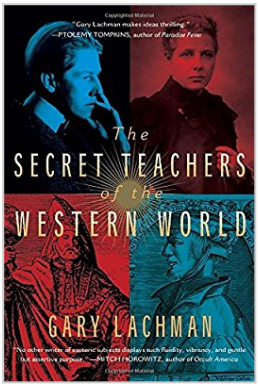

The Secret Teachers of the Western World

By Gary Lachman

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This epic study unveils the esoteric masters who have covertly impacted the intellectual development of the West, from Pythagoras and Zoroaster to the little-known modern icons Jean Gebser and Schwaller de Lubicz.

Running alongside the mainstream of Western intellectual history there is another current which, in a very real sense, should take pride of place, but which for the last few centuries has occupied a shadowy, inferior position, somewhere underground.

This "other" stream forms the subject of Gary Lachman's epic history and analysis, ***The Secret Teachers of the Western World.***

In this clarifying, accessible, and fascinating study, the acclaimed historian explores the Western esoteric tradition – a thought movement with ancient roots and modern expressions, which, in a broad sense, regards the cosmos as a living, spiritual, meaningful being and humankind as having a unique obligation and responsibility in it.

The historical roots of our "counter tradition," as Lachman explores, have their beginning in Alexandria around the time of Christ. It was then that we find the first written accounts of the ancient tradition, which had earlier been passed on orally. Here, in this remarkable city, filled with teachers, philosophers, and mystics from Egypt, Greece, Asia, and other parts of the world, in a multi-cultural, multi-faith, and pluralistic society, a synthesis took place, a creative blending of different ideas and visions, which gave the hidden tradition the eclectic character it retains today.

The history of our esoteric tradition roughly forms three parts:

Part One: After looking back at the earliest roots of the esoteric tradition in ancient Egypt and Greece, the historical narrative opens in Alexandria in the first centuries of the Christian era. Over the following centuries, it traces our "other" tradition through such agents as the Hermeticists; Kabbalists; Gnostics;

Neoplatonists; and early Church fathers, among many others. We examine the reemergence of the lost Hermetic books in the Renaissance and their influence on the emerging modern mind.

Part Two begins with the fall of Hermeticism in the late Renaissance and the beginning of “the esoteric counterculture.” In 1614, the same year that the Hermetic teachings fell from grace, a strange document appeared in Kassel, Germany announcing the existence of a mysterious fraternity: the Rosicrucians. Part two charts the impact of the Rosicrucians and the esoteric currents that followed, such as the Romance movement and the European occult revival of the late nineteenth century, including Madame Blavatsky and the opening of the western mind to the wisdom of the East, and the fin-de-siècle occultism of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

Part Three chronicles the rise of “modern esotericism,” as seen in the influence of Rudolf Steiner, Gurdjieff, Annie Besant, Krishnamurti, Aleister Crowley, R. A Schwaller de Lubicz, and many others. Central is the life and work of C.G. Jung, perhaps the most important figure in the development of modern spirituality. The book looks at the occult revival of the “mystic sixties” and our own New Age, and how this itself has given birth to a more critical, rigorous investigation of the ancient wisdom.

With many detours and dead ends, we now seem to be slowly moving into a watershed. It has become clear that the dominant, left-brain, reductionist view, once so liberating and exciting, has run out of steam, and the promise of that much-sought-after “paradigm change” seems possible. We may be on the brink of a culminating moment of the esoteric intellectual tradition of the West.

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Editorial Review

Review
"It is no mean feat to make good sense of the Arcana and to cast light on the occult, but Lachman has pulled it off with this most engaging book. *The Secret Teachers of the Western World* is a very ambitious undertaking most successfully completed."
--William Irwin Thompson, author of ***The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light***

"Gary Lachman makes ideas thrilling. . . Start reading and feel the world around you start to come to life."
--Ptolemy Tompkins, author of *The Modern Book of the Dead* and collaborator with Eben Alexander, M.D., on *Proof of Heaven*

“Gary Lachman spoils his readers -- after encountering his prose you will find no other writing on esoteric and occult subjects that displays such fluidity, vibrancy, and gentle but assertive purpose. . . Gary has become the voice for our generation that Colin Wilson was before him.”
--Mitch Horowitz, author of *Occult America* and *One Simple Idea: How Positive Thinking Reshaped Modern Life*

“Gary Lachman has become an increasingly prolific engine of literate, well-written, and clear-headed books about esoteric history and ‘occulture.’ ”
--Erik Davis, author of *TechGnosis*

“Thinking outside the box, Lachman challenges many contemporary theories by reinserting a sense of the spiritual back into the discussion.”
--Leonard Shlain, author *of Art & Physics* and *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*

“Gary Lachman presents the Western esoteric tradition as a richly detailed parade of characters, seething with political ambitions, follies, even infamy. He teaches by example that to understand their psychology and historical contexts is far more useful than moralizing or partisan reactions.”
--Joscelyn Godwin, Colgate University, author of *The Theosophical Enlightenment*

“The invisible Rosicrucian brothers of the seventeenth century, the ‘Unknown Superiors’ of high-grade Freemasons, French utopian occultists, and Traditionalists of the twentieth century trace a continuous tradition of esoteric idealism applied to political thinking. Gary Lachman offers a panoramic spectacle of occultists and millenarian visionaries who seek to translate an absolute gnosis into a radical program of regeneration.”
--Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, professor of Western Esotericism, University of Exeter

About the Author
Gary Lachman is one of today’s most respected writers on esoteric and occult themes. His many books -- including *Madame Blavatsky*, *Swedenborg*, *Jung the Mystic*, and *Rudolf Steiner* -- have received international acclaim. He has appeared on many television and radio programs and is an adjunct professor in the Evolution of Consciousness at the California Institute of Integral Studies. A founding member of the band Blondie, Lachman has been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He lives in London.

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INTRODUCTION

REJECTED KNOWLEDGE

For some time now I have been involved in a study of what is known as the “western esoteric tradition.” I’ve written biographies of some of its major figures, looked at its impact on politics, literature, popular culture, and society, and tried to understand its place and importance in the evolution of the western mind. “Esoteric” means “inner” and “secret,” and although its exact roots are unclear—some place its origin in lost Atlantis, others in ancient Egypt—the western esoteric tradition has its source in several mystical and occult teachings of the past: Hermeticism, Gnosticism, Kabbalah, and the Neoplatonism that arose in Alexandria in the early centuries of our era.

Accounts of these and other esoteric philosophies will be found in the pages that follow, but one thing they all share is that they are for the most part rejected by our accepted intellectual tradition, the standard “official” story of the history of the western mind. They form, as the historian of the occult James Webb called it, a body of “rejected knowledge,” the intellectual refuse we have discarded as we abandoned the superstitions of the past in order to embrace the science of the modern day.

In some ways this is an accurate if incomplete assessment. Yet as I have tried to show in earlier books, this “other” tradition, however disparaged, refuses to disappear, and it remains in different forms available to us today. Why is this other knowledge rejected and why does it refuse to go away?

The central reason this knowledge is rejected is that it fails to meet the criteria of “real” knowledge set by modern science. Since its beginnings in the seventeenth century, modern science has focused on the kind of “facts” that can be grasped by the senses and proven by measurement. It abandoned the religious explanations for the world, which posited an unseen God behind the universe; accepted only that which it could see and touch; and brought an acute analysis to the phenomena of the physical world. Gradually, and with increasing certainty, it came to the conclusion that the only knowledge worth knowing was the kind that could be quantified. Physical laws that could be observed and measured would, it believed, account for everything, and the belief that anything else was needed or that anything could escape the necessities imposed by these laws was abandoned. The results of this belief we see around us everywhere, from the computer I am using to write this book to the probes we have sent out into space in order to explore the mysteries of the universe.

To say that this kind of knowledge is good and useful is an understatement. As more than one historian has pointed out, because of it the world has advanced more in the last few centuries than in the millennia that preceded them. This knowledge is absolutely indispensable, and because of it we today, who profit by it, live lives undreamed of by our ancestors. But is it the only kind of knowledge?

The esoteric tradition says no. There is another kind of knowledge. It is not one of physical facts, nor can it be quantified and measured. It is a knowledge of our inner world, not the outer one, a knowledge of what we used to call the spirit or the soul, that invisible, intangible something that animates us and leads us to ask questions about who we are and what our place in this mysterious world can be. It is essentially concerned with the meaning of our existence, a question that the other kind of knowledge cannot answer or rejects as nonsense. For our scientific kind of knowledge, the spirit or soul are superstitions, delusions, as neither can be detected by the senses. Who has seen the soul or spirit? For the esoteric tradition, the physical world available to the senses that science affirms as the only reality is only a small part of a much greater reality, an

invisible, inner reality, that informs the outer world and gives it life and meaning.

For those who have a sense of this invisible, other reality, the answers to life's mysteries offered by modern science are inadequate and unsatisfying. They are unable to accept them and they find themselves seeking something else.

For most of our history, mankind in some way believed in the existence of this other, invisible world, inaccessible to the senses. It is only in relatively recent times that we have rejected it as unreal and placed all our faith in the truths of modern science. Yet not everyone has been happy with this conclusion; traces of this other knowledge remain and many persist in trying to understand it and what it can tell us about ourselves. The proponents of modern science insist this is a mistake and assure us that we must reject this false knowledge in order to gain the truth. Yet the feeling that this other knowledge has something to tell us persists, and despite all the attempts by modern science to eradicate it, it stubbornly remains.

For different people in different ways there is a nagging, insistent sense that something is missing, and that for all its undeniable achievements and advances in understanding the physical world, the explanations for themselves and the universe offered by modern science lack something important. There is the feeling that somewhere, in the background, there is something that would help make sense of it all, but that we can't quite put our finger on it. The knowledge offered by the esoteric tradition may be rejected, but the feeling that without it we are somehow incomplete is something that simply won't go away. Whether we like it or not, we seem to be stuck with it.

In 2011, I came across a book that led me to see this rejected knowledge in a new and very suggestive light. It was *The Master and His Emissary* (2009) by the psychiatrist and literary scholar Iain McGilchrist. *The Master and His Emissary* is about our two cerebral hemispheres, the right and left sides of the brain, and the differences between them. What exactly our having two brains has to do with the western esoteric tradition may not seem immediately clear. But if the reader will bear with me, the connection—a very important one—should become less obscure as we go along.

OUR OTHER SELF

As everyone today knows, the cliché idea about the left and right brain is that the left is a scientist while the right is an artist. In the nineteenth century, this neat dichotomy was summed up in a handy formula: "left for language, right for recognition." The fact that we have two brains has been recognized for millennia—Greek physicians in the third century B.C. speculated about it—although exactly why we do has never been clearly understood.1 The left, the story goes, deals with language, logic, and sequential thought and has an acute sense of time, while the right is attuned to patterns, intuition, sees wholes simultaneously, and seems to reside in a kind of eternal present—at any rate it has a poor sense of time. The left cerebral hemisphere deals with language, it is the home of our ego, the verbal "I" with which we identify. Next door to it—or "us"—separated by a bundle of neural fibers called the corpus callosum or commissure, resides, for all intents and purposes, a stranger. This stranger does not speak but communicates in symbols, images, intuitions, hunches, even physical sensations, and may, as some theorists have speculated, be involved in paranormal phenomena.

One of the most bizarre findings of split-brain research is that when, for some reason, the corpus callosum, which facilitates communication between the hemispheres, is severed—sometimes in order to inhibit epileptic fits, which are a kind of "electrical storm" within the brain—the result is that the patient literally becomes two people. For some unknown reason, the right side of the body is controlled by the left brain, and the left side by the right. When the connection between the hemispheres is broken, the oddity about this arrangement becomes clear. Experiments with patients with severed commissures produced extraordinary

results.

For example, our right visual field is controlled by the left brain, and our left visual field by the right (each eye has a right and left field, but for convenience's sake I will speak of the left and right eye). A patient whose commissure was severed was shown an apple with his right eye, connected to the left, verbal brain, and an orange with his left eye, connected to his speechless right brain. When asked what he had seen, he replied "apple"; when asked to write with his left hand—connected to his right brain—what he had seen, he wrote "orange." Shown two different symbols—a circle and a square—with each eye, when asked what he had seen, he replied "square." When asked to draw with his left hand what he was just shown, he drew a circle. When asked what he had just drawn, he replied "a square." A patient might bump into something with his left side, connected to his right brain, *but not notice it.* He didn't notice it because "he" lives in his left brain and so really did not bump into anything; it was the stranger in his right brain who did. One woman was shown a sexy picture with her left eye and blushed; asked why she was blushing, she replied quite accurately, "I don't know."2

Some split-brain patients find that they have become a divided self, literally battling with their other half. One patient complained that doing grocery shopping became an ordeal. "I'd reach with my right hand for the thing I wanted, but the left would come in and they'd kind of fight." Even dressing became a struggle: the two sides had different tastes and a patient might wind up wearing three outfits at once.3 Yet there are times when the right brain comes to the aid of the left. The neuropsychologist Roger Sperry tested split-brain patients by flashing red and green lights randomly at their left eye and asking them to guess which color they had just seen. As the patient couldn't have seen anything—"he" lives in the left, verbal hemisphere—the results should have been fifty-fifty. Yet more times than not, a patient would say "red," then suddenly start, change his mind, and answer "green"; his right brain had heard the incorrect answer and metaphorically kicked his other half under the table. We all have had the experience of having a name or word on "the tip of the tongue," but not quite being able to remember it; the French have a term for this, *presque vu,* "almost seen." What may be at work here is that the right brain somehow knows what we want to say, but can't tell the left. Yet we are right to think that we do know it, as our other half does, and it may try to give us clues.4 Goethe famously wrote in *Faust* that *"Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! In meiner Brust"* ("Two souls, alas, live in my breast"). It seems that Goethe was right.

