

Altered states of unconscious: a question of elf and safety

Entities exist in many realms. There are the realms of the dead, the realms of dreams, and the realms of the imagination. There are also the spirits of animals, the spirits of the Earth and solar system and stars, and the angelic stellar intelligences. There are spirits of each species of plant or mushroom, each with its own way of being, its own way of seeing and experiencing the world, of participating in the whole. — Rupert Sheldrake¹

An abstract, cognizant entity may be impossible to know directly because of the complexity of the multidimensional spheres of the world soul. But when the entity structure descends, diffusing down through spirit, it becomes increasingly simple and develops more and more into cognitive forms that belong to the human mind in its evolutionary resonance with morphogenetic fields. At these lower levels, the entity is forced into representations that are culturally dependent such as faeries, dakinis, elementals, and so on. —
Ralph Abraham¹

In all times and all places, with the possible exception of Western Europe for the past two hundred years, a social commerce between human beings and various types of discarnate entities, or non-human intelligences, was taken for granted. — Terence McKenna¹

As the Trialogians indicate above, the pesky pixies and naughty numens just won't go away. They have been with us for millennia and they will remain with us, one assumes, for millennia. Ghostly stick beings and therianthropes adorn our ancestors' cave walls. St Paul admonished the Corinthians to reject demons and pagan idolatry, and Christianity has since then had troubled relationship with sprites and spirits, fairies, elves and goblins. Ghouls, grotesques and gargoyles leer from mediaeval church towers and portals as both threat and appeal. Chaucer's Wife of Bath sings of the lost time of Arthur, when '*All was this land fulfild of fayerye. / The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye.*' Shakespeare's Puck, the fairy king Oberon's jester, is called by a fairy '*that shrewd and knavish sprite / Call'd Robin Goodfellow*', or, as Puck calls himself, '*that merry wanderer of the night.*' Elizabeth I [who incidentally was born and lived on the: grounds where the University of Greenwich, home of BC, now stands.

Ed.] was likened to the Fairy Queen, whilst her magus-spy John Dee rapped with angels. Girls in pinafores frolic with garden fairies in tricky Victorian photographs. Robert Louis Stevenson thanked the Brownies for providing him his stories such as *Jekyll and Hyde*. Alien greys gaze passively from 20th century ufology; and so it goes on in an endless list across cultures and ages.

Jung's 1958 essay *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*² is a penetrating study of the phenomenon of UFOs, concentrating not on questions of the material status of the flying saucers – where do they come from, what are they, how do they fly, etc. – but on why are they appearing in our skies? What does their appearance suggest about those who witness them or pay an interest in them? He appraised their circular form as mandalas, as symbols of mankind's yearning for the sacred; as psychic effect, arising out of the de-sacralised barren landscape of the modern, technological, atomic, Cold War era. His question in essence was: why flying saucers – why now?

I borrowed Jung's model³ to consider the phenomenon of crop formations, transcending the perplexing debate about who made them (are they made by humans and therefore 'fake', or by some other agency and therefore 'real?') to consider what they mean, how they are approached, how they appear to trigger anomalous experiences in both those who make them and those who chart them. I also considered their mandala nature and their evocation of collective yearning for the sacred. Why crop circles – why now?

I followed a similar method⁴ to consider the meaningful appearance of ayahuasca beyond its traditional cultural environment, considering the reintegration of the daimonic and the indigenous and the implications of plant consciousness in our rigid technological age. Why ayahuasca – why now?

The story now leads me to consider the reappearance of elfin entities in the collective imagination, in particular those elves encountered through psilocybin and DMT. Why elves – why now?

Such a myth-oriented approach is not to belittle the heuristic steps taken by many scholars to consider, precisely, the ontological status of psychedelic elves. It is important to base investigation on where these entities dwell – what realities, what dimensions, inner or outer, material or imaginary – and to consider the nature of their autonomy and their relationship with the psyche of the voyager.

