

## A LETTER FROM JACK BURNHAM

Michael Bonesteel, May 16, 2024

Michael Bonesteel is an independent author, curator, and contributing editor to *Raw Vision* magazine. He is the author of *Henry Darger: Art and Selected Writings* (Rizzoli International, 2000) and was formerly an art critic for *Art in America* and *Artforum* magazines, as well as a managing editor of the *New Art Examiner*.

\* \* \*

Jack Burnham (1931–2019) possessed one of the finest minds I have ever encountered. Rarely does a towering intellect share space in the same persona with such intuitive brilliance and authentic humility.

I had the great good fortune of befriending him when I was a bureau chief for *The New Art Examiner* in Chicago from 1980 to 1981. His profoundly insightful article on the self-taught genius Henry Darger (“The Henry Darger Collection: Another Art Treasure Lost to Chicago?”, *The New Art Examiner*, October 1979) had been a revelation to me. For the November 1980 edition of the *Examiner*, I edited a theme issue on “Art and the Occult” and invited Jack to contribute an essay, which he titled “Esoteric Sources of Duchamp’s Dual Paradise.” As Jack and I socialized over drinks or dinner, in a gentle voice that belied the passionate intensity of his searching, he would share his latest thoughts about, say, Marcel Duchamp as “Merkabah Rider”—a secret master of the Kabbalah—and other fascinating subjects.

The following account may sound preposterous to any confirmed atheists or scientific materialists reading this, but those who allow for the presence of a mystical dimension in their lives, as Jack did, may find it informative.

Like Jack, I was a spiritual seeker and I told him about some of my experiences as a participant in a group of like-minded friends who regularly witnessed the channeling of an interdimensional entity called Michael. This entity had been made known to the public by author Chelsea Quinn Yarbro’s book *Messages from Michael* (1979)—much as the entity Seth, who also resides on what is known as the Mid-Causal Plane (the next level beyond the Astral Plane) had been popularized through the mediumship of Jane Roberts (*Seth Speaks*, 1972). Unlike Seth, however, Michael was also channeled by numerous other mediums worldwide. I had observed my friend Mary Jonaitis’s experiments with channeling Michael over several years, from her early attempts through the Ouija board to her final ability to simply allow Michael to speak through her directly when she went into a mild hypnotic trance (today Mary continues to give Michael readings as the founder of Consultations in Depth in Santa Fe, New Mexico).

Jack was intrigued and expressed an interest in obtaining information about the metaphysical aspects of Duchamp’s art and life. He submitted three questions which I passed on to Mary: 1) Did Duchamp arrive at the third and highest level of enlightenment? 2) Was he a rider of the chariot? 3) What is the metaphysical meaning of Duchamp’s book on the end-moves in chess?

The entity Michael’s response to the first question about whether Duchamp achieved enlightenment was: “No. He was close though.” Was he a chariot rider? “Yes. He will attain the third level on the Astral Plane. He has now achieved it.” Michael’s confusion of

future and present tense here is puzzling, but perhaps that is because time does not exist in the afterlife. The answer to the last question regarding the metaphysical meaning of Duchamp's end-moves in chess was: "That would take a lengthy discourse with a large effort on our part because we have to work out the language equivalents for ideas that defy and contradict language in its fixed state. [Michael referred to itself as "we" because it is a group soul composed of some one thousand conjoined soul fragments.] Please retain the question and consider it submitted." We took it upon ourselves to ask if Duchamp would be able to talk to Jack via Michael. "We can't guarantee the medium's [Mary's] safety in dealing with the Astral Plane especially in the city [Mary normally conducted sessions with Michael in rural Wisconsin and found the oppressive energetic condition in cities like Chicago an impediment to clear communication]. Perhaps we could transfer Duchamp's fragment's thought entities for you and that would be very enlightening." [Michael referred to individual souls as "fragments" because apparently on a higher level we are all members of greater soul groups or pods.]

By the fall of 1981, Jack had become quite reclusive, and we asked Michael about his well-being. "Would you tell us if Jack's seclusion will end soon? How is he doing?" Michael's response: "He is not so good. He is out of touch with nature. He is very depressed and needs to come out of himself. He gives the reason that he needs to work, but that is an excuse. You can try to contact him. Tell him you will listen. Let him know that you miss him and that he is appreciated and loved, only be discerning and conservative in your expression of this because he will be too cynical to accept anything in flowery profusion."