Yet with all this fascinating material, neuroscientists soon began to lose interest in studying the split brain. One reason was that, with increasing research, the neat localization of functions in either side of the brain did not hold up. Scientists soon realized that although one hemisphere may be more dominant in some processes—as the left is with language—both sides of the brain do the same things and are involved in practically all our activities.5 The neat separation into localized functions unraveled and scientists began to wonder if there really was anything interesting in the fact that we have two brains. Some even joked that we have a second one as a kind of spare, in case the other is damaged.

Another reason research into our two hemispheres dwindled is that most "hard" scientists disapproved of the popularizing of split-brain theory by "soft" self-help psychology and New Age gurus, and understandably wanted to back away from it. Peer pressure, professional prudence, and the recognition that there were no significant functional differences between the hemispheres meant that most serious neuroscientists made a discreet exodus from our twin brains. The one legacy from the early days of split-brain theory that remained enshrined in mainstream neuroscience is that the left "logical" brain is dominant. The right, it believed, was "minor," a kind of slightly helpful sidekick who tags along while the boss deals with serious matters. The right brain was the "spare," it seemed, while the left was the main set of equipment, something that McGilchrist, with a daunting amount of research, set out to disprove.

DUAL REALITIES

The Master and His Emissary is important because it revamps the split-brain discussion, and it does it in a way that opens up whole new areas of investigation, some of which, I believe, throw new light on our rejected, esoteric tradition. There is an important difference between our two cerebral hemispheres, McGilchrist argues, but it is not a difference in *what* they do, but in *how* they do it.6 Both sides of our brain may do the same things, and be involved in the same functions, but each side performs these functions differently—very differently, in fact. Our two brains have radically different approaches to our experience and the world; indeed, McGilchrist even suggests that they are different *personalities*, something split-brain patients have discovered for themselves, with their "other" brain having different tastes in food and clothing. McGilchrist argues that the differences between our cerebral hemispheres are so great that "for us as human beings there are two fundamentally opposed realities," an insight that, in different ways, is shared by our rejected esoteric tradition.7

The right brain, which, McGilchrist tells us, is older and more fundamental—it is the "master" of his title—presents reality as a unified whole. It provides the "big picture" of a living, breathing Other, that strange, ambiguous world that exists outside our minds. It is geared toward the new, the unfamiliar, and with what we can call the immediate "is-ness" of things, the *Istigkeit* of the medieval Rhineland mystic Meister Eckhart. It is concerned with *implicit* meanings that can be felt but not pinned down exactly; it is partial to what the philosopher Michael Polanyi called "the tacit dimension," the implied, intuited meanings of which, as Polanyi says, "we can know more than we can tell."8 Poetry, metaphor, images, and symbols are some ways in which we try to communicate what the right brain shows us, and the meanings these forms of expression convey share in this implicitness. Good poetry has an aura of *suggestiveness* around it, a sense that it reaches out beyond the dictionary meanings of the words it uses; it alludes to a significance that we cannot express specifically, but which nonetheless *touches* us.

The right brain is geared toward engaging with living things, McGilchrist says, and with recognizing overall patterns, meanings, and relations. It is attuned to the network of connections that links everything with everything else. Its fundamental attention is to the "whole," which it takes in simultaneously. It is more geared to perceiving the forest, we might say, and not the individual trees.

The left brain, on the other hand—literally—is geared, McGilchrist argues, toward breaking up the whole that the right presents. It turns the right brain's unity into bits and pieces, which it can then manipulate. Its job is to analyze the big picture presented by the right and reduce it to easily manageable parts, which it can control and arrange to suit its purposes. These are generally geared toward survival. Where the right is open to "newness" and appreciates the "being" of things-in-themselves, the left is geared to representing reality as something familiar and sees things in terms of their *use.* The left brain has a utilitarian approach to reality, whereas the right just accepts things as they are. The left brain "stands apart" from experience, it *distances* itself from it in order to master it, while the right brain is *in* it. We use the left brain to "cope" with the world, as it were, while it is through the right that we *appreciate* it.

McGilchrist explains that the right brain needs the left because its picture, while of the whole, is fuzzy and imprecise. The left brain "unpacks" the whole that the right brain presents, and brings its details into sharper focus. The left, on the other hand, needs the right because while it can focus with dazzling clarity on discreet bits, it loses the connections between things and can find itself stranded in a fragmented world. One brain can lose itself in a vague, hazy perception of the whole; the Other, in a narrow obsession with the part. One brain gives us context, the other detail. One looks at a panorama, the other through a microscope. One brain presents everything "allatonce"; the other in bits and pieces "one-at-a-time." If we think of a camera and how its lens can be focused on either the background or the foreground, we can see how these two opposing perceptions of things complement each other. In life, we need to see the forest *and* the trees, often at the same time, and this can prove difficult. It would be impossible for one brain to do this, McGilchrist contends, and so we have two.9

WHO'S THE BOSS?

Probably the most controversial argument in *The Master and His Emissary* is McGilchrist's contention that the right brain, rather than a superfluous sidekick, is really the boss, although the left brain generally refuses to recognize this. As mentioned earlier, the right brain is older; its form of perceiving and interacting with the world is primary. We would not, McGilchrist argues, have a "world" for the left brain to carve up and manipulate if it were not for the right brain's "presencing" of it in its unadulterated wholeness.

In fact, McGilchrist sees the relation between the two hemispheres as a friendly but serious rivalry. Throughout our history, he argues, they have been engaged in a system of cerebral checks and balances, with each inhibiting the other's excesses in a neurological embodiment of William Blake's dictum that "Opposition is true friendship." As we have seen with split-brain patients, this friendly opposition can get out of hand, with the two sides canceling each other out. But for the most part, McGilchrist says, our two brains have complemented each other amiably.

Until recently, that is.

McGilchrist argues that since the Industrial Revolution, this power-sharing agreement has broken down, with the left brain assuming an increasingly dominant position. It was at this point that the "Emissary" usurped power from the "Master." The situation is rather like that of the Gnostic creation myth, in which the demiurge, or craftsman, employed by the "true God" to create the world, comes to believe that *it* is really in control, that it is the supreme deity, and enacts a coup d'état, with disastrous consequences. The left brain likes to deal with what is familiar, with what it knows, and in modern times it has been busy turning the world around it into what it knows best: a machine. Its demand for precision, clarity, definiteness, and parts has created a world that is more and more *like itself.* This means, McGilchrist argues, that there is less and less of an "other" for the right brain to "presence," because increasingly all it can reflect back is the world the left brain has created. Modern cities, vast industrialized areas, the seemingly unstoppable digitizing of experience—think of our growing demand for the "lifelike" presentation of entertainment, of HD television and 3-D films, that represent to us in electronically enhanced detail a "natural world" that is itself steadily diminishing: all of this points to an increasingly left-brain world. According to McGilchrist, for the last two centuries, the left brain has been busy creating a mechanical environment, a world of parts, bits, and pieces that it can manipulate and through which it can fulfil its utilitarian aims and goals, at the expense of the whole.

One result of this left-brain takeover is that the materialist, reductionist science which it informs increasingly diminishes the right brain's contribution to our understanding of the world. One example of this is mainstream neuroscience's contention that the right brain is "minor," "secondary," and, ultimately, unimportant. On a wider scale, the overarching belief that we live in a purposeless, meaningless universe, within which we ourselves are equally purposeless and meaningless, has come to dominate our consciousness. The only kind of "meaning" the left brain can grasp is explicit; it is the kind involved in a "how-to" kind of question, not the "why" variety, or the kind provided by measuring devices, graphs, and figures (as you might expect, the right brain is a music lover; the left has a tin ear). And it can only assimilate it in an "either/or" context—the binary 0 and 1 of our computers. This being so, it can see no meaning to our existence, and that seems to be the general assessment. As the astrophysicist Steven Weinberg famously remarked, "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless."10 Comprehensible to the left brain, that is.

LEFT-BRAIN AGGRESSION

There was much in what McGilchrist said that interested me, but here I want to make one point. There is a

fundamental *aggressive* character to the left brain's recent bid for power. To be sure, there is a fundamental aggressive character to left-brain consciousness to begin with. This is clear in its propensity for analysis, for breaking up the whole into separate pieces, for manipulating reality. It is, as it were, our tool for *attacking* reality, for shaping it to our needs. In *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess,* Leonard Shlain argues that left-brain consciousness developed in male hunters because of their need to focus their attention tightly on their prey, excluding everything else; right brain "field awareness" developed in female gatherers/nurturers, who needed to be more aware of their surroundings.11 As the poet Wordsworth wrote, "We murder to dissect." All of this is necessary. The left brain is our indispensable tool for surviving in the world, and it is because of it that we have become the dominant species on the planet. McGilchrist is certainly not saying that we should get rid of the left brain and return to a right-brain–dominated world. We need both in order to, as the poet W. B. Yeats says in "Under Ben Bulben," complete our partial mind, as well as our "partial reality." But if, as McGilchrist says, our cerebral hemispheres have distinct temperaments and personalities—something split-brain patients experience at first hand—then it makes perfect sense to wonder if the left brain would *purposely* try to undermine the right. If it is involved in a competition with its rival, we can assume that it would go out of its way to diminish the right brain's input, or to eradicate it completely.

With this in mind, I began to wonder: is there some expression of right-brain thinking, of a right-brain view of the world, that would be a prime target for the expansionist aims of the left brain? Is there a body of "right-brain knowledge," so to speak, that the left brain would certainly want to topple, or at least to cast aspersions on? Is there some right-brain tradition, the reputation of which the left brain would like to undermine?

McGilchrist was not the first to suggest that the left brain had aggressive tendencies toward the right. In *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess,* Leonard Shlain argued that the rise of literacy—a left-brain development—and its focus on linear, sequential thinking led to the decline of the earlier, right-brain, image-oriented goddess religions, as well as to the rise of monotheism and patriarchal forms of society. Left-brain literacy, Shlain contends, is male friendly, while right-brain imagery is more feminine. The subtitle of Shlain's book is *The Conflict Between Word and Image,* and as we've seen, the left brain works with language and logic while the right is more at home with symbols and imagery. Shlain makes a strong case that, since the rise of literacy in the second millennium B.C., the left brain has increasingly gained greater and greater dominance, and has, at times, fought a highly aggressive campaign against its opposite hemisphere. "Speech," Shlain writes, "gave the left brain the edge to usurp the sovereignty of the mind from its elder twin"; Shlain agrees with McGilchrist that the right-brain form of consciousness is primary.12 Whatever we may think of Shlain's argument—in *A Secret History of Consciousness,* I point out some of its drawbacks—he does show that at different times in history, "left-brain consciousness" seems to have waged an often ruthless war against its right-brain counterpart.13

If the left brain has waged a smear campaign against the right, would it take other forms than Shlain's "conflict between word and image"? Would it, as it were, open up other fronts? One target of left-brain aggression, it seems to me, would certainly be the western esoteric tradition.

ESOTERICISM AND THE RIGHT BRAIN

The more I thought about this, the more obvious it became. For one thing, the esoteric tradition deals in imagery and symbols, the meanings of which are often complex and multiple, and which elude the left brain's demand for clarity and definiteness; they are more attuned to what McGilchrist calls the right brain's "both/and" approach, rather than the left brain's "either/or." Indeed, imagination, linked to the right brain, is one of the central pillars of the esoteric tradition. As the historian of esotericism Antoine Faivre writes, imagination is "a kind of organ of the soul, thanks to which humanity can establish a cognitive and visionary relationship with an intermediary world," what Faivre's fellow esoteric scholar Henry Corbin called the

"*Mundus Imaginalis,*" the "Imaginal World," an *inner* yet nonetheless *objective* symbolic territory, having its own rules and inhabitants. Imagination, Faivre argues, is an indispensable "tool for knowledge of self, world, Myth," and he makes imagination one of the "four fundamental elements" of esotericism.14 In the same sense, the poet and essayist Kathleen Raine, who has written about poetry and its links to esotericism, speaks of a "learning of the imagination." The esoteric tradition is also intuitive, focusing on our subtle, inner worlds, rather than our obvious outer one. It believes in a living, organic, spiritual, even conscious universe, rather than a dead, mechanical, oblivious one. It is also concerned more with the whole than with the part, with the "correspondences" between things—the "network of connections that links everything with everything else"—than with what separates them. It is also more attuned to the kind of simultaneity associated with the right brain than with the sequential thought associated with the left.

It is also rooted in what it calls "ancient wisdom" and is less concerned with the future. As mentioned, McGilchrist believes the right brain predates the left—it is older—while the left, he argues, has an often manic self-confidence and "forward-looking" fixation. The esoteric tradition is more focused on *being* rather than *doing*, on inner change rather than controlling the world. And it is less keen on maintaining the strict subject/object, "I" and "not-I" relation to the world than the left is. A key insight, in some form or another, in the esoteric tradition is that "all is one," and that the usual sharp distinction between inner and outer worlds that the left brain is at pains to uphold is not as secure as it seems. Lastly, the esoteric tradition is concerned with the timeless, the eternal; it is involved with the mythic character of our consciousness and even speaks of a "perennial philosophy." The left brain, we know, is obsessed with time.