Terence McKenna¹ posits three distinct bases from which to evaluate the ontological status of the elves: 'The first option is that these entities are rare, but physical, and that they have identities somewhere between the coelacanths and Bigfoot'. The second option he calls 'the Jungian position' citing Jung's "autonomous fragments of psychic energy that have temporarily escaped from the controlling power of the ego". His third possibility, 'the most interesting, but the one fraught with argumentative pitfalls, is that these entities are (1) nonphysical and (2) autonomous in their existence in some sense' (93-4).

Peter Meyer, in a pioneering article⁵, isolates three distinct fields from which to address the questions about the DMT elves: the neuropharmacological (what is happening to the brain?), the phenomenological (what are trippers reporting?), and the ontological (what is the nature of being of these entities and their environment?). He articulates eight possible responses to this final question, amongst which that the elves are: (i) simple hallucination, (ii) 'independently-existing intelligent entities' from a 'parallel or higher dimension', (iv) a view of reality from the reptilian mind (DMT as an ancient, pre-mammalian neurotransmitter), (vi) the souls of the dead, and (viii) 'probes from an extraterrestrial or even an extradimensional species, sent out to make contact with organisms such as ourselves.'

Variations and further hypotheses have been offered by countless others, as documented by Graham St. John in his recent cultural history of DMT *Mystery School in Hyperspace*⁶, ranging from mere hallucination occasioned by neurochemical perturbation to encounters with hyperspatial ETs. How are we to navigate such complex and contradictory positions?

My intuition is to consider each possibility equally plausible and equally valid, basing my method upon sympathy for the *imaginal* nature of reality: dreams and visions are no mere hallucination; they are coded narratives connected symbolically to the subject and are therefore, however vague materially, not unreal. Might the elves be one day classified within our taxonomical schema, like the coelacanth? It is unlikely, but giant squids – the mythical kraken – have been hauled up from the depths. The coelacanth itself is a mythic beast – a living fossil forgotten by evolution from the cretaceous. As Borges reminds us, a lion is both animal and symbol. Myth and reality are always intertwined.

McKenna dismisses the Jungian position as 'the mentalist-reductionist approach to discarnate entities,' predicating his judgment, I imagine, on the understanding that

Jung considered the psyche essentially interior and non-material; (his *ad lib* citation of Jung is, I surmise, from Jung's 1921 work *Psychological Types*). As such, he was likely not aware of Jung's vivid accounts of encounters with strikingly autonomous psychic intelligences in *The Red Book*⁷, published a decade after McKenna's death.

In this dazzling illustrated book, Jung dialogues with the prophet Elijah and John the Baptist's nemesis Salome. Jung is troubled by their radical autonomy and declares: 'I can hardly reckon you as being part of my soul [...] Therefore I must separate you and Salome from my soul and place you among the daimons' (357). Such is the autonomous nature of Salome and Elijah that when Jung confronts them and suggests that 'You are the symbol of the most extreme contradiction', Elijah retorts: 'We are real and not symbols' (246). Later, Elijah returns to this matter and explains: 'You may call us symbols for the same reason that you can also call your fellow men symbols, if you wish to. But we are just as real as your fellow men. You invalidate nothing and solve nothing by calling us symbols' (249).

Elijah's response is tremendous, as he urges Jung to understand that we are all daimonic beings, forever encountered symbolically by others, forever encountering others symbolically.

Not everything in *The Red Book* is as clear as this response, and I feel its impact lies with Jung's bewilderment when confronted with figures of such overwhelming autonomy. Hence his ultimate desire to tell them that they are not real because he is dreaming them. His guru figure, Philemon is, by Jung's own account, far more of an individuated soul than he is. He is, indeed, a wise old man.

Jung clearly understood in his dealings with Philemon, Salome and Elijah that there is something *utterly* beyond our consciousness that is nevertheless part of our consciousness. He learns to feel that they are real *because* he dreams them.

Elijah seems quite peeved, rebuking Jung for doubting his sovereignty.

