

‘Interstices of unreason’ and the Imaginal: an exploration

In the essay ‘Avatars of the Tortoise’ Borges cites Novalis: *‘The greatest sorcerer would be he who bewitches himself to the point of taking his own phantasmagorias for autonomous apparitions. Is that not our case?’*

‘I conjecture,’ responds Borges, *‘that it is our case. We, the indivisible divinity that operates within us, have dreamt the world. We have dreamt it resistant, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and firm in time. But we have consented within its architecture tenuous and eternal interstices of unreason to know that it is false.’*

We are the sorcerers, dreaming the world into existence, ‘consenting’ to beguiling ‘interstices of unreason’ (translated also as ‘chinks,’ ‘crevices,’ and ‘cracks’) that appear in the seemingly solid structure of this dream-world. As so often happens in Borges, this sequence, if explored with enthusiasm, spins into vertiginous loops, leading the reader into an unsettling yet entrancing state of confusion. The text itself becomes an interstice of unreason.

I have long been fascinated by these interstices of unreason, exploring many avenues of inquiry into these interstices. One is *mysticism*, another is *psychedelic*, and my contribution to the first Breaking Convention volume was a historical overview of the debate about the relationship between mystical and psychedelic states, a debate that bubbles on today. Another avenue is the *imaginal*. It is a word and network of associated ideas that vibrate at the heart of the mystical-psychedelic debate.

In my consideration of the imaginal, I share the fascination that Erik Davis feels for the *weird*. At the heart of psychedelic, he suggests, is something *weird*. The weird is present since earliest childhood, and so there is often a flavour of childhood fear and excitement in an adult psychedelic experience. He traces the word back from current machine-elf encounters through sci-fi comics, H.P. Lovecraft, Shelley, the Weird Sisters of Macbeth, to Beowulf and its Anglo-Saxon origins. Citing these historical sources, Erik peppers his chronicle with associated words that capture something of the weird: spectral, supernatural, creepy, disturbing, peculiar, strange, bizarre, wayward, spooky, irrational, thrilling, lowbrow, pulpy, not-for-polite-society, elvin, dreadful, ghostly, ghoully, crazy, zany, marvellous, odd, hoaxy, tricky, uncanny, queer, deviant, wiggly, sticky, goofy. These weird words are the wyrd.

If, as Davis suggests, the weird is ‘the uncanny’s crass country cousin’ (2017), the imaginal is the mysterious aunt, with a whiff of the exotic, the numinous, and, at times, the portentous. The imaginal, the psychedelic, the weird and the uncanny are kinfolk, sharing many an attribute; and the imaginal, like the weird, is present since earliest childhood.

Definitions of the word are variable, and its history reveals attempts to describe and explain something very difficult to describe and explain. In seeking the meaning I have explored some bizarre landscapes: the world of fairy and elves; daimons and numens of diverse hues, UFOlogy, Forteana (that's to say, the *dammned facts* that Charles Fort so meticulously recorded), Swedenborg's angels, psychedelic psychotherapy, Borges and Julio Cortázar's troubling short stories, Magical Realism, semiotics, conspiracy theories, dreams, art and poetry.

It is an imaginal adventure to explore the imaginal. It is a little-known word that dances between discourses, and as such carries different baggage than some of its associated meanings, such as spiritual, mystical, oneiric, anomalous, paraphenomenal, psychedelic, weird.

In its current usage, we owe the word to Frederic Myers: poet, classicist, philologist, co-founder of the Society for Psychical Research and compiler of thousands of anecdotes about hauntings, spirit communication, precognition, telepathy, and other strange powers and phenomena, many of which he was the first to name. Myers inhabited that exciting Victorian period of cross-fertilisation of discoveries, disciplines and methods, of those lofty-named scientific and magical Societies, Institutes and Orders. He collected and collated with tenacity, building a solid base upon which to present his visionary theories, and he delved into the newly-blooming language of cellular biology and retrieved the word *imaginal* to refer to those spooky phenomena he investigated so avidly.

The imaginal is rooted in the biological matrix. Like the *imaginal disks* or *cells* that survive the grub's metamorphosis in the cocoon to construct the new insect, so humans have hidden powers that occasionally manifest and which demonstrate to us our greater potential.

