

Shattered Mirrors

*Initiation, Death and Rebirth in
the Encounter Experience*

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Act One

Mapping the Underworld

*“All faith is False; all Faith is true:
Truth is the shattered mirror strown
In myriad bits, while each believes
his little bit the whole to own.”*

Sir Richard Francis Burton
“The Kasidah of Haji Abdu El-Yezdi”

Introduction

During a recent podcast (Harold, 2018), researcher Joshua Cutchin discussed the artwork for a new edition of Jacques Vallee's ground-breaking book on UFOs and myth, *Passport to Magonia*. The artwork depicts a stereotypical alien holding several masks: devil, faerie-queen and clichéd B-Movie alien.

Cutchin observes that earlier versions featured the alien *himself* as a mask, a puppet worked by a hidden hand out of frame. The 'alien' is thus transposed from the presumed reality *behind* the disguises to merely another iteration in the series. The publisher's changed the artwork for commercial reasons, but the two differing emphases highlight our perceived psychological need for concrete answers, for resolution and certainty in relation to the unexplained. This study will be, in part, an examination of what may be uncovered if we approach mystery with no imposed desire for coherent resolutions that 'make sense' of it all. Of what we may be able to see if we resist the call to literalise and let mystery speak and unfold on its own terms, much in the manner we would if we were watching a theatrical drama. We'll focus on what has been termed 'Extraordinary Encounter' experiences by folklorist Peter Rojcewicz - i.e. encounters with apparently non-human entities - and suggest possible readings of such experiences which sees them as offering the potential for transformation, both in relation to the initial percipient and, in a wider context, to a secondary audience. Rojcewicz has developed a typology for approaching encounter experience which he terms the Extraordinary Encounter Continuum Hypothesis (EECH) and which provides a useful frame of reference for our own approach. Rojcewicz defines the EECH as referring to human interaction with the anomalous regardless of the perceived form - i.e. representing a spectrum which can include entities, beings¹, objects or lights. It also presents in more subjective forms such as

abduction, out-of-body travel (OBE), near-death experience (NDE), shamanic journey, or combination of two or more of these forms, No individual encounter category is more important in itself than another... [all] are discrete but related. They are separate but not separated, like an individual's relationship to a hand... All phenomena along the encounter continuum share at least a borderline... (Rojcewicz, 1986, p. 135)

Our study will focus primarily on initiatory aspects of the UFO encounter experience noting parallels with religious motifs, shamanic journeys and NDE experiences, while also touching on the idea of initiatory structures in a wider societal context; if the initiatory function is capable of expression through

¹ Rojcewicz distinguishes 'beings', i.e. aliens, cryptids, faeries etc, from 'entities' which would include ghosts or visionary apparitions.

a series of masks, each of which correspond to apparently differing manifestations (myth, religion, UFOs, NDEs etc) then it may well be that the ‘masks’ operate on a wider spectrum not constrained to categories of a mystical, paranormal or anomalous nature. We will consider such experiences then, as a series of shifting masks which draw on mythic motifs and feed them back into popular culture in altered and adjusted forms which in turn reappear in the descriptions of such experiences². It will be argued that these shifting masks constitute an initiatory experience to the extent that one *realizes they are* masks and seeks to see beyond them... rejecting the offered images as being the ‘One Truth’ which supersedes/negates others. This ‘Seeing beyond’ is essentially shifting from modes of thinking that assume discoverable ‘absolute truths’ behind the mask, to a realization that there are infinite layers of the onion. In this way we are free to take an intermediate position and see the mask as a mirror - not real or unreal in itself but a signifier, a reflection through which we can transcend the literal. When we lose the habit of thinking of the mask as something which *conceals* we are free to engage with what it *expresses*³. As Ginette Paris has observed: “*Dionysus is not the god behind the mask. He is the mask.*” (Paris, cited in Thompson, 1991, p. 96). This ‘seeing beyond’, we will suggest, is encouraged by the experiences themselves; they often appear ludicrous or absurd and signal in this manner that they are not to be taken literally. Accepting this position of ambiguity, a refusal to literalise, opens the way to transformational experience - essentially leading to a form of gnosis - and, apprehended in a mythic sense, such experiences, whether at first and second remove, can be seen as constituting a form of mystery school in and of themselves. In line with this, we will outline parallels between the visionary experiences of the founders of religious traditions and encounter experience. Our approach therefore will be from a study of comparative religion or folkloric. In this we follow Professor of Theology and UFO researcher Ted Peters in what he terms a ‘*hermeneutic of culture*’, an approach which “seeks to uncover and the reveal the latent religious dimensions or meanings of contemporary experience - i.e. to unveil the structures of man’s being-in-the-world not evident to the immediate or ordinary level of understanding.” (Peters, 1977, p. 261). Similarities will be noted between

² See Appendix 1 for a possible model informing the ‘recycling’ of central motifs.

³ It’s of note here that masks in Greek drama served to express various emotional states rather than conceal. It’s in this dramatic sense we use the concept here - in line with the idea of the encounter experience being readable as a form of psychodrama.

motifs from established religion and those of the UFO mythos, both of which, it will be suggested, draw on a common initial impulse. We suggest that this impulse is *initiatory* in nature and operates by breaking down personal identity, humbling the self in the face of a transcendence which may be conceived equally as ‘God’, ‘the Numinous’ or ‘extra-terrestrials’... the ultimate goal being to ‘awaken’ or ‘see-through’⁴ appearances to a deeper knowing and perception. The main argument of this paper therefore will be that anomalous encounters can be interpreted as a psychodrama, a masque or play, which can be perceived as an initiatory experience and is, essentially, a contemporary analogue of the traditional shamanic journey.

The title of this paper was inspired by John Keel’s observation that there is

certain information which is being fed to us over a period of time, thousands of years. We are given little fragments in each generation. We are building up a literature, a philosophy, and a theology based on these fragments... These fragments have served as the bases for countless beliefs, theories, ideologies, and everyone has been going off on a different tangent. (Keel, cited in Steiger, 2016, p. 178)

We tend to elevate our ‘fragments’ to the status of the universal but this may not be what prevents us from seeing the whole picture. It’s possible we may not see the complete canvas because there isn’t one actually there. Or not yet. What appears to us may be an illusion – false in as much as it’s a mirror, a reflection of what we ourselves project outward. The reflected image hides an empty space beneath the mask - but it’s one that we can fill if we acknowledge it. Or we can choose to keep it hidden and claim the mask as the true reality.

⁴ Regarding myth, David Miller quotes Korzybski that “students need a training in ‘non-identity’ in order to ‘free themselves from their own habits of thinking’” (Korzybski, quoted in Miller, 2014, p. 22) adding “mythographers see through things; we see the metaphoric and poetic basis of all knowing, its nonliteralness, its mythic quality, But we often do not go the extra mile and see through our own seeing through” (ibid. p. 23). This training to ‘non-identity’ and double vision of ‘seeing through the seeing through’ is relevant to our usage here.

Openings and Awakenings

It's possible to place supranormal experiences into two distinct categories, the first being the initial experience of the percipient and the second, that of the wider set of 'transmitters' at second-hand of the account of the experience. Thus "Each encounter case can, and *should*, be seen on the one hand as an individual experience, and on the other as part of a universal phenomenon." (Evans, 1987, p. 177). The initial experience may thus take on secondary importance to the memorate or oral narrative⁵ - "the second and all subsequent transmitters of a UFO vision receive and identical 'memorate' from their predecessors, irrespectively whether the first teller really saw it, imagined it or lied about it... [among the members of the legend-transmitting chain] there are also skeptics as well as deniers. Nevertheless, the sequence does not break up." (Dégh, 1977, pp. 246 - 247). In relation to the UFO phenomenon, the secondary 'transmission' is often at variance with the initial experience and viewed exclusively through an 'extra-terrestrial' filter, whereas in actuality, the experience is susceptible to mystical, mythic or even religious renderings. It may be that elements of UFO lore such as the abduction experience are, on a certain level, *intended* to function primarily on the level of a secondary transmission, the initial experience in some cases being a trigger for the dissemination of certain motifs into a wider cultural context. Whitley Strieber has suggested something similar in framing his experiences as part of an "attempt to shock us into a new kind of awareness" (Strieber, cited in Jarrell, 2016, p. 76). Such a 'shock' could foreseeably function at one or more removes, regardless of whether one has partaken of the initial experience which it describes. Strieber goes on to downplay the 'alien' aspect of his experiences, "being identified as a believer in aliens has always troubled me... important parts of it have also been deeply human" (Strieber, 2011, p. 5), despite the ostensible extra-terrestrial appearance of what he prefers to call 'the visitors'. Here Strieber is *seeing through* the alien overlay to a richer underlying reality. This may well be an intimation of the 'new kind of awareness' he is describing, a refusal to take outwardness as 'Truth'. Indeed, the outward form may well serve the function of leading away from the underlying reality, of purposefully contradicting it. This raises questions as to how such experiences might appear were they to be presented in differing frameworks. If encounters such as Strieber's can be seen as mystical experiences stripped of religious

⁵ 'Memorate' is a term coined by Carl Wilhelm von Sydow signifying first-person accounts of a "supranormal event that render something that *might* be real or remembered, distinguished from legends in that they lacked the traditional content and stylistic qualities characteristic of traditional legends." (Dewan, 2006, p. 187)

overlay, what might such an experience look like when stripped of the current 'extra-terrestrial' reference points? One area that parallels both the mystical and UFO experience is the 'Flow' state experienced by elite sportspeople. Murphy and White have compiled numerous accounts of "a wide variety of extraordinary experience emerges in sport - moments of preternatural calm and stillness, feelings of detachment and freedom... changes in one's sense of time and space, apparent clairvoyance and telepathy, and glimpses of disembodied entities." (Murphy and White, 1995, p. 133). Two key factors in the 'Flow' state correspond with motifs from the encounter experience: time distortion and an overwhelming perception of silence. The element of sudden descending silence is a liminal marker common to many anomalous encounters and has been termed 'the Oz-factor' by researcher Jenny Randles

"There was no noise. Even the trees. Not even normal night noises."... this effect (known to UFOlogists as the Oz Factor) is commonly reported at the onset of close encounters. It seems to mark a boundary between different realities where laws of time and space diverge. (Randles, 1997, p. 107)