There are other characteristics of the western esoteric tradition that would suggest that if the left brain was planning an assault on the reputation of the right, it would turn its sights in its direction. We know that with the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century—a development clearly linked to the temperament of the left brain—the esoteric tradition lost much of its prestige and that, in order to maintain itself, it had to go "underground" and become, as it remains today, a kind of "counterculture." In my book *The Quest for Hermes Trismegistus* (2011), I speculate that Hermeticism's loss of prestige in the seventeenth century was related to what philosopher Jean Gebser calls the "deficient mode of the mental-rational consciousness structure."15 There are some important similarities between Gebser's ideas and McGilchrist's and, if the reader will allow, it is necessary to touch on some of them here.

STRUCTURES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The German-born Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser is little known to English-speaking readers; this is unfortunate, as he is one of the most important thinkers of the last century. His life reads like an intellectual adventure story. He was a child during World War I, saw the rise of the Nazis, just missed being killed in the Spanish Civil War, escaped Paris on the eve of the German occupation, and finally settled in Switzerland, where he became friends with C. G. Jung and took part in the famous Eranos Conferences over which Jung presided. In 1932, while working on a book about the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, Gebser had an insight whose implications were stunning and which he devoted the rest of his life to grasping. In Rilke's poetry, Gebser seemed to see evidence that a change was taking place in western consciousness, that it was somehow becoming *different.* A new kind of consciousness seemed to be appearing in the West, Gebser believed, and he began to see evidence for this in a variety of fields: in science, art, literature, philosophy, as well as other disciplines. Gebser spent the next decade and a half collecting material supporting his insight and collating his data; in 1949, his magnum opus, *The Ever-Present Origin*, appeared; it would not be translated into English until 1985.

The central argument of *The Ever-Present Origin* is that human consciousness is not static. Throughout its history, it has gone through several changes—what Gebser calls "mutations"—before arriving at our own form of consciousness. These mutations transform consciousness from one "structure" to another. There

have been four such structures so far, what Gebser calls “the archaic,” “the magical,” “the mythic,” and the “the mental-rational,” ranging from our prehistoric ancestors to modern times. Gebser also posits a fifth “structure of consciousness,” what he calls “the integral,” which is an integration of the previous four structures, and he believed that we, in the late modern world, were beginning to experience the effects of the shift from the mental-rational to the integral structure. These effects, Gebser believed, had to do with our experience of time. Gebser offers a sometimes daunting amount of evidence for his structures of consciousness and for our current passage into the integral structure, and in *A Secret History of Consciousness,* the reader can find my extended account of his ideas.16

The basic idea behind Gebser’s structures of consciousness is that they are characterized by an increasing separation and distinction from what he calls “Origin,” an atemporal, nonspatial ontological source, which is “before all time,” yet which is also “the entirety of the very beginning.”17 “Origin,” Gebser tells us, is a “preforming and primal paradigm of Being,” a kind of timeless “matrix” out of which all things come into existence.18 If the reader finds this a bit confusing, he is not alone. Readers of Gebser soon become aware of a frequent difficulty with his terminology; this is because he is forced to use our everyday language in order to express insights that transcend the everyday. Georg Feuerstein, in his book on Gebser, speaks of “Origin” as “the ever-present reality . . . by nature divine and spiritual” out of which our different consciousness structures emerge, and that seems a workable enough definition.19 One thing to note about Gebser’s “Origin” is that it is very similar to Gnostic ideas about “the Pleroma,” as well as to Neoplatonic and Hermetic notions about “the One” or the Kabbalistic “*En-Sof*”: all are a kind of nonmanifest source of the manifest universe, but at the same time are posited as a goal for those pursuing the spiritual path. While the left brain has difficulty comprehending ideas about a “nonmanifest source” and “ever-present reality,” the right brain, it seems, is quite at home with them.

Each structure of consciousness goes through a period of development, at the end of which it enters what Gebser calls its “deficient mode.” This is when what initially was an asset becomes a handicap, when the potentials of a structure have been exhausted, and when the characteristics associated with a consciousness structure atrophy and harden into exaggerations of themselves. They become, as it were, a kind of caricature. This development is necessary in order for the next consciousness structure to emerge. The previous one needs to break up so it can make space for the new structure and the process is not always easy. The history of our consciousness, Gebser maintains, is littered with psychic catastrophes, a reflection McGilchrist agrees with. According to Gebser, who died in 1973, we are living through the last stages of the deficient mode of the mental-rational structure, and he believed that within a few decades, a “global catastrophe” was, if not imminent, certainly very likely.

THE MENTAL-RATIONAL STRUCTURE AND THE LEFT BRAIN

As its name suggests, the mental-rational structure, which Gebser believed began circa 1225 B.C., is characterized by rational, discursive thought, the kind of logical, sequential thinking associated with the left brain. Whereas the previous structure of consciousness, the mythic, is characterized by “a shaping or designing of images”—a right-brain activity—the mental-rational structure is focused on words. Gebser’s dating for the beginning of the mental-rational structure falls within suggestive reach of the dating of the first alphabets, thus aligning his “mutations” of consciousness fairly closely with Leonard Shlain’s ideas about the rise of literacy.

What sets the mental-rational structure apart from the previous three structures is that it is the most separated from “Origin.” In it, human consciousness, which had previously felt a fundamental connection to the world around it, was now unattached and “free.” The subject/object divide became firm. Consciousness and the world were clearly experienced as different, radically opposed realities. In the mental-rational structure, for the first time man learned how to think about the world as something separate from himself, and this also

meant the growing dominance of the ego, the verbal "I" which, we've seen, inhabits the left brain. As Feuerstein writes, in the mental-rational structure we find for the first time "the individual who could brave life, more or less, on his or her own, who did not feel particularly bound by, or even beholden to, the past, but who looked ahead to the possibilities of the future."20 It was with the rise of the mental-rational structure that, Gebser argues, our idea of a linear time arose, and with it "the future." The previous mythic structure, he argues, saw time as cyclical, as a kind of "eternal recurrence," a coupling that the historian of religion Mircea Eliade also recognized in his book *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954). We've seen that the left brain is partial to both time and the future.

The similarities between Gebser's and McGilchrist's ideas suggest that there is good reason to link Gebser's mental-rational structure with the kind of consciousness McGilchrist associates with the left brain. For all intents and purposes, Gebser and McGilchrist are, I believe, speaking about the same thing. There are important differences between their ideas, but in a broad and significant sense they are fellow travelers.

HERMETIC RENAISSANCE

Gebser believed that the mental-rational structure entered its deficient mode around the early fourteenth century; his evidence for this is the rise of perspective painting during the first stirrings of the Renaissance.21 Medieval man felt himself to be a part of nature; he was *in* it, in a way that we are not. With perspective, consciousness withdrew from the tapestry of nature and stood apart from it; perspective was a radical break with earlier painting because it aimed to be "lifelike," to present the world as we "really" see it. The Renaissance was one of the periods in history when, according to McGilchrist, the two sides of the brain briefly worked together, producing an enormously creative time. It was also a time of a large-scale "Hermetic revival," and some scholars have even suggested that the Renaissance owes more to Hermes Trismegistus than it does to Plato.22 Yet within two centuries of Hermes' return, the entente cordiale between the left and right brain that McGilchrist associates with the Renaissance had clearly broken down.

In 1471, the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino published his translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the collection of magical and philosophical writings attributed to the legendary Hermes Trismegistus, which had been lost for a millennium. For roughly the next century and a half, the prestige of Hermes and his teaching were secure, and he was even considered of equal stature with Jesus and Moses.23 Even figures associated with the rise of modern science and the modern world—Copernicus, Johannes Kepler, Isaac Newton—were profoundly influenced by Hermetic ideas. Kepler, who discovered the laws of planetary motion, made a living as an astrologer, and Newton wrote more about alchemy than he did about gravity—which, if nothing else, is a very "occult" force, given that no one has ever seen it.24 Yet by 1614, something had changed. Rising critical scholarship revealed that the *Corpus Hermeticum*, believed to have been written by Hermes Trismegistus before the Flood and to be the fount of the "ancient wisdom" at the heart of Hermeticism, could not have been written then. The texts were more likely the product of the Egyptian-Greek syncretism of first- and second-century Alexandria, and could not have been, as they had been believed to be, the source of Plato and other ancient philosophers' wisdom. From being revered as one of the most important spiritual, philosophical, and magical teachers of all time, Hermes Trismegistus was now seen to be a fraud—he had, in fact, most likely never existed. His teaching was a joke and his followers fools and laughingstocks.

It was of course precisely this dethroning of Hermes and his teachings that paved the way for the rise of modern science and for the kind of knowledge associated with it. To grasp the laws of planetary motion, we had to abandon the idea that the planets were moved, in Dante's words, by "the love that moves the sun and the other stars." In order to understand the world intellectually, the left brain has to distance itself from it and turn it into an object. But when reading accounts of the transition from a magical way of seeing the world to our scientific one, I was struck by the aggressiveness of much of the anti-Hermes rhetoric.25 It was not simply a case of recognizing a mistake, which, certainly, would have caused some embarrassment, and then

carrying on. On the contrary, what took place seems to have been more like an all-out war on the Hermetic view of the world.

ANTI-HERMES

This campaign was led chiefly by the Catholic monk, theologian, philosopher, and mathematician Marin Mersenne, who was a close friend of René Descartes, the thinker who, more than anyone else, is associated with the strict separation of consciousness and the world.26 In 1623, Mersenne published a mammoth work, *Quaestiones Celeberrimae in Genesim.* This is ostensibly an unwieldy commentary on the book of Genesis, but in actuality it is an extended attack on the Hermetic tradition. Mersenne denounced magic, divination, Kabbalah, pantheism, astrology, the *Anima mundi* or "soul of the world," and, most crucially, animism, the idea, central to esotericism, that the universe is in some way a living, sentient being with which man can communicate. Yet Mersenne did not merely argue that such beliefs were wrong or blasphemous—he was, strange for our time, fighting in the service of both the church and the new, mechanical view of the world. Mersenne went further and insisted that such beliefs were clearly insane, that is, pathological.27 If, as the esoteric scholar Joscelyn Godwin writes, the Hermetic view "combines the practical examination of nature with a spiritual view of the universe as an intelligent hierarchy of beings," and "draws its wisdom from all possible sources," while seeing "the proper end of man as the direct knowledge of God," Mersenne would have none of it.28 As the historian Frances Yates wrote, Mersenne was "actively combating Renaissance animism and magical conceptions in order to clear the way for the new times."29 In other words, he was doing his utmost to ensure the triumph of the new mechanical way of seeing the world, and he had no reservations about fair play to achieve his goal. As we've seen, according to McGilchrist, the left brain is much more at home with machines than it is with living things, and René Descartes, friend of Mersenne, argued persuasively that animals were, in a sense, really only a kind of machine, or, as we would say today, robots. And the kind of mechanical way of seeing the world, denuded of all interiority and value, that Mersenne and Descartes trumpeted, is, according to Gebser, a quintessential expression of the deficient mode of the mental-rational structure of consciousness.

INTEGRATION

Mersenne's attack on the Hermetic view of things, as well as the many others that followed in its wake and continue today, was, it seems to me, nothing less than an all-out attempt at character assassination. It was an effort not only to point out that such a view was wrong, from the rising scientific perspective, but to defame it and its adherents. In our context here it was, I submit, a left-brain assault on a right-brain body of thought, much like the kind of "word versus image" campaign Leonard Shlain describes in *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess.* But we could just as equally say that it was an attack by the deficient mental-rational structure on the remnants of the mythical structure that resided in the esoteric, Hermetic view, as well as on the hints of the integral structure this view embodied. As McGilchrist argues, the Renaissance was a time when the two rival hemispheres came together briefly, that is, they "integrated," and formed a creative union that produced remarkable works of art and architecture. This was something different from the *embeddedness* in the world of an overly right-brain consciousness—a characteristic of Gebser's mythic structure of consciousness—or the *objectification* of the world to which the left brain is prone—exemplified in Gebser's mental-rational structure—but a creative combination of the two, something along the lines of the "practical examination of nature" combined with the "spiritual view of the universe as an intelligent hierarchy of beings" Joscelyn Godwin mentions above.

CONSCIOUSNESS WARS

The esoteric, Hermetic tradition, forced underground by the rise of material, mechanical science, has suffered, I believe, a full-scale, no-holds-barred assault by the left brain and the deficient mode of the

mental-rational structure. Its right-brain worldview, with its sense of a living, intelligent universe with which we can participate through our imagination, was targeted for attack by its left-brain antagonist. It is not the case, as it is generally accepted, that the Hermetic/esoteric view, anchored in what it erroneously believed was a profound "ancient wisdom," was, with the rise of reason, rationality, and the Enlightenment, simply superseded by a more correct view. It was not simply a case of "superstition" giving way to "science," or of dogma dissolving in the face of free thought. That "more correct view," informed by the proselytizing zeal of a *competing form of consciousness*, seems to have purposely and ruthlessly set out to consciously obliterate its rival. This was, indeed, a real war, one carried out on the fields of consciousness.