"Is there anything Jack can do to help himself?" we inquired. "Well," replied Michael, "that is a whole can of worms. He has a long way to go before he could accept it on a physical level. Give him Ohsawa's *The Book of Judgement*. It will tease his intellect."

Michael also furnished us with Jack's "overleaves." Overleaves are descriptions of the soul's spiritual level of evolution. According to the Michael system, each one of us has an essence role (sage, artisan, priest, slave, king, warrior and scholar). Each soul also goes through five ages of development on the Earth Plane (infant, baby, young, mature and old). Additionally, each age contains seven levels and souls generally spend three lifetimes at each level. There are further overleaves designated as goals, modes, attitudes, centers and chief features. Jack was a 6<sup>th</sup> level mature warrior with a goal of acceptance, a mode of power, an attitude of cynic, a center of moving (emotional part), and a chief feature of martyrdom. For further explanations of what these mean, please refer to Yarbrow's book *Messages from Michael*.

Michael also gave us Duchamp's overleaves, which Jack refers to in his letter, but I have not been able to locate those.

After I shared all the above with Jack, he sent me a four-page letter which offers an invaluable glimpse into his psyche, upbringing, and emotional and medical condition, as well as the personal crisis he appeared to be going through at the time. Within the next year or so Jack relocated to teach at the University of Maryland, and we lost touch, but I continue to cherish the time we spent getting to know one another in Chicago.

This preface, I hope, will provide some background context to the letter he wrote dated Sept. 17, 1981.

September 17th, 1981

Dear Michael,

As usual I read your letter last night with avid interest, and it occurred to me that I have about one hundred more questions about Duchamp that Michael might help me with -- but these will have to wait.

I was touched, Michael, both by your genuine kindness towards me, and your interest in my welfare, and the other Michael's touching if benign concern for my painful state these days. In a sense what I am going through at this time is a deprivation of a lot of things in my life that I thought were essential or at the very least, emotionally supportive. Michael, how I envy you 7th Level Old Soul Fat Cats, with your shit together and most of your life problems solved.

There is no doubt in my mind that the Other Michael's information of my soul profile is essentially correct. If, like Duchamp, my goal is acceptance, it stems in part from a progressively depressed and asensual mother, although one quite capable of great love and sacrifice for her children, and an angry, unstable father with violent mood-swings and no subconscious desire for family life -- and so the combination is, or was, a perfect breeding ground for feeling rejection, and in the larger sense of all the social stratas and interpersonal relationships one goes through life eternally seeking love, warmth, affection, and ACCEPTANCE, and not really finding it, paradoxically even when it is offered time and time again. That again is part of my masochism trip. At the root of this is a profound self-loathing or self-rejection (the old Groucho Marx line, "Who would want to belong to a country club that would have someone like me as a member?" - Ah, I know it so well). In a nuclear sense, it's not wanting to be a member of one's own family.

So one progressively covers over the archetypal hurt by all kinds of ego-pleasing diversions, e.g., editorships, reviews, lecture invitations, fancy guest professorships, trips in and out of the country, and last but not least, getting laid as often as possible with as many attractive women as possible. All of these are forms of ego-gratification that more or less, ameliorate, no deaden the archetypal pain that's unseen, unfelt, but still there.

What I've been trying to do in these past ten months is come in contact with that pain, look at it, feel it, touch its core so to speak.



And by taking away so many of life's little, and big, gratifications, I've gradually been able to begin feeling that deeper pain. You'd be surprised, or perhaps you wouldn't, at the amount of sheer guilt, anxiety-ridden obsessions, and pure anger that constantly comes up in me -- because I essentially have nothing to do but feel that, let it come up. I thought that cutting myself off from women would be the hardest part of this, but surprisingly it has been the need to watch television. Not much but the creeping urge later in the evening to watch MASH, Benny Hill, Lew Grant, or Hill Street Blues -- God it's addictive if you live alone. I've just about gone cold turkey on watching Cubs games because I could see so clearly that that is an act of pure masochism (as one sports writer wrote, the Cubs have a chance this year to create a new baseball record, the only team in the history of Major League baseball to come in last twice in one season).

