

parapsychological capacities attributed to shamans and religious prodigies, or the widespread belief in a separable soul and its ability to leave the body. The latter is an especially common experience that has led in turn to countless belief systems around the immortality or reincarnation of the soul and its various subtle bodies or spiritual "vehicles." If one is interested in how religions develop, then one should be keenly interested in exactly these sorts of extreme experiences, wherever one finds them.

I found them in Whitley. Gradually, over the last five years, I have come to consider him and *Communion* as litmus tests for my field. I have decided that if we, as scholars of religion, cannot take this text seriously, if we cannot interpret it in some satisfying fashion, if we cannot make some sense of this man's honest descriptions of his traumatic, transcendent experiences, then we have no business trying to understand his spiritual ancestors in the historical record. We either put up here, or we shut up there.

I decided to put up.

The Wastebasket Problem

My engagement with Whitley is also part of a conscious research strategy. In his pioneering book *UFOs: Operation Trojan Horse* (1970), John Keel encouraged us almost a half-century ago to stop focusing on the light shows in the sky and start looking closely at the effects that these phenomena have on the witnesses and contactees. The real meaning and purpose of the UFO phenomenon, Keel felt, is not in some machine in the sky. It is in the people who encounter these strange lights and are transformed by them. *The secret of contact lies in the contactee.*

As a historian of religions, I am committed to the human context of any and all religious experience. Whatever the ultimate origin of such events might be, we know of *no* religious experience, scriptural text, or revelation that did not come through a human being or human community.

The UFO phenomenon, of course, much like the human experience of the gods and revelation (indeed, *as* another human experience of the gods and revelation), might end up having something fundamental to do with the nonhuman, the superhuman, or the future-human. That remains to be seen. But, as researchers, we must begin somewhere, and it is better to begin with what one does know and can study than with what one does not know and cannot study.

Which leads me to "the wastebasket problem."³ Something like the UFO phenomenon is not a single thing. It is a broad set of things that are constantly being confused and mixed up. It is a "wastebasket" category, by which I mean that "UFO" is an umbrella term that encodes a particular cold war military history and encompasses very diverse historical facts, institutions, and experiential events.

Under this broad umbrella, for example, we find: millennia-old folklore currents, particularly around the abductions and otherworlds of faerie lore, as famously pointed out by Jacques Vallee; the physiological condition of sleep paralysis and what my colleague David Hufford calls the "supernatural assault"; elements of traditional Catholic and now Evangelical demonology and angelology; various ancient Gnostic and early modern esoteric teachings; more recent Theosophical and New Age beliefs and channeling practices (significantly, it appears that the early UFO contactee communities of the 1950s helped shape the earlier language of the "channel," from medical clairvoyant Edgar Cayce, into its contemporary use⁴); real secret military projects in multiple countries; U.S. intelligence misinformation campaigns; faked crashes and orchestrated hoaxes; a few modern UFO religions and at least one suicide cult (Heaven's Gate); culturally filtered encounters with balls of apparently conscious plasmalike light variously interpreted as ghost riders, souls, witches, and now UFOs; near-death experiences involving encounters with similar conscious light forms and subsequent "electrified" human bodies that affect electronics and electrical equipment in the en-

vironment; a whole range of parapsychological phenomena, including and especially telepathy; perceptual mistakes involving natural meteorological and astronomical phenomena and top-secret military technology; hard to dismiss physical sightings by individuals and large groups, including military professionals and government officials;² the stranger details of modern apparitions of the Virgin Mary, some of which eerily reproduce the specific behavior of flying saucers; psychedelia of various sorts, especially around the "little people" and hyperdimensional "elves" of DMT (dimethyltryptamine) and Amazonian ayahuasca shamanism; and literally—and this is no exaggeration—hundreds of thousands of individual contact and abduction experiences, often in bed and often heavily sexualized.

Are all of these things really the same thing? No. Are they somehow nevertheless related? Sometimes. So how do we determine which is which, what belongs where, what to compare with what in order to get where? What should be on our table, for whose interests, and toward what goal or purpose?

To take the most obvious example, it is often assumed that the "things seen in the sky" have some relationship to the occult erotic encounters in bed with various discarnate beings. But this, in fact, is not at all clear. These two sets of events *can* be related within a particular narrative or mythical framework, but this does not require any universal causal relationship between the two, as if the former were somehow always causing the latter. Maybe in some cases they are related. Maybe in others they are not. But certainly not all things seen in the sky are related to all things seen and experienced in the abduction literature.

The UFO phenomenon is confusing, then, first and foremost because we are using a single *very* loose comparative category to collect, classify, and interpret what are probably completely different things. That some of the things in the wastebasket (say, the military disinformation campaigns) appear to be actively mimicking and dissimulating some of the other things in the wastebasket (say, the genuine unexplained aerial phenomena)

hardly helps the matter. It only shakes up the wastebasket and makes it messier and more confused.

