

## *How life gets in: poem and essay*

by

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### **Synchronicity**

- I The lamp of human consciousness is the light synchronicity is drawn to.
- II The meeting place between an idea in the mind and its simulacrum in the outer world.
- III Synchronicity is where time and space play hide and seek with convention.
- IV Synchronicity loves passion, questions, seeking, determination, eccentricity.  
Synchronicity loves eccentricity.
- V Lovers, scholars, researchers, scientists and librarians, writers, analysts and analysts. These are the people synchronicity prefers to hang out with.
- VI Human agency is needed to turn synchronicity's gears.
- VII Meaning-making is synchronicity's preferred cadence.
- VIII Synchronicity is glimmering, shimmering immanence.
- IX Synchronicity does not act on its own volition – synchronicity has no volition.
- X If synchronicity has a sense of humour it is kind, without maliciousness.
- XI Sometimes synchronicity is mistaken for her cousin, apophenia.
- XII Perhaps they are forgotten Greek muses; synchronicity and her younger cousin apophenia.

- XIII Jung discerned an ordering force at the shimmer where psyche meets the physical.
- IXX What has god got to do with it?
- XX Being shy, synchronicity avoids being snared by rationality, science.
- XXI Synchronicity is what sister serendipity will look like when it is all grown up. Chance, luck and coincidence, mere cousins.
- XXII Mistakes attract synchronicity; errors, mischance.
- XXIII Years can go into the making of synchronicity.
- XXIV Synchronicity strips the veil away and shows us – interconnectedness.
- XXV Synchronicity is a vortex with energies pouring in, numinous insight streaming out.

## Essay: The ‘names’ synchronicity

... the purpose of art is not to mediate a shuttling back and forth between radically opposed and mutually exclusive domains of mind and world ... but rather to bind mind and world in an ongoing movement.<sup>1</sup> Tim Ingold

In 2021, my cat and I moved temporarily into an apartment on George St East Melbourne, after a traumatic mid-PhD project relationship break-up. I had left our shared home so my partner could adjust, and rented the one-bedroom flat of a friend of a friend. Each time I left or returned to the apartment, the street name seemed to call out to me: ‘George’, ‘George’, ‘George’. Not only was George the name of one of my research subjects – French 19<sup>th</sup> century social radical and prolific female novelist and playwright George Sand, but, coincidentally, ‘George’ is also the name of my late father. There were only four flats and I was astounded to find out in addition, my neighbour next door on the first floor had the name of my ex-partner, and the woman downstairs was named ‘Anne’. I felt synchronicity being enacted in this psychodrama of weirdly confluent and meaningful names – with life guidance to be had, but at first, I had no idea what it could be.

Paying attention to how synchronicity unfolds in my life has been a passion since studying Analytic Psychologist Carl Jung’s conceptualisation in the 1980s. I have experienced a number of spectacular examples, often connected with major writing projects. Many have clustered in my PhD project, feeding and bleeding into research scope and design, biographic investigation, creative writing and poetic composition, and interwoven with distinctly personal elements; making a mockery of rigid divisions between ‘life’ and PhD. In this essay I look at how synchronicity is an interesting and instructive lens through which to examine one way ‘life gets in’ to PhD.

Using the creative practice framework articulated by Ross Gibson, I toggle between exploring a particular example of synchronicity (the ‘names’ synchronicity) alongside theories about the nature and generation of synchronicity. Gibson describes this back-and-forth examination as a ‘cognitive quickstep’, setting “immersion and critical distance oscillating” and taking us “continuously and instantaneously inside and outside the

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (2011), 178/179, ProQuest, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rmit/detail.action?docID=684030>.

experiences we seek to comprehend.”<sup>2</sup> This is a particularly apt way to approach synchronicity as it allows grounding of the theory in an actual experience.

‘Synchronicity’ occurs in an interweaving of psyche and matter, at that place of human ‘insinuation’ between inner world and environment. An example of what Gibson calls “the entangled imbrication”<sup>3</sup> of self and world. Carl Jung first used the term ‘synchronicity’ in a 1929 seminar, later choosing it as the subtitle of his landmark 1952 book on the subject. He considered synchronicity an “acausal connecting principal”,<sup>4</sup> defined as a psychic occurrence where meaningful events that are independent in time and space are connected. Jung notes that “the simultaneous occurrence of a certain psychic state with one or more external events which appear as meaningful parallels to the momentary subjective state.”<sup>5</sup> My ‘names’ synchronicity is one of these moments of coincidental affinity.