The grub comes from the egg laid by a winged insect, and a winged insect it must itself become; but meantime it must for the sake of its own nurture and preservation acquire certain larval characters—characters sometimes so complex that the observer may be excused for mistaking that larva for a perfect insect destined for no further change save death. Such larval characters, acquired to meet the risks of a temporary environment, I seem to see in man's earthly strength and glory. (Myers 2011: 97)

There is an inspiring quality to Myers' vision of metamorphosis in a chrysalis towards the *imago* – the perfect insect. It has a flavour of baptism, spiritual emergence, death and rebirth, a narrative germane to many spiritual traditions. Yet Myers wove the term with the emerging discourse of evolution. 'We are watching the emergence of unguessed potentialities from the primal germ,' Myers declared. 'The mind is no walled plot which a diagram will figure; it is a landscape with lines which stretch out of view, and an ever-changing horizon' (2011: 98).

The analogy is problematic, not least because evolution means different things in different discourses, but it is stirring and optimistic, bringing into play an enticing teleological mythos.

Metamorphosis, mutation, growth, adaptation, development, ascent, evolution. These words are great attractors. The grub-butterfly image has a simple parable quality to it that has ensured its survival.¹

So why the *imaginal*? Why not the *imaginary* or the *imagination*? What is special about this word? Jeffrey Kripal writes in *Authors of the Impossible*:

Myers became convinced that in certain contexts, the imagination can take on genuinely transcendental capacities, that is, that it can make contact with what appears to be a real spiritual world, or, at the very least, an entirely different order of mind and consciousness. The imaginal is the imagination on steroids. The imaginary is Clark Kent, the normal. The imaginal is Superman, the supernormal. Same guy, different suits. *The Human as Two*. (2010: 83)

The mutant, superhero feel is wonderfully appropriate to Kripal's love of comics and pop culture heroes and villains, a place alive with magic and archetypes. The imaginal is central to Myers' conviction that the human personality greatly exceeds the vessel it inhabits, that it has prodigious talents and can perform prodigious deeds, that it is not restricted to localised space-time, that it may survive bodily death. Yet our language and educational models do not equip us appropriately to acknowledge, investigate and enact these imaginal capacities. Hence we remain shy of our true potential, the caterpillar unaware of butterflyhood.

Whilst the word *imaginal* is not prominent in the vocabulary of Carl Jung, there is much of the imaginal in his explorations of that peculiar interpenetration of the physical and the psychical. Depth psychology, animated by the languages of myth, archetypes, numinous, unconscious, psyche, synchronicity and individuation, is a profound exploration of the imaginal. Indeed, Jung's practice of Active Imagination is a method for extending the reach of the imagination into its Superman capacities and thus engage in the process of healing.

Henri Corbin, friend of Jung and co-guest at the Eranos gathering, theologian and professor Islamic Studies in Paris and reader of Swedenborg, discovered in his readings of Sufi poetry and in particular the Andalusian poet mystic philosopher Ibn 'Arabi, the idea of *ālam al-mithāl*. He translated this expression as *mundus imaginalis*, with which, writes Angela Voss, 'to designate the psychic space in which the "super-sensible" reality of dreams, theophanies and spiritual beings are manifested, in a visionary sense, to the individual' (2009: 1). In Corbin the imaginal is less psychical, less paraphenomenal, than for Myers, yet it retains that idea of latent

¹ Alejandro Jodorowsky writes of his zen training with Ejo Takata: 'Ejo silenced me with a blow of his flat kyosaku. "Intellectual, learn to die!" I was offended. This was the first time he had said this to me. Then he struck me again. "Awakening is not a thing. It is not a goal, not a concept. It is not something to be attained. It is a metamorphosis. If the caterpillar thinks about the butterfly it is to become, saying 'And then I shall have wings and antennae, there will never be a butterfly. The caterpillar must accept its own disappearance in its transformation. When the marvellous butterfly takes wing, nothing of the caterpillar remains...'" (2008: 62).

power activated by the imagination where the spiritual and the material interact. In Corbin the experience is sacred, elevated, divine.

The imaginal is meaningful if meaningfully experienced. To begin with, a threshold needs to be crossed in understanding, quite simply, that weird stuff happens. Myers, Charles Fort or Colin Wilson are perfect reading here. Can one reach the end of Wilson's *Mysteries* or *Beyond the Occult* and maintain that weird stuff does not happen?

Perhaps.

