ sybil/ true
representation of the soul/ unshielded communication.

All of these things are concerned with either accessing the unconscious or contacting the dead. The way to contact the dead is to access the unconscious. I believe that we live on in another way that we cannot be conscious of but that we are always aware of in our unconscious world. I think that mediums are able to channel the dead because they are able to wander about in the collective unconscious at will.

Do you remember when I used to set alarm clocks at different times in the night to wake me up from dreams? I found eventually that my dreams were predictive in that I was able to access my unconscious world so regularly that I was able to 'see' where I was heading in life. I don't use them so much these days – too much hanging around with existential anarchists.

Karen

We have set something in motion through the correspondence, and for me, at least, it means I have a channel open to run my feelings through. And that channel, due to the vast amount of time and experience we have to recover, is likely to be one that would be overloaded with explanations and descriptions of events and feelings of little interest to a cold reader. But I know that this channel of communication is necessary for me to write anything at all. That's because I have so much debilitating energy passing through me continuously that unless I can get that out of the way nothing of any

quality will ever get produced. And I think that a work of fiction, or a work that aspires to the condition of art, is a conceptually crafted thing that whose meaning is inherent in its form. It has to stand alone. It really shouldn't be the product of a cathartic expressive urge channelled into a dialogue.

And that is what intimate personal communication tends towards for me. So how to reconcile that kind of expressive communicative urge with the desire to produce a self-contained work of art is a core question. But even so, the unfolding of the question is not in itself a work.

What I am trying to say, again, is that...

The function of interruptions in thinking-writing that aspires to the state of immediacy, channel shifts, immediately recorded, disrupt the continuity of the form, introduce disjunctions in the flow.

I look out of the window to my right. A vast plane of luminous pale grey over a band of ochre and brick... I look INTO the whiteness of the sky and imagine a channel open directly to you. That it is open at your end I cannot know but I can only imagine the channel as an unlimited openness that is the 'impossible' precondition for unmediated communication.

I wrote 'say' before. That was intended. But I know it is only writing. And not even that, because writing having the quality of continuity and flow is closer to the immediacy of voice. This is typing. Tip, tip, tap. A further, muted, remove. Perhaps the fantasy of automatism is precisely a consequence of the distance we have put between each other with the aid of communication technologies. Modern channelling emerges precisely in societies where individuals are tendentially atomised while simultaneously communication technologies begin to fill in the gaps between them. In an atomised and automated machinic environment,

channelling is a nostalgic dream of unmediated communication with the loved. That is why the mouth and the ear are the most important organs. That it is often the dead with whom such communication is wished underlines the desperate sense of isolation we experience in general. To not be isolated; is that not the fundamental impetus of communication in general? Hence the massive ambiguity of these communication machines we use everyday, simultaneously enabling and preventing direct communication. In fact...and now I feel the rambling urge taking me over... I think that the dynamic history of evolving communications technologies is driven by a dialectical process of extension in space and immediacy in time. We are where we are now, communicating over this distance, in such quick time, because of that process. I believe the demand for traumatic telemediacy is driven by something similar to the fantasy of communicating with the dead. The dead are the deeply individualised, fantasmatic embodiments of the same force that draws us towards the vicarious experience of 'death live'.

John

I am writing this online because I am hoping that it will come out onto the page unimpeded by my conscious thought. I am sitting by the window looking out on the garden, Hannah is in the room behind me listening to music from Poland, it feels a strange place to be.

I have just read your letter and I think that I understand your urge and your question and your desire and the despair that arises from feeling separated from energetic flow of life and death. I am also starting to

understand something that is passing between us.

The channel that you imagined is possibly what has opened up communication for me again. What is true in your imagination is true in the other dimensions. It is like a light being switched on or a current flowing and if you have been projecting this then it is little wonder that the channels are opening again for me because I am sensitive and able to use them. What I need to be sure of is that I can cope with it again because it is where madness lies if it is not done properly. What I said in my letter to you previously about at least one of us knowing where we are at all times is essential to remember. I have been trained well to open and close channels and will begin to use the processes that I learned again.

The blocking of energy flow is most often caused by disbelief. I used to wake every morning and promise myself to believe at least one unbelievable thing before breakfast. I actually didn't need to do this at all really because my energy was not ever blocked and my problem was always finding ways of closing down the channel so that I could get rest and not be pestered day and night by people with messages for other people that I had never heard of.

All of this I left behind when my grandmother died. Having it come back to me is a bit like learning to walk again, the parts of me that I need to use feel rusty and out of use. There was a time when I could use the ability at will but it would take a long time to ever get to that point again and I would need to work hard to get there. I am not sure whether I could ever get to the point that I was at when my grandmother died although I am sure that she will help me.

She and I have a password. We agreed it before she died so that I would know it was her. If she has not gone too far on and I don't think that she has, I will hear from her soon. She is of course, nothing like the woman I

remember in the physical world, but I will know her for certain and I don't really need a password at all. I suppose the existence of the password could be proof that a medium has contacted her but I don't need to hear it all really because I know her presence.