In the early stages of its campaign, the antiesoteric view enjoyed many victories, and it eventually established itself as the sole arbiter of what is true, what is "real" knowledge, and what is not. But now, some four hundred years after Hermes Trismegistus, the thrice-great sage of magic and the ancient wisdom, was dethroned, his usurper's position seems threatened—or at least the foundations on which it established its supremacy seem somewhat less secure. In our time, the deficient mode of Gebser's mental-rational consciousness structure has reached its peak, as it were. Developments like deconstructionism and postmodernism suggest that the western intellectual tradition has begun to take itself apart, with the left brain's obsession with analysis turning on itself.30 Even earlier than these, the rise of the "new physics" of quantum theory and related fields in the early part of the last century has shown that the neat nineteenth-century vision of a perfectly explainable mechanical universe is no longer tenable. But there are more pressing concerns. We've seen that Gebser in his last days believed that we were heading toward a "global catastrophe," and the various crises—ecological, environmental, economic, social, political, religious, and cultural—that fill our daily news reports suggest he was not far wrong. Our era has had no shortage of Cassandras, and it would be easy to lump Gebser's concerns together with other, less eloquent—not to mention less researched—jeremiads. But there is a tension, an anxiety about our time that somehow seems to suggest that *something* will happen, that some dike will burst, and that we will have a flood. As the philosopher Richard Tarnas remarked, "late modern man"—that is, ourselves—is "the incongruously sensitive denizen of an implacable vastness devoid of meaning," living in a world in which "gigantism and turmoil, excessive noise, speed and complexity dominate the human environment."31 Things, many believe, cannot stay this way much longer. As Yeats said long ago, "the centre cannot hold."

Gebser was hopeful that with awareness and will, catastrophe can be avoided, and the shift from our decaying mental-rational structure into the new integral one could be achieved without the world collapsing. McGilchrist is hopeful too. Although he believes that left-brain dominance is increasing and that this is resulting in a world that is more and more like that familiar to people suffering from schizophrenia, McGilchrist also believes that the very crisis induced by left-brain dominance will—or at least may—trigger a reversal.32 He points out that in the past, similar periods of left-brain dominance have, in a sense, set off an alarm that resulted in a shift toward right-brain values. In what Jung called an "*enantiodromia*"—that is, a reversal of values when one's conscious attitude becomes lopsided and the unconscious steps in to restore the balance—our hyper left-brain view may trigger a resurgence of the right.

Yet the idea is not merely to jettison the left brain and return to an earlier, right-brain mode of consciousness. That would merely push the pendulum back to the other side. Our left-brain consciousness was not a mistake, or "fall," but an experiment on the part of the right, out of which it emerged. It is, as McGilchrist says, the right brain's emissary. It is needed, absolutely necessary, and has a job to do; the problem is, it does it too well. The point is to educate our left brain—that is, ourselves—so we can achieve the kind of psychic integration that both McGilchrist and Gebser suggest is our salvation.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

They were not the only ones to see this. A reader of *The Master and His Emissary* familiar with the esoteric

tradition could not be criticized for experiencing a distinct feeling of déjà vu. One of the central themes informing the western esoteric tradition, as well as that of the eastern, is the union of opposites. We see this in the ancient Chinese *yin-yang* symbol, in the *mysterium coniunctionis* or *coincidentia oppositorum* of alchemy, in the pillars of Mercy and Severity that border the Middle Pillar of Harmony in Kabbalah, in the union of microcosm (man) and macrocosm (universe) in Hermeticism and in its central dictum "as above, so below." The idea that by bringing opposites together, some new, third element, not given, is produced, or that a third element is necessary in order to bring about the union, also has a long history in esotericism, as well as in more mainstream forms of thought.

In alchemy, for example, the Great Work of transmutation requires the union of sulfur and mercury—the Sun and the Moon—brought about through the medium of salt (Earth). Hindu philosophy speaks of the three *guna*s, which are characteristics or tendencies of being. Left to themselves, *tamas,* the *guna* of inertia, and *rajas,* the *guna* of agitation, lead to ill health and disturbances, unless they are balanced by *sattva,* the middle *guna* of bliss. We have already mentioned Blake ("Without contraries is no progression," again from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). The philosopher Hegel's dialectic, the three-step dance of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, is another expression of this threefold arrangement, as is Nietzsche's pairing of Apollo and Dionysus, the Greek gods of order and madness, whose union, Nietzsche believed, was behind the beauty of Greek drama. Rudolf Steiner's "spiritual science" offers a similar tripartite arrangement. For Steiner, the spirits of Ahriman, associated with deadening materialism, and Lucifer, the source of pride and hubris, are united and transcended by Christ, the mediator of these opposing spiritual forces. Gurdjieff spoke of a "law of three," a "fundamental law" responsible for all phenomena in existence.33 And Jung spoke of the "transcendent function," brought about by the union of the conscious and unconscious mind, which produces some new, unexpected development that can help an individual break free of a psychic deadlock.34

The psychologist and paranormal investigator Stan Gooch argued, much like McGilchrist, that humans inhabit two different and opposed realities, which he called Reality O (the objective world) and Reality S (our inner, subjective world), and that these are reconciled in what he called Reality U, or "universal reality."35 One of the best guides to understanding these opposed realities, Gooch believed, were the *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* by the German Romantic poet Friedrich Schiller. In these Schiller writes that "Freedom arises only when a man is a complete being, when both his fundamental drives [of imagination and intellect, or right and left brain] are fully developed; it will, therefore, be lacking as long as he is incomplete, as long as one of the two drives is excluded."36 Schiller was a contemporary and friend of Goethe, whose own thinking focused on the tension between two forces, what he called "polarity" and "intensification," the work of dividing unities and unifying divisions, the "systole" and "diastole" of the eternal heartbeat. Goethe shared this insight with his younger English contemporary, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who spoke of the "universal law of polarity" which was "first promulgated by Heraclitus," the pre-Socratic philosopher who argued that the "way up and the way down are one and the same."37 More than a century after Coleridge, Arthur Koestler proposed what he called a "holoarchy," a hierarchy comprising what he calls "holons," which are simultaneously both "parts" and "wholes." Holons are "parts" of the level of the holoarchy that is above them, and "wholes" to the part that is below. In this they display what Koestler sees as fundamental characteristics of all "holons," whether physical, organic, or social: what he calls their "self-transcending" and their "self-assertive" tendency; that is, their tendency to merge into a larger whole, and their tendency to affirm their independence. It is suggestive that Koestler speaks of this as a "Janus principle," taking the name from the two-faced Roman god.38

A DOUBLE-TRUTH UNIVERSE

This list could go on. When I began to see what Richard Tarnas calls our "double-truth universe" in light of our twin hemispheres, I experienced a kind of "double-truth" myself.39 Was this a profound insight, or a numbing platitude? When you begin to look for these oppositions, they seem obvious. And yet, they are so

obvious that we overlook them, or feel they are not important. I do not know whether our “dualities”—those mentioned above as well as the many I have not mentioned—originate in the fact that we have two brains, or rather if our having two brains is a neurological expression of some fundamental law of being, some irreducible cosmic *yin-yang* that runs through everything. In one sense this doesn’t matter. What is important is that the central idea running through all of these philosophies of “polarity,” “opposition,” and “duality” is the need for the creative tension between them to be maintained. This means that any imbalance between them, with one side dominating the other, must be rectified. This is not in order to achieve some bland equilibrium, but to keep the creative interchange between them going.

From the perspective of Jung’s psychology, if the conscious, rational mind ignores or obscures the input from the unconscious, the situation can be corrected in two different ways. The individual can consciously attempt to open up a dialogue with his or her other half and actively try to absorb and assimilate what it has to say—Jung developed a method of doing this, “active imagination,” the aim of which was to stimulate the “transcendent function” mentioned above.40 Failing this, the unconscious would do it itself, and this can be calamitous. The unconscious contents are not always polite; they can burst into our conscious life in sometimes terrifying ways. They are willing to work with us if we are open to them, but they will make themselves felt, whether we want them to or not. The first route is preferable but harder, and demands discipline and determination. The second route is easier: you just let yourself go mad.

I don’t want to put too Freudian a point on this, but I think we can say that with the rise of left-brain dominance and the deficient mode of the mental-rational structure, our culture has swung into a dangerous imbalance, by repressing the contribution of our other self, our other mode of consciousness. And one sign of this, I suggest, is the wholesale rejection of what we call “the western esoteric tradition.” For the last four centuries we have pushed this aside, made it a laughingstock, diminished its importance, and ignored it—when we haven’t made determined attempts to eradicate it once and for all. Scientists periodically announce that they have finally and categorically debunked “the occult,” the paranormal, mysticism, and everything related to it, but as anyone familiar with the history of our defamed inner tradition knows, it will not go away. We can’t get rid of it for the simple reason that it is literally part of us; if I am correct it has its roots there, a few millimeters across from “us,” next door in our right brain.41 Whether we like it or not, we have to make an attempt to get to know our neighbor, our other self, or suffer the consequences.

OUR SECRET TEACHERS

What follows is a kind of history of our “other” mode of consciousness, our “other” mind, and a look at what we can learn from its rejected knowledge. This knowledge has been subject to abuse by both the church and science, been driven underground and parodied in popular culture, but its influence has always been felt, if not acknowledged, and it has produced a remarkable canon of ideas, insights, and speculation about ourselves and our place in the cosmos. There is the standard history of who we are, how we got here, and what the outlook for our future may be. But there is another history, a “secret history” of our consciousness, as I have argued in an earlier book. That history is not as easily accessible as the official one, although, to be sure, it has become more available to us in recent years through the Internet and other sources on our “information highway.” The standard history teaches us that the actors in this secret history were a muddled, superstitious lot, gullible and credulous, when they were not simply madmen or fools. The western inner tradition has certainly had its fair share of eccentric types, but this wholesale low assessment of its members is merely propaganda, and the western world owes much to its “secret teachers,” to the men and women who devoted themselves to understanding and expressing the vision of our other mode of consciousness.

Some of these teachers we know and in a sense are not secret at all. Yet in many cases what they have to teach remains so. Some are not so well known, indeed, are hardly known at all. One can be a secret teacher in the sense of being unknown, but one can also be a secret teacher in the sense that what you teach is secret,

hidden, obscured, or perhaps in some cases, even purposely disguised. Esoteric means “inner,” that which resides within, as opposed to the exoteric, which relates to the outer surface of things. It also means something aimed at a small group, those who share an interest in and have a familiarity with concerns to which the majority is oblivious. The western inner tradition has always faced criticism about elitism, about select groups who pride themselves on being different, if not superior to the masses. A smug spiritual self-satisfaction can arise with those who enjoy the distinction between “us” and “them.” But this is true of any group; esotericism has no monopoly on egos and the false sense of superiority to which they are prone. The message of our secret teachers is open to everyone. To understand it requires the same degree of intelligence, discipline, and determination needed to master a musical instrument or gain proficiency in quantum mechanics. But perhaps the most important thing is that you must want to learn.

What makes an esoteric education different from learning to play a musical instrument or grasping quantum physics is that its subject and the person pursuing it are one and the same. In studying esotericism, we are in reality studying and exploring ourselves, our being, our consciousness, and this is not a study from which we can remain “scientifically” detached. As the historian of esotericism Arthur Versluis remarks, within its different branches, western esotericism displays a “consistently recurring theme of transmuting consciousness, which is to say, of awakening latent, profound connections between humanity, nature and the divine, and of restoring a paradisal union between them.”42 We should, Versluis argues, view “esoteric traditions as written maps of and means toward the exploration of consciousness,” and see the initiations that make up much of the esoteric tradition as ways of “awakening . . . higher degrees of consciousness.”43

I agree. What draws most people to the study of esoteric ideas and philosophies is a profound felt need for this change, this transmutation of consciousness. Something is missing, there is some lack that the usual sources of satisfaction cannot meet. There is a vague, obscure sense that one must change oneself in order to meet this need, and the different insights and philosophies making up the varied strands of the western inner tradition suggest a way of doing this. I would add to this that we have good reason to believe that at least some of what is missing is the contribution to our self-understanding offered by our much maligned yet infinitely patient, wise, and silent neighbor living in the brain next door.

So let us take a look at the sources of our rejected knowledge and what lessons we can learn from the secret teachers of the western world.