One might maintain that all such experiences may be explained rationally, somehow. Statistically, precognitive dreams are *bound* to happen sometimes. Whilst improbable, there is nothing *impossible* about the apparition of a relative on the eve of his or her death in another land. It is simply remarkable coincidence. UFOs are secret military aircraft, or tricks of the light, or photographic double exposure, or hoax, or just plain delusion. Alien encounters and abductions are overactive dreams. DMT entities are culturally-conditioned brain-blips, wild hallucinations. Nevertheless, in order to produce such rational explanations, one would have to recognise that something *odd* had occurred in order to warrant studying it in order to refute it. Sceptics are keen explorers of the weird. Scepticism is a very useful tool.

The second threshold is recognising that the tools of sceptical inquiry, whilst useful, are clumsy in the fluid and often fragile architecture of the imaginal.

We can consider this in the light of divination. It is inevitable and wholly appropriate that a book of wisdom such as the *I Ching* should provide meaningful responses to questions posed. It is a book of wisdom. That is what it does. The 8 trigrams are symbols of archetypal resonance: *Heaven*, the Creative, *Lake*, the Joyous, *Fire*, the Clinging, *Thunder*, the Arousing, *Wind*, the Gentle, *Water*, the Abysmal, *Mountain*, Keeping Still, *Earth*, the Receptive. Their arrangement within 64 hexagrams provides interesting dramas of these principles, which have received commentaries from such luminaries as King Wen, Confucius, Richard Wilhelm and Carl Jung. These hexagrams then spin their own narrative depending on the arrangement of inner trigrams and the changing lines (yin to yang, yang to yin) that in turn change into new hexagrams.

How could this *not* be meaningful? Wonderful, but not impossible.

The *I Ching*, however, has the capacity to respond to the querent with such precision that a peculiar resonance is felt, something addressed, uncannily conscious in the response, something certainly impossible: a reader can know a book, but how can a book know its reader?

Likewise the Tarot. Each of the 22 cards of the major arcana drips with symbolic meaning. It is inevitable that one may derive meaning from an emergent story that moves from, say, *La*

Lune to *L'amoureux* to *Le Chariot*, to the un-named un-numbered card of *Death*.² How could a reading *not* be meaningful in some capacity?

It is precisely this inevitability of meaning that has granted divinatory systems such power and durability over the centuries. They spell out mythic narratives of essential aspects of life, germane to all people, translatable into languages and cultures across time and geography. This is the mythic power, but it is not necessarily the imaginal power.

There are times that the Tarot winks back. That peculiar resonance again, that uncannily conscious response. This is the imaginal. The layers are blurred. We enter a fiction. An interstice of unreason, briefly felt, then passing, and we begin the long work of understanding and incorporating the response. This is the hidden pulse of divination. It is the same with Jung's synchronicity. Random events of a similar timbre *can*, however improbably, occur. For the occurrence to become synchronicity, there must be the will to perceive meaning. The events flood with psyche. Mechanistic explanations, however plausible, are unsatisfactory.

This is the hidden pulse of art and of literature. As a young man, Allen Ginsberg entered a state of reverie while reading William Blake's poem 'Ah Sunflower' in his New York apartment. The atmosphere changed and he heard the voice of Blake read out the verse. He spent his life trying to recapture that feeling through poetry, altered states and spiritual practices, recognising that Blake was his guru.

Borges explored interstices of unreason, those moments that reveal the dream-aspect of reality. Odd moments, strange experiences, brief encounters with the numinous, with the numens. He experienced them. He created them in his fiction, playing curious literary games where the layers intermingle, where the boundaries between the author, narrator, character and reader become blurred.

'I don't write fiction,' declared 80 year-old Borges in interview, 'I invent fact' (1982: 117). That reads like a zen koan, a profoundly imaginal puzzle making sense on one level, nonsense on another, without either layer being neatly identified. Borges presents himself as the narrator and character in tales that inevitably become truly weird. Locations inside and outside the text are hard to separate.

Things seep through. The fiction-within-fiction-within-fiction worlds of Mlejnas and Tlön affect the fiction-within-fiction of Uqbar. Objects from Uqbar start appearing in the real world of the tale, which is our world as it is narrated by Borges, in Buenos Aires with his *compadre*

² Whilst the minor arcana of the Marseille deck are more distant, a subtle meaning may be revealed through the number and the suit, the shapes and colours. It just requires a little more work.

Adolfo Bioy-Casares. These apports are called *hronir*, and one that Borges witnessed was a metal coin so heavy it could scarcely be lifted.