Communication machines don't get in the way of communication in other dimensions. I keep saying other dimensions because I don't know how else to describe the different layers and levels of existence. It's a bit like tuning in a radio station, all of those words and things are there anyway, but you don't hear them because you're not attuned to them. When you tune in, the words come flowing out. It's just like that when I 'hear' except that I don't hear in the physical. The different layers and dimensions are very very noisy though and tiring and it doesn't do to be tuned in all of the time. Anyway the machines we use for communication will prevent most people from communicating on other levels but that's the way it is I suppose.

The dead are people who have lived in the physical and with whom we still have powerful connections and urges towards and who at times have urges towards us. It is extraordinarily difficult for them to communicate with us though and we have to make it easier by listening and paying attention.

Karen

Thanks for your letter. It's brought me close to a place where many threads intersect an openness.

One of the core themes of my thinking for the last few years has hinged on something I call the Mother Code. I'll try to quickly trace the history of its emergence.

I first began to formerly explore the meaning and history of an inner-landscape complex that had been making itself ever more present for me as I moved further into academic (ie theory reading-thinking) life. It grew ever more sophisticated in parallel to the formal purposes of my knowledge. In short; the more I learned the stronger became my memorial connections to York. Eventually I had a fully fixed memorial map built upon remarkably specific points that I knew from my childhood and youth. There's no doubt that this phenomena was largely a consequence of my first close intellectual encounter with psychoanalytic ideas. I was trying to understand the theory while simultaneously trying to understand myself.

The complex memorial system that developed, rather like a photographic print develops, as if it latent on the planes of my imagination, was something I had to externalise-exorcise in some way. It had become inextricably associated with all the suffocatingly symbolic stuff that we cannot escape in ourselves, of all that we are returned to despite ourselves.

Needless to say you had a very powerful significance in the story of that complex. In particular that which had to do with my learning to understand the sexual dynamics of another's body, and one of a different sex. I vaguely remember the issue was very 'cosmopolitan', if you get my drift. So there was all this tension between repression and desire in the system, the role of the super-ego and the law, the meaning of taboo and transgression, gender difference, how to know desire outside one's self, etc, etc...

At the time of completing that project my thoughts were gravitating around a location which seemed to be the epicentre of the entire system (I've since discovered that it has no such centre. The centre changes over time, depending on factors external to the system itself). That

location was in front of Southland's Chapel on Southland's Road, South Bank. It was where my grandma and grandad used to go to the Camera Club. It was close to Nunthorpe school and on the way to Rountries Park.

The point is that towards the close of the show, when I was still expecting to come to some final revelation-resolution, I was reading a book about shamanism and popular showmanship. In it there was a chapter on Harry Houdini who it claimed was a modern shaman. After reading the book Houdini seemed to enter the ordinarily uninhabited innerscapes like a composite of the ghost of Christmas past and the Wax Man in the cell of the Castle Museum. I imagined he must have some special cryptic message which would help me escape my interior isolation. The first part was the key that his wife would slip to him in a stage kiss before each escape act (I'd been thinking a lot about Ariadne and Perseus, for obvious reasons). That's when the significance of my maternal line's interest in spiritualism came to the fore. Two facts about Houdini's life were also of great significance for me at that time. The fact that his art evolved from a fear that should his mother die he would go mad and be slammed-up in an asylum. In advance of this likelihood he spent long evenings of his early marriage tied up (by his wife) in a straight jacket, learning how to 'escape the inevitable'. That seemed very close to my predicament at the time. But my mother was already dead.

The second was the fact that after his mother's death Houdini (who could no longer be locked up securely by anyone, anywhere) became the scourge of the hoax mediums in Europe and America, attending and debunking every séance or spiritualist gathering which claimed to be in contact with the departed. He too, had given his mother a code. His relentless passion for the

destruction of illusions was fuelled by his need to believe in life after death. Tragically he never received the Mother Code.

The other main thread of the Mother Code comes from the history of Electronic Voice Phenomena. It's founder Friedrich Jurgenson, a Swedish film producer, first hit upon the idea when he discovered the voice of his deceased mother speaking through recordings of birdsongs he had made in audio-tape. This is what she said: "Friedrich, you are being watched. Friedel, my little Friedel, can you hear me?". Konstantin Raudive, the next big name in EVP also first made contact with his mother through recordings of white noise.

I suppose the connections I'm making are fairly obvious. We can make connections in our minds in infinite variety of ways. Presumably there are no more than six degrees of separation between ideas too. I am not a sensitive. In fact I am probably a very inert medium, the kind of person who blocks the channels. And I suppose that's a lot to do with why this memorial system came into existence. It's a network of blockages where the desire for communication and flow of psychic energy is at its strongest and most critical.