Emotional destabilisation, I had found through research, was one of the predisposing conditions for synchronicity occurrence (expressed through travel, or major life events such as sickness, death or marriage),<sup>6</sup> and I was experiencing a major life dislocation. Researcher Bernard Beitman writes that synchronicity tears a person from the web of ordinary reality”.<sup>7</sup> New Materialist philosopher Jane Bennett, writing of occasions of wonder, attributes both pleasurable and *unheimlich* (uncanny) features. Like Beitman, Bennet describes people experiencing such occasions as being “disrupted or torn out of one’s default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition.”<sup>8</sup> Relocating geographically, especially under my own such challenging circumstances, had broken the energetic web which adhered invisibly around me in my domain and regular routes, providing a kind of opening which invited other experiences.

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<sup>2</sup> Ross Gibson, “The Known World,” TEXT Special issue, “Symposium: Creative and practice-led research—current status, future plans” (Oct. 2010), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ross Gibson, “[The Known World](#),” TEXT Special issue, “Symposium: Creative and practice-led research—current status, future plans” (Oct. 2010), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Cambray, “[Synchronicity & Emergence](#),” *American Imago*, vol. 59 no. 4 (Winter 2002), 411.

<sup>5</sup> Carl G Jung, “Carl Jung on “Synchronicity”, Carl Jung Depth Psychology [Website](#), n.p., I consider synchronicity to be privileged in a spectrum of meaningful aleatory occurrences, with serendipity being a less intense instance.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Beitman, “Synchroners, High Emotion, and Coincidence Interpretation.” *Psychiatric Annals* (May 2009), 281, doi:10.3928/0048571320090423-02.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Beitman, “Synchroners”, 284.

<sup>8</sup> Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton University Press, 2016, ProQuest Ebrary), 5.

Engaged in the messy negotiation of separating lives, the only way I found to re-enter my PhD project was instinctually, via composing poetry. I had two research subjects – Sand and Anna Magdalena Bach. Although Anna Magdalena was also a creative woman – harpsichordist, soprano singer and transcriber of Bach’s work – it was Sand who I found myself writing about. Previous biographic research about Sand was still stored and accessible, and in the month in which I hadn’t written, various syntheses had occurred. I couldn’t think critically, (could hardly string sentences together) but my ability to write poems, strangely, was heightened. Continuing to write is mostly how Sand herself dealt with the end of relationships. Her legendary commitment to disciplined writing practice was described by her friend, literary critic Gustave Planche, as ‘*auguste permanence*’ – ‘studious confinement’,<sup>9</sup> as she shut herself in her study from 9pm each night, often writing for thirteen hours at a stretch.<sup>10</sup> Sand used writing “as a remedy for everything,”<sup>11</sup> even relationship breakdown. I may not have had quite her stamina, but I was walking in her footsteps.

One of the legacies of long-term synchronicity immersion is that now, forty years since first reading Jung, I have a radar fine-honed to synchronicity’s occurrence. This has bequeathed what I have called a ‘propensity-for-connection’, teaching myself to pay attention to coincidence and other aleatory occurrences, to notice them and wonder if they hold meaning. ‘Co-incident detection’ Beitman calls it.<sup>12</sup> I see these occurrences on a spectrum, with serendipity being at one end such as finding a lucky \$5 bill, or a particularly apt book in the library (they could happen to anyone) and synchronicity being individualised to a high degree.

So well-endowed was my PhD project by such apparently random but deeply meaningful events in terms of shaping research scope and design, that I came to name my research methodology, ‘Synchronicity Methodology’. These were not just impactful occurrences in themselves but often such events led me to significant changes in PhD research design, becoming germane to the evolution of the project. Research also revealed that other creative writers also experience synchronicity – although they may not name it such but nonetheless

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<sup>9</sup> Curtis Cate, *George Sand: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), 260.

<sup>10</sup> Cate, *George Sand*, 301.

<sup>11</sup> Cate, *George Sand*, 301.