There is a way forward, though, and we will take it here. That way forward consists of (a) acknowledging the obvious presence of various military-, intelligence-, and security-state measures at work in the cold war history of the UFO phenomenon (the acronym *does*, after all, come from the American military), but (b) setting these aside in order to move beyond and past them to the much older and deeper roots of the encounters in the global history of mystical and esoteric literature. This simple move solves many problems all at once. It takes us out of areas that this author has no authority over, no knowledge of, and no interest in. It also cleans up *a lot* on our table. Moreover, it allows us to focus on those subjects that we really do know something about and that we can actually study. Here all of those subjects crystallize in a single subject: Whitley Strieber.

How (Not) to Control What's on the Table

There are two basic problems anyone must confront when one attempts to make some sense of this fantastic material. And they come at the reader from opposite directions.

From the first direction, which is the more elite and formidable challenge, one confronts the ideological debunker (as opposed to the fair and open-minded skeptic), standard scientist, or conventional materialist who seeks to protect a flatland materialist worldview by simply *keeping off the table* all of the fantastic stuff that suggests that we are living in a super natural world that is anything but flat. There are many protective strategies employed here. Five of the most common are: (1) the automatic conflation or unconscious identification of science with materialist interpretations of science; (2) the invocation of the adjective "anecdotal" to dismiss these events as somehow meaningless and not part of the real empirical experienced

world; (3) a naive understanding of mind that classifies all visionary phenomena as simple "imaginary" products of brain matter (without the slightest clue how this works); (4) the public shaming of sincere and serious people, from all walks of life, who see or say otherwise; and, related to the last, (5) a certain historical amnesia with respect to all of those scientists and intellectuals who have been fascinated by the unexplained and have seen these phenomena not as meaningless anecdotes to dismiss and demean but as important clues to a future superscience.

At the end of the day, though, most of these objections boil down to a simple (and simplistic) attempt *to control what is on the table* so that the only permissible evidence left there is that evidence that supports the materialist assumptions. It is very easy to explain all of reality if you get to define what that "all" is. It is very easy to explain everything on the table if you have just taken off the table everything that you cannot explain.

Nevertheless, Whitley and I consider the materialist objections to be serious objections. They are certainly the most successful objections. Accordingly, we take them seriously, and we will be addressing them at considerable length as we proceed with our conversation.

How (Not) to Compare What's on the Table

So that is the first basic problem. It will take the book to answer it adequately. There is another problem that can be dealt with more quickly. From the second direction, one confronts the true believer who naively literalizes or mechanizes the UFO visionary encounters and so further confuses what is on the table. Intellectually speaking, this second problem is not as formidable as the first, but it is nevertheless important to address and understand, since it, too, has worked to prevent any adequate public conversation.

This book is my public engagement with what I have elsewhere called

the comparative practices of popular culture. By the latter expression, I mean those comparisons performed by individuals who are not professionally trained to compare across cultures and times.⁶ I have learned a great deal from these writers. I am grateful, particularly for how they often venture into ideas and areas that no professional historian would dare go, not at least in public. I love that about them.

Having said that, there are other aspects of the comparative practices of popular culture that make me wince, or groan, and that need to be challenged, or at least qualified and better nuanced. I am thinking in particular of two basic ways that individuals have been comparing the ufological material for the last half-century or so. Both are understandable strategies, but both are also flawed. We will need to talk about them in these pages, and we cannot talk about them if they do not have names. So let us call these two strategies *reductive comparison* and *religious comparison*.

Reductive comparison can be pictured as a straight arrow moving from right to left, that is, from a present worldview to a past one. Religious comparison can be thought of as an equally straight arrow moving from the left to the right, that is, from a past worldview to a present one. As the reversed arrow imagery suggests, these two comparative practices are really not so different from each other. Which is another way of saying that they make the same mistake, if in opposite directions.

Here is how.

Reductive comparison is best exemplified in figures like Erich von Däniken, author of *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968), and his followers. This kind of comparison uncritically assumes the truth and completeness of the present Western worldview and so reads all religious phenomena of the past as misinterpretations of what can only be properly understood from the modern Western scientific worldview. The comparison is "reductive" in the sense that it reduces the surface or mistaken truths of the past worldview to the fuller and deeper truth of the present worldview.

The modern Western worldview has been dominated for the last century or so (a mere blink or wink in the bigger picture) by what has been called "instrumental reason," so named because it wants to turn everything into an instrument or technology. This worldview is materialistic and mechanistic, that is, it insists that all of reality is nothing but matter (that's the materialism part), and that this matter operates through machinelike mathematical laws (that's the mechanism part). The same worldview also commonly asserts that the *only* reliable way to know something about reality is through the scientific method and, more specifically, through mathematics. If something cannot be turned into an object or "thing," replicated and controlled in a laboratory, and measured (that is, assigned a number or mathematical form), it cannot be considered real and so does not deserve our attention or respect. That is a bit of an exaggeration, but not much of one.