Such is the sense of the trip reports in Strassman's *DMT Spirit Molecule*⁸ where subjects describe stumbling into an elfin engagement, rather than in any way 'inventing' or 'imagining' the encounter.

Such is the atmosphere of Swedenborg's spiritual adventures. The angels he dialogues with were busy prior to his arrival and will be busy once he departs. They do not appear to surge into existence through his creative imagination any more than his friends in London, Stockholm or Amsterdam do. Swedenborg would not be so rude as to suggest to them that he was somehow their creator.

I can illustrate this drama: when in Paris you ask a passer-by directions, yet while she points down the street to indicate, you stare at her wide-eyed and you ask her 'are you real? Am I dreaming you? Are you a fiction, a creature of my imagination?' The chances are you will get lost.

You have an appointment with the doctor, to seek healing for your sore knee. Yet while she is diagnosing the ailment and considering a treatment you ask, astonished, '*what is your ontological status?*' My sense is that your knee would not heal.

So if you seek healing from a saint or from Christ or from the fairies by the well or the pixies at the waterfall, there is no point in asking for healing but apologising for knowing that they're not *really* there, that they can't *really* help. How rude!

Saint Fulano, I seek your help! (but I secretly know you're just a statue).

What kind of help do you want? You won't get much help from a mere statue. No – you must invest! This shit's real. Stop the chatter. Stop interrupting yourself when asking for guidance or healing by allowing yourself to see it as make-believe.

(Although such a strategy may very effectively be employed to shrivel up a monster – tell him he *is* simply make-believe!)

Jung likewise moved from asking whether he had dreamt of his dead father or whether his father visited him in his dreams, to concerning himself with what his father had to say.

What does a dead relative have to say?

What are the elves saying?

What do we seek with them and they with us?

This is a well-reported feature of ayahuasca encounters: don't be so astonished by us, say the elves, the serpent, the jaguar or the luminous woman, listen to what we have to say...

And so don't quiz the elf about its ontological status, especially knowing its trickster nature. Elf today pixie tomorrow. They're self-transforming. You can't catch an elf in a box.

Listen to the voices, don't pathologize them.

But don't idolize them.

Graham St John suggests⁹: 'perhaps it is not what these entities are or where they come from that ultimately matters, but what these anomalies can do for us. Rather than fixating on where they come from, it appears more fruitful to explore the meaning and implications of their message, whether on a scale of personal growth or

consciousness evolution.’ Indeed; and following his suggestion we may ask: what do the elves *mean*? Why elves – why now?

Elves are not angels. They are tricksters; mercurial, hermetic, inhabiting crossroads and crooked trees and standing stones on the moonlit moorland.

Certain states of consciousness are required in order to engage with the elves. They appear in reverie and in vision, in the flickers of the fire, in the shadows of the twilight woodland, in the ripples of the stream, in the moment of enchantment reading a child a fairy story. ‘And so Snow White ate the poisoned apple and died and the dwarves laid her in a glass casket...’

There will be no encounter through tough-minded rational analysis. Let go – circle awhile in the lazy eddies of space-time. Drift into reverie. Be enchanted.

They can lure us off the path. The lone Irish tippler in so many of the stories collected by William Butler Yeats staggers home along the track and is enticed into the mire to join the fairy dance.

Treat them respectfully and they’ll protect you and give you a boon – perhaps the gift of music and dance, perhaps psychic strength to accept change, perhaps simply a good story to tell on long winter nights. Do we not thank Santa and his elves for the presents by leaving a mince pie and a nip of sloe gin? In Asturias, in northern Spain, the domestic *trasgu* (I think a distant cousin of the Leprachaun) will steal things if you do not leave him a bit of cake or a drop of cider from time to time.

Treat the elves disrespectfully and they’ll disrespect you, tripping you up, like the A.A. Milne poem of Brave Sir Botany who falls in the village fishpond in his fine armour. Shakespeare’s fairy asks Puck: ‘*are not you he / That frights the maidens of the villagery [...] Misdread night wanderers, laughing at their harm?*’ The elves in Borges’ *Book of Imaginary Beings* steal cattle and, occasionally, steal children.