<sup>12</sup> Beitman, “Synchroners, 284.

finding affirmation for the path they were taking. Poet Jessica Wilkinson writes of “crazy link ups all over the place”,<sup>13</sup> quoting one of her biographic subjects, dancer Lucette Aldous.

The approach to synchronicity I have adopted, embracing dynamism at its core, stresses that it is the subject who discerns the meaning in the occurrence, not anything preordained. RL Skains, adapting a model developed by Makri and Blandford defines the skills necessary in being able to utilise information located serendipitously. She writes of “the knowledge and experience to make the mental connection and to recognise the significance of that connection’, but also the appropriate skills to make something meaningful from that connection.”<sup>14</sup> Developing the discernment to attribute accurately nuanced meaning to synchronicity is part of the practice, as scholar Christine Payne-Towler points out.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes though co-incidences are patently ridiculous and not meaningful (a friend and I both buying the same brand of toothpaste, for instance).

One of the most uncanny elements of synchronicity is the feeling that the event addresses the recipient / participant in a most personal way, as if the event knew the content of that person’s mind. We are used to believing that our thoughts remain unperceived, in internal privacy. However, Jungians (and others) do not subscribe to such siloed views. Jungian scholar Tjeu van den Berk, affirms, “The psyche does not exist only in the interior of the person, isolated from the cosmos. Psyche and non-psyche are in some way entwined with each other”.<sup>16</sup>

I won’t go into the connections between my father and I here, nor what I made of possible resonances between Sand and my father. I’ll focus instead on ‘George’, my biographic research subject, the woman who had adopted a male name in 1831 in order to be published. She had been at the centre of my attention for the last four years and was filling my now turbulent days with meaningful work; both focus and anchor. I felt profoundly reassured to have these names reflected back to me, as if – how to say it – this place in George St, with Anne below me and the fellow (who seemed very nice) who shared a name with my

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<sup>13</sup> Jessica Wilkinson, “Crazy link ups all over the place: Notes wandering toward a research choreography”. *AXON: Creative Explorations* (vol. 12 no. 2), 7.

<sup>14</sup> R. Lyle Skains (2018) “Creative Practice as Research: Discourse on Methodology”, *Media Practice and Education*, Vol. 19 Iss, 1, 82-97, DOI: 10.1080/14682753.2017.1362175.

<sup>15</sup> Christine Payne-Towler, “Synchronicity and Psyche”, *Jung Journal*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2020), 76, doi: 10.1080/19342039.2020.1742556.73.

<sup>16</sup> Tjeu van den Berk, *Jung on Art: The Autonomy of the Creative Drive*, (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012, ProQuest Ebrary), 130.

ex-partner below me, had been prepared, this place ‘knew’ I was coming. I say that, mindful that synchronicity is acausal and that places don’t ‘know’ in any conventional epistemic ways.

Experiences of synchronicity are remarkable, full of wonder, awe and numinosity. I felt all of these affects when I reflected on the names of my apartment mates. For no-one else would this triad of names have the same meaning. Payne-Towler captures some of the ‘tailormade’ aspect:

For the person to whom a synchronicity manifests, the feeling that accompanies a convergence is palpable, like bolts of a padlock clicking into place to open a hidden compartment. The event seems tailormade for the unique observer, though there is no logical way to explain how the juxtapositions were accomplished.<sup>17</sup>

For all that synchronicity seems remarkable – it is made even more so if you’re looking from the perspective of Cartesian binaries, using as your starting point an individual whose psyche is separate and distinct from the world. But perhaps synchronicity does not seem so remarkable if you start from a different vantage point such as expressed by Buddhist philosopher Thich Nhat Hanh, for instance, whose awareness is of our ‘interbeing’, his recognition “that everything relies on everything else in order to manifest.”<sup>18</sup> Jungians such as Christine Payne-Towler contend that “synchronicity is an innate attribute of the consciousness at the bedrock of every psyche.”<sup>19</sup>

Schooled in Jungian approaches to synchronicity (as noted previously) I initially conceived of such occasions principally as psychological occurrences. However, reading the writing of psychoanalyst and artist Marion Milner (building on the work of art historian Bernard Berenson), persuaded me to broaden my conception to include synchronicity as an aesthetic experience, based on moments of perceiving “a relationship of reciprocity between internal and external reality.”<sup>20</sup> My experiences of reciprocity have often felt beautiful, even sublime, to draw on two aesthetic elements.