Onsets of silence in sporting contexts where large crowds are present is perhaps more remarkable than when occurring during solitary encounters in remote locations at night, but both seem to be a prelude of sorts, an overture to a deepening of the experience. Time alteration is common in both contexts: "time seems to slow down, in an uncanny way, as if everything were moving in slow motion... the whole thing seems like a movie or a dance in slow motion" (Murphy and White, 1995, p. 42). Murphy and White quote an experiment where subjects under hypnosis conducted various tasks. One subject "took ten seconds to fashion a dress... Later she said that to her the session seemed to last an hour (ordinarily, designing a dress took her several hours)." (ibid., p. 44). This time-distortion effect is a key motif in faerie lore where, typically, visitors to fairyland return to find many years passed since they departed, or vice versa. Such Missing Time is also a marked element of UFO encounters and also, as we shall see, of shamanic visionary experience. There are even examples of 'life reviews' (as generally known from NDEs) occurring to athletes in 'Flow' (ibid., p. 47). Clearly there are parallels between Flow and encounter experiences, indeed, they may stem from a similar basis, one that is obscured or transmuted in the context of a public sporting event. I myself have personal experience of similar states, one in a sporting context (events unfolding in slow motion) and one during the course of a normal day. From my

perspective both seem similar experiences although the sporting occurrence possessed an intense focus (i.e. on the game) not present in the other. This second experience occurred whilst travelling on the London tube. I was watching people in the carriage and suddenly everything fell completely silent and I entered a state of heightened awareness. There was an overwhelming sensation that this state was something that should be 'normal' and that no-one else was in a similar state, I knew that if they had been we'd have recognised each other as being in that space. Realising I was 'alone' brought on a form of extreme fear, almost panic, which brought me 'back to myself'. I then - and this may be significant - forgot all about the experience, only to recall it perhaps thirty minutes later when I was no longer on the train. The fear aspect is also significant. I see two possible sources of the fear/panic - the first, that I was the only person in that state, almost as if I was a different being from the others there. This linked to the knowledge that I would not be in this state much longer - I would rejoin the others. Allied to this, an awareness underneath, as it were, saw these others - and by extension, the driver - as powerless due to their unawareness. The overall feeling was of beings lacking control and thus subject to accidents. Fear is, of course, a leitmotif of anomalous encounters from ghosts to UFO abduction, but it is generally interpreted as a response to abnormal situations such as perceived threats from beings rather than as a product of the altered state itself. This is not necessarily the case... fear may be a basic core component of the experience. The great scholar of religion Rudolf Otto, has shown how such experiences of fear and awe are placed in a mystical/religious context along a spectrum which he terms *mysterium tremendum* and which manifest in ways differing both in form and degree, "the feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide... or lead to the strangest excitements... it has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror." (Otto, 1939, pp. 12-13). Otto equates this experience to what is known theologically as 'fear of God' - a 'shuddering' in the face of the numinous. Not fear as we commonly understand it, but rather

something more than 'natural', ordinary fear. It implies that the mysterious is already beginning to loom before the mind, to touch the feelings. It implies the first application of a category of valuation which has no place in the everyday natural world of ordinary experience and is only possible to a being in whom has been awakened a mental predisposition, unique in kind and different in a definite way from any 'natural' faculty. (ibid., pp. 15-16)

The *mysterium tremendum*, therefore, can clearly be seen not primarily as a *reaction*, but rather an indication of the presence of the *numinous*. Perhaps even a precursor and messenger of a type of rebirth.

In this regard, referring to the experiences of Whitley Strieber, Jeffrey Kripal observes

extreme fear and terror in *Communion* can and do function as a kind of portal into other states of being. Overwhelming fear alters Strieber's state of consciousness so radically that he becomes something, or someone, else... Terror erases the ego and splits the human in two. (Kripal, 2014, p. 908)

Paradoxically, this 'splitting in two', may be a means, as Kripal implies, of becoming whole. A form of shamanic dismemberment and an entry to the imaginal/liminal realm and it is this aspect to which we now turn our consideration.

Approaching the Threshold

The religious term ‘gnosis’ has frequently been applied to the UFO phenomenon, in particular the experiences of Whitley Strieber (see Robertson, 2014). In our context, the term signifies *imparted* knowledge (i.e. as opposed to mere belief). In this reading, the encounter experience constitutes the impartation of the knowledge - the *means* of the awakening to knowledge - rather than the knowledge itself. To take the experience at face-value, to see it as *being* the knowledge rather than a conduit or signpost is to literalize the experience. As we shall see, the UFO experience contains aspects viewable as specifically militating *against* literal readings⁶. Elements that encourage the experiencer to dive beneath the surface and *see-through*, or, conversely, allow an ‘opting-out’, to literalise/refuse the call, should one choose to do so⁷. If the encounter experience can be seen as leading to a form of gnosis, it follows that the experience itself is not the end-product but rather a catalyst, albeit not one situated in normative reality. Such experiences occur in the liminal area which Henry Corbin has termed the *mundus imaginalis*. In Islamic cosmology, this ‘world’ is essentially the real world, with material existence being seen as a shadow of that reality. The *mundus imaginalis* is a bridge, “an intermediary realm that exists between the spiritual and corporeal realms, in which spirit becomes matter, matter becomes spirit and the invisible becomes visible” (Nouriani, 2017, p. 389). It is in this realm, which can be apprehended as an altered psychological state as well as a ‘place’⁸, in which visionary experiences occur and the function of which is to “mediate between us and the divine, and *guide and influence the self-realization or individuation process*” (ibid.) (my italics). Viewed in this way, the phenomena may be seen as a ‘rite of passage’ or initiation. The parallels with UFO abduction and shamanic initiation are well-known but, as

⁶ Many encounter experiences contain improbable or ludicrous elements but in examples situated elsewhere on Rojcewicz’s EECH spectrum – ghosts and faeries for example – such motifs have become standardized by tradition or familiarity and no longer retain ability to ‘shock’ by their jarring nature. Reports of faeries driving small cars or flying in miniature aircraft (surely unnecessary for a winged entity) might at one time have occasioned such incongruity. Alternatively, these motifs could argue for the subjective nature of the experience. See Johnson (2014, pp. 245 – 246) for an account of fairy cars.

⁷ It’s interesting in light of upcoming discussions of the *mundus imaginalis* and liminality, that the surface elements of these experiences contain a neither/nor intermediate aspect: one can ‘reject the call’ to see through appearances by accepting the experience as presented and ignoring absurd elements just as one can reject by viewing the absurdity as proof the whole thing is unworthy of consideration – neither/nor becomes skeptic/believer.

⁸ The intermediate nature of the *mundus imaginalis* is expressed in terms of a space between binary polarities. As in dreams, it’s possible for conceptions to be both/neither simultaneously. UFOs also display this liminal quality, presenting as non-solid objects which conversely leave radar or ground traces.

Patrick Harpur points out, the motif might be less circumscribed in its application

The most important rite of passage – the puberty rite – has features which, if not universal, are extremely common, viz, the candidate is abruptly abducted from his family, tribe, habitat to an isolated liminal zone... the abductors often look identical, e.g. wearing masks with almond-shaped eyes and little slots for mouths. They terrify the child. ...Such treatment is not the prerogative of shamans; it is deemed necessary for everyone who has to forsake their childish status and enter the adult world. (Harpur, 1988, pp. 1-2)

Harpur goes on to make the point that Western societies do not currently have equivalents of the rites of passage in traditional cultures, and, as such, encounter experiences may be an expression of an underlying need to fulfil this lack⁹. Reading such experiences in terms of initiation, we may also see the experience signifying not passage from child to adult but, rather presaging a metaphorical ‘growing up’ – a passage into a ‘spiritual’ adulthood. The relationship of rites of passage to anomalous experience has been pointed out by several researchers, notably George Hansen, who draws on the work of anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner in his ground-breaking study *The Trickster and the Paranormal* (Hansen, 2001). Hansen identifies three areas relevant to the study of the paranormal in van Gennep and Turner: liminality, anti-structure and communitas. Liminality is essentially a phase of transition, an example of which may be seen in rituals associated with the onset of puberty as mentioned above. The term is derived from *limen*, meaning ‘threshold’ and signifies an intermediate state between two fixed positions. Rituals marking such events are concerned essentially with transitions between states of being and exemplify the subject’s status as ‘betwixt and between’ and ‘no longer/not yet’ - “The symbols exhibited express that the ‘liminal personae’ are neither living nor dead, and both living and dead... they are considered neither male nor female, deprived of rank, status and property.” (Deflem, 1991, p. 13). Liminality is therefore directly related to spiritual/mystical development and constitutes a transformational experience in its own right, “liminal moments are characterised by very real spiritual experiences that profoundly shake the personality... [they are] particularly vivid examples of real spiritual exercises that install a mixture of strength and humbleness in the person... ” (Thomassen, 2009, p. 21).

⁹ Little research has been done on UFOs in non-Western contexts which could verify this contention, but a recent study of Australian Aboriginal communities found widespread beliefs that, despite witnessing UFOs, aboriginal people were never abducted. The only abductees were non-Aboriginals visiting the community. Regarding this, the researcher was told “the aliens were able to recognize Aboriginal people as belonging in the area... ‘they know us. This is our land’” (Saethre, 2007, p. 909).

Communitas is a term adopted by Turner to differentiate from 'community' and refers to social equalisations which occur in either a deliberately constructed or spontaneous manner. An example of the latter may be seen in the days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York when, during the first days following the tragedy, taxi drivers drove people without charge, shopkeepers dispensed water for free and people gave time and resources without thought of anything beyond helping the community. In such circumstances social structure and status is bypassed. Communitas can also be deliberately engendered and is often introduced as an element in rites of passage. Central to our theme of anomalous encounters as transformational or instructional experience is the function of communitas in such contexts; "it is as though they [the initiates] are being *reduced or ground down* to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew" (Turner, cited in Hansen, 2001, p. 57) (my italics). The concept of a 'humbling' is a key one in many mystical and initiatory systems and communitas exemplifies this aspect in a similar manner. Hansen observes that "communitas is linked with humility... it forces one to realize that one is part of humanity and shares in the human condition." (Hansen, 2001, p. 58).

The third concept, anti-structure, overlaps to a certain extent with the preceding two and is used by Turner to expand van Gennep's original formulation of liminality. Unlike the terms communitas and liminality, anti-structure re-focuses on aspects not brought out in the previous labels; "the idea of disruption, of the border between chaos and order, or being anti-establishment" (ibid., p. 59), elements considered later in relation to the trickster/fool motif. These concepts are central to the idea we will develop of the encounter experience as a form of initiatory rite and an expression of the 'mysteries'¹⁰.

¹⁰ Following van Gennep's usage: "as I use the term, 'mysteries', comprise the ceremonial whole which transfers the neophyte from the profane to the sacred world and places him in direct and permanent communication with the latter." (Van Gennep, 1977, p. 89).