Neglect poor Santa and he may neglect you. What! No presents?

There are the gremlins in the machine, knocking out parts of the ordered system, rerouting, jarring. We get angry – *fucking computer’s frozen again* – but can we see the freeze as an opportunity to question the importance of the job we were doing on the computer? Need we be staring at a screen? Is that touchy unsent email necessary? Is it not the moment to breathe and stretch and walk and make a cup of tea?

Gremlins, like elves, are elements of change. Change can be tough, but change can be enriching.

You see to be lured off the path is to be pulled out of a rut... to be enticed into enchantment... to be spun out of the routine.

Elves are routine-busters. They are resistant to rigid structures of control and order. Simply discussing elves is a heterodox act – *elves? What do you mean, elves? You mean the wee beasties in fairy stories? You can't be serious!*

There are McKenna's machine elves, who chant Syd Barrett's 'another way for gnomes to say, hoooooorrrrrraaaaaayyyyyy', and who giggle and fold in and out of space-time, saying 'do what we are doing,' which is throwing about wobbly language balls. Play!

There are the silent Hattifattener-like witnesses I have seen whilst lying bemushroomed in a yellow tent in the woods on a crisp autumn afternoon, who simply hang in there, abiding. Old like the hills.

There is the elfin king himself – the Green Man – hiding in plain sight right up against the throne of ecclesiastical authority, reminding us all that the straight lines and ordered symmetry of our temples will one day be ivy-clad, home for birds and beetles. No power of sword and scripture can unsettle the Green Man. He abides.

There are the white elves of *The Lord of the Rings*, sombre and severe, but capable of powerful magic. Well they need to be powerful, faced with the horror of Mordor. I can understand why they're sombre. Sometime it is necessary to fight steel with steel, ugliness with righteous indignation.

Elves are sneaky and mischievous.

Well, is that not cunning and resourceful?

If we are keen to resist rigid structures of control and order, we likewise need to be cunning and resourceful.

They are allies for those resisting injustice, brutality and aggression, not least because the elves can be unjust, brutal and aggressive.

Keep your wits about you. Don't abandon your power of critical perception. Today, amidst the goblin market of religions, ideologies and slogans, we must keep our wits about us. There are forces keen to ensnare us, trap us and trip us. The elves teach us to keep alert by trapping and tripping us. Don't be coerced. Don't be coerced especially by elves.

They can help you in a fight. But they might bite you too.

The elves, I think, resist playfully yet earnestly the ravages of capital modernity. Elves would not renew Trident. Elves would not frack. It is not in elfin spirit to

bulldoze forests, to poison streams, to massacre the buffalo and the whale; not in the elfin spirit to bulldoze cultures, not in the elfin spirit to annihilate.

But it might be in goblin nature. Were your encounters with elves or goblins? How to distinguish?

Many goblins have flipped and followed the trickster dynamic to its hurtful rather than healing ends.

They begin innocuously enough, like the eerie Hobgoblin in Tove Jansson's *Finn Family Moomintroll*¹⁰, who wanders the universe with his flying panther, looking for the King's Ruby, and whose top hat causes chaos in the Moominhouse by transforming anything put in it into weird creatures.

Or the goblins of Brian Froud and Allen Lee's *Fairies*, who are trickster and sprightly yet never malevolent.

Or the goblins of Christina Rossetti's poem 'Goblin Market', who entice with fruity bounty: 'Apples and quinces, Lemons and oranges, Plump unpeck'd cherries, Melons and raspberries, [...] All ripe together, In summer weather,' but who are quick to anger and quick to avenge.

