

What do reports of encounters with imaginal entities (angels, faerie, etc.) imply about the nature of the human psyche?

“What isn’t there, in front of our eyes, is usually more real than what is.”
(Kingsley, 2001, p.33)

I would like to open this essay by drawing the reader’s attention to the above quotation, taken from Peter Kingsley’s, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*. For it is something of this sentiment, this melancholic ache for what Kingsley describes as “the missingness [which] is too hard to bear” (2001, p.33), which I believe, pervades the being of modern man and which will lie at the heart of any attempt to answer the above question (if indeed any answer can be made). Despite the essentially slippery nature of this topic, I do not allow this to daunt me, rather, I feel now (and perhaps have always felt) eager to enter into the world of this arguably delightful subject matter. Indeed, it would seem that as I embark on the journey of this work, I am entering into a larger and more wonderful world, filled with enchanting creatures and “impossible” encounters that would seem to suggest, just as Kingsley’s words hint at, that things are not always quite what they seem, and moreover, that this vital mystery is an essential part of what it is to be human.

Before we venture into more magical, unknown realms, I would first like to briefly discuss our current world view; namely the rationalist and largely secular society in which we live in the West. In his account of the divided brain and its role in shaping our culture, *The Master and his Emissary*, Iain McGilchrist uses the metaphor of the dominance of the left hemisphere over the right hemisphere to describe “the banishment of wonder; the triumph of the explicit” in modern Western society (2009, p.337). McGilchrist traces this development from the time of the Ancient Greeks, but highlights the role of the Enlightenment in entrenching this rationalising discourse in the modern psyche, leading to “the striving for an objective, scientific detachment - independent as far as possible of the ‘confounding’ effects of whatever is personal or intuitive, or whatever cannot be made explicit and rationally defended” (2009, p.350). This need for certainty and clarity, I would argue, is the central component of rational consciousness. Indeed, within this world view, as Edward Whitmont argues, “whatever is nonmaterial

and cannot be spatially perceived or demonstrated is denied reality. It cannot exist” (1982, p.70). Thus, the gods are banished and with them our sense of the divine, or the holy, as coexisting with us in the world. We are no longer divine beings, but rather we are biological man, subject to the processes of our human bodies and living within a clearly definable, “dead” world. In my opinion, this is quite a dreary view of our existence, and yet it is arguably the prevalent one, and one which undoubtedly has untold effects on both the psyche of modern man and on our relationship with the natural world.

It is into this rather gloomy, dystopian vision of the world that I would like to introduce the idea of imaginal entities. In particular, I am interested in looking at encounters with angels, all the while acknowledging that there is a vast array of discarnate intelligences (fairies, gnomes, djinn, water spirits, UFOs etc.), which make up our experience of nonhuman life forms. Indeed, one of the most striking things about these phenomena is their ubiquitous nature; Terrance Mckenna writes, “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 disincarnate entities ... was taken for granted” (2001, p.93). For my own part, I have always been drawn to angels, encouraged perhaps by a mother who placed paintings of angels over my bed, who delighted in stories of unusual ‘otherworldly’ happenings and who would on occasion consult her angel cards. My mother (who is no longer living) had, I have always felt, a sort of otherworldly quality to her, almost as if she was half in this world and half in another. A remnant of her Irish roots perhaps, but also an intuitive sense that this visible world could not possibly be ‘all’. And indeed, from everything that I have read and heard, I have started to believe that perhaps there is truth in this statement and that moreover, these nonhuman entities are much closer to us than we could ever imagine.

Thus, I would like to argue then that even with the “secularisation of consciousness” these phenomena continue to appear and impinge on our everyday, empirical reality, often in quite remarkable ways (Berger, 1969, p.4). Within our contemporary culture, Lorna Byrne, a modern Irish mystic, is an interesting

example of someone who regularly sees apparitions of angels. Indeed, she has written several books which explain not only the ways in which angels work in the world, but which also describe their physical appearance and give descriptions of exercises for connecting with guardian angels. She comments, “I see angels every day and have done since I was a baby. I see them as plainly as I see people on the street” (2010, p.1).