The Shaman's Journey

Shamanism, according to Hilary Evans, represents the “oldest visionary tradition known to humanity” (Evans, 1987, p. 154). Although it contains elements which have parallels in religious expression, NDEs and UFO abductions, these distinct areas should not be subsumed beneath a shamanistic heading, but rather should be seen as

a way of noticing particular resonances or similarities between the traditional cultures and our own contemporary materials. As long as we do not “essentialise” the category, that is, confuse it with a single, unchanging religious meaning, we can use it as a helpful, comparative lens with which to focus our gaze. (Kripal and Strieber, 2016, p. 193)

Similarly, regarding the term ‘shaman’ itself, our rendering here refers more generally to varying types of spiritual mediators; “those who work in old and mainly local traditions as well as those who experiment in nonlocal ways with practices from those traditions.” (Roothaan, 2015, p. 142). In speaking of religious traditions, it’s useful to draw distinctions between the founder’s experiences and that of subsequent adherents... the initial impulse is invariably derived from visionary experience but most current religious formulations do not present themselves as a means of accessing such experiences. Indeed, in many instances they actively negate this aspect and, where acknowledged, it’s generally relegated to the category of the ‘mystical’ (i.e. framed as a subsidiary aspect which is more or less reserved for an elite subgroup). The visionary experience is thus set-apart, sanctified as something only accessible to the prophets, saints and original authorities. Nevertheless, as observed by Whitley Strieber, experiences of a similar nature, albeit differing in degree, may well be a continuous constituent part of the human experience; “it may be that what happened to Mohammed his cave and to Christ in Egypt, to Buddha in his youth and to all of our great prophets and seers, was an exalted version of the same humble experience that causes a flying saucer to traverse the sky or a visitor to appear in a bedroom or light to fill a circle of friends.” (Strieber, 1988, p. 236). From this perspective, we may see religion as a literalisation - an ‘essentialising’ as Kripal would have it - of an original visionary impetus. The temptation to literalise is ever-present. It shows itself in the acceptance of pat answers to a mystery, in assumptions that outer masks are synonymous with inner realities, that aliens are visiting earth because they manifest in a form which plays into our concepts of what such beings might look like. If we overcome the habit of

literalisation - and, as we shall see, such an overcoming is a key lesson of the experience - then we find new ranges of freedom. Finding answers shrinks in importance. It may no longer matter what is behind the mask if we can see there *is* a mask... for the purpose of the mask is to convey something. Who (or what) is doing the conveying is of less importance if we can enter into the spirit of the play. It may even detract from the performance to know the details of the actors and directors and serve only to break the dramatic spell. There is a strange beauty in reaching this perspective which is poetically evoked by Strieber

The "visitor experience" is old. Two hundred years ago a farmer might have come in from his plowing and said, "I saw fairies dancing in the glen." A thousand years ago he might have seen angels flying. Two thousand years ago it would have been Dionysus leaping in the fields. Four thousand years ago he might have seen the goddess Earth herself walking those old hills, her starry robe sparkling with the pure light of magic. (ibid., p. 237)

Strieber's vision is infused with a Blakean manner of seeing and is born of his own initiatory experiences, the acceptance of the received lesson to not take things at face-value. The magic he speaks of resides in this unconditional apprehension, the intermediate approach of both seeing the goddess as a mask and simultaneously accepting the mask as her face. Such a suspension has much in common with the feelings engendered by fairy tales. Marina Warner in *Stranger Magic*, her masterful survey of *Arabian Nights* lore, has termed these 'charmed states' (Warner, 2011) and much UFO lore does have something of the fairy tale attached to it. We 'know' the stories are impossible, but we are, by the means of this impossibility, transported to another level of apprehension where this knowledge is transcended. These 'charmed states' work at many removes, the initial visionary experience may be vouchsafed to one specific individual, but we can all partake of the ongoing story as it is related again and again. We too can cross the threshold and return to a "time when God did not yet separate light from darkness and the Grimm brothers did not separate tales from legends, [when] magic horses and carpets were also often visible in their flight." (Dégh, 1977, p. 242).

Motifs of flying horses are familiar from mythology and are a noted element of shamanic initiation rites where horses "enables the shaman to fly through the air, to reach the heavens... [it] is a mythical image of death... it produces the 'break-through in plane', the passage from this world to other worlds." (Eliade,

1964, p. 467)¹¹. It is possible to discern similar motifs in the lives of many religious figures, a notable example being the prophet Muhammad, in particular, the ‘Night Journey’ or *mi’râj* as known from Islamic tradition (specifically Qur’an, suras 17 and 53). The text outlines a series of events in which Muhammad, while sleeping, was taken from Mecca to Jerusalem on the winged horse *buraq* and thence onwards to the seven heavens to be instructed in the divine mysteries by the angel Gabriel before visiting the hell and the underworld. As pointed out by Porter (among others), “an experience of an ascent to the sky is an essential part of the *initiation* of a shaman” (Porter, 1974, p. 71)¹². Although some Muslim commentators (and some atheists)¹³ have literalised this experience, it is implicit in the accounts that it was not literal but visionary. The accounts incorporate the common motif of lapsed time - the experience ostensibly spanned an extended period but, on Muhammad’s return, his bed was still warm and a jug of water overturned at the onset of the experience had not yet emptied which is a clear indication that the events described are to be seen as occurring within the span of seconds the water would have taken to drain away. In regard to such time-dilation motifs, the UFO researcher Thomas Bullard has noted how “abduction reports and fairy legends share the notion of a distortion of the temporal continuum” (Bullard, 1989, p. 160) and also drawn attention to another crossover motif, that of “dismemberment and reassembly of the body carried out by supernatural beings” (ibid., p. 162)¹⁴. Such a dismemberment episode also occurs at the start of the *mi’râj* narrative when Muhammad is stated to be “between sleep and waking” (Vuckovic, 2005 p. 23) and an angelic figure extracts his heart and washes it prior to the commencement of the Night Journey. An earlier tradition has a similar episode which is held to have occurred when Muhammad was four years old

two white-robed men had seized the child Muhammad, thrown him down on the ground and torn open his

¹¹ The horse is also synonymous with the shaman’s horse-hide drum which leads him/her on their journey. The symbolism is reflected in the horse-headed stick which the shaman rides into trance. (Eliade, 1964, p.173)

¹² It bears repeating, following Porter and Eliade, that the argument here is not that Muhammad was directly influenced by Central Asian/Siberian shamanism but that “a very closely similar ecstatic technique and structure of religious experience are to be seen in Muhammad” (Porter, 1964, p. 70)

¹³ See the entry ‘Dawkins and the Flying Horse’ (Heresiarch, 2013) at “Heresy Corner” blog for discussion of the debate between Richard Dawkins and Mehdi Hasan which highlights literalist misconceptions as well as the shamanic elements of the Night Journey.

¹⁴ Russian researcher Valerii Sanarov (Sanarov, 1981) has noted the parallels between shamanic dismemberment motifs and anomalous accounts such as phantom airships, UFOs and the Indian Rope Trick (see also Eliade, 1964, p. 127)

stomach... when they had opened his chest, they had taken out his heart and, after removing a lump of black blood, they had washed the stomach and heart of the Prophet with show to purify these organs. (Netton, 2011, p. 8)

Contrast this experience with another report cited by Bullard (The Arabic text emphasises the incision being from throat to belly): “One man recalled under hypnosis that at age five a team of abductors split him open from breastbone to pubic bone and performed some sort of operation on his internal organs, then sealed him up by a means that left no trace.” (Bullard, 1989, p. 162)

Angela Roothaan has drawn numerous parallels between shamanic motifs in the life of Muhammad with equivalents from Gospel accounts relating to Jesus and has argued that these accounts

relate to what are now called “alternate states of consciousness”... [and as such] problematize the view that the “monotheistic” religions are so-called “great world religions”, transcending natural human experiences, while other religions, which are understood to remain in the realm of natural, are considered to be small and local. (Roothaan, 2015, p. 147)

Such a reframing is, in essence, an anti-structural process of *deliteralisation*, a reclaiming of the original (and ongoing) possibility of a connection with the numinous. Such shifts in perspective are inherent in the encounter experience, if only by dint of the fact that the central motifs remain constant in the face of the all-too human drive to essentialise. From one perspective, it may well be *us* who create the masks and we only deconstruct what we ourselves have created. One consequence of this shift of perspective is that

the meaning of the religious revelations connected to holy books is shown in a different light... the religious salvation these religious founders inspire can be interpreted as connecting one to the alternate reality in which he or she can transcend the confines of the material world, come into contact with the creative forces of the universe, and be healed in both spiritual and physical aspects. (ibid., p. 150)

The means by which such a change of perspective (in a very real sense, a *rebirth*) is effected is multifaceted.

It doesn't matter what the cosmic shaman looks like or how he behaves. His function is quite simply to educate the soul. Whether he does this by acting out the role of the trickster, the masked demon or the sage is irrelevant. His ways are protean, but his objective is the same through a thousand disguises.

(Ring, 1989, p. 5)

One does not need to have undergone such an initiation at first-hand to be opened up to this new way of

seeing, to partake of this freedom from compartmentalisation. Indeed, the primary initial experiencer assumes the role of the prophet descending the sacred mountain with a message for the wider community. In this figure “it is not hard to recognise the Shaman, divested of ritual guise” (Sultanova, 2015, p. 25) and this motif of the prophet echoes through the ages to our own time, updated for our technological age and bridging the liminal space between prophet and shaman to bring the people not just knowledge in the abstract, but new ways of seeing and apprehending¹⁵

The standard contactee account seems to follow a particular structure, not unlike the career of the prophet in the Old Testament. The biblical prophet was chosen by the Lord and given a revelation in the form of an oracle; similarly; the contactee is very mysteriously singled out by the crew of a flying saucer to be the recipient of saucer secrets... [he] is claiming his role as shaman, as *axis mundi*, as having brought to Earth transcendental knowledge. (Peters, 2014, pp. 209 - 213)

¹⁵ It may be of interest here that many of the organs manipulated in the discussed ‘dismemberment’ motifs are organs of perception. The heart is a traditional example, but more explicit ones are to be found in UFO abduction lore – see Bullard (1989, pp. 162-163) for examples of brain and eyeball removal and replacement.

Trickster Takes A Bow

Many researchers have noted how the UFO experience displays a degree of ambiguity, often displaying illogical/absurd elements or prankishness, a factor which has been interpreted as evidence of demonic (in Christian terms) deception. Incongruity of this type manifests both as motifs within such experiences and in communication between percipients and entities. In the latter case, exchanges are often of a nature that no rational person would logically present as convincing evidence to support their experience. One abductee (a police officer who suffered ridicule as a result of his experience), was greeted in terms redolent of Hollywood B-movies; “are you the watchman of this place? ... Watchman, some day you will see the universe!” (Vallee, 1990, p. 161). Other examples include such statements as “we are from anywhere... but we’ll be in Greece tomorrow” (Vallee, 1989, p. 179) and entities who promise to allow a witness to take a ‘souvenir’ but subsequently contradict themselves and refuse (Vallee, 1990, p. 169). There are often visual anomalies (anomalies *within* the anomaly, if you will) such as the presence of absurd ‘out-of-place’ characters - witnesses report having “seen Godzilla, others have seen Bambi. The experience, in every case, was real to them.” (ibid., p. 161). The presence of the human dead, often known to the percipient, is also a key motif (as in traditional faerie-lore), and humans as accomplices of the ‘aliens’ are reported often. This is telling, more so than with a Bambi or Godzilla, for humans alongside aliens on their interstellar craft strikes perhaps more of a jarring note. Abductee Barney Hill recalled, under hypnosis, one such example¹⁶, an excerpt from the session transcript is revealing (emphasis mine):

BARNEY (He takes care to be extremely precise.)

There was a row of windows. A huge row of windows. Only divided by struts or structures that prevented it from being one solid window. Or then - it would have been one solid window. And the evil face on the...

(He starts to say "leader.") He looks like a German Nazi. He's a Nazi . . .

(There is a questioning tone in his voice.)

DOCTOR He's a Nazi. Did he have on a uniform?

BARNEY Yes.

DOCTOR What kind of uniform?

BARNEY (With a small amount of surprise.) He had a black scarf around his neck, dangling over his left shoulder. (He gestures in his trance.)