The worldview of conventional science, technology, and instrumental reason, of course, is an extremely powerful and useful one. I am by no means against any of this. Quite the opposite. But what is useful is not at all the same thing as what is. Where things go wrong, then, is when individuals take this very modern and very practical way of knowing something about the world and assume that it represents the *whole* world.

Things go more badly still when individuals (who have no training in history or the study of religion) project these very recent (and no doubt very temporary) assumptions backward into the distant past and advance highly speculative mechanistic and materialistic scenarios. So the universally attested phenomena of magic—whereby a mental event "in here" is astonishingly correlated with a physical event "out there"—becomes nothing more than the misinterpreted effects of an advanced technology. Gods descending from the sky to bestow cultural or practical knowledge become ancient astronauts. Chinese dragons become misperceived spaceships. Mayan funerary art illustrates a rocket ship taking off. And so on. In each case, a religious expression is "reduced" to a distorted technological or material fact.

On the surface, these comparisons are provocative and even sometimes attractive, since the connection that they draw between ancient gods and the modern UFO phenomenon is in fact a plausible one. There *are* some genuinely uncanny comparisons to be drawn here. Still, the way that this approach handles ancient religious texts and artifacts, that is, as relatively unproblematic records of real historical events (records which few if any of the reductive comparativists can actually read in their original languages) is extremely naive.

Moreover, and more seriously still, the *direction* and *meaning* of the connections and comparisons drawn are far from clear or obvious. I mean, why read ancient religious texts through the prism of the UFO as ultra-modern machine? Why not read modern UFO encounters through the prism of ancient religious texts, that is, as discarnate souls, modern gods, or revelation events? In the end, there is no good reason to assume that we just happen to be living in the historical moment that has the privileged view of things. Indeed, there is every clear and good reason to assume that this is not the case.

Religious comparisons—best exemplified in the writing of various Evangelical and fundamentalist authors who interpret UFOs and aliens as portents of the end of the world and/or as demons—make the exact opposite comparative move. They uncritically assume the truth and completeness of a past worldview (in this case, a diverse collection of ancient Near Eastern cultures embedded in the biblical texts) and read all the UFO phenomena of the present from these past mythical and religious assumptions.

The ancient biblical worldview was dominated by the assumed presence of invading spirits and demons, which functioned as the standard explanation at that time for disease and mental illness. Hence possession was understood to be the cause of the illness and exorcism was the cure. More problematic still, such demons also entered the early Christian practices of "comparing religions." In these early comparative practices of popular

culture, the gods of other peoples and cultures were not genuine gods or sincere expressions of some greater God. They were demons. They were evil. These demonic readings, then, made good emotional sense of the destructive aspects of disease and mental illness, but they also functioned as a way of literally demonizing other religious communities. This same demonic reading of other people's religious experiences would also lead to later historical horrors, like the early modern persecution of witches in Europe and colonial America.

Unfortunately, that is not an exaggeration at all.

Having said all of that, there are aspects of both the reductive and religious comparisons that are attractive and that actually work to our benefit in particular contexts.

To take a single example (we will get to others in the pages that follow), it is remarkable and surely significant that particular religious visions of the past look like visions of some kind of living machine or conscious technology.⁷ The famous vision of Ezekiel in the first few chapters of the biblical book of the same name is a very good example. The Jewish traditions have understood those chapters as revealed descriptions of a divine "chariot" and have made them central to their own versions of the mystical life, hence the "chariot mysticism" of ancient Judaism. But, clearly, whatever the prophet saw within his own "abduction" experience, it was no chariot. Not even close. Any honest reader can see that, immediately. Unsurprisingly, the biblical book itself never uses the word "chariot."

It is also worth keeping in mind here that the Jewish tradition has long recognized that the first chapters of Ezekiel are among the strangest and most dangerous chapters in the entire Hebrew Bible. Moreover, it has often sought to restrict access to them, particularly among the young and unprepared. There is even a well-known rabbinic text that tells about a child who accidentally read these chapters and was consumed by fire that burst from

the holy pages. We need not be Jewish or Hebrew readers to detect an important lesson there.

But even with the conscious machines of the history of religions we have to be very careful. Something like the very traditional Jewish (mis) metaphor of the chariot, after all, should give us deep pause, as the rabbis, kabbalists, and ancient readers who invoked it were doing more or less what the modern reductive comparisons are doing today. They were taking the cutting-edge technology of their own place and time (in their case, the chariot) and reading it into an extraordinary visionary scene where it really does not work or belong. Clearly, when individuals invoke "space-ships," "ancient astronauts," and "extraterrestrials" today (all aspects of our present modernist culture and science-fiction literature) to describe past visionary events, they are doing the same thing. Basically, they are invoking chariots. They are drawing the same straight arrow from their own relative present to some past event or text. They are misreading the past through the lens of the present. They are doing something similar, of course, when they read modern UFO encounters as ultramodern machines. Here they are misreading the present through the lens of the present.