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<sup>17</sup> Payne-Towler, “Synchronicity”, 70.

<sup>18</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Insight of Interbeing”, on *Garrison Institute*, 2/8/17. Retrieved 15/11/23. <https://www.garrisoninstitute.org/blog/insight-of-interbeing/>.

<sup>19</sup> Payne-Towler, “Synchronicity”, 64.

<sup>20</sup> Alberto Stefana, “Revisiting Marion Milner’s work on creativity and art”, *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Vol 100, No. 1 (2019): 128, doi: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00207578.2018.1533376>

For me, experiencing the momentary symmetry between internal and external reality – as in the ‘names’ synchronicity – as if ‘bolts clicked into place’, is ‘reparative’ and renders synchronicity an experience of reciprocity par excellence. Multiple experiences of synchronicity are cumulative, serving to ‘bind mind and world in an ongoing movement.’<sup>21</sup>

The way the poems poured out of me drew me closer to Sand, as she sometimes wrote a novel in a matter of days.<sup>22</sup> Such deep immersion also provided insight into how ‘life got into’ her creative practice, as it had into mine. For her it was through her romantic relationships and friendships, her vast corpus of research; botany, mineralogy, agricultural practices and customs, dialects and linguistic conventions. I like to think Sand would have appreciated my research into and recounting of occasions of synchronicity, as there’s evidence of her entering imaginatively into meaningful co-incidence. One such incident occurred when she discovered that both her grandmother and her future daughter-in-law (Sand’s mother) were imprisoned in the same convent (although at slightly different times during *The Reign of Terror* of the 1793 revolution).<sup>23</sup> This was the English Augustinian convent in Paris where remarkably, in another meaningful co-incidence, Sand herself became a boarder in her early adolescence.<sup>24</sup>

Sometimes creative ideas need a lull in forward momentum – when you’re getting a cuppa, having a shower, going for a walk – to emerge, blurring the distinction between work and the rest of life. Synchronicity is similar in that it does not respect dedicated working hours. It occurs whenever the right conditions prevail and uses whatever is to hand. Each time I experienced a synchronicity connected with Sand, for a time there was no separation between ‘life’ and the PhD – with ‘personal’ guidance mixed up with ‘thesis’ guidance; they were a single gestalt and as I’ve attempted to show with the names synchronicity, so enmeshed I couldn’t unravel them.

The triggering of a synchronicity doesn’t have to be consciously sought or envisioned, but the energy for it must be latent in the personal unconscious. This component of personal responsiveness specifically ties a human ego to the ultimate manifestation,

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<sup>21</sup> Ingold, *Being*, 178/179.

<sup>22</sup> The novel *La Mare au Diable* (*The Devil’s Pool*) was, for example, written over four nights. Cate, *George Sand*, 538.

<sup>23</sup> George Sand, *Story of my Life: The Autobiography of George Sand: A Group Translation*, ed., Thelma Jurgrau (New York: The State University of New York Press, 1991), 116.

<sup>24</sup> Sand, *Story*, 113.

marking it out as “mine, for me, because of me” in no uncertain terms.<sup>25</sup>

‘George’, ‘George’, ‘George’ – the street name continued to call out to me. I continued to write poems about her, day after day – her smoking, her writing practice, how she’d picnicked with the first Minister when she was propaganda Minister during the brief 1848 failed Republic. For many hours each day my mind was absorbed in details of her life and literature-making. So much so that I hadn’t spared a thought for my other research subject, Anna Magdalena. Despite Anna Magdalena’s creative accomplishments, she wasn’t giving me inspiration at this most crucial time. I was in danger of sinking under the challenges confronting me and I grabbed at Sand; boldly smoking her hookah, wearing trousers and sitting in the gods in Paris theatres, galloping thirty-five kms (and back) on horseback for the chance of a few hours with her lover,<sup>26</sup> cutting her hair off to send another.<sup>27</sup> Her verve and originality, her brave reinvention were what I needed – not alas, the more conventional, helpmeet, Anna Magdalena. Eventually I realised that I needed to jettison Anna Magdalena as a PhD research subject and focus my research on Sand exclusively. This decision emerged as a kind of *fait accomplis* – all I needed to do was to become conscious of what was happening anyway. This highlighted an element in research design within creative writing projects – that consequential decisions aren’t always made cerebrally, logically but emerge from the way mind and world are already bound in an ‘ongoing movement’ (for me often in synchronicity), which serves to further bind ‘mind and world’, as Ingold observes.<sup>28</sup>