¹⁶ An excellent account of the Hill case in relation to raciology and Missing Time may be found in Drysdale (2008)

DOCTOR *You pointed it out as if it were on you.*

BARNEY *(Half to himself.) I never noticed that before.*

(Fuller, 1966, p. 91)

There seems to be no discernible pattern traceable in these ‘absurd’ experiences, but one leitmotif does appear to centre around differing perceptions of time. In the example above, the beings told the witness she’d be allowed to take an item but later refused, almost as if, for them, the latter action did not follow from the first, but was somehow dislocated in time. In the same case, the witness observed “everything seemed to happen in slow motion” (Vallee, 1990, p. 168). Similar time-dilation effects can be seen in the case of Carl Higdon, a forty-year old man abducted during a hunting trip, an experience which began when he fired his rifle: “the sound of the shot was curiously muffled and the bullet seemed to travel so slowly that Carl was able to watch it in flight.” (Harpur, 2003, p. 205)¹⁷. Another example from Vallee runs thus: “a witness meets a UFO occupant who asks, ‘what time is it?’ and [he/she] replies ‘it’s 2.30,’ only to be bluntly told, ‘you lie – it is 4 o’clock’” (Vallee, 1977, p. 36). Here we see the key elements conflated; the preoccupation with concepts of time coupled with the element of deceit. Interestingly, here it is inverted, turned back on the witness... the entity accuses the witness of lying, but, in reality, it is they being untruthful. These elements combine to create the atmosphere of absurdity... almost as if the intention was for the story to undermine itself. This has been noted by several researchers and has generally been interpreted as deliberate deceit designed to lead people astray for sinister purposes. It’s possible in some cases that the presence of fear as a significant element in many paranormal occurrences, leads some commentators to conclude the experience is therefore sinister or negative, rather than seeing the fear as an apprehension of the numinous or *mysterium tremendum*. A typical ‘negative’ interpretation is that of Roberts and Gilbertson who in *The Dark Gods* argue that UFOs and other phenomena are manifestations of ‘dark’ (i.e. demonic) forces and argue from a reductionist/literal position that

The religious ethos consistently takes on a polarizingly dualistic form... The conflict, on its most elemental level, has always been seen as binary. The war is/was between ‘Order and Chaos’, ‘Good and Evil’, ‘Light and Darkness’, ‘Heaven and Hell’, ‘Demons and Angels’... it was and is always seen as a direct confrontation of opposing forces for mastery of what can only be termed the pure ‘state of existence’ (Roberts and Gilbertson, 1980, p. 28).

¹⁷ Interestingly this 1974 case has parallels with the movie *The Matrix* – not only is the famous ‘bullet’ motif replicated but the entity offers the witness a choice of pills and he takes one.

This view cannot be sustained alongside a reading of religious traditions being codifications of original visionary experiences which are essentially initiatory. In such readings, binary positions such as this represent merely another literalisation - in the same sense institutionalised religion can be seen as literalisation – and a nullification of the initial impetus. Clearly, at times the encounter experience *presents itself* as affirming a reductionist binary position - or perhaps, more properly, manifests as a reflection of the consciousness it's acting on - but in this reading, it's merely another mask, a reflection of ourselves. The opportunity for transformation is being presented via the mask and we can recognise it as an aspect of our own self, or we can project it onto the 'other' and refuse the call. A mask may not hide, it may *show*. In relation to this aspect, Keith Thompson has observed how Dionysus, the 'god of masks'

does not, strictly speaking, disguise himself through his many masks; rather he *reveals* himself through them. By focussing so much on the motif of deception through disguise, perhaps mainstream ufology misses the larger point. Could the UFO's behavior, which fits our *fantasy* of secrecy, constitute its own particular style of revelation? (Thompson, 1991, p. 96)

Thompson draws out the point that binary modes of thinking lead to drawing distinctions between our inner and exterior states - distinctions that force us to perceive masks solely as methods of concealment and blind us to the possibilities known to our ancestors that masks may serve as *connections* to the concepts they embody.

Dionysus arrives on the scene not to reveal this distinction as false, but rather to turn our gaze on the extent which the distinction – when taken literally – forces dichotomies (inside vs. outside, idea vs. form, truth vs. appearance) that have not been shown to exist in nature. (ibid., p. 97)

The Trickster - of which Dionysus is a manifestation - is a mythic figure "who steps godlike through the cracks and flaws in the ordered world of ordinary reality" (Combs and Holland, 1994, p. 82). He is known largely from Native American lore where he appears as Coyote, Raven or Crow. Trickster also appears as Hermes in Western cultures and in figures like Joha and Nasrudin in Middle Eastern tradition. He is "not designated by immediately observable physical features [but by] a more abstract constellation of characteristics that is usually personified (i.e. identified with a person or animal)." (Hansen, 2001, p. 28). Trickster is relevant to mythic readings of UFO/encounter experience as he embodies the liminal/intermediate perspective: he is both fool and wise-man, a clown as well as Campbell's "super-

shaman” (Campbell, 1959, p. 275) and, as Hermes, both messenger and thief. Trickster, in some aspects, teaches the art of double-seeing - perhaps double *moving* - juxtaposing paradoxical elements, not only to pinpoint the intermediate position in binary stances such as those of Roberts and Gilbertson, but, also to highlight multiple possibilities and offer us new ranges of choice. As Hermes, he can “move in either direction or, more to the point, act as the agent by which others are led in either direction... It is this double motion that makes Hermes at once an enchanter and a disenchanter.” (Hyde, 1999, p. 208), he is the guardian of thresholds between “states of human experience: between day and night, sleeping and waking, consciousness and the unconscious, life and death.” (Combs and Holland, 1994, p. 83).

Trickster then, presents in myriad forms. He is Dionysus and Hermes. He is Nasrudin Hodja, riding his donkey backwards, who, when asked why, replies ‘It’s not me sitting backwards, it’s the donkey facing the wrong way’. Trickster, like Nasrudin on his donkey, first presents the immediate obvious view - the standard perception initially meeting the eye which passes without question or examination. He then subverts it to show the opposite view (it is the *donkey* that is facing the wrong way) but not to favour one perspective; Trickster presents the two equally, both with identical weight. It’s this action that reveals a hidden third perspective; the intermediate bridging view which affords entry to the world of the imaginal. James Hillman has termed this process ‘overcoming the opposites’ and links it directly to gnostic knowing

“Overcoming the opposites” is a transcending, mystical experience. For it to abandon thinking in opposites is to lose consciousness... the clarifying mode of seeing, knowing and ordering... it means also losing the belief that being is finally accountable in terms of simple abstract pairs in mystical tension.
(Hillman, 1979, p. 83)

This ‘overcoming’ may be enacted by ‘seeing through’ the overtly illogical aspects of the visionary experience. Indeed, in our reading, this is a key function of such nonsensical elements. Jacques Vallee has described these absurd elements as metalogical, arguing that they have

A symbolic meaning beyond the apparent contradiction of the dialogue... Situations such as these often have the deep poetic and paradoxical quality of Eastern religious tales (“what is the sound of one hand clapping?”) ... if you strive to convey a truth that lies beyond the semantic level made possible by your

audience's language, you must construct apparent contradictions in terms of ordinary meaning. (Vallee, 1989, p. 177)

The reference to the *Zen Koan* is significant. The purpose of a *Koan* is to transcend itself and this is a function of Trickster too; his metalogic offers conflicting perspectives that we can either identify with or transcend. Vallee also sees metalogic as a form of mask - one designed solely to conceal, to “make ultimate detection impossible” (ibid., p. 178) - and notes how it functions to exploit “both the gullibility of the zealots and the narrow-mindedness of the debunkers” (ibid.) but from our perspective it is *we* who exploit ourselves. *We* who choose which is facing the wrong way, donkey or man. In so doing, we refuse the opportunity to step into the in-between liminal space. Trickster is not concealing, he is showing... offering. As Thompson noted: “Conventional thinking holds that masks conceal. Dionysus teaches that masks also reveal” (Thompson, 1991, p. 96). There may be no concealment at all... the revealing masks may need to be exaggerated, grotesque, or extreme for us to take them seriously. Trickster is revealing us through his faces and informing us that, if we can take the leap, we can choose any one of them. He shows us the fool and the wise man in order “for us to gain a sense of proportion about ourselves. This he does by testing and trying us, so that we might discover what we are made of. His motto might well be, ‘If the fool persists in his folly, he would become wise’.” (Singer, 1973, p. 290).

Act Two

A School of Night

In me there are two souls, alas, and their
Division tears my life in two.
One loves the world, it clutches here, it binds
Itself to her, clinging with furious lust;
The other longs to soar beyond the dust
Into the realm of high ancestral minds.
Are there no spirits moving in the air,
Ruling the region between earth and sky?
Come down to then to me from your golden mists on high,
Give me a magic cloak to carry me
Away to some far place, some land untold,
And I'd not part with it for silk or gold
Or a king's crown, so precious it would be!

Goethe

Systems of Control

Vallee's conception of the absurdist elements of encounter experiences constituting a metalogic rests on an underlying presumption that such events are foundationally situated in the everyday world. That is to say, the seemingly confusing elements are confusing precisely *because* they do not fit alongside normative reality, when they are weighed against it. If one proceeds to seek a rationale for the absurdity from within normative experience, then clearly, deception is a logical explanation for the absurd aspects. If, however, one takes the stance that the experience is *not* essentially located in everyday reality (i.e. the experiencer enters into the 'space' of the *phenomenon* rather than vice versa, regardless of whether this is conceived of as an altered state of consciousness or a visit to a locale as in an NDE for example) then the argument does not necessarily hold. The logic of dreams is not the logic of waking. In dreams it is possible to perceive, say, an elephant, which is simultaneously one's father and to see no contradiction between either aspect or any illogicality in the depiction. The perception of absurdity comes later, when one is awake and back in 'normal' reality, no longer in a state where dualities can be apprehended fully without attendant needs to rationalise. In this sense it should be noted that there is a dichotomy here between the experiencer and the researcher – in both cases there is often an urge to rationalise the experience (to literalise or bring under personal control), to situate it back in the everyday world. Vallee's metalogic and his 'Control System' theory would seem to be clear examples of an attempt to do this but, by the same token, so are the ideas being outlined here; they are both attempts to apprehend the mystery necessarily *within our own terms*. There is nothing inherently wrong in attempting to find explanations for anomalies, this after all is the basis of science, but it may be that there are classes of phenomena that are not susceptible to explanation in terms of our current paradigms and that other 'ways of seeing' are needed to approach them. This may be in part what such experiences are communicating. There is no deception if apprehended on the phenomenon's own terms, this is only a factor if one reduces the experience to the limits of our present boundaries instead of expanding our own perspective to move into the wider context of the phenomenon. In his book *The Super Natural* (co-authored with Whitley Strieber), Jeffrey Kripal has highlighted these two differing modes by contrasting Charles Fort's 'wild talents' (essentially psychic abilities of the mind such as clairvoyance) with what he terms 'wild vision'.