CHAPTER ONE

AN ANCIENT WISDOM

The western inner or esoteric tradition often speaks of an “ancient wisdom.” We find this in the Hermetic tradition, with the idea that its founder, the legendary Hermes Trismegistus, received a divine revelation at the dawn of time, which he subsequently passed on to his disciples. Today we know that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was not written “before the Flood,” as some of its earliest readers believed, but is most likely a product of the religious and philosophical syncretism characteristic of Roman Alexandria. But in esoteric circles, the idea of an initiatic descent, a *Aurea Catena,* or “Golden Chain” of adepts, reaching back into the dim vaults of antiquity and beyond, persists. The Renaissance, which saw a powerful Hermetic revival, was of course informed by the retrieval of ancient philosophy, namely Plato, which was lost during the so-called Dark Ages. But it was precisely the belief that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was written by Hermes Trismegistus in very ancient times—indeed, well before Plato—that made its rediscovery in 1463 so spectacular.1

For the philosophers and scholars of the Renaissance, the older an idea or a teaching was, the better, and the very old was the best of all. This is in sharp contrast with much of our own sensibilities, which see the new,

the novel, the "breakthrough," and the "cutting edge" as more worthy of our attention. Scholars of the Renaissance believed that the ancient texts that had been lost for centuries were closer to the source of knowledge, and hence were more pure, much as a mountain stream is clearer nearer its source, unlike the muddy waters of the lowlands. Renaissance scholars were indeed excited by Plato. But the wisdom that Plato had to offer, so the story went, was given to him by earlier sages, who themselves received it from even earlier adepts, who, as Frances Yates writes, "walked more closely with the gods."2

As the historian Christopher McIntosh remarked, it was the fifteenth-century Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino, translator of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, who "started the habit of talking in terms of a special wisdom handed down from sage to sage."3 This special wisdom was indeed very old, and Ficino himself heard about it from his patron, Cosimo de' Medici, the great power broker of Florence. Cosimo himself had heard about this ancient wisdom from the Byzantine Neoplatonic philosopher George Gemistos Plethon. Suffice it to say here that it was Plethon's conversation with Cosimo about a "primal theology," a *prisca theologia*, received by the Persian mage Zoroaster and other adepts at the dawn of time, and which informed all the world's religions, that eventually led to the rediscovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and, through this, much of what we know as the Renaissance.

Plethon's idea of an ancient wisdom, intermittently lost and rediscovered, has become a mainstay of esoteric thought. Practically every esoteric thinker has recourse to it. Some speak of it more than others, but in general all refer in some sense to a knowledge that was available to mankind in earlier times, but which has, over the centuries, become obscure, if not completely forgotten. In his sometimes unreliable but still very readable account of the philosophy of the occult, *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, translated into English by the occultist A. E. Waite as *Transcendental Magic*, the nineteenth-century French magician Eliphas Levi presents a moving, if highly romantic, expression of the idea:

Behind the veil of all the hieratic and mystical allegories of ancient doctrines, behind the darkness and strange ordeals of all initiations, under the seal of all sacred writings, in the ruins of old Nineveh or Thebes, on the crumbling stones of old temples and on the blackened visage of the Assyrian or Egyptian sphinx, in the monstrous or marvelous paintings which interpret to the faithful of India the inspired pages of the Vedas, in the cryptic emblems of our old books on alchemy, in the ceremonies practiced at reception by all secret societies, there are found indications of a doctrine which is everywhere the same and everywhere carefully concealed.4

That what is said in this passage is not strictly true does not take away from its romantic and imaginative power. It is clear to most critical students of esotericism that there is not a single "doctrine" shared by the various groups associated with the esoteric, nor is there the kind of historical continuity between different esoteric movements that less historically minded readers may imagine. (Although having said this, there is, I believe, what Arthur Versluis calls an "ahistorical continuity," a continuity of shared ideas, some which we will encounter as we go along.5) It is, in fact, a mistake to speak of "esotericism" as if it were a single, monolithic teaching, like communism or socialism. As I discovered while researching for this book, there are almost as many definitions of "esotericism" as there are esotericists or historians of esotericism writing about it.6 In fact, much of the "academic esotericism" of recent years is taken up with refining the definition of its subject—applying, we might say, left-brain explicitness to a right-brain implicit understanding—a common enough practice in academia, but which may be a stumbling block for the average reader.

"Esotericism" is a wide umbrella term covering a variety of ideas, beliefs, and practices which, while not necessarily sharing a single common element, do seem to share what the philosopher Wittgenstein called a "family resemblance."7 This is a collection of overlapping similarities, which link different members of a group together, but which can easily dissolve if we attempt to make their connection too explicit.8 It is, in a sense, more concerned with *recognition*, which is a right-brain affair, than *definition*, which is much more

the business of the left.9 Even among professing esotericists, there are different ideas of what esotericism is. Gurdjieff's esotericism is not the same as, say, Rudolf Steiner's, and both of their ideas about it may differ significantly from that of some other teacher's. But unless we are sectarians, we would not say that Gurdjieff or Steiner's ideas were not "esoteric," even if we could not define the term in a way acceptable to academics. For our purposes here, I will follow Joscelyn Godwin, who writes that "the word *esoteric* refers to the inner aspect of a religion or philosophy, of which the outer aspect is *exoteric*," and repeat what I said previously, that such *inner* teachings are fundamentally concerned with the "transmutation of consciousness."10

In the esoteric tradition, this "transmutation of consciousness" is commonly known as *gnosis*, a Greek word meaning "knowledge," but not knowledge in our everyday sense of the word, knowledge of "facts" or concepts. It is a kind of *experiential* knowledge, a knowledge that is also an "experience." It is a kind of "knowledge in italics." When you know something in the sense of *gnosis*, you *really know* it. In *The Quest for Hermes Trismegistus*, I write at length about *gnosis*; here I will repeat my own definition of it: "immediate, direct, non-discursive cognition of reality," a reality, that is, that includes the spiritual.11 This is the knowledge of "the hidden or invisible realms or aspects of existence."12 I will hazard the statement that the essence of esotericism is the attainment of such knowledge, and that this is its central contrast with orthodox religions, which are based on faith and belief. Without such a focus, the study of esotericism, it seems to me, would be concerned solely with what is *exoteric*, that is nonessential, about it.

It was passages like Eliphas Levi's above that led Madame Blavatsky, one of the founders of the Theosophical Society and herself an important "secret teacher," to title her first major work of esoteric philosophy, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (1877). Indeed, it was a lecture on "The Lost Canon of Proportion of the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans" given to her earlier "Miracle Club" that led to the formation, in 1875, of the Theosophical Society itself, one of whose aims is "the study of ancient religions, philosophies, and sciences."13 Some years later, Annie Besant, successor to Madame Blavatsky as head of the Theosophical Society, wrote a book called *The Ancient Wisdom* (1897). Even esotericists who have no truck with Blavatsky or the Theosophical Society still look to the ancient past as the source of their study. One of the major esoteric movements in the twentieth century, Traditionalism, takes as its central belief the existence of a primordial spiritual tradition, which was revealed by a divine source and flourished in the ancient past, but which has been subsequently lost. The founder of Traditionalism is generally considered to be the French metaphysician René Guénon, but other Traditionalists include the art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, the philosopher Huston Smith, and the far-right Italian esotericist Julius Evola. All, in different ways, share the idea of a *philosophia perennis*, a "perennial philosophy," the belief that "all religions shared a common origin in a single perennial (or primeval or primordial) religion that had subsequently taken on a variety of forms," an idea, we've seen, that it shares with Hermeticism.14 Gurdjieff is another target for the Traditionalists, who consider his "Fourth Way" teaching "counter-initiatic," that is, a kind of esoteric "black magic."15 Yet Gurdjieff, like the Traditionalists, also spoke of an ancient teaching, and his discovery of this, in the monastery of the Sarmoung Brotherhood in Central Asia, forms the climax to his spiritual adventure story *Meetings with Remarkable Men.*16

Mention of the Sarmoung Brotherhood brings us to another mainstay of esoteric thought: the belief that throughout history there have been "schools" informed with this ancient wisdom, secretly at work "behind the scenes" of civilization, helping humanity in its struggle to evolve. These secret schools, so the story goes, are the real agents of our development, and at crucial points in history, they inject esoteric ideas into the mainstream, in order to help mankind in its slow growth toward spiritual maturity.

THE OLD WORLD

We have seen that Iain McGilchrist believes that the right brain is older than its upstart emissary, the left, a

belief he shares with Leonard Shlain and other “split-brain” theorists. This would suggest that the kind of consciousness associated with the right brain would also be older than that associated with the left.17 We have also seen that Jean Gebser believes that before the rise of the mental-rational consciousness structure—which we have linked to the left brain—humankind lived in the mythic consciousness structure, one more attuned to images, feelings, and intuitions, all elements of right-brain consciousness. Our own consciousness is slanted more to the left than to the right. We see the world as something firmly outside us; there is a clear distinction between our inner world of thoughts, feelings, impressions, and the outer one of physical things. We see things in sharp detail and perceive them as separate, independent objects, and although we know that nature is “alive” in the sense of being “organic,” we do not believe that it, like ourselves, has an “inside,” and we certainly don’t believe that inorganic things, like stars and stones, are alive in any way at all. There is good reason to suspect that our earlier form of consciousness saw things differently. In *A Secret History of Consciousness*, I look at a number of different philosophies of consciousness, some esoteric, some more mainstream. I try to show that all, in different ways, suggest that at an earlier time, human beings had a more “participatory” kind of consciousness, a kind of consciousness more in line with what we know about right-brain consciousness than the left; that is, a consciousness that was more permeable, less rigid in its distinction between “inside” and “out.” This is a kind of consciousness that, except in certain circumstances, we only experience now as children.

For example, the philosopher of language, and great friend of C. S. Lewis, Owen Barfield—one of our secret teachers—believed that the history of language revealed what he called the “evolution of consciousness,” and he argued this point in his first book, *History in English Words.* Put briefly, Barfield believed that as we look back into the history of language, we see that it becomes more figurative, more metaphorical, more, in a sense, alive and poetic; our own age is, as the literary philosopher Erich Heller said, much more one of prose. This is because, Barfield believed, at an earlier time the world was more “alive,” had more, as we would say, “soul,” and that when earlier people—and modern-day poets—said that the world *spoke* to them, they were speaking the truth.18 To say that the world “back then” was more alive is another way of saying that our consciousness then perceived it as such; it was a kind of consciousness that, as Barfield says, could see the inside of things, rather than, as we do, only their surface. It was a kind of consciousness that participated in the world around it, rather than one, like our own, that only, as it were, bumps up against it.

Barfield came to his insights independently, but when he became aware of the work of Rudolf Steiner, he saw that Steiner, on a larger scale, was saying the same thing. Steiner, one of our most important secret teachers, also believed in an evolution of consciousness, but his outline of it included not only human history, but that of the cosmos as well. In fact, for Steiner, the evolution of consciousness goes hand in hand with that of the cosmos because for him, fundamentally, our consciousness and the cosmos are two sides of the same thing. In other words, for Steiner, the kind of world we perceive depends on the kind of consciousness perceiving it, an insight he shares, in a different way, with McGilchrist.19

Steiner’s system is vast, like a huge cathedral, and in some aspects it shares much with that of Gebser.20 In his reading of the evolution of consciousness, Steiner spoke of “epochs” rather than “structures of consciousness,” and he also spoke of earlier stages of our evolution that preceded our own Earth stage in the somewhat awkward terms of “Old Saturn,” “Old Sun,” and “Old Moon.” In the “Old Moon” stage before our current Earth stage, consciousness perceived things in terms of images; it was, as Steiner called it, a “picture thinking,” something more akin to our own experience of dreams.21 We would not then, he claimed, see a discreet, definite object and then have a “concept” or idea about it “in our heads,” but would respond to the “picture” as a symbol that would elicit the appropriate *feeling.* Steiner’s picture thinking seems very close to how Gebser describes the mythical structure of consciousness, a key part of which was the *reflection* of the inner world in the outer. Gebser sees the myth of Narcissus, the youth who fell in love with his reflection in a pool, as emblematic of the mythic structure.

Both Steiner's "picture thinking" and Gebser's "reflection" strike me as in line with what we know of how the right brain interacts with the world. Both would be open to the kind of "both/and" approach associated with the right brain, as opposed to the left brain's "either/or." In his account of Steiner's teaching, Stewart C. Easton remarks that "In the age before autonomous thinking"—the age, that is, before the rise of the left brain—"men perceived and interpreted . . . the world through their feeling. Thus to the ancient Egyptian there was no contradiction when his literature provided him with different stories of creation and assigned the deed to various gods." "No contradiction was present to the Egyptians," Easton says, "because contradiction belongs to thinking, not to the feelings."22 Contradiction, we've seen, is something troubling to the left brain, but not the right, which is open to metaphor and multiple meanings, as is the case in its appreciation of symbols.

HOW OLD IS THE SPHINX?

Mention of the Egyptians brings me to another connection between the right brain, esotericism, and the kind of consciousness that may be the source of "ancient wisdom"—or that at least may point us in its direction. In *The Caretakers of the Cosmos*, I make a connection between what we understand about right-brain consciousness and some of the ideas of another secret teacher, the French alchemist and maverick Egyptologist René Schwaller de Lubicz.