Things seep through. *El mago* of 'The Circular Ruins' heads off to the wilderness to dream a son, and having eventually dreamt his son into sovereign, autonomous, existence, understands 'With relief, with humiliation, with terror, that he also was an illusion, that someone else was dreaming him.' Wait – if he thought himself real but finds out that he is fictional, what about the reader, what about me? Who is my author?

Things seep through. In 'Borges and I' he separates himself into two, the popular Borges: 'the other', and the private: 'I'. The known and the unknown, the revealed and the hidden, the persona and the self. Yet they both borrow from each other. They intermingle. They're hard to distinguish. He ends with the typically Borgesian line: 'I do not know which of us has written this page.' We're back at the beginning – a snake eating its tale.

In the poem 'Ajedrez' the lively chess pieces are unaware that they are pieces in the game. The players do not know that they are pieces in God's game. (Borges being Borges does not end there): God does not know that he is a piece in another god's game, etc. etc. ad infinitum.

It is a dizzying vision, unfolding fractally. I find it everywhere in Borges. It is an intellectual riddle at one level, a labyrinth that can be viewed from above. But enter the labyrinth and you lose orientation. Events from the fiction start unfolding in the reader's world. *Hronir* are everywhere. Things seep through.

This blurring of the layers between actor, character, playwright and audience is at the heart of theatre. Velázquez the painter paints his own reflection painting his own reflection in *Las Meninas*. M.C. Escher's hand draws the hand drawing the hand. Neo enters the Matrix armed with the knowledge that it is all computer coding. Dan Milligan, the hero of Spike Milligan's *Puckoon*, lambasts the author for writing him terrible legs: 'Wot are dey?' he repeated angrily. 'Legs.' 'Legs? LEGS? Whose legs?' 'Yours.' 'Mine? And who are you?' 'The Author.' 'Author? Author? Did you write these legs?' 'Yes.' 'Well I don't like dem. I don't like 'em at all at all. I could ha' writted better legs meself' (2003: 28). Italo Calvino draws the reader into the plot of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, reaching through the textual separation. Cervantes plays with these layers constantly in *Don Quixote*. Characters become their own fictions in dialogue with the chronicler, narrator, translator, author, and reader. Untying the knots is impossible.

If explained as mere trope then it remains as mere trope, a nice depiction of a riddle, cunning literary artifice. But if pursued, then the reader is drawn into the plot and enters the fictional landscape. That is imaginal reading.

This is where authors can uncannily communicate with their readers, as the readers understand that the author addresses *them!* Something is activated through the text that allows the author, narrator, character and reader – separated across space, time and layers of artifice – to vibrate together, to communicate mutually. This is where art performs its magic. This is where great learning can occur.

Corbin emphasised that ‘The organ of this universe is the active Imagination; it is the place of theophanic visions, the scene on which visionary events and symbolic histories appear in their true reality.’ It is the imagination that enables and hosts the experience, yet Corbin distinguished between Imaginal and the Imaginary: ‘The word imaginary will never be used, because with its present ambiguity this word, by prejudging the reality attained or to be attained, betrays an inability to deal with this at once intermediate and intermediary world’ (2014: 4)

Corbin emphasised this intermediate quality of the imaginal – both real and not-real, intrinsic and extrinsic, psychical and physical. Kripal eloquently seizes this conundrum, referring to the imaginal as ‘that *tertium quid* or third space between fantasy and reality, apparition and appearance, subjectivity and objectivity, through which folklore and mythology and much magical and mystical experience appear to be mediated’ (2007: 179).

This strange middle ground, both imaginary and not imaginary, is what I find so appealing about the imaginal. A useful hermeneutic tool in appraising odd phenomena in all their forms. The imaginal is meaningful engagement with the imagination without fixation on whether it is real or not.

It is a persistent ontological question. W.B. Yeats pursued Swedenborg’s spiritual journeys with sympathy, recognising their profound validity, whilst quipping that Swedenborg’s heavens, with their immaculate gardens and lack of the wild or rugged, were very much a product of Swedenborg’s pre-Romantic age. The voyages are thus temporal and a-temporal, culturally-conditioned and a-cultural, real and imagined.

It is a persistent question. Given that so many people have reported encounters with entities in DMT-space, what does this say about the ontology of the entities? Are they real like us: intelligent, self-aware, autonomous, sovereign, mortal and determined by form, or are they figments of our imagination, collective visions from the collective unconscious. In short, are they *really* real or make-believe? The answer: yes!