I tried to pay attention to my dreams last night but I can only remember a fragment from shortly before waking, and that was clearly a strong residue from the film I saw yesterday afternoon. It's a recurrent visual theme in *Day of the Wolf*; a long, static shot through a forest in daylight. If you a look long enough the relation between the positive and negative space starts to break down and figures moving across the plane seem to be passing through a solid substance. That seemed to be a very strong visual metaphor for the passage of something like the spirit of the wolf through humans in the wood. In my dreams there were two clearly defined negative spaces representing two figures. The colour was

distinctly silver grey, like in a birch forest.

I will attach a couple of images of Florie. I really haven't told you too much about her though I've found out quite a lot. One of the images is of her and the control she channelled – Katie King. Katie was the daughter of a famous buccaneer called Henry Morgan, another spirit control figure. Interesting because of the links to the Caribbean and the sugar-chocolate-slavery-economy. (Spirit economies?). The other is of her and the eminent Victorian physicist William Crookes, who took a career-threatening and very personal interest in Florie/Katie. The terraced house where she lived in the 1880's on Eleanor Road has now been replaced by modern flats. I used to live two streets down in a house which I believed to be plagued by very negative psychic energies. Other than this uncanny proximity nothing of immediate significance is coming through the Florence link. I think the grey wolf in the birch forest is stronger.

John

VODOU, POSSESSION AND THE REVOLUTIONARY UNCONSCIOUS

Transcription of a talk given at the Brunei gallery, School of African and Oriental Studies, 23 January, 2004 at the opening of an exhibition celebrating the 200th Anniversary of the foundation of the Haitian Republic.

“There are some seats at the back, people might get tired, I’m going to talk for approximately forty minutes it’s not quite... I’m never sure how that will work, so if you want to sit down, sit down now if you’ve got tired legs.

Okay, I’d like to thank Leah for inviting me to give this talk, sort of at the last minute. The last time Leah invited me to give a talk it was equally exciting and I have to say that the topic of ‘Vodou, Possession and the Revolutionary Unconscious’ is something that it’s been fantastic to revisit and hopefully the pleasure of revisiting this territory will be communicated to you tonight.

I realise that not everybody here will be as familiar with Haitian culture and the issues surrounding Vodou and so I’m going to give a very, very brief intro to Haitian Vodou – and I have to say I’m not an expert, it’s not my area of expertise, and hopefully as I talk it will become clear exactly... well maybe... where my expertise lie or don’t lie.

So just a little bit for those of you who may not be too familiar with the concept of Haitian Vodou: it’s a religion that began in Haiti with the arrival of slaves there and it was practiced throughout the period of slavery, largely in secret until the Haitian Revolution, the revolution being a key point after which Vodou became more overground, for obvious reasons. The term ‘Voodoo’ I discussed before, in my last presentation, in terms of a Westernised

concept of Vodou and all the prejudices that had become associated with the term. I explored that particular area... I'll speak a little bit more about that later. Today I'm going to try to address something more 'authentic' than the artificial construct that I talked about last time. From the research I've been doing, the term Vodou (... I'm sure there're people... I'm really nervous about this because I know there're 'experts' here, 'serious' experts, so if you can correct me afterwards in anything that I get slightly wrong... I'm very... I feel like I'm walking on a tightrope).

There have been debates about the origin of the word Vodou or Vodun. There was some discussion that it came from a European sect called the Valdensians but it seems that in fact it derived from the Fon language of Benin where it has various meanings including 'God', 'Spirit' and also God and spirits as embodied in particular objects – 'fetish' objects as they have been called. I won't go too far into the history of the term fetishism but obviously, for those of you who know, it's a loaded term.

The general meaning that I want to give to Vodou today, the meaning I'm trying to talk about, is the meaning of an 'invisible, mysterious and terrible force'. I want to talk of Vodou as a force that's much more anonymous and perhaps much more material than anything that's personified in particular spirits and it's this notion of a material force that I'm going to be trying to address today and hopefully it will become clear why I'm doing that.

Now Vodou is important in Haitian culture... 'important'? ... massively important in Haitian culture, as those of you who know that know, and it enabled the deracinated slaves to preserve an African cultural heritage in the face of systematic ethnocide carried out by the colonial rulers. ('Ethnocide' is a term from Pierre

Clastres, if anyone, well... I don't know how academic I need to be about this, so I'll tone down the academic stuff). So, 'ethnocide'; the systematic destruction of a people's culture. And certainly the slaves brought to Haiti were deracinated in that way and ethnocide was enacted upon them. Vodou was practiced under the cover of Catholicism which was the official religion of Haiti throughout the colonial period and afterwards. It has been subject to a series of anti-superstition campaigns and has survived the systematic attempts to eradicate it very positively and strongly as you all know.

Just very briefly, for those of you who don't know, the pantheon of Vodou gods are called the Loas, so when I refer to the Loas, that's what I'm talking about. Also I may mention the 'invisibles' which relates to this invisible force that I'm thinking about. And they reside in the ancestral home of Guinea, the mythic ancestral home of the African spirits.