Clairvoyance might give insight into our everyday world – one might, for example, have a premonition that a certain event will occur at a specific time and place, but

The symbolic imaginal, or wild vision, works very differently. Here the dream or waking vision is experienced as mediating some other world or metaphysical truth... The sense is that these images and narratives are functioning as ciphers of some other form of mind... the human imagination is not so much clairvoyant as it is an organ of revelation... there are at least two worlds or dimensions at play here. (Kripal and Strieber, 2016, p. 125)

Vallee recognises these two dimensions at play and theorises that “there is a spiritual control system for human consciousness and that paranormal phenomena like UFOs are one of its manifestations.” (Vallee, 1989, p. 272). This control system, in Vallee’s view, is akin to a house thermostat which regulates temperature based on outside conditions, lowering when too hot and increasing when too cold. Vallee makes no claims as to whether this system is artificial or natural but infers its possible existence from the absurdities of metalogic described above and relating them to the ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ positions in the thermostat analogy. Thus, an observer, based on personal bias or other factors, might see hot as ‘good’ and cold as ‘bad’ while another may “take a reversed view and decide that warm is ‘evil’... to understand the whole phenomenon one needs a grasp of the control concept, and one must be ready to understand that it needs two opposite principles for its function” (ibid.). This position though, only holds good if one does not admit of possible intermediate liminal states between these two opposite principles. If such a third principle exists then, the analogy collapses. Vallee gets close to such a position in later thinking on his Control System and postulates two possible variations - both of which can nevertheless still be seen to be rooted, to a large extent, in a materialist outlook

(i) An alien intelligence, possibly earth-based, could be training us toward a new type of behaviour...(ii) Alternately, in a Jungian interpretation of the same theme, the human collective unconscious could be projecting ahead of itself the imagery which is necessary for our own long-term survival (Vallee, 1991, p. 254)

Neither of these possibilities can be seen to equate to Kripal’s ‘wild vision’ without massaging the term, Vallee’s two options here seem to lack transcendence and a connection to the numinous. In the first variant (it is perhaps significant he uses the phrase ‘earth-based’) human behaviour is a known thing, we are

merely being shown (or trained into) a new *form* of something we are familiar with. That is, we receive merely another behaviour to add to our stock of existing behaviours which will then, *in toto*, become the new norm. The second variant is again rooted, this time more squarely, in existing human experience. That is not to say that the encounter phenomenon cannot be human (on a deep mythic level, it surely is) but rather that the insights gained in such a reading go to build the human world *as we know it*. Not to *transform* that world but to add to it. As humans we struggle to survive, here the gnosis merely shows us new methods of doing so, of evolving and becoming more efficient. Again, the transformation and transcendence which are so marked in the experience itself do not figure in the outcomes of that experience. It's almost as if, in this reading, the new behaviours or the information regarding survival could be delivered, perhaps more effectively, by any other means than a paranormal or mystical one. Our argument so far - that the encounter phenomenon is a form of initiatory experience - can here be framed as a third variant to Vallee's control system hypothesis; one that introduces the imaginal as an intermediate position between his two polarities and which, in line with Kripal's 'wild vision', is initiatory in aspect. It does not aim to deceive, rather it is us, as humans, who, under the spell of surface appearance, fall back into literalising. It does not aim to control our behaviour but rather, our views and behaviour evolve necessarily as a result of the encounter. We noted above the twofold dimension of the initiatory experience; the primary experience of the initial progenitor and, a subsequent coalesced narrative which informs those who may, or may not, have had similar experiences. The two distinct experiences are different in both typology and form but we would argue that just as the visionary experience is a *catalyst* for gnosis and not gnosis in and of itself, then so can secondary narratives be seen to serve the same function. That is to say; such narratives can inspire towards a 'seeing through' or 'wild vision' in themselves. As visionary experience is essentially mythic and stems from the same 'other' as poetry, music and art, one would expect initiatory elements capable of signalling towards gnosis (in our current sense) to manifest in those areas also. We would argue that some music and poetry as well as folklore such as fairy tales and trickster stories are examples of this and, in effect, represent an ongoing wisdom tradition but it is also possible that there are relatively recent examples in modern literature and fiction. We will now examine one such possible example.

The Godgame

John Fowles' 1966 novel *The Magus* revolves around a disaffected young man, Nicholas Urfe, who takes a teaching job on a Greek island school to escape his banal existence in London. There he meets a reclusive millionaire, Maurice Conchis, owner of Bourani, an estate on the island. Over repeated visits, Nicholas - and the reader - are drawn into what Fowles has referred to as 'Conchis' heuristic mill' (Fowles, 1997, p. 10) which is a form of psychodrama effected by Conchis relating stories from his life which Nicholas finds subsequently enacted in a form of meta-theatre. He is presented with a "series of mysteries in the form of masks and masquerades, during which [he] penetrates one mask (or masque) only to discover another behind it" (Rubenstein, 1975, p. 332). These scenes are initially presented as real events which Nicholas has 'accidentally' stumbled across and it is only when he has peeled off several layers of the onion that he is allowed to realise they are enacted by members of an acting troupe hired by Conchis. At times Nicholas identifies as the heroic mythic figure in a labyrinthine maze, at others he feels a form of self-pitying victimhood, angry and resentful what he sees as an unforgiveable and deceptive manipulation but Conchis is essentially honest about his creations, he merely asks Nicholas "to 'just pretend to believe'. Nicholas' response, for most of the novel, is to resist mystery, by trying to find reasonable and rational explanations for what is happening to him" (ibid., p. 330)¹⁸. Conchis' programme ultimately culminates in an initiation or 'judgement' where Nicholas must judge both his 'teachers' and himself. Having passed through Conchis' crucible, Nicholas still tries to rationalise the experience and on his return to England plays detective by attempting to track down the actors and contact others who've had previous experience of Conchis' system or the 'godgame' (the name by which the actors refer to the 'play' and which Fowles had initially intended as a title¹⁹). The novel ends in ambiguous manner when Nicholas - changed by the experience yet still enamoured of the process - believing himself a player in the godgame's climatic final scene, his last hurrah on centre-stage, realises that there is no culmination, that "there were no watching eyes... the theatre was empty. It was not a theatre" (Fowles, 1997, p. 654). The game had ended, and he is, as at the beginning of his journey, alone.

¹⁸ An interesting parallel to Conchis' 'just pretend to believe' may be seen in the Schirmer abduction case cited above, where the aliens' parting message was "We want you to believe in us, but not too much" (Kripal, 2011, p. 273)

¹⁹ "I did intend Conchis to exhibit a series of masks representing human notions of God, from the supernatural to the jargon-ridden scientific" (Fowles, 1997, p. 10)

There are three aspects of Fowles' novel which can be drawn out and shown to have immediate relevance to the ideas outlined in this paper, the first of these being a parallel between Conchis' 'system' and our reading of the encounter experience. The focal point of *The Magus* is the overarching theme of a trickster-like figure who orchestrates theatrical vignettes which draw on mythic motifs, many of which contain absurdist elements to the extent that "one is never certain whether to regard his masquerades as the work of a wise man or a madman" (Rubenstein, 1975, p. 336). Fowles makes no direct reference to our primary focus of faerie-lore, purported alien encounters or NDEs²⁰ but nevertheless is clearly approaching the same liminal space from an alternative, philosophically based, direction. Just as in the UFO mythos, Conchis likewise employs a series of masks, these may be of a different genre but they draw on the same underlying mythic motifs and are employed to the same ends that, in this reading, the encounter experience is structured to lead to. Conchis' 'system', in short, is initiatory in the same manner we have been arguing the encounter experience is. Paul Lorenz, in outlining Fowles' philosophical position, references Heraclitus' concept of 'whole sight' (echoes of Kripal's 'wild vision') and has it thus

a person with whole sight knows that 'we all live at a crossroads of irreconcilable poles' whose very irreconcilability 'constitutes our escape'. With whole sight, a person knows that 'the many are like an audience under the spell of a conjuror, seemingly unable to do anything but serve as material for the conjuror's tricks' even though 'the true destiny of man is to become a magician himself' (Lorenz, 1996, p. 71)

To enable the chosen participant to achieve 'whole sight' then can be seen to be the ultimate aim of Conchis' manipulations... to frame the appropriate circumstances in which they may possibly achieve a form of gnosis. It is perhaps significant that the participants in the godgame are seen somehow to be 'chosen' for participation (Conchis at one point asks Nicholas if he is 'elect' and tells him that he thinks he might be), just as in many encounter experiences the witness is informed they have been singled-out to undergo the experience - as in the case of Whitley Strieber for example²¹

²⁰ Nevertheless, Fowles does touch on some motifs implicit in the UFO mythos. At one point he uses hypnosis on Nicholas to induce a form of Out of Body Experience and there is reference to possible extra-terrestrial life in the motif of a pamphlet about telepathy which Conchis gives to Nicholas and which is entitled "On Communication With Other Worlds" (Fowles, 1997, p. 190)

²¹ Kripal in framing Strieber's experiences as shamanic, states that his experiences centre around "a single word uttered by the almond-eyed female visitor: She told him that he had been 'chosen'" (Kripal and Strieber, 2016, p. 195)

The second parallel is that of structure. There is overlap here because Fowles is clearly basing his work around a mythic framework, specifically one which “corresponds to the pattern of the labyrinth, in which each line of pursuit leads to a dead end of false corner” (Rubenstein, 1975, p. 330). Fowles conflates this mythic aspect with his concept of the *domaine* - which signifies both Bourani and the mysteries enacted there - a place set apart from Nicholas’ workaday life teaching on the island. It is essentially a liminal space, a place of the Imaginal: “The domaine is privileged and special; but it is also by its very nature a place of temporary rather than permanent residence. Its function is to encourage learning and change” (Loveday, 1985, p. 32). To further underline this point Conchis states that the name Bourani itself means both ‘water’ (which is implicitly read as signifying baptism and rebirth) and ‘death’ (which again underlines these motifs)²². Rojcewicz (1986, p. 141) has outlined 10 motifs which he has shown appear continuously in extraordinary encounters (i.e. UFO/abductions, NDEs and OBEs and Shamanic experience), these motifs are:

- 1) Feelings of friendliness, love etc.
- 2) Being Chosen: ‘mission motif’
- 3) Instruction/Enlightenment
- 4) Passing through material objects
- 5) Beings of light/unusual lights
- 6) Journeys to nonordinary realms
- 7) Tunnels/Enclosures/Borders/Limits
- 8) (Nearly) Ineffable
- 9) Revelatory Moments
- 10) Psychic Manifestations

Practically all of these motifs are clearly present in *The Magus* in explicit or implicit form. On the basic level the story is essentially a love story (1) with the protagonist selected by Conchis (2) to play the central role. The *masques* are instructional and, as we have seen above, designed to lead to greater self-knowledge (3). (4, 5, 7 and 8) are evident in the hypnosis experience (Fowles, 1997, pp. 236-238) where Conchis makes Nicholas focus on a star which becomes a bright and unusual light. He then experiences an OBE. Revelatory moments (9) occur throughout the book, being a major theme and part of Conchis’

²² Fowles makes play with words throughout the novel. The letters of Nicholas and Conchis overlap to a degree and it is stressed that the ‘ch’ in Conchis is soft – i.e Conchis equals ‘conscious’. Similarly, Nicholas’ surname, Urfe, is surely to be read as signifying ‘earth’.

personal aim to engender and psychic elements (10) are present in both the tone of the book (Fowles has said he was aiming for an atmosphere akin to *The Turn of the Screw*) and in the ostensible subject-matter of the *masques* as well as figuring in several of Conchis' conversations. These motifs are amplified in observations by Jarell who makes the following points which can additionally be seen to have clear parallels in Fowles' narrative:

The encounter is perceived and often described as nonsensical.