And although the overwhelming consensus of scholarship on the Hebrew Bible is that the first few chapters of Ezekiel record an actual reported vision, do we need to be reminded that a text is not the same thing as a historical event, that stories in texts, even biblical texts, often never happened at all?

The religious comparisons can also be helpful, particularly to the extent that they work to challenge the simplistic technological readings of the reductive comparisons. The latter "nuts and bolts" readings of UFOs (whereby the UFO is a physical, objective machine), for example, inevitably cherry pick the ufological literature and concentrate on those encounters or sightings that look very much like technological encounters. Many of them indeed do.

But then what to do with the simple facts that these things in the sky do things that no machine can do, that they behave more like thoughts than things? And what to do with the little and big humanoids and, as John Keel continuously reminded us in order to *really* mess things up, the hairy and winged monsters often seen in association with the crafts? And this is before we get to the elaborate descriptions of the humanoids' apparent abilities to walk through walls, float, read minds, paralyze people, disappear into thin air, and so on. Are not all of these abilities traditional magical powers? And are not all of these powers common features of the gods in cultures like ancient Greece and traditional Hindu India?⁸ In other words, these encounters *do* look like religious encounters. The religious comparisons, like the reductive comparisons, have a real point.

But the question remains: Which way do we shoot the arrow of comparison and interpretation?

The Future of the Past

The short answer is: "both ways."

The longer answer is: "it's complicated."

The truth is that the comparative practices that Whitley and I will be performing in the pages that follow are neither purely reductive nor religious. We will privilege neither our modern world's materialism and mechanisms nor the mythical and religious assumptions of some past worldview, since all of these are clearly relative to their place and time, *as is our own*. It is precisely this acute awareness of the relativity of any perspective, of *any* point in space-time, that makes things so complicated and rich.

We will draw comparative lines between the past and the present, then, but we will "shoot the arrow both ways." By doing this, we will allow the religious comparisons to challenge the reductive ones, and we will allow the reductive comparisons to challenge the religious ones. But we

will privilege neither. If we need a visual image here, we might replace our two straight arrows with a time loop circling back and forth as it moves up and forward in a kind of spiraling progression. Not a straight arrow but an upward spiral, then.

Elsewhere, I have written of "the future of the past" to capture this progressive spiraling model of historical thinking and interpretation.⁹ By this paradoxical expression, I mean that we need to come to terms with the simple fact that, yes, we can now read the past in ways that past peoples could not read their own presents. *Our future changes the meanings of their past*. But any adequate understanding of their past will also inevitably challenge our own present assumptions about the world *and so change the meanings of our present*. There is no straight arrow here. There is a kind of recurring time loop, a constant return to the past in order to reassess and recalibrate the present toward a different kind of future. Anyone who works seriously with historical materials is familiar with these interpretive paradoxes.

Think this is the stuff of academic eggheads and so irrelevant to the subject at hand? Think again. These sorts of interpretive paradoxes and historical loops are *integral features of the contact experiences themselves*. Indeed, the contact literature has only radicalized the possibilities of this future of the past. In many of these events, after all, the implication is that *we* are in the past being visited by future humans, who are contacting and abducting us toward, we can only assume (or hope), some kind of recalibration or adjustment.¹⁰ Consider lines like this one, from Whitley's *The Secret School*: "The vague mythological beings of the past that have focused into the aliens of the present will soon become our selves as we become the very time travelers whose shadows haunt all our history, including the present."¹¹

That is the kind of mind-bending comparative practice that we are after here. To really name it, define it, and practice it, however, will take the work of both an experienter and a theorist working together, in deep conversation and mutual criticism. This is the spirit of our undertaking. Our

mutual wager is that, by "shooting the arrow both ways," by practicing the paradoxes of "the future of the past," by "sitting with the question" instead of landing on some stock rational or religious answer, a *third* kind of gnosis or new superknowledge will eventually emerge, one that can encounter a strange being in the bedroom without labeling that presence an angel or an alien, much less a demon, hallucination, or anecdote.¹² "Not as you have been taught."

Hence our title: *The Super Natural*. With this little provocation, effected by the tiniest and humblest of moves (a single thumb tap on the laptop's space bar), we move beyond both the flatland materialism of scientism (the natural) and the naive literalisms of certain types of religion (the supernatural). Within that tiny gap or space, we seek another different kind of answer or, at the very least, another way of asking the questions, one that is deeply material and deeply spiritual at the same time.