This occasion of synchronicity tightened my personal line of connection to Sand, increasing my confidence and authority to write about her. But it also led guidance to crucial decisions about the design and scope of my PhD thesis. The thesis I ended up writing focused exclusively on Sand. This meant I had time to delve deeper into research about her. Two essential facets of her life came to greater clarity due to this deeper immersion. Finding Donna Dickenson’s book – *George Sand: A Brave Man – The Most Womanly Woman* was a felicitous or serendipitous happening in terms of the definitions I have outlined. From this I learnt that alongside other instances of her practical socialism, Sand gave away over one

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<sup>25</sup> Payne-Towler, “Synchronicity”, 76.

<sup>26</sup> Erica Abeel, *On the Issues* Online, Summer 1995, Retrieved 7/11/19.  
[https://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1995summer/Summer1995\\_ABEEL.np](https://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1995summer/Summer1995_ABEEL.np).

<sup>27</sup> Lyndon Orr, “Famous Affinities of History”, Authorama website, n.p.,  
<http://www.authorama.com/famous-affinities-of-history-iv-6.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Tim Ingold, *Being*, 178/179.

million dollars over the course of her life.<sup>29</sup> This bolstered what I already knew – that she provided assistance in establishing a populist library, urged ‘Le Peuple’ (The People), towards political education,<sup>30</sup> in pamphlets written in her role as unofficial propaganda minister in the 1848 provisional government, provided financial and nutritional support for forty peasant families,<sup>31</sup> and the so-called ‘proletarian poets’.<sup>32</sup> Her giving away such a significant amount of money gave credential to her claims as a socialist.

Secondly, Dickenson’s details of Henry James’s sexist misrepresentation of Sand, could be added to Margaret Cohen’s details I already had that Stendhal and Balzac sought to discredit her because they felt threatened by her success and so that they could maintain their own market share.<sup>33</sup> Had I not jettisoned Anna Magdalena I would not have had time to drill down so deeply into these two crucial areas of Sandian research.

## Conclusion

Synchronicity, serendipity and other aleatory occurrences have provided me with plentiful opportunities to reconfigure knowledge-making. Synchronicity in particular has involved experiences of radically different senses of ‘self’, beyond the confines usually associated with ‘mind’ or ‘body’. Moreover, experiences of synchronicity provide different senses of time; the usual separation of past and present flowing into a single unified sense of ‘nowness’. In addition, during my candidature, synchronicity has blurred the hard boundary between ‘life’ and ‘study’, occurring outside dedicated study hours and contexts, and contributing to shaping my research design and conduct, and processes of poetic inspiration and composition. These multiple boundary-blurring effects of the synchronicities are congruent with feminist epistemology which seeks to value the nuance of what happens in the interstices or margins. In thinking and writing about synchronicity I aim to challenge

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<sup>29</sup> Donna Dickenson, *George Sand: A Brave Man – The Most Womanly Woman* (Oxford: Berg Publishers Limited, 1988), 3.

<sup>30</sup> Sand had an office and small staff, met with the First Minister Lamartine, and was responsible for much of the written propaganda (directives, proclamations, circulars and orders,) of all 10 provisional Ministers as well as pamphlets to Le Peuple, although she received no remuneration for her work. Noel B Gerson, *George Sand A Novel of the First Modern, Liberated Woman* (Leeds: Sapere Books, 1972), 224, e-book.

<sup>31</sup> Dickenson, 95, and Cate, *George Sand*, 548.

<sup>32</sup> Dickenson, 95.

<sup>33</sup> Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 13.

remnants of my own allegiance to Cartesian epistemology and this has necessitated a deep examination of the phenomena itself, leaving me better informed about what it is and what I can do to make synchronicity more likely.