Important too is possession, a fundamental aspect of Vodou. I'll be talking about possession. Now it has to... it has to talk about this... my experience isn't direct it's indirect in terms of possession. And er... well... my interest in it will sort of I think come clear. It's to do with something more... at the moment it's gravitating towards something much more towards mediumship in European and North American contexts in the 19th century. I'm very interested in mediumship in general. Another title for this talk could have been 'Channelling the Revolutionary Spirit'. It's what the kind of... that's the focus on the kind of what I'm thinking about here.

Possession is going to be a key issue, as is the issue of sacrifice, whose social role I'll be addressing today too. Now, at the last talk I gave at the exhibition 'Smells Like Vodou Spirit' I talked about the misrepresentations of Haitian Vodou in Western culture. I wasn't really talking about Vodou as an authentic cultural practice of Haiti, I

was talking about the idea of Vodou in Western culture. I talked about something called the 'Voodoo Construct' which was made up of four, key components – enduring motifs which in the West in representations of this thing called 'v' 'oo' 'd' 'oo' (voodoo which you're not... you know we're not spelling it... I mean you know what I'm saying about this voodoo spelling thing... it's the whole [sharp intake of breath]) 'v' 'oo' 'd' 'oo' which is used to describe this sort of Western conception of kind of a... a... anxieties around particular cultural phenomena and psychological phenomena. And I isolated four particular motifs then: the voodoo doll, the zombie, the witch doctor – who today will be played by a mesmeric hypnotist – and the possessed individual, which will today be replaced by the possessed crowd – something much more sinister and frightening than the possessed individual. So I'm about this depersonalisation, this collective depersonalisation in possession... is what I'm kind of moving towards.

Now what I did come up with in this idea of the Voodoo construct is that it's much more about Western cultural anxieties than it is about any authentic thing called Haitian Vodou. So therefore it's not really a misrepresentation of an authentic culture. What happened in Hollywood Voodoo – and there's not that many examples of Hollywood Voodoo – is that it's much more about Western cultural and psychological anxieties, which loosely I would call the 'return of the repressed', the repressed being superstitious beliefs, beliefs in witchcraft, magic, supernatural beings and possession, key issues as to what the anxiety is undermining; fundamental notions about the properly individuated, rational and reasonable subject.

This isn't to deny that representations of this thing 'v' 'oo' 'd' 'oo' don't have a very strong racial character and they are also ways of playing out racial anxieties, anxi-

eties about blackness in white Western culture. But again this is not something that's explicitly about Haiti. What I'm going to talk about today is something much more to do explicitly with Haiti.

This talk is gravitating between two poles. One pole is the revolutionary Surrealist movement in Paris in the 1920's and 30's. I consider the Surrealists to have been engaged in a radical, revolutionary reconfiguration of the unconscious in opposition to conservative and reactionary constructions. They were trying to re-radicalize the notion of the unconscious. For the Surrealists – as Michael Richardson has demonstrated in his book *The Refusal of the Shadow*, a book of writings by Surrealists about the Carribean – Haiti serves a mythopoeic function. Now this term 'mythopoesis' is a term that, again, I'm going to be talking to today (talking 'to'? – talking 'about' – that's so American. 'I'll be talking to the concept of mythopoesis today') I'll try and explain why mythopoesis becomes relevant and important. It's only recently popped into my head... 'POP' like that [hit's microphone]... and I suddenly realised that what I was talking about was mythopoesis but I didn't know what mythopoesis was. Sometimes that happens you know, that suddenly you're talking about something... and when I looked into the history of it it became even spookier because it was... well anyway, maybe later I'll explain why.

I'm using the term mythopoesis to suggest that stories and myths have a power to effect reality and effect social transformation regardless of their objective, concrete factuality, that stories have this creative power. And it's the creative power of the story of the Haitian Revolution that I think appealed to the Surrealists in the 1920's, especially the ceremony of Bois-Caïman, which is what I'm really going to be focussing on today. Bois-Caïman is the ceremony which, legend has it, was a Vodou cere-

mony which gave rise to the Haitian slave revolution of 1791. What I'm pointing towards here is a radical reconfiguration or rethinking of the unconscious which tries to remove from it the idea of it being under the mastery of a rational, individuated ego working for the reality principle. There's a radical de-subjectivised notion of the unconscious that I'm trying to talk about today.

According to Richardson, the Surrealists saw in the history of Haiti 'the germ of a society that had the potential to challenge the ethics of international capitalism'. This is exemplified by André Breton's visit to Haiti in 1945 and some of the consequences of his speeches in Haiti in that period.

Now the second pole of this presentation is represented by the figure of Anton Mesmer. Mesmer was a Swish – a Swiss physicist – who gave his name... a swish physhisist? – who gave his name to Mesmerism, which I'm sure you have some idea of. Mesmer is a key figure in the origin of the discourse of the unconscious and the development of dynamic psychiatry. The book that really put me on to Mesmer is a book by Henri F. Ellenberger, an amazing book, which I recently looked at again in the British Library, a book that I super-recommend, called *The Discovery of the Unconscious*. It's an incredible book and Mesmer has an important role to play in it. I was reading this book several years ago and came across this very significant paragraph. Now the term that Mesmer used for his practice was Magnetism (from Animal Magnetism, the name he gave to the subtle force that permeates all things in the universe). This is at the end of the 18th century:

'In Saint Domingue (pre-Revolutionary Haiti) Magnetism degenerated into a psychic epidemic amongst the Negro slaves, increasing their agitation, and the French domination ended in a bloodbath. Later Mesmer boasted that the new Republic, now called

Haiti, owed its independence to him’.