Hence the new world that has arrived with this book but that has also always been here. Hence the Already World, the natural world that is really and truly a super natural world.

Making the Cut

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It is an easy thing to jump to the conclusion that I am claiming here that I was abducted by aliens and had semen stolen by them, but I am not claiming that. I am reporting a perception, not making a claim, and there is a world of difference between those two approaches.

Whitley Strieber is a phenomenon, a kind of religious prodigy without a religion who cannot help engaging classic religious questions and themes, since that is what his experiences clearly invoke. The last lines of the preceding chapter voice these perennial religious questions perfectly: he seeks an objective answer to the hymning questions of "what we are, where we are, and why we are here." Obviously, the emphasis is on that "we," that is, on our own human nature.

Or super nature.

The human-centered focus of the inquiry speaks volumes. What Whitley really seems to want is not a new religion but a new science, one that can take extreme religious experiences (out-of-body and near-death experiences, precognitions, moments of clairvoyance, and visions of the dead) as privileged data about the deepest nature of mind or consciousness,

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which is to say about "what we are, where we are, and why we are here." I think he is right about that. I have said as much many times in very public places.¹³

We are not anti-science. Quite the contrary. We simply want a science that is honest and brave enough to take in *all* that human beings experience without immediately explaining away that "all and everything" by some easy pat answer that is really no answer at all. The Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James had a wonderful expression for such a future science. He dreamed of a "radical empiricism," that is, one that took *every* human experience, however strange or apparently impossible, under its careful gaze without prejudice or assumption. This book is an attempt to practice just such a radical empiricism.

Experience as Experiment

But how?

Whitley's intellectual orientation, "lost in a forest of hypotheses," is a very good example of what one of my colleagues, Alex van der Haven, calls the "hypothetical supernatural." Alex means something very specific by this curious phrase. He means to refer to all of those modern individuals who have known their own personal revelations but do not want to believe or accept them prematurely. Rather, they want to question them, test them. Put most simply, they want to turn their own mystical "experiences" into scientific "experiments."

In Alex's terms, they want to take their own apparently religious experiences not as absolute-truth claims but as testable hypotheses. This is why these modern mystics care so little for religious institutions and care so much for professional science. They literally want to be tested (hence Whitley's various submissions to MRIs, psychiatric examinations, and temporal lobe tests). They want the truth to be known. This is also why they are so

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hurt when professional scientists do not return their confidence and, instead, heap insults on them and their experiences. The modern visionaries embrace science, but the conventional scientists too often respond with a sneer.

In his own way of putting it, Whitley writes of wanting "to sit with the question," of leaving the question open and learning to live with the ambiguity. He wants to do this not as a compromise, but as a mirroring response to what these experiences/experiments clearly intend: *they themselves are ambiguous and paradoxical*. Hence his identification of this same ambiguity as "the most interesting aspect of the phenomenon" and his call that we embrace this and that we abandon the terms of the "false either/or debate" that has taken place so far, with its two unworkable and untenable positions: there are space aliens among us, or it's all rubbish.

From the Paranormal to the Super Natural

Whitley and I disagree about some things. Being writers, we also care very much about words. The word "paranormal" is one of the things we disagree about. Whitley's rejection of the paranormal in his opening lines as more or less the same thing as the supernatural is certainly accurate enough within today's very loose use of the paranormal in the tabloids and in horror movies. But this rejection is unwarranted and unnecessary if we are using the term in its original, intended meanings.

As I have explained elsewhere in detail, the adjective appears to have been coined by British and French intellectuals and scientists shortly before and around the turn of the twentieth century, first as the British English *supernormal*, then as the French *paranormal*, in order to describe things like telepathic and poltergeist phenomena. As they were carefully crafted and originally intended, the supernormal and the paranormal meant something like "of the natural world but not yet explainable by our present science."

They meant "normal," but normal on the extreme end of the spectrum, an end which we do not yet have the tools to model and map but someday will. These adjectives did *not* mean "supernatural," that is, they did not signal the presence of a ghost, deity, or anything necessarily outside the natural world and its workings. Quite the contrary, both the supernormal and the paranormal signaled exactly the approach that Whitley has long advocated.

But I understand how these historical origins are now largely lost. Perhaps, then, it is time to retire a word like "paranormal." Or at least use it much more carefully. Whatever we decide, it is certainly time to clean up our language and make it more precise again. It is time for the super natural.

On Belief and Denial

There is another level to Whitley Strieber as phenomenon, and it has to do with this notion of taking one's experiences as experiments, this extraordinary modern ability to *not* believe one's own most intimate experiences, however convincing they may appear.