There is a marked theatricality to the encounter, as if the occurrence is being manipulated or staged

The encounter is connected to our physical reality... [often occurs] near bodies of water

A link between the encounter and death

A forced cognitive dissonance created in the human mind [allowing] startling and revelatory connections
(Jarell, 2016, pp. 69-70)

The third aspect to consider is perhaps the most subtle. It impinges on the effect of a *narrative* of an experience in terms of a wider audience, as opposed to the experience itself at first-hand. In such a reading we can draw a distinction between what may be termed the 'outcome' of a visionary experience for the initial percipient and the 'outcome' of those who receive the narrative at second-hand. In some cases, these second-hand receivers, being the majority, may well come to be seen as a source of authority whilst being at variance with the reading of the initial experiencer. Thus, it is possible for, say, Whitley Strieber to reject the view that his experiences were extra-terrestrial in nature whilst supporters of the extra-terrestrial hypothesis refer to his experiences as evidence for their position. A similar divergence can be seen in our earlier assessment of orthodox religious dogma in relation to the shamanic and visionary experiences of the founders. If we accept such a divergence, then we open ourselves to the possibility – and surely, it's no more than this – that the initial experience may not be of primary importance. It is undoubtedly centred on the individual, but its wider intent might be for the culture as a whole or for collective individuals drawn to the narrative. That is to say, retellings of initiations may not actually be 'authentic', they may be fictions intended as signposts or pointers to a wider audience as to the *possibility* of what is being described²³. That is to say, they are not an initiation as described but, nevertheless, are initiatory in as much they function to open our eyes to the possibility of different ways

²³ *The Magus* may be seen as part of a wider grouping of 20th century cultural artefacts revolving around the idea of masks, ambiguous manipulation of an individual and absurdist/mystery motifs utilised to bring the protagonist to greater self-knowledge. See Appendix 2 for a brief discussion of further examples.

of seeing. Fowles himself was writing with a similar concept in mind and, like Conchis, he “is playing a godgame with the minds of his readers: he is experimenting with the possibility that his readers’ eyes can be opened to the expanded world of Heraclitean ‘whole sight’... the godgame is an instrument of liberation” (Lorenz, 1996, p. 70). Here, though, the liberation and sight being provoked are not by any means a ‘conversion’, nor a sudden perception of a pre-existing monolithic truth. For Fowles, one is either creating one’s own reality or accepting one created by another. Conchis leads Nicholas to realise that the maze has no centre, and on peeling back another layer, to wonder if there even is a minotaur? Yet another mask is removed and another realisation – one which, for some people, afraid of illusory monsters, is a step too far: if there is no centre then can *I become* my own centre? Can I create my own story rather than participate in someone else’s? One that they themselves, when at the stage I now find myself, created? There may be nothing behind the masks... or perhaps the masks are waiting for us to inhabit them

In a world without absolutes, Fowles suggests, the possibility of constructing one’s own reality or of participating in someone else’s carries with it an even greater responsibility, for one must penetrate the masks and masques which define the relationship between self and world in order to determine one’s own center. (Rubenstein, 1975, p. 333).

The masks being unpeeled are the layers of one’s own self.

The Curtain Closes

The argument advanced to this point is that the encounter experience acts as a form of initiatory rite of passage from normative human cognition into more spiritual modes of perception, according to the extent that the experience is *lived through* – i.e. claimed as one’s own and incorporated into the self. Literalising of the experience is always barrier to this process and, conversely, abandoning the false security of a fixed position where we know the truth’ leads, paradoxically, to greater knowledge.

It is the kind of knowledge that re-realizes the unity of subject and object, a supra-rational knowing of the self in relation to nature. It is Gnosis... a change takes place, a change in the perspective of the abductee *due to taking the time to interpret* the meaning of the event... the abductors become partners or, better yet, teachers. (Peters, 2014, pp. 247-248)

As suggested above, achieving this knowledge may even be possible at one remove and not just available to the individual percipient. Recent NDE research (Tassell-Matamua *et al*, 2017) has shown that subjects experiencing an NDE “reported significantly greater spiritual transformation after a traumatic event, compared to those who experienced a traumatic event but did not have a NDE” (ibid., p. 97) and suggests that merely *learning* about such experiences “facilitates psycho-spiritual change” (ibid., p. 112). If the idea that such experiences can be interpreted as a form of school is valid and, if the ‘teaching’ extends to the culture at large as suggested above, then one would expect to see the encounter experience itself develop over time as the ‘students’ themselves learn more. This is in fact what do see in terms of the UFO phenomenon: the earliest encounters were characterised by ‘contactees’ who had literalised their experience (albeit at the explicit suggestion of the entities involved) to form belief in beings from Mars, Venus and elsewhere. As the phenomenon developed into the abduction mythos, the spiritual element that was already present to a lesser extent, became more marked and moved to the fore. As noted previously²⁴, cultural motifs can be seen to inform the *form of expression* of visionary experience, leaving, as it were the actual content or message from the ‘Other’ intact... one recalls Iamblichus’ comment that “gods, formless in themselves, require subtle-material daimons to execute their commands on Earth.” (Gallant, 2011, p. 73). If this ‘subtle-material’ is, in effect, drawn from prior conditionings and pre-conceptions of

²⁴ See Appendix 1 for examples of how belief plays into anomalous encounters and Whitley Strieber’s acknowledgement of motifs from childhood movies emerging in his later experiences.

the percipient as in the case of Strieber's B-movies, then it follows that it could take any form present in the subject's consciousness. If the witness is of a religious disposition, then the experience will present in a framework commensurate with that belief. An example of this can be seen in the case of Betty Andreasson where "The religious background provides the *conceptual set*, the interpretive filter, so to speak, through which Betty tries to comprehend her experience" (Peters, 2014, p. 185). Andreasson's encounter occurred in 1967 and is one of the most researched of UFO abduction cases. It follows the stereotypical patterns known from abduction lore but is notable for divergence in several areas: the encounter began in Betty's home (as opposed to in a car) and numerous members of her family were present although under some sort of temporary suspended animation for the duration of the experience. Betty was taken out of her house to a craft and there subjected to the usual physical examination. The craft was apparently parked on a hill and, after the examination, Betty was taken "via a tunnel to another world, seemingly underground" (Evans, 1987, p. 163)²⁵ and the experience culminated with an ecstatic encounter with a bird-like entity that Betty later recognised as the mythological phoenix. During this experience Betty was communicating telepathically with the aliens, one of whom was called Quazgaa²⁶, and expressed her confusion at not knowing what was happening to her

To this they respond, as if speaking with one voice rather than many, "I have chosen you." Betty has been chosen for something, just as the Old Testament prophets were chosen by God to deliver a message to Israel. "Are you the Lord God?" Betty asks in near panic. "*I shall show you as your time goes by*", was the equivocal reply. The space voice comforts and encourages Betty, asking her to wait patiently and to trust God. *Her fear is a problem.* "I can release you," says the voice "but you must release yourself of that fear through my son." (Peters, 2014, p. 181)

Several key elements are evident here; the 'chosen' motif discussed above seems integral somehow to such initiatory experiences. The 'time' motif is also pertinent here given the emphasis the entities in

²⁵ Note the parallels to Faerie-lore here. Faeries are associated with hills and hill forts and the underground. The tunnel also is evocative of the NDE experience. See also (Lahood, 2006) quoted below for the example of shaman/midwives and hill motifs.

²⁶ Whitley Strieber has noted that Quazgaa corresponds phonetically to a Gaelic term meaning 'of the cross'; "The fact that a visitor approaching a Christian and providing a deeply Christian experience to that person would have a name translatable from an obscure language as "of the cross" is nothing less than astonishing to me" (Strieber, 1988, pp. 47-48)

encounter experiences seem to place on this aspect – ‘*your*’ time here is perhaps significant. Finally, we have the attendant fear as an underlying concomitant of the experience as a whole. What is striking here is the overall Christian framework of the experience. Betty had been a devout Christian before this encounter and, indeed, she at first assumed - despite the presence of a UFO and ‘aliens’ – that the experience was an angelic visitation with no extra-terrestrial element whatsoever, in fact she knew nothing of UFOs and was not interested in the subject. The most interesting aspect of this encounter though is the inclusion of elements that are not Christian – the phoenix and the archetypal examination motifs. If the experience was framing itself in a purely Christian context, why include these elements? The phoenix being a symbol of death and rebirth could equally have been replaced with a Christ-like figure without breaking the narrative. Perhaps the phoenix in this placement represents a metalogical or absurd facet of the experience to Betty’s mind, if not our own. In relation to the Christian framework of Betty’s experience Hilary Evans has postulated that

encounter experiences are required to conform, overall, to an accepted format or pattern, and only when that has been observed are they adapted to the individual’s needs... the most important thing encounter cases have in common is, paradoxically, what they *don’t* have in common: that despite ostensible similarities each is a one-off experience created with the individual witness in mind. (Evans, 1987, p. 181)

The phoenix²⁷, as in Betty’s experience, is, of course, a major symbol of death and rebirth, both motifs being present in a vast majority of visionary experiences. As noted again by Evans, Mircea Eliade has identified a stage of the ritual process termed *regressus ad uterum* “in which the initiate ‘clears’ himself for his new life by returning symbolically to the womb” (ibid., p. 238). Themes and motifs relating to birth/rebirth are so prevalent in such encounters (note the tunnel in Betty’s experience above) that it has led several researchers to postulate birth-trauma as an explanation for the experience. Undeniably there is a strong connection to birth (essentially rebirth) but the birth-trauma theory is, in our present reading, another example of the literalisation of a metaphorical element and the consequent denuding of its transformative and initiatory power. Nevertheless, there are strong links to birth motifs that do, in fact, straddle the material as well as the metaphoric, researching NDEs in relation to male pregnancy-related crises, Gregg Lahood has drawn attention to

²⁷ It is interesting to note that other abductees have experienced phoenix motifs. See Fowler (1982, p. 32) for examples.

the profound and complex relationship between female midwife/shamans, birth, death, and alterity-scapes found in many cultures. Midwives too can fly into hyperspace in the service of birth-giving women... In some cultures, such visionary states are seen as evidence of “*divine election*” of a midwife (Lahood, 2006, p. 223)

(emphasis mine). Lahood goes on to give other examples that conjoin death motifs with those of birth/rebirth including the experience of a midwife/shaman which parallels both shamanic and abduction lore and has both an initiatory and a teaching aspect: “she suddenly found herself in a huge carpeted chamber inside the hill. On a dais sat a number of deceased midwives completely white from head to toe” (Paul and Paul cited in Lahood, 2006, p. 223). Note here that the midwives ‘summoned’ the participant in order to instruct her in her/their vocation and again, similar to the Andreasson case, the setting is firstly *upon* a hill where the midwife was walking and from there she’s transported to *inside* the hill underground. Read as *regressus ad uterum* the motifs of underground rooms, caves where prophets receive revelation and perhaps even the UFOs themselves as crafts, can be interpreted as symbolising the womb from which the experiencer will emerge reborn. On another level structured craft are also perhaps viewable as the soul – or what the soul will eventually come to be. In the early days of the emerging UFO mythos, before abduction reports came to dominate the narrative, there was a common repeating faintly ludicrous metalogic in encounter scenarios; a craft is on the ground, apparently stalled or broken-down, and strangely clad diminutive humanoids are attempting to fix it with unsuitable tools, tinkering with the machinery by adjusting aspects of the outside of the craft. When disturbed they rush inside their ship, now miraculously fixed, and soar off into outer space. We don’t hear such reports now, today the witness is more likely to find themselves aboard with no preamble but, nevertheless, the humanoids are still ‘tinkering with the machinery’ - only now the machinery is the human being themselves.