Or the naughty Goblins in *Noddy*, Sly and Gobbo. In one story they steal Noddy's car and crash it – poor Noddy. But they provide the plot to so many of the stories. They're integral to the fragile geometry of Toyland. They create the friction that Noddy's nice friends just somehow fail to create. Bigears the brownie and Tessie Bear, are, well, just a little dull. Sly and Gobbo would be fun to get drunk with. They were the childhood friends your parents wanted you to avoid. They're rude and impolite – they'll lead you astray – they're troublemakers. They're unpleasant, but they're not Orks.

Orks are goblins. They're savage. They win battles. They cut down trees. They clear the forests in order to make more Orks. They multiply through destruction. They buy into the ideologies of Sauron – his hideous promises of power and the indulgence of material desire. That's the nature of the Ork, and even the gentle Samwise finds the courage to fight them. Tolkien's Orks and Goblins are brothers in vileness, and he attributes to them man's capacity for vileness: 'It is not unlikely,' Tolkien wrote, 'that they invented some of the machines that have since troubled the world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once, for wheels and engines and explosives always delighted them.'

Goblins are capable of burning the trees and poisoning the wells.

Swedenborg relates that we attract souls as to our own disposition. We must be alert to our congress with goblins. Never trust a goblin. Beware goblin tricks.

Just because you meet an elf it doesn't mean he's not a goblin. Just because you meet a goblin it doesn't mean he's not an Ork. If an Ork, what then? Remember that there is Ork in us all. Are you acting Orkishly? Have you been an Ork lately?

Yet neither is it in the elfin spirit to bring mankind together in one great shining peaceful harmony. No heavenly circles of light and purity and freshly laundered white clothes. No – the elves are more earthy, more mischievous, more tied to the dirty truths of embodied existence.

The elves are the allies for those who grow in the shadows of the moonlight, for those who groove the grooves of an old oak.

I see the elves engaged in a discourse of environmental consciousness.

This is a voice of enchantment.

'The elves and gnomes,' McKenna tells us, 'are there to remind us that, in the matter of understanding the self, we have yet to leave the playpen in the nursery of ontology.'

Right – we are like children again, asking whether fairies are real, not like *fairy-story* real but *really* real... like you and me. We are plunged again into childhood naiveté, questioning openly the ideological underpinnings of consensual reality. Naive perhaps, enchanting, certainly. For our society is set on a pathway of disenchantment. The problems we face are the result of de-sacralisation and disenchantment.

Ugly architecture, polluted rivers, dull tomatoes, boring TV, hurt and pain and suffering, corruption, torture. Torture!

There are people who torture, people trained to torture. Which numens are they evoking? Perhaps the goblins.

We know the natural ethic of our heart. We know how to discern the tricks that heal from the tricks that harm – but sometimes we need to re-learn how to discern – how to listen to that natural ethic of our heart.

Ralph Abraham like many others suggests that entities garb themselves in the trappings of the age. These multidimensional grinning fractal machine elves may have lost their leather jerkins and acorn hats, but they retain their elfin nature.

Elves appear today amidst the mycelial internetworks of communication connecting folk across the globe. Such is the presence of Terence McKenna in this

hyper-cyber-space that the elves are likely to dress as he depicted and favour singing Syd Barrett over fiddling a jig.

As with every previous cultural dynamic, elves and similar entities are upsetting the established patterns of reality. They will not be pinned down, however consensually they manifest, and however meticulously we search in the micro-circuitry of the mind. McKenna claimed that there is something differentiating the machine elves from traditional elves – that they are visible to anyone who trips the tryptamines. But not everyone does. Not everyone hunts the high hills for the Yeti nor plunges the depths of Loch Ness. The reports can still be dismissed as frivolous fancy.

The elves unsettle; they are unsettling. They enchant and yet ensnare. They sparkle in sunlit beauty then leer ravenously in fluorescent goblin wickedness. They teach through tricks, teaching adeptness, alertness, discernment, plant-like adaptability, patience. They play the sweetest music, drawing you through the dancing flames, through the rippling water, through the sun-speckled green branches into the lushest reverie... and then steal your phone.

Next time don't take your phone.

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