It bears constant underlining. Belief is an understandable but often unhelpful response in this realm. It is also a potentially dangerous response. Certain types of belief—particularly literalist ones that do not understand the symbolic or coded nature of religious expressions—can quickly make a fool out of one, since religious experiences interpreted literally are often patently absurd. To the extent, moreover, that literalist beliefs lead people to identify themselves with their culturally relative religious ideas, local ethnicities, and historical cultures, they can also lead to real social conflict, even horrific violence, as we see again and again in our modern world. Fundamentalism, of whatever stripe, is the curse and cancer of religious belief.

And the exact same warning holds here as well, in the realm of the super natural. As John Keel put it with respect to his own paranormal researches: "Belief is the enemy." To the famous motto of the 1990s hit tele-

vision series *The X-Files*, "I want to believe," Keel would have shot back immediately: "Don't."

I would not go that far, since I think religious expressions, including religious beliefs, are often pointing toward something very real, perhaps even ultimately real, if always in coded ways. But there is more. I also think that there is something potentially occult or magical about belief. Belief can function as a naive literalism or serious obstacle to serious thought, to be sure. But belief can also conjure. Belief can make real. Belief might even act as a kind of psychic portal through which other beings can enter our world, as Whitley has speculated in some of his most visionary moments. It all comes down to *how* one believes, not whether one believes. It all comes down to whether one possesses an adequate understanding of the religious imagination and the symbol. More, much more, on all of this later.

It is also worth observing in this context that the ideological debunker is also a fundamentalist, if of a very different stripe. Unlike the literal believer, who affirms but then misreads what has happened, the debunker denies what happened, what was honestly seen, what was sincerely experienced. The debunker makes a liar out of a truth teller and so shuts down the experience-as-experiment before it can begin. Here our empiricism, our experience, and our experiment come to an end.

Making the Cut

So how to move forward? How to find a new path between and beyond the literalizing belief of the believer and the flatland denial of the debunker? A particularly rich vein of resources for such a way forward can be found in a stream of thought and practice called *phenomenology*.

The basic concepts of phenomenology are not too difficult to understand and are, in fact, already at work in Whitley's writing. A "phenomenon," from which the practice gets its name, is simply the Greek word

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for "appearance." Here it refers to an awareness of something that appears as an object of experience, *whatever* that object of experience might be. Phenomenology is the study of such appearances. German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) is normally credited as its founder, even if the method has deeper roots, as we will see in a moment.¹⁴

The fundamental idea here is to begin any inquiry by taking a set of experiences on their own terms and setting aside, for the time being, the question of their possible external source, cause, or truth value. The method encourages us to "make a cut" between the appearances themselves and what may, or may not, lie behind them. Whitley practices such a phenomenological cut naturally and effortlessly when he writes in the last chapter that "I am reporting a perception, not making a claim, and there is a world of difference between those two approaches." Indeed! That's the phenomenological cut.

Very much related to phenomenology but lying deeper back in the German stream was the foundational thinking of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant made a famous distinction between phenomena (again, "appearances" in the mind) and noumena (things in themselves allegedly "out there," apart from how they appear to us). Kant taught us that we do not know the world as it really is. We only know the world as it is filtered through and shaped by our senses and the structuring categories of the human mind (very basic unquestioned categories, like space, time, and causality). None of these mental filters or innate categories of understanding are necessarily reflective of what is really "out there," although Kant thought that the appearances were reflections of something real.

In today's language, we would say that the innate categories of space, time, and causality and our perceptions of the physical world are functions of our neurological wiring and senses. Such categories and sensory filters are certainly "close enough," since they have allowed us to adapt and survive in this world for hundreds of thousands of years (and gross misperceptions

of the natural world would, obviously, be fatal for any young species or new organism). But we cannot assume from any of this that our perceptions are absolutely true, only that they are relatively and practically true. All we can assume is that our perceptions of the world are *true enough*.

True enough for what?

Survival.

Unfortunately, as science progresses, this "true enough" gets smaller and smaller. We are now being told that 95 percent of the physical world is completely invisible and unknown to our young science. We know nothing about this "dark energy" and "dark matter." We only know that the vast dark is there. And the 5 percent we know something about? Well, we cannot sense the vast majority of it, either. Indeed, our senses are pathetic when it comes to the full range of the electromagnetic spectrum. We are almost totally deaf, dumb, and blind in this Already World of energy and light. Nearly *everything* about the cosmos is occult to our evolved (or unevolved) perceptual system.

This cut, then, between "what appears" and "what is" is not just a function of some difficult ideas from some dead German professors. It is a very reasonable and appropriate response to *our actual situation in the cosmos*.

The Numinous

The same distinction between experience-as-appearance and the possible object or source of such an experience has been central to the study of religion, where scholars routinely "make the cut," or suspend judgment about the truth value of a religious phenomenon, as a means to study religious experiences they have not had, mythical worlds they do not share, and belief systems that they do not hold. The reason is simple enough. Once one makes such a cut, one can, in principle, take *any* religious experience or mythical world seriously and sympathetically without adopting any

particular interpretation of it, much as one suspends disbelief to enjoy a good novel or watch a science-fiction movie.