The work of René Schwaller de Lubicz became widely known in the 1990s through popular books such as Graham Hancock's *Fingerprints of the Gods* and Robert Bauval and Adrian Gilbert's *The Orion Mystery*, as well as Bauval and Hancock's *The Message of the Sphinx*. The title "de Lubicz" was given to Schwaller by the esoteric Lithuanian poet O. V. de Lubicz Milosz in 1919, when both were members of a secret occult society.23 Bauval and Hancock argue that an unknown but highly advanced ancient civilization preceded the historically known civilizations, and both drew on Schwaller de Lubicz's contention that the Great Sphinx of Giza was much older than the official accounts declared. The official account says that the Sphinx was built around 2500 B.C. during the reign of the pharaoh Khafra, but in one of this last books, *Sacred Science*, Schwaller remarked that it had in fact been built much earlier, at around 10,500 B.C. The reason for this dating, Schwaller argued, is that the body of the Sphinx showed clear signs of water erosion. Schwaller originally believed this was caused by flooding, but it was later determined that rainfall was responsible. The last time enough rain fell in Egypt to cause such erosion was some twelve thousand years ago—when, that is, it was not yet a desert.24

As a maverick Egyptologist, who also dabbled in alchemy and had a penchant for secret societies and right-wing politics, Schwaller did not reach a wide audience, and the mainstream Egyptologists who knew of his work considered him a crank. But in 1979, John Anthony West's *The Serpent in the Sky*—an extensive study of Schwaller's ideas—brought Schwaller's work to a wider, more appreciative readership, the budding New Age movement. It was through West's book that Hancock came across Schwaller's remarks about the Sphinx. Schwaller's dating of the construction of the Sphinx gained strong support in 1989 when West convinced the geologist and paleontologist Robert Schoch, a professor at Boston University, to test Schwaller's theory. Schoch was an expert on soft stone, like the limestone of which the Sphinx is made, and to his surprise, Schoch discovered that Schwaller was right, at least about the erosion marks. They were caused by water, not wind and sand, as the official accounts stated.

Understandably, Schoch's results caused consternation among orthodox Egyptologists, but their ire was raised even more by Bauval's argument that the entire plan of the Giza complex, including the Sphinx, the great pyramids, and the Nile, was laid out in Schwaller's date of 10,500 B.C. It was originally designed, Bauval argued, to mirror the night sky over Giza at that time, specifically the constellation Leo, the belt of Orion, and the Milky Way. In order to provide a picture of the night sky over Egypt circa 10,500 B.C., Bauval and Hancock used a computer to simulate the "precession of the equinoxes," the apparent backward

movement of the sun through the zodiac.25 They discovered that the Giza complex did indeed reflect with surprising accuracy the heavens directly above it, and they argued that this arrangement was designed to commemorate what in Egyptian mythology was known as Zep Tepi, the “First Time.”

This “First Time,” i.e., the beginning of Egyptian civilization, occurred during the age of Leo, some twelve thousand years ago. The official account of human history tells us that twelve thousand years ago, we were incapable of the kind of engineering skills needed to construct the Sphinx, or practically anything else, and that we certainly didn’t have the tools for the job. At best, the only implements available to our Neolithic ancestors then were some flint and sticks. Even the construction of the pyramids, which Bauval and Hancock agree took place later, poses problems. The engineering ability necessary to build the pyramids alone baffles us, but what is even more baffling is the kind of *knowledge* that seems to be embodied in the stone.26

As dozens of books have pointed out, the Great Pyramid of Giza is a compendium of mathematical and astronomical knowledge far in excess of what we believe the people responsible for them should have possessed. As early as 1864, an amateur Egyptologist, the London publisher John Taylor, argued that whoever built the Great Pyramid had included π (pi) in their measurements, a number that was supposed to have been first discovered by the Greek mathematician Archimedes in 250 B.C.—that is, centuries later.27 (For those who have forgotten, π is the ratio of a circle’s circumference to its diameter.) Much nonsense has been written about the pyramids, linking them to everything from biblical prophecy to UFOs, and giving rise to what some skeptics call a subgenre of junk literature written by “pyramidiots.” But to the unbiased reader it is clear that whoever was responsible for the pyramids and other Egyptian mysteries, such as the temples at Karnak and Luxor, knew a great deal more than what our official accounts suggest. Since 1894, when the British astronomer Norman Lockyer demonstrated in *The Dawn of Astronomy* that Egyptian temples, as well as the pyramids, were most likely, if not exclusively, used for astronomical purposes, many researchers have come to see that the kind of knowledge involved in their construction—as well as in other ancient structures, like Stonehenge (Lockyer was the first to suggest it was a kind of observatory)—was vastly different from what our official accounts allow.28

Schwaller too recognized that whoever built the Sphinx, the Great Pyramid, and the temples at Luxor and Karnak was mathematically and cosmologically astute. From 1936 to 1951, Schwaller and his wife, Isha, herself the author of a series of novels about ancient Egypt (*Her-Bak: Egyptian Initiate* is the best known), studied the ancient Egyptian monuments. Schwaller found evidence in them for pi, but also for much more: a knowledge of the precession of the equinoxes, of the Pythagorean theorem centuries in advance of Pythagoras, of the circumference of the globe, as well as evidence of φ (phi), known as the Golden Section, a mathematical proportion that was again supposedly unknown until it was discovered by the Greeks. As John Anthony West makes clear, the Golden Section is more than an important item in classical architecture. It is, according to Schwaller, the mathematical archetype of the universe, the reason why we have an “asymmetrical” “lumpy” world of galaxies and planets, and not a flattened-out, homogenous one, a question that today occupies contemporary cosmologists.29 In his writings, Schwaller linked phi to planetary orbits, to the architecture of Gothic cathedrals, and to plant and animal forms. It is, he argued, a “form constant,” that is, a kind of blueprint for reality or “law” of creation. Through his research, Schwaller came to believe that all of Egyptian life—from mundane, everyday items to their religious sites—was centered around what he saw as a central metaphysical vision about “cosmic harmony” and “the forces that bring about the becoming of things.”30

THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE HEART

The mathematical and cosmological knowledge that Schwaller discovered embedded in the ancient Egyptian monuments was indeed astounding, but what was perhaps even more astounding was the fact that this knowledge was the product of a form of consciousness radically different from our own. Schwaller came to

believe that Luxor, Karnak, and other Egyptian monuments were living organisms of a kind; they were, he saw, compendia of esoteric knowledge, whose central purpose was a kind of transmutation of consciousness. This knowledge, he believed, was rooted in a form of consciousness that he called "the intelligence of the heart." This was essentially a way of looking into the *insides* of things, much as Owen Barfield, discussed above, believed was true of human consciousness at an earlier stage. Our own modern consciousness—what Schwaller called "cerebral consciousness" or "the Set mind," named after the Egyptian god of chaos, storms, and the desert—was limited, Schwaller believed, to the *outside* of things. "Cerebral consciousness," Schwaller argued, "granulates" reality into bits and pieces; it severs the ties in the "network of connections that links everything with everything else" which, we've seen, is associated with a right-brain form of consciousness. "All in the universe," Schwaller wrote, "is in interdependent connection with all," a version of the "all is one" perception of the world common to esotericism.31 Schwaller's "intelligence of the heart" is essentially a participatory form of consciousness. This is made clear in Schwaller's enigmatic posthumous work *Nature Word.* With the "intelligence of the heart," Schwaller tells us, we can "tumble with the rock that falls from the mountain/Seek light and rejoice with the rosebud about to open" and "expand in space with the ripening fruit."32 In other words, with the "intelligence of the heart," we can experience all of these things—and more—from the *inside.*

It was this ability to perceive the "inside" of reality that, Schwaller argued, allowed the ancient Egyptians a kind of immediate access to the type of mathematical and cosmological knowledge that our "cerebral consciousness" has acquired slowly only after much labor and many years. The ancient Egyptians, Schwaller believed, saw the world *symbolically,* much as Stewart Easton above says our "Old Moon" consciousness did. Nature was a kind of text—hence Schwaller's title *Nature Word*—that conveyed truths about the forces behind it. The Egyptians called these forces "Neters," which we translate as "gods," and they portrayed these forces in different symbolic forms. This "symbolic perception" allowed the ancient Egyptians a greater leeway in interpreting reality. For one thing, it allowed them to experience what Schwaller called "the simultaneity of opposite states."

Schwaller first came upon this kind of "double-thinking" through his study of quantum physics, especially the work of Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr. Heisenberg, we know, developed what he called "the uncertainty principle," the recognition that at the level of elementary particles, we can know either a particle's position or its speed, but not both; securing one obscures the other. Bohr is famous for what he called "the principle of complementarity," the idea that light can act as a wave or a particle depending on the context, giving rise to the portmanteau term "wavicle." Before this, physicists banged their heads on the question of whether it acted as one or the other, as it gave conflicting evidence of both.33

The "intelligence of the heart," Schwaller argued, was what allowed the Egyptians to develop what he called "*symbolique*," that is, the ability to hold mutually exclusive ideas together simultaneously. For example, when an ancient Egyptian saw the hieroglyph of a bird, he knew it *denoted* the actual, living creature, but he was also aware of its *connotations,* that it was a symbol of the "cosmic function" embodied in the bird, that is, of flight. For Schwaller, hieroglyphics not only *designated,* they *evoked.* That is, they served dual purposes simultaneously. As we've seen, this is something the right brain ("both/and") is partial to, but which gives the left brain ("either/or") much grief.

HENRI BERGSON'S BRAIN

Another link between Schwaller's ideas about the consciousness of the ancient Egyptians and the right brain came from Schwaller's background in the work of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, a secret teacher of the mainstream. For a time in the early part of the last century, Bergson was the most famous philosopher on the planet, but he is little read today, although there has been renewed interest in his work in some areas.34 In his early days, Schwaller was a student of the artist Henri Matisse, and Matisse himself had been a student

of Bergson, so it is not unreasonable to think that Schwaller absorbed some of Bergson's ideas (indeed, given Bergson's popularity, it would have been almost impossible for him not to). Bergson believed that the human brain and nervous system serve an essentially *eliminative* function. That is to say, their purpose is to keep stimuli and information *out* of conscious awareness—not to bring it in—and to allow only as much of reality into consciousness as, in Aldous Huxley's words, "will help us to stay alive on the surface of this particular planet."35 Huxley made this remark in the context of his famous experiment with mescaline, which, he said, allowed him to see "what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence."36 (Interestingly, Huxley speaks of experiencing the *Istigkeit* ["is-ness"] of Meister Eckhart, mentioned in the Introduction.)

Huxley believed mescaline—as well as other psychedelic drugs—achieved their effects by turning off the brain's "reducing valve" and, as it were, allowing the "taps of reality" to run full blast. When this happened to Huxley, he was flooded with what he calls "Mind at Large." Huxley quotes the philosopher C. D. Broad, who had paraphrased Bergson's ideas about the eliminative function of the brain. Broad had written that "Each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe." Were the brain not to reduce or "edit" this universal awareness—or "cosmic consciousness," as the psychologist R. M. Bucke, a little known secret teacher, called it—we would be swamped, Broad said, with a "mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge." As it is, our inner editor does a very good job of providing us with only that very small selection of reality "which is likely to be practically useful."37

Bergson, Broad, and Huxley did not have the material on split-brain theory that is available to us, but if they did, I believe they would have recognized its importance. We have seen that the right brain is aware of the "network of connections linking everything with everything else," which seems in line with our remarks about "universal awareness" and "cosmic consciousness" above. And we have also seen that the left brain is geared toward focusing tightly on its objectives, and ignoring everything else. We can, I think, see Bergson's cerebral "reducing valve" and "eliminative function" as operations involving the left brain, and that what it reduces is the broader, wider awareness of the right.

A SUCCESSFUL ADAPTATION

The brain's eliminative function is, as Bergson and Huxley saw, a highly successful evolutionary adaptation. Were we not able to edit out most of the "interdependent connections" everything has with everything else, we would not have become such a successful species. Huxley recognized this when he remarked that if everyone took mescaline, there would be no wars, but there would be no civilization either, because no one would bother to create it. We would be too happy enjoying our sense of "cosmic consciousness" to do anything so boring. In order to function effectively—and to spur our creative efforts—consciousness needs to be *limited.* We need, in effect, to be dissatisfied enough with our situation in order to improve it. (The advice to "be here now," offered by many spiritual teachers is valuable and salutary, but it can also lead to us "remaining there then.") Yet, as we've seen, our highly efficient editor does his job too well. Much of the "irrelevant knowledge" it leaves out of our awareness has to do with what makes life worth living, its beauty and meaning. Huxley understood this when, as mentioned, he felt that under mescaline, he saw existence in its pristine form. In *The Doors of Perception,* his account of his drug experience, Huxley writes that he saw everything shining with an inner light that reflected its infinite significance; looking at the bamboo legs of a chair, Huxley felt that he had *become* them. This is a common experience within the western—and eastern—inner tradition. That is, Huxley saw into the inside of the chair, and everything else around him. The seventeenth-century Bohemian visionary Jacob Boehme spoke of seeing into what he called "the signature of things," and this seems to be what Huxley saw too.

This ability to see into the interior of reality Bergson called "intuition." This was, he said, a "kind of

intellectual sympathy by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible." Anyone who has read Boehme will know his accounts of his mystical vision are not easy to grasp, and we remember what was said in the Introduction about the difficulty in conveying implicit meanings. On the other hand, our everyday consciousness, Bergson said, "reduces the object to elements already known, that is, to elements common both to it and other objects."38 As we have seen, the left brain likes to turn everything it encounters into something familiar.

THE NINEVEH NUMBER

There is good reason then, I think, to equate Schwaller de Lubicz's "intelligence of the heart" with a kind of right-brain awareness. Robert Lawlor, one of Schwaller's translators and an authority on "sacred geometry," said as much when he wrote that "localization in the right hemisphere of the highly intuitive aspects of thought, together with the capacity for non-verbal pattern recognition, is consistent with the dominant quality of mind which, in Schwaller de Lubicz's view, could have produced the temple architecture and hieroglyphic writings of the ancient Egyptians."39 If the kind of knowing associated with a right-brain awareness was familiar to the ancient Egyptians, can we also find it in other ancient people? The answer seems to be yes.