Now this really intrigued me. What was Mesmer doing claiming to have founded the Republic of Haiti? How could this possibly be?

So I’m going to be moving between the poles of Revolutionary Surrealism and Mesmer’s claims about the founding of Haiti in 1791. And I’ve only done ten minutes.

Now my thinking in this regard is very much shaped by the writings of a Surrealist philosopher and thinker called Georges Bataille. And this is Georges Bataille [shows slide] sometime in the 1950’s. I don’t know how familiar people are with Bataille so I’ll say a little bit about his work and life.

When I was doing my doctoral research I was looking at Bataille in the context of debates about the detrimental social effects of representations of violence in the mass media. And some recurrent themes started coming up while looking at these issues, especially the issue of ‘Contagion’. Another very dominant metaphor in the discourse of the social effects of mass media can be traced back to the notion of the hypnotist with certain sections of the population configured as vulnerable to suggestion, prone to this powerful influence of this ‘Influencing Machine’ (Victor Tausk’s term). I was looking at issues of violence in the media from this kind of perspective.

Bataille was associated with the French Surrealist movement of the 1920’s. He was excommunicated from the official movement by Andre Breton who described him as a ‘philosopher who philosophised with a fly on his nose’, which may... I won’t talk about that actually... but it’s to do with his... basically Bataille is an excremental philosopher. But that’s not important today.

Now alongside Roger Caillois and Michel Lieris, Bataille has been associated with what James Clifford, in

The Predicament of Culture, describes as Ethnographic Surrealism. In the 1930's Bataille founded something called the College of Sociology which was devoted to a sociological understanding of the sacred – and 'the sacred' is going to be a key term here, especially the idea of a sacred force, a material sacred force which is something we will be moving towards.

Bataille's thinking is very much influenced by the *L'Année*'s school of French sociology (Durkheim and Mauss). I'm just going to say a little bit about Durkheim and Mauss for those of you who are unfamiliar with this particular tradition within French sociology. First there's the central role of religion in any elementary form of society and particularly the force of the sacred – that which is 'set apart'. What's also important for this sociology of the sacred is that the sacred is radically ambivalent from a Durkheimian position, that it partakes of both the pure and the impure. Bataille famously said that 'Every object of attraction can become an object of repulsion, and vice versa'. He also said 'Nothing convinces me more than that we are bound and sworn to that which repulses us the most, that which inspires our most intense disgust'. Here we have an aesthetics of radical ambivalence associated with an elementary definition of the sacred as a social force which is both pure and impure. The other important characteristic of this notion of the sacred is that it is contagious. This is fundamental Durkheim; the (primary) prohibition on touching has to do with the *contagious* power of the sacred. It's this idea of something incredibly powerful and contagious, that can pass through things, that is associated with the notion of the unconscious that I'm working towards.

The sacred also has a very important cohesive power too, in society. Not only does it bind societies together it also has the power to radically unbind them. I was going

to show an image of Judith beheading Holofernes as in instance of what Freud used in his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* to the radical dissolution of the social formation (in this case the Assyrian army) once it's symbolic head has been decapitated. It's a very Oedipal Freudian model but it's still based on an assumption of radically disintegrating society through some sacrificial use of the sacred.

Also from Durkheim and Mauss – particularly Durkheim – we have this very strong emphasis on the fundamental role of taboo and transgression and in many ways the history of the term 'taboo' is similar to the term 'vodou' in that both describe the power imbued in objects and also the objects which contain that power.

The third issue, which is very important here, especially for Bataille, is that both Durkheim but particularly Mauss in *The Gift*, were interested in counter-capitalist economic systems or alternative economic systems; non-acquisitive and non-productive economic systems like the Gift, like Potlatch and like Sacrifice. Hence the fundamental significance of sacrifice for Bataille. These are economies which involve, and put at the forefront, non-productive expenditures.

Bataille's thought is also violently anti-idealistic and fiercely religious. So we have a kind of materialist religiosity; very violent, very aggressive, very destructive. He advocated what he called a *base materialist* theory of religion which was a mixture of Hegelianism, Marxism, Nietzsche and Durkheim but that's... don't need that. What it emphasises is this collective social force. What he was trying to do, in all of his works, was find ways of unleashing this collective social force, this force of the sacred in the interest of social revolution. He had a very strong sense that sacrifice was one of the key modes by which this sacred force could be unleashed. I've spent a lot of time in my research finding out how this could

possibly be and have found that Bois Caïman is perhaps the best mythopoeic example of the relationship between ritual sacrifice and the unleashing of revolutionary social force.