Of course, her ability to see angels, although rare, is hardly a new phenomenon. The story of the angel is as ancient and timeless as we are, stretching back to the earliest times and the beginnings of the monotheistic religions. Angels have always been seen as messengers, a crucial link between us and the divine world. Interestingly, they also seem to have a very particular cultural image. G. Don Gilmore writes, “The form of an angel is a creation of inspired imagination that is built up in group consciousness over the years by those who have visualised angels in a particular way” (1990, p.7). It is for this reason perhaps, that descriptions of angels from different sources seem to describe the same reality. Indeed, just as Byrne tells of angels as a “bright light, like a beam of light” (2010, p.1) so too does the soldier, in his account of the angelic sightings at Mons during the First World War, speak of a “strange light which seemed to be quite distinctly outlined” and of a light which “became brighter” (as quoted in Cooper, 1990, p.186).

Who are these angels then who are seen, one could argue, just as we see the world around us, as ‘real’ entities? Can we conclude that they are this world entities, or rather do they appear as though from another dimension? Are they ‘other’ to us, or do we ‘imagine’ them with our minds? Could it be that they are both? Firstly, to address purely material explanations of such phenomena, that is, as an encounter with a supernatural, independent ‘other’. Such a literalist interpretation would clearly be in line with our dualistic conception of reality, in which we split the mind from matter, the soul from the intellect and the heart from the body. Indeed, as David Bohm argues, “the notion that the one who thinks (the Ego) is at least in principle completely separate from and independent of the reality he thinks about is of course firmly embedded in our entire tradition” (2002, p.xi).

Nevertheless, as Angela Voss points out, the idea that such apparitions can be labelled as objectively 'real' would seem to be an overly simplistic one. Indeed, she remarks that this viewpoint assumes that "such a 'reality' has an external, verifiable existence independent from the observer's own visionary frequency" (2013, p.245). In other words, that we could somehow separate ourselves (the subject) from what we are seeing (the object). As the physicist's idea of 'complementarity' has shown, however, this is simply not the case, nor can be proven to be true. On this subject C.G. Jung writes, "Physics has demonstrated ... that in the realm of atomic magnitudes an observer is postulated in objective reality, and that only on this condition is a satisfactory scheme of explanation possible" (as quoted in Romanyshyn, 2013, p.36), or in other words, "the subject is an indispensable part of the equation of reality" (Romanyshyn, 2013, p.33).

Therefore, if these types of encounter cannot be understood "outside the forms of consciousness that perceive and experience them, that is, us" then the next logical step would be to argue that these encounters are purely an imaginative invention or are simply a product of physical operations taking place in the brain (Kripal, 2010, p.210). This model, which Terence McKenna names the "Jungian mentalist-reductionist model" is in fact the prevailing model when dealing with these encounters, and places the emphasis on the observer (who henceforth becomes 'mad' or 'delusional') (2001, p.94). In this psychological framework the angel can be described as a presence within the psyche, which emerges from the subconscious or the Jungian collective unconscious (a level of reality that is non-personal yet mysteriously intertwined with the personal) and which takes an archetypal or symbolic form (Hyde, 2018). Thus, the encounter with the imaginal entity is described as a projection of the psyche, not connected with any ostensible reality "out there".

This reductionist model, however, does not appear to take into account the very "realness" of these encounters on the part of the observer and the fact that these entities seem to present themselves as "independent of the ego and possessed of their own intelligence and will" (Cardin, 2013, p.279). As such, it is not, in my opinion, an entirely pleasing, or indeed very interesting explanation for the

appearance of imaginal entities. In view of this, it appears that we arrive at a curious impasse, that is the essential paradox of either a purely supernatural (objective) or psychological (subjective) explanation. Indeed, it would seem that we need a third way to approach this subject, involving a radical rethinking of how we interpret these types of encounters, and more importantly the way in which we understand the complex nature of the human psyche and its relationship to the world around us.