One of the most curious mysteries of the ancient world is what is known as the "Nineveh number." In 1843, Paul Emile Botta, French consul at Mosul in what was then Mesopotamia (today Iraq), made a remarkable discovery. Digging at a mound known as Kuyunjik, near the upper Tigris, he came upon the library of the ancient Assyrian king Assurbanipal, who reigned in the sixth century B.C. Looking through the many clay tablets he unearthed, Botta came upon one that contained an unusually long number, running to fifteen places: 195,955,200,000,000. The mound in which the tablet was discovered was at the site of the ancient city of Nineveh, so it became known as the "Nineveh number." What struck Botta and others at the time as strange was what ancient people would *do* with such a number? What could they use it for? Although fairly common today, people in the nineteenth century rarely used the idea of a million. What possible function could a number just short of two hundred *trillion* serve the ancient Assyrians?

In his book *Our Cosmic Ancestors* (1988), Maurice Chatelain, a French space scientist and former NASA communications systems chief, writes of using a computer to investigate the Nineveh number. He came up with some curious results. One was that the number was not arbitrary. It is 60 times 70, brought to the power of 7. Chatelain then remembered that the Sumerians, credited with inventing writing, calculated using base sixty rather than base ten; we have inherited our sixty-second minute and sixty-minute hour from them. The Assyrians inherited their culture from the Babylonians, who inherited theirs from the Sumerians, so Chatelain wondered if the number 60 could offer any clue to the meaning of the Nineveh number. He discovered it did, and that the vast number could be seen as equaling 2,268 million days—just over six million years—worked out in *seconds.* Other surprises followed. Chatelain wondered if the Sumerians, who were obsessive astronomers, had known about the precession of the equinoxes. A complete precessional cycle takes roughly twenty-six thousand years. Chatelain divided this into the Nineveh number and discovered that it worked out to precisely 240 cycles, or "Big Years." Chatelain then recalled the idea of "the great constant of the solar system," a kind of astronomical "highest common factor," into which all other cosmic numbers—planetary orbits, as well as those of satellites—will divide. Again using a computer, Chatelain calculated the length of the planetary and satellite orbits in seconds and found that they too divided into the Nineveh number equally. Whoever had calculated this figure, Chatelain concluded, seemed to know a lot about the stars.

But the Nineveh number had even more surprises. Chatelain computed the period of the Earth's rotation against the Nineveh number and was surprised to find it produced a slight discrepancy: it was off by one twelve-millionths of a day per year. This troubled him. The error was indeed slight, but so far he had not come across any inaccuracies and he wondered why he should do so now. Then Chatelain realized something

that the ancient Sumerians—or whoever the Nineveh number originated from—would not have known: that the Earth's rotation has been slowing down at an infinitesimal rate, and that in twelve million years, a year will be a day shorter. Factoring this into his equation, Chatelain discovered that if the Nineveh number was a correct figure for the Earth's rotation, it must have been computed some 64,800 years ago. But beings intelligent enough to compute such a figure were simply not around then—or were they?

THE BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

Chatelain's own suggestion was that the knowledge contained in the Nineveh number came from extraterrestrials. His book is in the Erich von Däniken school of thought, that sees human evolution as a result of experiment and intervention carried out by "ancient astronauts." This may suggest a shaky provenance, but Colin Wilson has suggested that the kind of knowledge responsible for the Nineveh number—and other ancient astronomical mysteries—may be similar to that displayed by "calculating prodigies."40 In 1826, a six-year-old boy named Benjamin Blyth was out walking with his father when he asked what time it was. His father told him and a few moments later Benjamin replied, "In that case I have been alive for . . ." and went on to give the exact figure in seconds, around 160 million. His father jotted the answer down and when they returned home he worked out the calculations. He told Benjamin he was off by 172,800 seconds. But Benjamin corrected him, saying he left out two leap years.

Zerah Colburn, the nineteenth-century "lightning calculator," was asked whether 4,294,967,297 was a "prime number" or not. Prime numbers cannot be divided exactly by any numbers other than one or themselves. We know the easy ones: 5, 7, 11, 13, 17; but past a certain point they are no longer obvious and need to be worked out. The trouble with primes is that there is no easy method of doing this: you simply have to divide all the smaller numbers into it. Even a computer has to do it "the hard way," and with large numbers this takes time. Yet Zerah was able to do it "in his head" and almost immediately say that this ten-digit number wasn't prime, but could be divided by 641. Similarly, the psychiatrist Oliver Sacks has written about "idiot savants" who entertain each other by swapping twenty-four-digit primes.41 These individuals are otherwise severely mentally handicapped, but in this one instance they display powers that strike us as miraculous.

There is no logical way for these people to have arrived at their calculations. As Wilson suggests, it is as if they can somehow simply "see" the correct answer. In a sense there is no "calculating" at all, at least not in the usual way. Rather, it is as if their minds could somehow "hover in the air, like a hawk, over the whole number field, and pounce on prime numbers [or any other correct answer] as if they were rabbits."42 They had a "bird's-eye view" of the problem and, rising above it, seemed to use some form of "pattern recognition" to "see" which number would "fit." Wilson remarks that Keith Critchlow, the architect and authority on sacred geometry, suggests that a similar "method" was used by the Babylonians when working out right angles that ran into thousands of feet, and Wilson suggests that something similar may have been at work with the Nineveh number. Other ancient architects may have been privy to a similar insight. Studying the standing stones at Callanish, in Scotland, and at other megalithic sites, the aeronautical engineer Alexander Thom declared that the people responsible for them were "prehistoric Einsteins."43 Thom noticed that the main north-south axis at Callanish was aligned directly with the Pole Star. But he also knew that when Callanish was erected—some estimates are as early as 3000 B.C.—the Pole Star was not in its current position. For the builders of Callanish to have aligned the site to geographic north without the Pole Star as a guide would have required highly sophisticated engineering ability—the kind, again, that should not have been capable then.

This seems bizarre. But then, as we've seen, the philosopher C. D. Broad maintained that "each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him and of perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe." The fact that we do not experience this kind of awareness—or only

rarely, in “mystical experiences”—is because of our left brain’s highly efficient editing abilities. Perhaps someone with a less efficient cerebral editor would, in some way we can’t yet understand, be able to tap into the knowledge necessary to erect Callanish and other sites of “archeoastronomy,” or “know” immediately whether a ten-digit number was prime or not.

HOW OLD IS MAN?

Needless to say, Maurice Chatelain’s suggestion that the Nineveh number dates from nearly sixty-five thousand years ago will no doubt raise several eyebrows, but in *A Secret History of Consciousness,* I write about some speculation that “anatomically modern human beings” have existed in time periods when, according to the standard accounts, they should not have been there.44 Some of the material I looked at came from a controversial book, *Forbidden Archaeology* by Michael A. Cremo and Richard L. Thompson, published in 1993. Its nine-hundred-plus pages are filled with what, from the standard account, are disturbing archaeological anomalies, but the fact that Cremo was a follower of Swami Prabhupada’s “Krishna Consciousness” movement was enough to suggest to most orthodox archaeologists that they could ignore his and Thompson’s findings with good conscience. But perhaps even more disturbing and certainly more difficult to ignore is an account by the respected anthropologist Mary Leakey. In 1978, at Laetoli, twenty miles south of the famous Olduvai Gorge, Mary Leakey, her son Philip, and another member of their party discovered what seemed to be typically human footprints preserved in volcanic ash that dated from 3.5 to 3.8 million years ago. The prints were left by hominids that walked upright, and Mary Leakey spoke of “unique evidence, of an unimpeachable nature” which argued that “our hominid ancestors were fully bipedal a little before 3.5 million years ago.” This went against all the standard accounts of human development. According to the accepted view, humans like ourselves only came on the scene some forty thousand years ago. Yet, as Mary Leakey wrote, “the essentially human nature and modern appearance of the footprints were quite extraordinary.”45 This, of course, does not prove that Chatelain’s dating of the Nineveh number is correct, or that the number itself is of any importance. But it does suggest the possibility that humans like ourselves may have walked the earth much earlier than we believe.

NEANDERTHAL MAN

One group of humans rather unlike ourselves who seem to have had a surprising astronomical knowledge were the Neanderthals, who flourished from 100,000 to 40,000 B.C. The clichéd picture of Neanderthal is of a stocky, beetle-browed, club-bearing subhuman, dragging his mate along behind him; but increasingly we see that this is little more than an ignorant caricature. In a series of brilliant books written in the 1970s and ’80s, the psychologist and paranormal investigator Stan Gooch argued that, in fact, Neanderthal was not the brutish caveman we believe him to be, but was in truth responsible for a “civilization” millennia before our own. A pioneer of “Neanderthal studies,” Gooch was laughed at when he first presented his ideas, but in recent years many of them—including the notion that Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon, our direct ancestor, mated and produced us—have been vindicated, without, sadly, Gooch receiving any credit.46

One of Gooch’s suggestions is that Neanderthal’s large brain capacity—1,400 cubic centimeters compared with our 1,300—was due to his larger cerebellum. The cerebellum (“little brain”) is located at the back of the skull, next to the brain stem and below the occipital and temporal lobes. It is a kind of early cerebrum, the part of the brain that contains the cerebral cortex, and like the right brain, the cerebellum is older. Gradually, the cerebrum increased in size until it covered over the cerebellum, much as a tree may grow around a stone; the cerebellum is now almost completely obscured by the cerebrum. Gooch argues that Neanderthal’s larger cerebellum made him “psychic” and allowed for a greater sensitivity to natural forces, like magnetic fields, but also to phenomena we would call “paranormal.” He also suggested that modern “psychics” would have larger, or at least more active, cerebella than nonpsychics.47 The eighteenth-century philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg—one of our secret teachers—who studied the brain extensively, also paid especial attention to

the cerebellum and, in his later religious writings, said that it was through it that the “influx from the Divine” reaches the soul. (That is why in heaven, Swedenborg says, no angel stands behind another, so as not to block the flow.) Swedenborg also believed that in an earlier time, man had greater contact with the Divine, unlike today, when we are separated from it by our rational intellect.48 In Frances Yates’s words quoted earlier, for Swedenborg, early man “walked more closely with the gods.” In his book *The Paranormal*, Gooch points out that Swedenborg, who, like Gooch, was psychic, reported that he had felt “actual conscious experience of the cerebellum during . . . paranormal activity,” and Swedenborg often spoke of being visited by angels and taking trips with them to heaven and hell. So Gooch’s ideas about the cerebellum may be significant.49

Among other surprises Gooch uncovered was that Neanderthals were very religious. They took care of their elderly and sick, and their dead were ritually buried, usually decorated with flowers and often with food and other offerings, suggesting a belief in an afterlife, an idea first proposed by the archaeologist Ralph Solecki in 1972 in *Shanidar, the Humanity of Neanderthal Man.* The dead were also painted in red ochre, a name for the iron ore hematite. In one mine discovered in southern Africa dating to a hundred thousand years ago, it is estimated that a million kilograms of the ore had been removed. This suggests a large coordinated effort involving many individuals motivated by deep religious convictions over many years—although perhaps “convictions” is the wrong word for something that would have been much more “intuitive.” Red ochre was important to Neanderthal, Gooch argues, because its color linked it to menstrual blood; the menstrual cycle, Gooch believes, was central to the Neanderthal “religion.”

TWO REALITIES

In the Introduction, I mentioned that Gooch argued that modern humans lived under two different “realities,” what he called Reality O and Reality S. This “duo-consciousness” is the result of our Cro-Magnon/Neanderthal ancestry. Reality O is the “objective” approach to the world that we have inherited from our Cro-Magnon ancestors, the tightly focused and highly edited awareness of the physical world that Leonard Shlain argued started with early hunters. Reality S is the “subjective” approach to life, the broader, more psychically sensitive awareness that Gooch believes we have inherited from Neanderthal. Gooch believes that Neanderthal were a devotee of a Goddess-based religion, which they associated with the moon. Cro-Magnon, on the other hand, were more attuned to a solar, masculine deity.

Eventually, the highly efficient Cro-Magnon eradicated his laid-back but more intuitive cousin, but not before he mated with her, and in our own psyches we continue the battle between them, much as McGilchrist argues goes on between our two brains. It should be mentioned that Gooch did not see the struggle going on between the cerebral hemispheres, but between the cerebrum and the cerebellum.50 But although he disagrees on its location and participants, on all other accounts his version of the battle is practically the same.51 Our inheritance from Neanderthal, Gooch argues, is behind what, in *Total Man* and other books, he calls our “ancient adversary” and “other self” with whom our rational ego is in constant conflict. According to Gooch, this “adversary” has given rise to our myths and legends of vampires, werewolves, goblins, centaurs, to fairy tales and other fables, as well as to works of literature such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.*

Cro-Magnon’s “solar” consciousness worked best in the bright light of day, and it revealed useful knowledge about the hard, physical world. Neanderthal’s intuitive approach was more suited to the night—he was nocturnal—and he was attuned, as Schwaller believed the later Egyptians were, to cosmic forces. Also like Schwaller’s Egyptians, Neanderthal most likely experienced a kind of “group consciousness.”52 In *Cities of Dreams*, Gooch argues that an entire Goddess-based Neanderthal “Moon civilization” once stretched across Europe, but was eventually lost with the rise of Cro-Magnon and his descendants, much as the cerebellum was eclipsed by the rise of the cerebrum. (We are reminded of Steiner’s “Old Moon” consciousness, and of

Leonard Shlain's Goddess civilization, eclipsed by aggressive left-brainers. In *The White Goddess,* the poet Robert Graves proposed a similar idea.) This civilization, however, was not like ours, made of technology, massive cities, machines, and an indiscriminate exploitation of the natural world, but was one more attuned to natural rhythms, to Schwaller de Lubicz's "intelligence of the heart" and the "forces that bring about the becoming of things." It would be a much more "inner"-based civilization than an "outer" one; as Gooch says, it would be a "civilization more of the mind than of buildings."53 Hence Gooch's title *Cities of Dreams.* Such a "civilization" would not necessarily leave many physical remains—think of the "civilization" of Native American Indians, all but wiped out by white settlers—but its cultural traces could be uncovered. In *The Guardians of the Ancient Wisdom,* Gooch argues that much of the western esoteric tradition is, like our fairy tales and legends, a garbled account of the Neanderthal Moon religion, and he argues that many of our superstitions and holy days are too. In this sense we can certainly see our Neanderthal ancestors as collectively making up one of our secret teachers.