In the course of writing this dissertation I mentioned to a friend the subject matter and he told me he himself had undergone an encounter experience. He was looking out over a lake ‘waiting for something to happen’ though not sure why he had this feeling. At some point he saw a structured craft hovering over the lake, this occasioned no surprise, oddly, and the next thing he realised he was aboard the craft. He only remembered one element of this encounter which was – in his present recollection – over very quickly and he was back standing by the lake with no UFO in sight. The snippet of memory that he

retains is the following: he was faced with an archetypal alien who was said he could ask any question. There was a pot of coins in the corner of the room so he asked what the purpose of this was and the alien replied that ‘where we come from we don’t have money – so people when they visit leave the coins they have because they want to live in a world without money like we do’. My friend found this a beautiful and comforting ‘dream’ because, he too, has ‘always wanted to live in a world without money’ and to him, this experience signifies the possibility. I didn’t mention to him the possible deeper readings of the experience because it is his experience and he owns the rights of interpretation for himself but for me, I thought instead of the Styx and the Ferryman, of Hermes as psychopomp and of the underworld being the ultimate ‘country with no money’... but that’s just me. As Hilary Evans has said “the psychodrama of the UFO abduction is simply the outer shell of the experience, chosen because of the currently available myths it happens to be the one most likely to win social acceptability; inside the public shell is the private experience.” (Evans, 1987, p. 239).

The link between the encounter experience and the Dead has been noted by many researchers. It is a key element in faerie-lore where the faeries are denizens of the underworld and, as has been noted earlier, there is a large degree of crossover between the Trickster archetype, particularly in his projection as Hermes, and the function of the psychopomp, the guide to the otherworld. Whitley Strieber has been explicit about the connection between his ‘visitor experience’ and conceptions of death and dying, going as far as to view the living as “students in a school where the visitors are the teachers and the dead are the graduates” (Robertson, 2014, p. 69). The idea of life as a ‘school’ is common in contemporary New-Age circles but its significance here is subtler and more nuanced²⁸. In Strieber’s reading “The aliens themselves stand in as figures for the future human” (Drysdale, 2008, p. 115) and the experience itself represents the first stirrings of an evolutionary leap whereby the imaginal is no longer “confined to the after-life realm but has spilled over into the seeming solidity of our sticks-and-stones world.” (Talbot, 1996, p. 281).

²⁸ Many experiencers of NDEs report arriving at similar conclusions. See for example J Timothy Green’s 2001 Case Study: “she now sees life as a sort of ‘school for the spirit’: we take on physical form to come here to learn specific lessons... this is a commonly held belief among individuals who have had deep NDEs.” (Green, 2001, pp. 214-215)

Just as the outer form of Strieber's experiences are informed by the Hollywood movies of his youth, the inner form can be seen to draw explicitly on the teachings of the Armenian mystic George Gurdjieff²⁹. Speaking of the 'visitors' Strieber states "I noticed from the beginning that my relationship with them was structured around ideas I had learned in the Gurdjieff work" (Kripal and Strieber, 2016, p. 109). Strieber speaks specifically of Gurdjieff's concept of triads – the idea that a passive and a negative force, when in opposition, need a third reconciling force to progress, which, if not present, can be artificially provided by the esoteric 'school' - but the influence runs much deeper into the nature of the 'esoteric school' itself. For Gurdjieff, true liberation comes through intentional suffering (i.e. submission to discomfort) in order to break down the individual ego which is illusory and false. Esoteric schools then, in this sense, are structured in a manner designed to achieve this end. In many senses Gurdjieff's teaching methods were those of Fowles' Conchis writ large: he acted a part in order to, essentially, bring his pupils face to face with the facets of themselves they would rather not face. This occasioned a form of humiliation which has been interpreted by writers such as Storr³⁰ as being merely the exercise of Gurdjieff's own unbounded ego but both the practice and engendered experience are ancient and directly related to spiritual transformation³¹. Gurdjieff - like Conchis and like the 'aliens' too - was playing a part, his teaching was also a psychodrama: "our feeling of this 'acting' in G. was exceptionally strong. Among ourselves we often said we never saw him and never would. In any other man so much 'acting' would have produced an impression of falsity" (Ouspensky, 1980 p. 33). The purpose of such projections is to break the ego, to undermine and deny the self which stands in the way of one's inner essence's perception of the divine - to

²⁹ As a sidenote an interesting study might be made on the influence of Gurdjieff on the modern UFO mythos. His book "All and Everything" or "Beelzebub's Tales to his Grandson" (Gurdjieff, 1950) is based around the trickster figure Beelzebub (not, in this case, 'evil') who is travelling through the universe on a spaceship, visiting different planets and meeting alien beings. In one of his discourses he talks of a planetary body split-off from earth's moon which he calls 'Anulios'. There is perhaps some parallel here with the planet 'Lanulos' which some early contactees claimed as the alien's home planet. See for example "Visitors from Lanulos" (Derenberger, 2014)

³⁰ "Gurdjieff was a dictator. He had the capacity so completely to humiliate his disciples that grown men would burst into tears" (Storr, 1997, p. 28)

³¹ In researching this aspect, I came across the following beautiful quote for which I have been unable to find a reference but which appears in the comment section of Reijo Oksanen's blog article "Gurdjieff and Orthodox Christianity" (Oksanen, 2011). I reproduce here:

"I wanted to get into the Kingdom of Heaven, and I tried one gate after another, but there were always so many people trying to get in that I could not even get through the crowd. And then I came to a little gate where there was no one trying to get in, and I got in very easily. Over the gate was written 'Humiliation'".

deny the ego its petty desires. As Hyde puts it in *Trickster Makes This World*: “Likes and dislikes are the lapdogs and guard dogs of the ego, busy all the time, panting and barking at the gates of attachment and aversion and thereby narrowing perception and experience.” (Hyde, 1999, p. 142). There is indeed something of the Trickster in this form of esoteric teaching – everything is ‘upside-down’. The fool is also wise, the things we desire are not the things our soul really needs, and the trickster/thief is the divine messenger who freely bestows gifts. Georg Feuerstein in *Holy Madness* (2006) has called such teaching ‘Crazy Wisdom’³² noting how such teachers instruct “in ways that are designed to startle or shock the conventional mind” (ibid., p. 3). For Feuerstein “the trickster is the mythological precursor of the crazy-wisdom guru who also sees it as his or her task to tear off all our cultural blinders and rational pretensions, so that we may see reality as it really is” (ibid., p. 6). This ‘tearing-away’ of necessity will seem like a violation and a humiliation – but in reality, it is not intended as such. Like the trickster’s tales, things here are ‘upside-down’ – what seems like hell may well, in the final analysis, be a salvation.

³² See Appendix 3 for a brief overview of ‘Crazy Wisdom’ and the concept of the Holy Fool as a background to the Trickster elements in the encounter experience.

Conclusion

The time has come to sum up. We have suggested one reading of the encounter experience as that of being akin to a Mystery School in which it is possible, even at one remove, to gain insight and liberation that is tantamount to a personal gnosis. It is important to remember that the argument here has not been that this is what such phenomena actually *are* in an absolute sense – for such an essentialising would nullify the possibility of the transformation it offers – but rather, that such experiences are mirrors that reflect where we ourselves are and the potential capacities we, as individuals, may develop. These experiences can function as a school if we can see them as functioning as a school. That does not mean that this is the correct manner of seeing because there is no correct manner of seeing. There is only what we can see and whether we can see deeper and beyond. One person’s reflection can never be identical to another’s and this may be an important point: one lesson we can take is that of how to stand on our own feet as individuals. It’s a hard lesson because the encounters are confusing. They seem to *demand* we find an explanation, but, as Kenneth Ring has said

We are meant to be baffled! Only by confronting and yielding to the unknowable – by rigorously avoiding the temptation to deny, or explain away, these phenomena or try to find some conventional explanation for them – can we, as a species, evolve in consciousness. (Ring, 1992, p. 246)

The phenomenon is inviting us to deeper seeing, but it is showing, not telling. We ourselves have to make the effort to see, that work won’t be done for us. What appears to be deceit only seems so if that’s what our mirror reflects from our inner self. We need to see beyond. Deceit may even be necessary. An attractive but false outward aspect (a mask, in fact), may serve to lure us in, to deceive us into “embarking on a prospective quest whose ordeals would otherwise deter us.” (Harpur, 2002, p. 287). Likewise, with other negative elements such as humiliation. What appears as humiliation to one observer might be seen almost as a cleansing to another – all are our own unique and individual ways of seeing reflected back to ourselves, along with the added possibility of real personal change – of seeing deeper. As Gallant has observed in relation to the marked motifs of ‘humiliation’ in the UFO phenomenon:

A “close encounter” will tend to open closed minds to new possibilities and disturb complacency and pride. An abduction is a kind of humiliation that undermines the ego, forces a realization of ignorance and dependence. (Gallant, 2011, p. 88)

The ‘theatrical nature’ of many encounter experiences is significant. In many ways it appears as if “everything happens as though the phenomenon was putting on an act for the witness’ benefit” (Evans, 1987, p. 208) and, on one level, this is arguably the case. On another level though it may be seen as part of the absurdist metalogic – a form of ‘get out’ clause which is essentially saying: ‘here is an opportunity to transcend and leave behind many aspects of your life. It will cause you pain and fear with no guarantees. But if you don’t feel you can do it then here are reasons why this whole thing is insane and which you can use to justify your rejection and carry on as normal’. It is the phenomenon presenting itself in a way which will enable someone who has had a foretaste of the numinous to reject it without feeling loss or remorse. Another way of rejecting taking the step into the unknown is, as we have seen, to make the unknown ‘known’... to literalise the phenomenon and take the position that we ‘*know*’ the answer: extra-terrestrials are visiting earth. And our governments know it too. In this way such experiences are shifted back into the safe ground of the material. We don’t need to make any effort. Everything is as it appears to be on the surface and the reason the surface appearance is not universally known is because there is a cover-up at governmental level. Case closed.

All of these exit strategies (and more) are built-in to the phenomenon and offered to us should we feel we need them. Alternatively, other things are on offer too. Less tangible things and perhaps, in many ways, less desirable too; ‘better horrors’, to assign a slightly different implication to Kripal’s memorable phrase.

As Whitley Strieber has it

Real transformation has nothing to do with gaining a better life in this world... transformation for a Zen monk, a Moslem Sufi, a Catholic or a Jehovah’s Witness is the same: it is a matter of delivering yourself into the possession of God... this involves giving up the “self”, which feels just like dying. (Strieber, 2016, p. 225)

There are many ways of this ‘dying’, this ‘giving up the self’. Traditionally, religion has been the main means of embarking on this approach to God, but there have been others. Most likely such methods appear and evolve in accordance with the cultural expressions of a given period and it seems likely that the encounter experience is just the latest iteration of an unspoken and unnamed tradition that has been deeply intertwined with us for the duration of our human story. Even the word ‘tradition’ in this context is misleading, for we are talking of something ‘Other’. Just as Iamblichus said that the Gods, being unknowable, needed material daimons to manifest but were not synonymous with these, then so does the

'Other' need an outer form that is not itself in order to be apprehended. Sometimes this form can be religion, sometimes art or music, and, yes, sometimes an experience of the anomalous. It is none of these things, but it *informs* and inhabits these things. They are the mask. The trick is to see beyond the outward mask to the inner essence of the 'Other'. If we fail to do so – and this is the human default position, no doubt – then we can only literalise the experience, what other choice do we have? But there is hope of 'salvation, for any form the 'Other' takes also carries with it the function of teaching us how to see... to bypass the reflected mirrors which only show a distortion of what we already are, and see-through to what we could eventually be. We need to lose our habits of naming, of pinning things down, of needing answers and many other things besides, but all these things, the experience itself can teach us. All we need to do is to surrender, to 'die', paradoxically to be reborn. This tradition which is not a tradition

is not a body of knowledge or system of thought. Rather it is a way of knowing and thinking, a way of seeing the world, which poets and visionaries have always possessed but which even they cannot stand outside of or formulate. Thus, one cannot be taught the tradition... one can only be initiated into it. Simply finding it out for yourself can be, like a quest, an act of self-initiation. (Harpur, 2003, p. 287)

In the final analysis, the encounter experience represents a mystery, but one in the archaic sense of the word and one which essentially represents a call to us to embark on a journey, not in alien craft on a voyage to distant planets, but a journey more immediate and far more human; a journey within to the underworld of our own selves on the quest to find out who we really are and what we might possibly eventually be.