Loosely defined by the *Chambers Dictionary* (1948) as the human soul or spirit or mind, it was widely believed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the human psyche could eventually be mapped and in some way be reduced to the mechanics of the brain. Thankfully, this trend has now been reversed and science has reawakened to the limits of its own knowledge and to the fact that, for the most part, the human psyche and consciousness¹ elude our current understanding. Indeed, for Jung the assumption that “our present knowledge of the psyche is total ... is just as false as the assumption that we know all there is to be known about the natural universe ... its enigma is limitless” (1969, p.6). Faced then, with the indefinable nature of the human mind and consciousness, it follows then that the outright dismissal of supernatural encounters is both premature and remarkably arrogant. For really, how can we say, if they are true or not. We simply do not know.

Aside from the sheer difficulty of coming to any ‘final’ understanding of the human psyche, is the added problem of our ingrained dualistic thinking, which arguably plagues any interpretation of these phenomena in our contemporary culture. The issue of the dual nature of what it is to be human, is one which the scientific psychologist, F. W. H. Myers grappled with his whole life. Indeed, as Edward F. Kelly points out in his introduction to *Irreducible Mind*, the central subject of Myers’s work was the “problem of relations between the inherently private,

¹ I would like to include here what I perceive to be the most satisfactory definition of human consciousness defined by Mario Beauregard as “a fundamental and irreducible property of the Ground of Being” (as quoted in Kripal, 2010, p.265).

subjective ... world or human mental life and the publicly observable, objective ... world of physiological events and phrases in the body and brain” (2010, p.xvii). This idea, which Jeffrey Kripal frames as the “Human as Two”, is one which acknowledges that “the sacred and the human are two sides of the same coin” (2010, p.255). Indeed, it would seem that in our focus on an external ‘rational’ world we have forgotten our sacred selves, believing ourselves to have outgrown religion and to be entirely self-sufficient. Nevertheless, that our psyches are somehow inhabiting a spiritual domain, whether we are aware of it or not, is arguably undeniable. This knowledge has, of course, been known by the mystics, the Eastern religions and the metaphysical poets for all of time, but is something which has largely been forgotten in the West. Indeed, as Voss points out, these higher or deeper states of consciousness have long been “regraded as inferior and unreliable” by our culture, and the fact that there are “echelons of deepening modes of perception available to humans which far exceed the limits of either sense perception or critical reasoning” is something which is either denied or ignored (2013, p.245 - 246).

There have, however, always been those individuals who have been in possession of this vision. Indeed, Emanuel Swedenborg’s encounters with angels as described in his book, *Heaven and Hell*, are testament to this. He writes, “when I have been allowed to be in the company of angels, I have seen what was there exactly the way I see things in our world, so perceptibly that I did not know I was not in our world” (2000, para.174). His descriptions of angels are such that it would seem to suggest that he has entered into another realm of being, or perhaps more accurately, another mode of consciousness. Indeed, for Swedenborg, it is quite clear that he is accessing deeper levels of mind, a sort of magical state of consciousness which has been all but forgotten by modern man. He writes:

The earliest humans on our planet enjoyed this kind of union with heaven’s angels ... and in them heaven and this world were a single whole... Then their deeper levels were closed, the levels that open into heaven, while their outer levels were open to the world. (2013, p.126-127)

I have quoted this long passage in full because for me it clearly illustrates what Jean Gebser has noted relating to the different phases of man's consciousness and in particular how human consciousness once existed "in a deep intimacy with nature" (Rachel, 2013, p.331). It is important to note that this magical level of consciousness, although no longer our primary mode of being, continues to be present in our consciousness and can therefore arguably manifest in certain states of mind (most obviously, perhaps, amongst very young children or following significant trauma). Thus, it would seem that in the modern period our consciousness has become so fragmented and tied up with a materialistic conception of reality, that something very profound has been lost, leading to what Kripal calls "a vast forgetting, a massive cultural repression, a tragic denial of our own potential nature" (2010, p.233). This sense of an unseen world, a liminal space that is known and yet not known, is often most potently expressed through poetry and can be seen, in particular, in the work of William Blake.