THE SEVEN SISTERS

One need not agree with Gooch completely to appreciate his main idea: that prior to the rise of historical times, there existed an ancient people who had a "wisdom"—and consciousness—different from our own, and which may indeed, as Gooch suggests, have in some way informed the western inner tradition. One apparently universal myth which, according to Gooch, was bequeathed to us by Neanderthal involves a faint group of stars called the Pleiades, also known as the Seven Sisters.

As a nocturnal being, Neanderthal would spend a great deal of time looking at the night sky. Neanderthal charted the movement and phases of the moon, and he seemed to have created ritual objects as part of his worship. At a Neanderthal site at La Quina in the Dordogne region of France, seventy-six perfect stone spheres were discovered, along with a flat flint disk some twenty centimeters in diameter. No obvious utilitarian use for these objects could be discovered and it seems they are a kind of religious artifact, related to Neanderthal's moon worship.54 But while we can accept that Neanderthal was obsessed by the moon—it is, after all, the largest and brightest object in the night sky—the attention he paid to the Pleiades seems less obvious. In *Cities of Dreams,* Gooch relates the strange fact that myths surrounding the Pleiades, also known as the Seven Sisters, can be found around the world, in places as far apart as ancient Greece, aboriginal Australia, North America, and Siberia. In fact, the Pleiades are the only constellation noted and named by every culture on the planet, past or present. They are always known as the Seven Sisters and they are always being hunted by the constellation Orion. The myths all tell the same story. But the Pleiades are not a bright constellation—they are made up of fourth magnitude stars—and to the naked eye seem rather faint. There are much brighter objects in the sky to attract the attention of early stargazers and mythmakers.

Yet Gooch argues persuasively that some thirty thousand years ago, late Neanderthal charted the movement of the Pleiades. He did this because, back then, the rise of the Seven Sisters marked the arrival of spring. As moon worshipers, Neanderthal would be interested in all heavenly activity, and as Goddess worshipers, the arrival of spring and its procreative powers would be important to them. Because of the precession of the equinoxes, however, the rise of the Pleiades and the arrival of the vernal equinox no longer happen at the same time, but Gooch argues that the significance the Seven Sisters had for Neanderthal was inherited by his Cro-Magnon competitor, who was just about to squeeze his starry-eyed cousin out of existence. Neanderthal's astronomical knowledge was gradually transformed into myth, something, Gooch maintains, that happened to all of Neanderthal's "wisdom," and was diffused across the globe.

Gooch was not the only one to notice this strange status of the Seven Sisters. In *Lost Civilizations of the Stone Age,* the Oxford anthropologist Richard Rudgley notes that the Russian prehistorian Boris Frolov also remarked on the curious ubiquity of the Pleiades in world mythology. Frolov was convinced that such acute parallels—even to exact names—across such distances could not be coincidental, and that they can only be

explained by a “common heritage.” Yet Rudgley comments that such a common heritage would point to a “tradition of communicable knowledge of the heavens that has existed for over 40,000 years.” That is, since the “beginning of the Upper Paleolithic,” and before both the New World and Australia were inhabited. It would also mean that the people of that time had a language. Rudgley recognizes that most authorities will not accept this—it would be “extremely awkward for most widely accepted views of the history and knowledge of science”—yet he does suggest that such a “knowledge” could help account for “certain objects of early Upper Paleolithic” that seem like “advanced examples of calendars based on both solar and lunar observations.”55 One such calendar was a piece of bone the prehistorian Alexander Marshack discovered in an Upper Paleolithic site. It dated from thirty-five thousand years ago yet had markings charting the phases of the moon, a finding he announced in his book *The Roots of Civilization.*56

DIRECT PERCEPTION

Rudgley is no occultist or esotericist, and his interest in ancient astronomers is strictly scientific, but as the title of his book suggests, he does believe that people of an earlier time knew more than we suspect. How did they know? We have seen that Schwaller de Lubicz believed it was through “the intelligence of the heart.” Gooch believed that Neanderthal and the humans that followed him experienced what he called “direct perceiving,” a form of intuition in which “you get things right straightaway—‘just like that.’” This is opposed to our more common “indirect perceiving,” in which you have to work things out.57 The difference between the two, Gooch points out, is that with “direct perceiving,” you don’t know how you know, you just do. The knowledge just “pops into your head” and you have no idea how it got there. With the more laborious and time-consuming “indirect perceiving,” you do know how you know, and what’s more, you can show someone else how to know it too. This is our usual kind of knowledge, what the Greeks called *episteme,* and we arrive at it through the boring methods of trial, error, memory, and rote, what in general terms we call “education.” Our other kind of knowledge is something different, and because our usual ideas about reality—based on our left-brain accounts—can’t explain it, we either dismiss it as impossible, or ignore it. Nevertheless, it is real.

The dark magician Aleister Crowley said that “even the crudest Magick eludes consciousness altogether, so that when one is able to do it, one does it without conscious comprehension, very much as one makes a good stroke at cricket or billiards.”58 Crowley’s remark echoes that of the Austrian novelist and occultist Gustav Meyrink, who said that magic is “doing without knowing.” Jean Gebser believed that all magic required “a sacrifice of consciousness.”59 Zerah Colburn, the “lightning calculator” whose talents certainly seemed magical, could not give an account of how he arrived at his answers, although they were correct. Neither could Oliver Sacks’s “idiot savants.” As Gooch writes, “It seems to me that the ancients, in particular, of course, Neanderthal and then those who came after him who were close to him, did gain real understanding intuitively, a real knowledge of aspects of human life and human biology, of some of the functions of the planet’s geology and perhaps some knowledge even of atomic and molecular structure.” They acquired this knowledge, Gooch suggests, through dreams and clairvoyance or “simply by looking and saying ‘this is so.’” And the strange thing is, as Gooch points out, “they were right.”

Gooch’s “direct perceiving,” like Schwaller de Lubicz’s “intelligence of the heart,” seems to be a form of knowing very similar to *gnosis,* discussed earlier in this chapter. All three suggest the kind of “participatory” character that Owen Barfield argued was typical of human consciousness at an earlier time. Again, we needn’t agree with all of Schwaller de Lubicz’s or Gooch’s arguments to recognize their basic idea: that at some point in our history, we seemed to possess a way of knowing that was different from our more familiar one, and that this way of knowing allowed us a kind of “wisdom” that we have lost touch with, or at least have less access to than we once did. “Lightning calculators” still seem to have some access to it, and in the annals of parapsychology and mysticism there are innumerable examples of an inexplicable knowledge coming to many individuals. We have also seen that drugs like mescaline can open our “doors of

perception," allowing us an experience of this older form of consciousness. In one form or another, these examples—and there are others—suggest that they are in some way related to the ancient wisdom we are in search of.

Where did it go?

WHAT HAPPENED?

No one knows exactly when or how we lost our ancient wisdom and arrived at the kind of consciousness we now possess. Rudolf Steiner speaks about the change from our "Old Moon" picture-based consciousness to our more logical, rational "Earth" consciousness, and Gebser of the transition from the mythic structure of consciousness to the mental-rational; but the actual mechanism involved remains unclear, although each gives plenty of evidence that the change did take place. Stan Gooch sees the cerebrum as the culprit, and McGilchrist puts the blame on only one half of it. Undoubtedly something happened that made things different, but no one knows exactly what triggered it. There have, however, been some suggestions.

In *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Julian Jaynes argues that at around 1250 B.C. a series of crises involving wars, massive migrations, pirate raids on the coastal towns of the Mediterranean carried out by the mysterious Sea People, natural disasters like the terrific volcanic eruption on the island of Santorini, and other disturbances led to the rise of our own ego-based consciousness.60 Prior to this, Jaynes argues, consciousness was "bicameral," two-chambered, which, in effect, means that before the "breakdown" of the "bicameral mind," humans were more or less like the split-brain patients mentioned in the Introduction. (Gebser believed that the mental-rational structure began around 1225 B.C., so his and Jaynes's dates seem to line up too.) Jaynes believed that prior to the end of the Bronze Age, humans did not experience an interior "self-consciousness" in the way that we do, but heard voices in their head which they believed came from the gods but were really issuing from the right brain. Much of Jaynes's evidence comes from Homer's *Iliad*, which was written down in the eighth or ninth century B.C., but which speaks of events—the Trojan War—taking place during the Mycenaean civilization some six or seven centuries earlier.

The *Iliad*, Jaynes argues, contains no words that describe inner states of mind. "The picture then is one of strangeness and heartlessness and emptiness," Jaynes writes. "We cannot approach these heroes by inventing mind-spaces behind their fierce eyes as we do each other."61 "Bicameral man" would not ask himself what he should do or what he thought about something, but would wait for a "message" from the gods—or, as Jaynes, argues, the right brain. (Jaynes's own "inspiration" for his theory came when he experienced an "auditory hallucination" while pondering the problem of knowledge.62) When he received his answer, he would go on with whatever he was doing. Jaynes even says that "bicameral man" might have had to ask the same question several times. On his way to build a dam across a river, he might forget where he was going and what he was supposed to do when he got there, and would have to petition the god again.

This kind of dreamy, absentminded approach to life worked fine for a long time—and it still does for many people. Life followed well-grooved routines and little happened to upset them. But when these routines were broken by wars, famine, or natural catastrophes, the older, more leisurely way of life collapsed and man had to learn how to react to things more quickly. Those who didn't fell by the wayside. Jaynes points out that the "bicameral men" who went against instinct and had the presence of mind—the phrase is instructive—to allow their wives and daughters to be raped by invaders would survive; those who followed the old edicts of the gods and tried to defend them would more than likely be cut down. Artifacts from after the time of Jaynes's proposed breakdown seem to corroborate his thesis. In 1230 B.C., a stone altar made by Tukulti-Ninurta I, a tyrant of Assyria, shows Tukulti kneeling before the *empty* throne of his god. A tablet from the same time reads, "One who has no god, as he walks along the street, headache envelopes him like a garment." Again, we don't need to accept all of Jaynes's argument to grasp the basic idea: that at some point

toward the end of the Bronze Age, something happened to human consciousness that put it on its road to us.

Leonard Shlain places the “split” between the old consciousness and the new a bit further back, to the rise of the alphabet circa 1700 to 1500 B.C. The Phoenicians are generally credited with the invention of the alphabet, but there is reason to believe that an earlier alphabet preceded the Phoenician, and more than likely the credit for this revolutionary development should be shared among several peoples who lived in the region between Egypt and Mesopotamia in the second millennium B.C. Whoever invented it, for Shlain the rise of literacy and its linear means of communication was, as we’ve seen, not an unalloyed benefit. For all its advantages, it has led, he argues, to a left-brain–dominated culture that diminished and degraded the earlier holistic, right-brain, image-based Goddess civilization.

One of the disturbing insights that Shlain shares with Jaynes is that for both, the rise of a left-brain ego-based consciousness seems to have gone hand in hand with the rise of violence and cruelty. The Phoenicians, according to Shlain, were a cruel people, given to child sacrifice, and they left no literary or cultural remains.63 The Assyrian Tiglath-Pileser I (1115–1077 B.C.), who came a century after Tukulti-Ninurta, inaugurated one of the bloodiest reigns in history. Laws made by Tiglath-Pileser carried inordinately severe penalties, even for minor infringements. Bas-reliefs of Assyrian campaigns depict whole populations being impaled. “The Assyrians,” Jaynes writes, “fell like butchers upon harmless villagers.”64 We have seen that the left brain has a fundamentally aggressive approach to experience, and Jaynes’s and Shlain’s accounts seem to corroborate this. As the left brain is geared toward dealing with the world, this makes a strange, disturbing kind of sense. Faced with a world thrown into chaos, and increasingly losing touch with the gods (or goddesses), the “old ways” no longer worked and our ancestors had to make snap decisions and achieve their aims as quickly as possible. As we all know, the quickest way to get something we want is to simply take it. “Smash and grab” is the shortest route to fulfilling desires. Pain is a good persuader. Although in the long run they are self-defeating, violence and cruelty, then, may be a kind of “shortcut” taken by a consciousness suddenly confronted by a dangerous world, and driven by a need to deal with things swiftly.65

A NECESSARY LOSS

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Tony Hill:

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Scott Anderson:

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