Particularly influential here has been the work of yet another German professor, Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). In the pages of this book, as in his other books, Whitley often invokes the language of the “numinous” to capture the feel and sensibilities of his experiences. The word was invented by Otto in one of the genuine classics of the study of religion, *The Idea of the Holy* (1917). By “the holy” Otto did not mean “the good” or “the ethical.” He meant “the numinous.” He meant an awesome power, electric energy, or godlike presence that a human being encounters in the environment and experiences as special, set apart—as Wholly Other. Today we might say: as Alien. What I think Otto was really writing about is the deeper nature of consciousness itself beyond the ego—a form of extended or cosmic mind that when manifested to the human ego, appears as Other or Alien. But we’ll get to that later.

Otto went to great lengths, mostly with biblical materials, to show that this numinous energy or alien presence might be experienced as positive or negative, or both at the same time. The numinous might in fact invoke a whole range of physiological, emotional, and spiritual responses: dread and foreboding, awe and mystery, eeriness, terror, reverence and worship, even ecstasy and mystical union. The angel is an expression of the numinous, but so too is the demon.

Otto was very much a follower of Kant. He did not think that human beings generally have any direct access to the numinous presence as it really and truly is. He thought rather that this mystical presence is always filtered through and shaped by the categories of the human mind and the cultures that largely determine its functioning. Otto, in short, had “made the cut,” and at about the same time as Husserl.

This may seem like an unnecessary conversation to you. It also may seem like an easy and obvious thing to do. But it is in fact very necessary,

and many, if not most, people are not able to make this cut, *especially* when it comes to religious phenomena. Many people firmly believe that what they believe is what is real; that is, they fail to make a cut between what has appeared to them within a particular experience or community and what may, or may not, actually be the case. Moreover, they can only take the religious experiences of their own culture and community sympathetically. And they insist on treating the numinous apparition of, say, an angel in completely different ways than they would treat the numinous apparition of, say, an alien or a demon. *They can't make the cut.*

Just as seriously—and just as seriously wrong—many people immediately dismiss and demean any extraordinary experience that cannot be fit into their own experience of the world. They declare them unreal, hallucinatory, or just plain crazy. In so doing, they also fail to make the cut. Making the cut means taking *all* experiences seriously, however strange or impossible they may seem to a particular psyche, and without immediately jumping to a moral or intellectual conclusion about what they mean or point toward.

Extreme experiences like those of Whitley and the modern contactees are particularly interesting here. We know that they happen. We do not know what they are. But we do not need to know what they are in order to begin to study their patterns, histories, narrative structures, sexual dimensions, and philosophical implications. Perhaps such appearances are more or less what they seem to be. Perhaps they are expressions of something else that is *not* appearing, something that, by its very nature, cannot appear as it really is to an embodied ego with this particular evolved nervous system. To employ a common movie metaphor, perhaps the pictures on the screen of the abduction experience are being projected from somewhere else, somewhere outside the dark room of the theater, somewhere “behind” or, if you prefer, “above” the display itself.

We will, in fact, explore this very suggestion below. We will also see

how the visionary appearances of Whitley displayed very real physical and sonic effects in the external environment, effects that Anne and others could see and hear. Whitley will also challenge us to confront the contact experience as something that cannot be safely walled off in a subjective psyche, as just a set of private experiences. Which is all to say that we will venture into the questions of what may lie beyond the phenomenological cut and well outside the phenomena of the contact experience.

But not yet. Here, at the beginning, it is enough to make the phenomenological cut and focus on the experiences as experiences, that is, purely as a subject (which may turn out to be something *far* bigger than we suppose). This simple move will immediately provide our conversation with a new intellectual and moral generosity. Making such a cut will allow us, after all, to take the most fantastic, unbelievable, even graphically sexual appearances and treat them seriously and sympathetically *without* having to treat them literally and naively. The practice will enable us to be faithful to what actually appeared and is being reported without immediately believing or dismissing it. Making the cut will free us to talk about the impossible without it sounding impossible. It will enable us to entertain the most astonishing possibilities without sounding like fools.

The Human as Two

"Making the cut" asks us to consider a particular duality or twoness in the human being, at least in the functioning of the human psyche and how it knows the world. Here, after all, we are asked to make a clear distinction between what appears to us as sense-based egos ("what we know"), and what actually is out there ("what is"). Kant and his successors have argued that human beings can never know the latter. Like the prisoners of Plato's Cave, we are all locked down tight to the cave floor of our senses and brains. We are locked into the cave of the skull, as it were, and condemned to

witness only flat, sense-based shadow shows in the dark—mini-movies inside our head.