For Bataille, revolution is a grand collective act of non-productive expenditure that resonates very strongly with the mythic story of Bois Caïman.

In the 1930's Bataille formed a secret society called Acéphale, devoted to a religious interpretation of the works of Nietzsche. Events surrounding Acéphale are 'shrouded in secrecy' but what the group seems to have been involved in is the promotion of the idea of 'myth'. 'Myth' and 'secrecy' come together here. Rumour has it they were planning to enact a ritual human sacrifice at a place in Paris by a tree which had been struck by lightning. (There's a book about this by Maurice Blanchot called *The Unavowable Community*). This very much following a kind of thinking that Freud expressed too: that society is founded on a crime committed in common and that the blood oath is incredibly important in binding groups together, especially revolutionary groups, revolutionary cells, explosive revolutionary cells, which is what Bataille was trying to initiate in Paris in the 1930's.

(Where am I now? – I'm here).

So we have an idea who Bataille was and where he was coming from in the 1930's. Now we have to go back to Haiti in 1789.

This is an image from Alfred Metraux's *Voodoo in Haiti* [a black and white photograph of a Vodou initiate drinking blood from the neck of sacrificed chicken], a close friend of Bataille's throughout his life.

I'm going to give a brief overview, and I know I'm going to be out of my depth here because I know there're a lot of experts on Haitian society and the Haitian revolution who will correct my scant knowledge

of the formal history of that revolution. But I want to make the point here that after the French parliament's Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of the new Republic – which was partly written by Lafayette, a figure who will come up more in a little while – that obviously there were free blacks and mulattoes in Haiti at that time who were interested in extending the revolutionary cause to Haiti including Vincent Ogé. Ogé is a key figure in the prelude to the Haitian revolution, travelling to Paris to petition the new parliament to recognise Haiti within the auspices of the new revolutionary government. Ogé travelled back to Haiti via London and South Carolina with a view to extending the revolutionary franchise to blacks in Haiti. This was obviously met with violent resistance by the white regime and Ogé was publicly tortured and executed as a sign to anyone who was thinking about rising up against the regime at the time.

(How am I doing?... is this about right?... okay).

The revolutionary army in Haiti would be under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture. But the slave army was organised by Boukman who was himself a Vodou priest (as legend has it). Boukman is fundamentally associated with the Bois Caïman ceremony. There's debate as to when exactly the ceremony took place. I was speaking to Leah today who told me that some historians are now saying it didn't actually happen. Which is great actually. In fact it's better in a way that it didn't happen for its mythopoeic value. But (according to other histories) it took place on either 14 August or 22 August – there's an eight day gap of uncertainty about when exactly it was.

A number of slaves gathered in the forests of Bois Caïman and a Vodou ceremony was held in which a pig was sacrificed and everybody swore a blood oath to overthrow their white slave-masters. And sometime in

the next eight days the slave uprising was inaugurated.

I'm going to skip the mythopeic section. But what I want to do... you want me to do the mythopoesis thing?... okay.

Mythopoesis. Nice word. It was coined by a British psychologist called Frederik Myers. Now Myers is a really key figure because he was head of the SPR, the Society for Psychical Research in London. There's this whole thing about Myers and Freud.

Freud kept secret his belief in telepathy throughout his life because it was bad PR. Ernst Jones is telling him 'Listen Sigmund, really don't play up this telepathic thing because it's really going to ruin the reputation of psychoanalysis' whereas Frederik Myers is an absolute believer. Now what the point of this is, is that the entire history of the development of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis and dynamic psychology throughout the 19th century is absolutely based on the bedrock of mediumship. It's about possession, it's about somnambulism, it's about people having visions and it's about an attempt to account for those visions. Mesmer himself began by saying 'I can account for somnambulism on purely materialistic and mechanistic grounds. Therefore all the possessions, the hallucinations and the visions can be explained without a superstitious belief system. We can move on a purely scientific basis'. However, throughout the 19th century, the scientists and psychologists were moving in and out of belief on this issue of whether or not people were actually channelling the dead, or channelling entities and what was actually going on in these situations.

Ellenberger's book is brilliant for this and it's just really very clear. So I was very surprised when I found that my research into mythopoesis took me back to Frederik Myers. There's a whole thing about Myers. He wrote a book called *Human Personality and its Survival*

Beyond Death, a massive two volume work in which he argued that mythopoesis refers to the primary level of unconscious processes. It means the capacity of humans to 'weave' (I won't go into a kind of... you all know) to 'weave' and 'fabricate' fantasies and stories at a base level. So the base level of the unconscious is a kind of fabricating fantasy machine.

Now this has to do with the fact that many of the people they were examining were hysterics. Now just read 'mediums' for 'hysterics'. From one perspective they're hysterics – if you're a materialist psychologist – and from the other perspective, of believers, they're mediums who are channelling entities, or they have access to channels of information which we are otherwise remote from. So their exploring mediums, schizoid mediums, who have dissociated they're personalities, and are able to fabricate stories. The psychological and psychoanalytic communities were split as to whether these stories were inventions – very, very clever fabrications – or authentic examples of some form of channelling. And I don't want to go... this is the kind of territory... I'm not sure. That's just where things are at at the moment.