My stint of celebacy has brought the strangest results. I must have gotten letters and calls from twelve women in places as far away as New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, (oh even Denver, not to speak of Chicago), wanting to come and visit me, wanting me to come to their place, wanting to cook dinner for me, or take them out to dinner, or just sleep with me, or inviting me to Wisconsin for this and that. Several from women that I've admired for a long time -- I'm beginning to believe that there is an element of telepathy involved and my Yin situation is bringing out a lot of Yang in some women, or there is an instinctive feeling of being safe. I suppose the crowning irony of this is that I even obliquely proposed marriage to the woman of my dreams in New York, Ellary, and she said YES, do come to New York, and I haven't been able to get out of the house. Talk about frustration. It's good for the soul I tell myself, with a laugh.

But I can say this, Michael, I went through seven years of psychotherapy, a summer of rebirthing, and two series of Rolfing sessions, but these last ten months have brought me closer to some essential truths about myself than all the rest. I'm not unneurotic, but I'm getting there. The hardest part is getting and keeping in touch with myself (which is a very real process which can be checked and felt) after some real frustrations, disappointments, or angry sessions with myself. Who knows, maybe I can work my way up to 1st level Old Soul in this life-time? Just now I'm shooting for being reasonably productive, giving, and contented for the rest of this lifetime.



Sometimes the meditation is very rocky and doesn't work at all, and then suddenly for three or four days I can feel extreme contentment and feelings approaching bliss. And then for this or that reason it all gets shot down, and I have to begin over again. I've just about finished George Ohsawa's The Book of Judgement, and I'm familiar with him through his little book on acupuncture and another You Are All Sampaku, which means you can see the white of your eyes under your irises because you're all fucked up and too Yin. I have several books by Michio Kushi on macrobiotics and Unitary theory. But I have two difficulties with Ohsawa's and Kushi's books: they never explain the Unitary Theory (Dual Monism which of course is the basis of Alchemy, Kabbalah, and all the World's religions) in any organized or serious detail, it's a chart here and an illustration there, but nothing terribly coherent. Ohsawa tends to be a bit of a tease, with a tendency towards bragging about his miraculous cures and taking moralistic pot shots at most of the rest of the world -- I guess he's feeling a certain amount of pain about being snubbed by the professional medical world.

Anyway I've looked today for something more thorough in the way of a Yin-Yang approach to eating and have gotten Naboru Muramoto's Healing Ourselves, which looks a bit more systematic and helpful for a Westerner. Most of the staples and condiments of a strict macrobiotic diet are just not available outside of Asia or Japan Town on Lincoln Avenue. I'll pass it on if you want, and it proves to be of real help.

Michael, you could ask the Other Michael if, given my symptoms which began about five years ago: thyroid deficiency, ears ringing, numbness in toes, if there is a diet I should follow or a procedure to regain bodily balance. From doing Naprapathy and acupuncture for these and looking at the charts, I know that these three problems are systemically connected, and I would appreciate his insights. Michael is right in saying that I have a hard time following physical regimes, and that I am out of touch with Nature. This is the thing that I have felt most keenly as I've done this seclusion business, memories of being more in touch as a child, the sense of a profound estrangement with the outdoors, except for a superficial visual appreciation. So I trust you and Mary, Michael, and any help that the Other Michael can give me, even though it's opening a big can of worms, is much appreciated. I sense your good will.

At this point I'll have to pass on rejoining society. I'd really love to meet Denise, Mary, and your other friends from Wisconsin. I'm beginning to realize, as if I didn't know before, how utterly wrong Northwestern is for me. There will be some big changes in my life but I have to take things one step at a time. You don't know how tempting the offer is to talk to Duchamp directly, someday I do hope it's possible. I'm particularly curious to know if he is aware or interested in the various attempts to explain his work, and if he holds them in the same amused disdain that he did with similar attempts during his own lifetime.

Tell the Other Michael of my great appreciation for his wisdom and insights, and also for your help and interest in my wellbeing,

Affectionately,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Jack". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the word "Affectionately,".