The encounter is imaginal: it is the place where consciousness pushes out to interact with other consciousness. Both inner and outer. It is, as Corbin writes, intermediate and intermediary.

This is why psychedelic therapy can be so effective. The imagination can be animated by the particular medicine, by the set and setting, and the explorer can enter landscapes of such

realness that the important work of healing can take place. Memories, dreams, events, people and beings can be encountered and engaged with. Knotty traumatic blocks may be untangled. Fragmented aspects of the self, visible and tangible in this radically altered state of consciousness, may be harmonised and integrated. Destructive patterns of behaviour may be modified.

The imagination could be dismissed as fantasy, illusion or delusion, but what happens in imagination can ripple into empirical reality, showing not only the reality of the imagination, but the imaginary nature of reality. Things seep through.

It can be terrifying.

Paranoia is imaginal. Not because it is mere delusion but because the State and its corporate commercial arms have the capacity to gather data of every thought and deed in our lives, not least because we willingly surrender the data. ‘Just because you’re not paranoid,’ Bob Anton Wilson reminds us as in *Everything is Under Control*, ‘doesn’t mean they’re not plotting against you’ (2009: 17). Conspiracies, he insists, occur all the time. Some are proved by history to be correct, others bat-shit crazy. The fears are not implausible.

Corbin warns that the realm of the imaginal is ‘not to be entered by housebreaking,’ that one must overcome the will-to-power. He reminds us that ‘the very idea of associating such concepts as “power” and the “spiritual” implies an initial secularization’ (2014: 16). When ruled by the power principle, the imaginal can be exploited to nightmarish ends. Wilson rapped about Operation Mindfuck, a discordian revolution of cultural chaos in which nothing is quite what it seems. It is manifesting with terrifying force in the figure of the 45th President and his feedback loops of conspiracy and fake news. An unwitting mindfuck operative taking power. Nothing is what it seems. Things fall apart.

Imaginal is also enchanting. It is also re-enchanting, because it gives us again that sense of potential felt as a child. The world as an extraordinary place. The world is wider and weirder than we suppose. We have astonishing potentials.

So the first threshold does not disrupt any ontological certainties. Weird stuff does happen but rational answers, however clunky, can be wheeled out to explain it. At the second threshold things get a bit wobbly. Yes, it may have been a trick of light or hallucination, but something truly weird happened, something beyond the rational answer. This is where things seep through, interstices of unreason sparkle in strange corners of books and plays and paintings. The statue is more than mere representation of the numen; it hosts the numen. This is where magic occurs. Spells and incantations, blessings and curses, prayers and offerings, are affective. The healing prayer offered to a revered saint is heard by the saint.

Or not. Because the imaginal is at work. The saint must be revered in order to hear. Without reverence there would be no saint. The prayer is the meeting between pray-er and praid-to. Intermediate and intermediary. This final threshold opens dizzily into the wider, mythic, reaches of the imaginal: it is all real and all fictional. An imaginal revelation, however fleeting, reveals that all is imaginal. Everything. Consciousness flows into form, whether a biological system like a human, a statue of a saint, a child's teddy bear or a fictional character like Don Quixote or Borges. How to distinguish ontological substance, self-awareness, autonomy? The question is ultimately a distraction; we are all imaginal beings, encountered through the ebb and flow of consciousness.

This is why Jung is so useful. Over the course of his enormous career he paid great attention to the creatures and landscapes of the psyche without passing judgement on their ontological status. A passage I refer to repeatedly is from the (very) posthumous *Red Book*, with the Prophet Elijah rebuking Jung for calling him a symbol. It's not that Elijah is *not* a symbol, it's that he is no more nor less symbolic than Jung himself. It is a beautiful reminder that we are all creatures of the imagination, imaginary beings, and that the contours of our reality are variable.

We flash into existence – into this body form – and from the body form send images of ourselves spinning into the matrix of reality. We are consciousness, and we far exceed the boundaries of our body, name or personality. We are part of vast networks of flowing information, interacting and engaging with other conscious forms.

The imaginal is the reminder that language is fluid, categories are not fixed, structures are flexible and logic is not always so logical. 'The world is full of many maybes,' Robert Anton Wilson reminds us. Maybe-logic. The story is written in the act. If you can't find a good leg-writer, write your own legs.

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