So mythopoesis comes to describe the creative power of myth. That stories can have a real transformative power in society. Now we can try to explain that in lots of ways, we can have a materialist explanation but what we can't deny is that stories have power. Whether they're true or not they work. And it's this working function of the myth that I'm interested in, especially the working function of a revolutionary myth.

So here's an account of Bois Caïman by Alfred Metraux. Apparently this account is from a Haitian school book from the 1950's. This is the story told to school children in Haiti. And I love it because it's the most lavish and lurid version I could find. This is how it

goes. (28.47).

‘To put an end to all holding back and to obtain absolute devotion he, Boukman, brought together a great number of slaves in the glade of Bois Caïman near the red mountain. When all were assembled a storm broke. Lightening scribbles the low dark clouds with brief radiance. In a few minutes the torrential rain begins to turn the ground into a marsh while a savage wind twists the moaning trees until even the thickest branches are wrenched off and crash to the earth. In the middle of this impressive scene, motionless, petrified in sacred awe, the assembled slaves behold an old Negress rise up, her body shaking from head to foot. She sings, she pirouettes and over her head she brandishes a huge cutlass. Now, in the great congregation an ever more profound stillness, more bated breath, eyes ever more burning fixed on the Negress, show how the crowd is rapt. At this moment a black pig is produced. The din of the storm drowns his grunts. With one vivid thrust the inspired priestess plunges her cutlass into the animal’s throat. The blood spurts – and is gathered smoking to be distributed in turn to the slaves: all drink, all swear to obey Boukman.’

So how does this relate to Anton Mesmer and what bearing does it have on the claim that the revolution was brought about by Mesmerism-Gone-Wrong in Haiti? Well, we need to know a little bit more about Mesmer. He was a Swiss physicist who developed that idea that physical and mental illness was explainable by the influence of the planets, bodies on bodies, a purely materialist account of physical disease, especially mental disease. He famously had a competition with an exorcist called Gassner in which he cured more people than his opponent. So Mesmer won and said ‘Look, I’m the greatest and I can cure people without the need of outmoded religious and superstitious ideas’. Pure

materialism, pure physics, pure enlightenment stuff. He identified this stuff called magnetic fluid that permeated the entire universe. Imbalances in this fluid led to unhealth and disease. Now this substance was in the whole universe, so social phenomena were also affected by imbalances in magnetic fluid. It can be stored, it can be channelled, it can be moved around. What I'm trying to say is that there's something about this magnetic fluid which has the qualities of the terrible force of Vodou or of sacred energy in general.

It doesn't have any bite for Mesmer but it could have. It could be like magnetism with teeth or something.

Now, he was working with possession and he could account for possession without a demonological theory, which is very important. He set up these things called Societies of Harmony, in Paris, which is where you went to be cured by the Mesmeric practice. They set up these things called *baquets*, these big vats of water with galvanized rods immersed in them and everyone held the rods and the Mesmerist would go around – because he was imbued with magnetic power – and when he touched people with a rod they would go into convulsive spasms. The blocked energies would be released and they'd achieve health, a balance of energies.

I'm sure you're familiar with this. It's been around a while this idea.

A lot of the Societies of Harmony, and one in particular called the Kornmann group – (Kornmann was an Alsatian banker who in fact bankrolled the Societies of Harmony as the major financier) – involved people who were later to be very active in the French revolution, including Lafayette who was a member of this group; people like Jean Louis Carra, Jean-Jaques Brissot, Nicolas Bergasse (who was in communication with Voltaire and Rousseau). The Societies were revolutionary hotbeds, so much so that some of the theories of the

Mesmerists, such as Jean Louis Carra in his *Examén Physique du Magnetism Animal* from 1795, could claim things like this;

‘The entire globe seems to be preparing itself by a pronounced upheaval in the course of the seasons for physical changes. In societies the masses are agitating now more than ever to disentangle at last the chaos of their morals and their legislation’.

So we find here a revolutionary Mesmerist saying that global energies, manifesting themselves through the masses will make them ready to rise up, and push through and create the crisis through which harmonious (social) balance would be achieved.

That’s the general idea that’s going on here. Now the Societies of Harmony in Paris were shut down eventually, because of their revolutionary reputation amongst other things, after an official investigation by a team of researchers.

I just want to put two things together here and maybe this is a little bit cheesy but I’m going to do it anyway. This is a description of the patients attending the Societies of Harmony written by one of the inspectors who were sent to check things out, to see if there was any ‘truth’ to the theory of Animal Magnetism.

‘A third class of patients are so agitated and tormented with convulsions, extraordinary by their frequency, their violence and their duration. As soon as one patient has commenced others are affected by the same symptoms characterised by precipitate and involuntary motions of all the limbs or the whole body, by contraction of the throat, by sudden affectation of the abdomen and by a distraction and wildness in the eyes, by tears, screams, hiccuping and by immoderate laughter’.