Blake was a visionary poet and artist who saw angels throughout his life. Indeed, at around the age of nine he had a vision of "trees filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars" (Gilchrist, 1907, p.7). His life abounds with such encounters and visions, and ever since I first studied his poetry whilst still at school, I have sensed that this in some way pointed to another way of seeing; that Blake held a secret that if we cared to listen closely, we could discover for ourselves. His poems express, and arguably act as a bridge to this other world, this deeper level of life which is normally so difficult to express in ordinary language, but which through both the use of metaphor and symbolism is beautifully conveyed:

To see a world in a grain of sand
And heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.

(Blake, 1863)

We have in these lines a vision of the divine as immanent in this world, the sense that "Heaven lies about us" if only we could move beyond our limited vision and

our sense of a separate, fragmented self, and truly “see” (Wordsworth, 1807). For Blake it was through the faculty of the Imagination that he was able to transform his experience of the world, a sort of subtle opening of consciousness, that had the power to change reality and produce the miraculous. This understanding of Imagination as divine vision is what Henry Corbin calls the *mundus imaginalis*, the “psychic space in which the ‘super-sensible’ reality of dreams, theophanies and spiritual beings are manifested in a visionary sense” (Voss, 2009, p.1), a state in which the individual transcends the duality of subject/object to enter into a psychic state of oneness with the universe.

It is this sense of the innate fluidity of the human psyche, which I believe has been lost in our modern conception of the human mind. For really what is suggested by prophetic voices such as Swedenborg and Blake, is that “man in his spiritual being is boundless and contains not a part of his universe, but its wholeness and infinitude” (Raine, 1995, p.63). Thus far from being shut off from the world in our minds, it would seem that we have the potential to move beyond the parameters of rational consciousness into vastly different realms, in which the external and the internal intermingle, and we become, albeit very briefly, part of a much larger field of consciousness.

It is here that I would like to briefly interject with my own limited experience of these types of phenomena. It was during a silent meditation retreat that I had a particularly arresting and haunting dream; one which has stayed with me ever since. In this dream I was visited and verbally comforted by my deceased mother. It was a truly vivid experience, and I awoke immediately from the dream to feel still the presence of my mother in the room with me and also the strong intuition (that I had never felt before) that in the body of a beloved friend, was actually an angel protecting and looking after me. I felt with absolute certainty that the spirit of my mother had been there with me in the room and that she had been both external to my psyche and was acting as an autonomous figure, speaking with words that did not come from me. Interestingly enough, in the days that followed, I remember a sort of otherworldly delight in nature and a sense of being profoundly

connected, or in tune with, the world around me. This was accompanied by a feeling of interior peace which lasted for several weeks after the event.

So then, what does such an experience say to me about the nature of the human psyche? The question is problematic, however, and I would maintain that a sense of relaxed openness generated by my week of meditation and silence had brought about a slight change in my awareness, allowing something other (in this case what I felt to be the spirit of my mother and a sort of angelic encounter) to come into my consciousness. Such an experience would also seem to indicate to me that there are limits to our ability to wholly understand the reality in which we live, and that language itself can only take us so far on this journey. Moreover, if we are to believe, as Kathleen Raine contends, that “human consciousness contains its universe ... mind is not in space, but all spaces and whatever these contain in mind” (1995, p.62-65) then what does this imply about our ability to create our own reality? If the boundaries between our individual psyches and the world around us are more permeable than we imagine, how does that affect our understanding of these encounters? To what extent do we participate in their creation?