Appendix 1 – Modalities of Belief

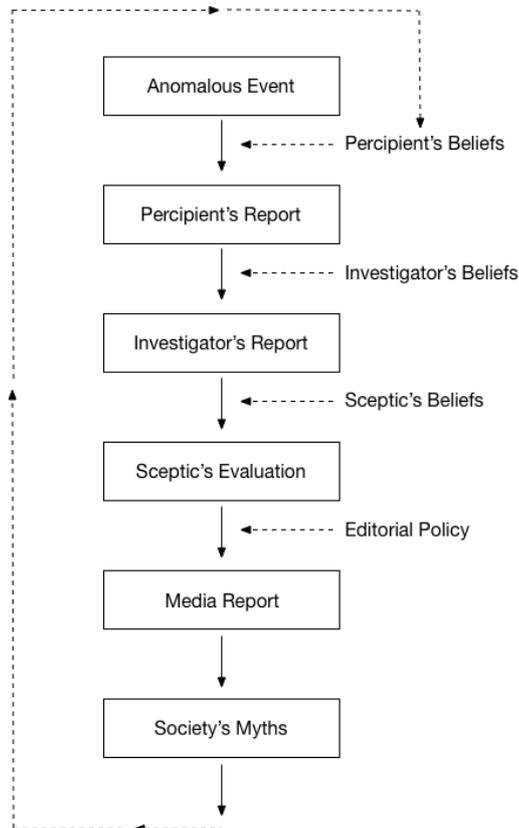
Ted Peters makes an important point in relation to the study of anomalous phenomena, stating that we “can never understand something that is absolutely new, that is radically different from anything we have experienced prior. The process of coming to understand something new or unusual involves comparing it with things that are familiar and already understood... we understand what we see in terms of a pre-existing ‘perceptual set’, in terms of what we expect to see.” (Peters, 2014, p. 36). In addition to the ‘perceptual set’ we also operate under the aegis of a ‘conceptual set’, which contains “everything taught to us by our culture, parents and peers, plus the accumulation of our own personal experiences” (ibid.). This core idea has been echoed and expanded by psychologist Mark Moravec with his ‘Model of Belief’ (see Figure 1 below) which illustrates how anomalous experience evolves over time in conformity to cultural filters. Moravec’s model undoubtedly holds good for a large percentage of anomalous occurrences but, in our context, has one weakness in that it makes no allowance for the anomalous event *itself* to be a key factor in the alteration of the beliefs of the percipient³³. Nevertheless, the core proposition of how beliefs feed into anomalous experience and are adapted in a form of loop is significant to our present study. An interesting example that appears to validate this model has been highlighted by Martin Kottmeyer. He draws attention to the fact that the first ‘flying saucer’ sighting by Kenneth Arnold in 1947 was not, in fact a sighting of flying saucers at all – this was a misinterpretation by a journalist Bill Bequette. Arnold was describing the *movement* of the objects which was ‘like a saucer if you skip it across the water’ and specified the objects were ‘not circular’ (Kottmeyer, 1993). Bequette in his article, misreported the saucer reference as referring to the *shape* of the objects. Thereafter, as Kottmeyer points out, people *reported* flying saucers.

The phrase "flying saucers" provided the mold which shaped the UFO myth at its beginning. As time progressed people would draw them, looking as they sound like they look. They in turn shaped hoax photos and the imagery of films like *The Flying Saucer* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and dozens of alien invasion films and TV shows in the decades that followed. It remains the stereotype to the present day. By one tally 82% of the craft descriptions in alien abduction reports fall into the flying saucer category... Bequette's error may not prove to be the ultimate refutation of the extraterrestrial theory for everyone. But it does leave their advocates in one helluva paradox: Why would extraterrestrials redesign their craft to

³³ It should be noted here that this model was developed to address UFOs primarily in terms of anomalous light phenomena rather than intended to be applicable to encounter, abduction or other ‘interactive’ type cases.

conform to Bequette's mistake? (ibid.)

The relationship between the UFO phenomenon and contemporary science-fiction films is an interesting field of research, although beyond the scope of our enquiry here. Mark Pilkington has conducted numerous studies into this area and has outlined some of his conclusions in his article '*Screen Memories*' (Pilkington, 2000). It is interesting to note however, that this model does not 'explain away' the phenomenon and experiencers such as Whitley Strieber are well aware of the influence of popular culture on the experience of a percipient. Jeffrey Kripal reports Strieber as stating that "he was perfectly aware that his visionary experience of the visitors was deeply informed by the bad Sci-fi B movies that he had seen in such numbers as a kid...but he was also aware that something else and more was behind these visionary displays." (Kripal, 2014, p. 905). Kripal notes that Strieber went further (incidentally, this is a classic example of inverting the position that is the 'seeing through' or 'new vision' the encounter experience can engender) and observed "what we need to do now is make better science fiction movies so that future abduction experiences will be more positive and productive". (ibid.)



[Figure 1. **A Model of Belief.** (Clarke, 2013, p. 87) Source: ©Fortean Times/Mark Moravec/Bob Rickard.]

Appendix 2 – Godgame Motifs in Popular Culture

John Fowles 1966 novel *The Magus* is perhaps the closest cultural analogue to the initiatory model we have proposed for the encounter experience but there are several others worthy of note. T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* evokes a similar atmosphere at times as does Nigel Dennis' 1955 novel *Cards of Identity*. The narrative of Dennis' work centres around a group of people – ostensibly psychologists – who have formed a group called the 'Identity Club' that meets to present various case-studies. The case studies, however are of fictional patients and reflect the bias and preconceptions of the members. The book makes allusions to masks and implicitly also to masques where the narrative culminates in a Shakespearian dramatic production. One might mention also Doris Lessing's *Canopus in Argos* series for a more abstruse rendering of these motifs but perhaps the most apposite example can be seen in Patrick McGoochan's 17-part TV series *The Prisoner*. Joanne Morreale notes that "rather than providing a coherent narrative that could be effortlessly consumed, it was structured as an enigma that challenged viewers to interpret meaning... *The Prisoner* provides viewers with a cognitive 'jolt' that makes them aware of the instability of their point of view and interpretive frameworks." (Morreale, 2010, p. 180). Like Fowles' protagonist Nicholas, the unnamed central character of the series finds himself removed from the normal world and situated in a liminal *domaine*, The Village, where he is assigned the identity Number 6 and subjected to tests and riddles as he seeks to escape and find the identity of an unseen puppet-master Number 1, a director/controller figure who implied to have a role similar to that which Conchis fulfils in *The Magus*. At the culmination of the series in a climactic scene, Number 6 finally tracks down Number 1 and finds him dressed in a robe and wearing a mask. On pulling off this mask Number 6 sees another mask, that of a monkey and forcibly removes this one to find.... himself.

Appendix 3 – Crazy-Wisdom and Holy Fools

Gurdjieff's system was not claimed by him to be original but rather, a continuation of a form of hidden perennial teaching he had connected with over decades of travel in the Middle East and Central Asia and which he subsequently brought to the West. The teaching itself owes much to Sufism - both the Naqshbandi Sufis and Gurdjieff/Ouspensky schools term their teaching 'The Fourth Way' - and Gurdjieff overtly acknowledges the influence in several places. Of relevance to our theme here is his use of the sayings of the Sufi wise-fool Trickster Nasrudin who appears as "Mullah Nassr Eddin" in Beelezebub's Tales. As noted by Feuerstein, Nasrudin is 'upside-down' in this world symbolising how "all authentic spirituality is a great reversal of ordinary values, attitudes and actions.... Nasrudin is a symbol for the Sufi path of *metanoía* and reversal." (Feuerstein, 2006, p. 21).

This reversal is embodied in followers of the 'Path of Blame', the *Malāmatiyya*, mystics courting public censure through "apparently reprehensible conduct: pretending to engage in illicit sexual relations, behaving like a madman, sitting on a dunghill" (Baldick, 1989, p.17) and similar anti-social behaviour. The purpose of this behaviour is twofold depending on the state of the practitioner. If they are on the journey to God, then it serves an ascetic function as a means of breaking the ego – the humiliation aspect as discussed above in relation to visionary experience. If they have achieved 'enlightenment' and/or are a teacher in their own right then it serves the purpose of filtering intending disciples to see if they can see beyond the appearance to the truth of the matter or whether they merely assume that the individual is impious – i.e. to fall for the actor's display. This practice has been traced back to pre-Islamic times, notably to Isaac of Nineveh and the Nestorian Church (ibid.) and further, to the Greek school of the Cynics. Interestingly, here one might note in relation to both Gurdjieff and Whitley Strieber's observation above that the 'visitors' often present themselves in terms of triads, Isaac of Nineveh's "teachings are repeatedly set out in terms of a threefold model" (ibid.). It is also interesting, and perhaps significant that the attitude of 'attracting blame' in the religious context has strong links to acting, drama and plays/music of all kinds. It also transcends religions representing a form of unbroken esoteric esotericism as it were stretching from the Greek Cynics, through early Christianity and Islam to the Eastern Orthodox Holy Fools. Schimmel has noted that some Syrian Christian saints "would rather live as actors or rope-dancers than show their deep religious concern" (Schimmel, 1975, p. 86).

A final point of note is of interest here – the motif of the clown (and other theatrical figures such as Harlequin) occurs frequently in the encounter experience, most notably in the context of DMT experiences but also in the encounter experience proper. Rick Strassman has conducted intensive studies of DMT (and has argued convincingly for parallels between the DMT state and the visionary experience evident in Biblical prophethood) in which clowns figure prominently as an ongoing motif across many subject's experiences (Strassman, 2014). Clearly the clown is a trickster figure, according to Feuerstein “both the ritual clown and the spiritual adept can be said to represent the axis mundi, the world axis, are thus radically ‘concentric’. The world axis which connects Heaven and Earth, symbolises transcendence” (Feuerstein, 2006, p. 8) and, relating to the above comments, “ritual clowns can be looked on as institutionalized agents of antinomianism” (ibid., p. 10).

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Endnotes

Quote on p. 2 “...the whole to own.”

From the *Kasidah of Hâjî Abdû El-Yezdî* by Sir Richard Francis Burton. 1880.

Complete text available online at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/kas/index.htm>

Quote on p. 4 “...precious it would be!”

From Goethe's *Faust: Part One* – ‘Outside the City Gate’. Lines 1110-25. (1994), trans. David Luke. Oxford, OUP.