So, it sounds like a good party really.

Now this is a description by Metraux of a *crise de pos-*

session. In the Societies of Harmony the state of convulsions was also called crises. It's the same language of a subjective, personal and individualised crisis that can be extended to the entire society. So this is Metraux on Vodou possession:

'The crisis of possession emits a power disturbingly contagious to unstable and nervous temperaments. That is why the sight of a possession sometimes causes others to break out, not only amongst the servants of the gods, who are prepared to be mounted but also amongst those who have come along as visitors or out of sheer curiosity'.

I know that putting these two examples together means I'm treading dodgy ground but it illustrates the point I'm trying to make quite simply.

I checked out the Haiti connection with the Mesmerists and it seems that New Orleans was the hub through which Mesmerism made its way to Haiti. The banker Kornmann received 2,400 livres from Saint Domingue which means there were at least ten members of the Society in Haiti prior to the Revolution. But the key connection is a figure called the Marquis de Puysegur, an aristocratic Mesmerist rather than a Jacobin. The aristocratic Mesmerists of the Puysegur family were in Haiti. The brother of the Marquis – who was famous for developing the idea that one could put someone into a hypnotic trance and then, while in the trance, the patient would predict the outcome of their cure (basically this is psychoanalysis in another form) – took Mesmerism to Haiti. He developed a technique whereby a tree is magnetised and you get the peasants on your estate (because it's the aristocrat's Mesmeric duty to distribute his curative magnetic force freely to the peasants to cure them) to hold the branches of the tree and the magnetic power is passed through them. One of the biographers of Mesmer claimed that it was

during one of these sessions that a group of Negro slaves confused Mesmerism with witchcraft 'giving rise to wild orgies and sorcerers dealing in black magic, and the authorities banned the practice' (Walmsley).

I'm getting close to the end now and I'm wondering 'Can I do this?'. I realise that the thesis that the historical construction of the unconscious and the development of a reactionary conservative theory of the unconscious during the 19th century is shaped in some way by the mythopoeic value of the Haitian revolution (and Vodou's role in it) hasn't been proven in this presentation. But if you look at figures like Gustave Le Bon, whose book *The Crowd*, was an absolutely fundamental influence on Freud and theories of crowd psychology, on the development of Public Relations; Edward Bernay's idea that the masses are slaves of their spinal columns, therefore we need to manipulate them because we can't bring about... etc, etc. This is clear. Le Bon described crowd members as being like 'women, children and savages' (and by savages he clearly means blacks), lower down on the evolutionary scale, 'slaves of their unconscious impulses', prone to contagious mimetic behaviour, much more prone to these crises, these explosive behavioural patterns. And this was of course a sign of their evolutionary inferiority. Also they can't distinguish between fact and fiction, reality and hallucination, which every sane, clear minded, white academic of the 19th century was easily able to do. An explicit text in this regard is Spencer St. John's book on Haiti, written in 1884, about the same time as Le Bon's book on the Crowd. Now I know these are very different texts but St. John's book is the most explicitly racist account of Haitian society that you're likely to come across (I'm sure some of you are familiar with this book). He argued that unless white, Capitalist's were allowed to invest in Haiti its society was destined to

'regress to the state of an African tribe'. Of Toussaint L'Ouverture he wrote, 'The story of Toussaint is so remarkable as to almost confound those who consider the Negro to be an inferior creature incapable of rising to genius'. Almost. This is so explicit. St. John was a pro-abolitionist because abolition would enable us to see, once and for all, whether blacks are equal to whites on the Labour market. This is the kind of attitude that is shaping crowd psychology at the end of the 19th century. White civilization over black savagery is very the dominant ideological polarity that's going on here.

(It's always hard to do a good ending isn't it?).

I'm talking about an image of the revolutionary unconscious as an invisible and terrible force of the sacred, channelled through myth and carrying fluid collective bodies, *en masse* (and this is the bit, how does it work?) and overthrowing despotic top-down power structures. There's a metaphor which recurs with this; the metaphor of the Volcano. (Another book on Haiti describes Louis the 16th as not knowing that he was sitting on a volcano until the lava – and this is a very weird play on the metaphor – the 'lava' arose up and strangled him).

So I'm going to close now, and the last word goes to C.L.R. James, from his preface to *The Black Jacobins* which comes very close to what I've been trying to talk about.

And this is the quote from 1938;

'In a revolution, when the ceaseless, slow accumulation of centuries bursts into volcanic eruption, the meteoric flares and flights above are a meaningless chaos, and lend themselves to infinite caprice and romanticism unless the observer sees them always as projections of the subsoil from which they came. The writer has sought not only to analyse but to demonstrate in their movements the economic forces of the age, their

moulding of a society and politics, of men in the mass and individual men and the powerful reaction of these on their environment on one of those rare moments when a society is at boiling point and therefore fluid'."