It is to the philosopher of religion, William James, that I turn to in order to respond to these questions. James argued that religious experience comes from ourselves rather than from God and argued for a religion of healthy mindedness in which you must believe first in order to know:

We can act as if there were a God; feel as if we were free; consider Nature as if she were full of special designs ... and we find then that these words do make a genuine difference in our moral life. (James, 1982, p.55)

It was his reverential attitude towards a universe in which such transformative religious experiences were not only possible, but desirable, that led him to suggest the need for a different approach to religion and to religious experience. For it was in such moments of openness that one could become “receptive to other dimensions of reality that would otherwise be concealed from you” (Ree, 2010).

In terms of the nature of the human psyche, this ability to transcend ‘normal’ reality can be explained through James’s development of the filter interpretation of the brain (the idea that instead of producing consciousness, the mind may filter or mediate consciousness). In one of his most famous passages James writes:

Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. (1982, p.388)

In light of this statement, it would seem that, far from being able to reduce encounters with imaginal to either literalist or psychic explanations, they are rather “expressions of a deeper nondual reality that possesses both ‘mental’ and ‘material’ qualities that manifest according to the subjective or objective structure of an experience” (Kripal, 2010, p.256). Thus, these transformative encounters cannot be said to demonstrate either the principle of mind or the principle of matter, but rather both. Furthermore, such an explanation suggests that in this movement towards the numinous we are in fact experiencing what some might argue is the ‘real’ world.

In conclusion, I would like to argue that despite a consistent world view, which tries to deny the experience of encounters with imaginal entities, these non-human life forms continue to speak to us in the modern, twenty-first century world, speaking to us through our particular cultural window, trying to wake us, as it were, from a deep sleep. Not only do these encounters confound our understanding of the supposedly rational world in which we live, but more importantly perhaps, they suggest to us that the nature of the human psyche, is for the moment at least, far beyond our scientific understanding, and perhaps will always be so. For in the last analysis, it is important to note the difficulty in ever grasping the full essence of these experiences, particularly when translated into an empirical or linguistic framework. Nevertheless, if we care to look closely and sit quietly with the knowledge that the human psyche is perhaps vaster and more wondrous than we can ever understand, we can see that what such phenomena ultimately point to is another sacred reality, another mode of awareness in which consciousness can be understood as “ a presence of mythological proportions that is filtered through the

brain and body but is in fact neither” (Taylor, as quoted in Kripal, 2010, p. 261). This then, is finally the great and fathomless mystery of the world and of the human psyche, for just as we are in the universe, so then is the universe in us. We thus become part of this sacred mystery, our souls a reflection of a divine cosmos.

As I close this essay, I would like to return to my own continuing fascination with angels. I try to imagine them around me now as I write these final words, to try and keep them alive in my consciousness if I can. Sometimes, when out walking I imagine that I catch a glimpse of them, out of the corner of my eye, a swift movement, a darting figure. Perhaps it is just the light, but perhaps not. Of course, one can never ‘prove’ that angels really exist, but that no longer seems to be the point, rather it seems that such a belief gives a profounder, more joyous sense of life and the world becomes a more enchanting, interesting place because of it. Finally, I have come to see that to turn towards the unseen in this life, is to open up the “doorways through which the mystery of fact, the wildness and pang of life” can come into our lives and potentially heal us, so that, after all, we might truly know ourselves in all our divinity (James, 1982, p.383).

(4,208 words)

Appendix

I include here for reference the poem that I wrote following my powerful dream experience.

O faery mists,
That hang still, silent, impenetrable
A magic veil between this world
And the next.

How you enchant me, draw me in!
Softly, softly I tread,
glittering cobwebs, lace the dark grasses underfoot.
A spell that shall not be broken.
Perhaps until the next life.

A thousand mysteries woven into this blessed morning.
Pale, pearly beams illuminate the racing clouds,
the golden vines
and whispering trees.
This is the beginning and the end of earthly delight.

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