But here is the thing. The history of mystical literature strongly suggests something else or more. Indeed, the whole point of Plato's parable is that we *can* crawl out of the cave and see the multidimensional world outside, that we *do* have access to the Light, even if many of our peers will never see it and so continue to deny that it exists at all. In rare but real cases, it very much looks as if individual human beings can know, even become, something of reality as it really is, as opposed to what their cultural, religious, and sensory scripts tell them. In essence, these individuals "wake up" out of the social and sensory movie that they are caught in as characters. They peel themselves as perceptions off the screen, turn around, and come to know something of the projecting light streaming in from behind or above them.

Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), the great medieval mystic, recognized this already over seven hundred years ago in a little sermon that sounds like a chapter out of Edwin Abbot's *Flatland* (1884). Eckhart is preaching of an inner light that makes humans divine and of a power beyond space and time that he called the *eternal Now*. "This light," he wrote, "is so potent that it is not merely in itself free of time and space, but . . . this light takes away time and space."¹⁵ In our own modern terms, we might say that this light grants a type of consciousness that is outside space-time. To employ the traditional religious terms, it is infinite (beyond space) and immortal (beyond time). "Anyone powerfully seized by this light," the man preached, "would be as far superior to another man as a living man is compared to one painted on a wall."¹⁶ The painted human lives in only two dimensions, we would say today. He is "flat." The illuminated human now lives in three or four or more. He or she is hyperdimensional, we would say.

This, I take it, is what Whitley is getting at through his own movielike visions, which admittedly astonish him and have even tempted him to

accept them as literally true, but which he can never quite bring himself to fully believe. From the beginning, he has suspected that something else is going on, that these are complex psychical projections from some hyperdimension and not simple objective truths, hence the very first lines of *Communion*, about how "the enigmatic presence of the human mind winks back from the dark." Whitley has expressed real frustration in the preceding chapter about how so few took to heart that opening line and how so many, to this day, continue to read him as some kind of literal believer in what he witnessed on his own private movie screen.

When one reads him carefully, what one finds is a very modern version of what one finds when one reads classical mystical literature—what I have called the Human as Two. Here is Whitley on the nature of his appearances or experiences: "I don't mean that it's entirely in the mind, but rather that the mind might not be entirely in us." In short, mind "might persist even outside of the cradle of the brain." In other words, there is ego, there is the human subject, there is "you" and "me." And then there is mind, which may not be restricted in any way to a brain, a skull, an individual ego, a culture, or a religion.

This, it turns out, is a very old idea that can be found in any number of forms, including the medieval European notion of the *animā mundi* or "soul of the world." Here is Whitley's version of the same: "If mind does exist independent of biology, then, given the conservation of energy, it is likely to be rather old, and given its lack of confinement in the body, limited, if at all, in unknown ways. Considering that this universe is at least thirteen billion years old, and that there is increasing evidence that it might not be the only one out there, it is liable, also, to have a good deal of experience." There is an understatement.

Whitley then goes on to ask a series of very astute questions, including the openly paradoxical one: "How would we communicate with it, and in so doing, to what degree would we be talking to ourselves?" Such a soul-of-

the-world or cosmic mind, after all, would be us and not us *at the same time*. And it would behave much like the lights dancing on the movie screen: it would take on *any* cultural narrative (or myth), *any* subjective form (or ego), including some really cruel and really stupid ones, but it would remain, despite all of this, pure white light—without a form, without a story, and without a religion. The Human as Two.

Producer or Reducer?

Such a mind beyond brain would also carry real implications for what is clearly *the* central religious question throughout human history: What happens to us when we die?

It all depends, I suppose, on what we mean by "us." Which part of the Human as Two are we talking about here?

It's really quite simple. If mind is a product of brain, then mind goes away when the brain dies. Period. If, however, the human brain is more like a highly evolved receiver, transmission station, or local neural network that limits, reduces, and shapes mind into a cultural and subjective container that we know as the self or ego (which is itself not the producer of mind either), then when brain dies, the self may or may not go away (or it may stick around for a while, and then go away), but mind almost certainly does not go away. Mind as mind, after all, would be completely unaffected by the death of an individual brain, much as the Internet is not the least bit affected when you turn off your laptop or "drown" it in the swimming pool. 100

It all comes down to this, then: Is the brain the producer or reducer of consciousness?

Materialist-oriented neuroscientists like to point out that when the brain is damaged, the personality often changes dramatically, and that when the brain stops, consciousness disappears. This, of course, is entirely correct. Where they presume too much is when they conclude from these

obvious facts that mind *equals* brain, or that brain *produces* mind. This may be the case, of course, but this possibility does not necessarily follow from the facts. It only follows from a particular interpretation of the facts. All that we really know is that when the biological medium of mind, that is, the human brain, has been damaged or destroyed, these events profoundly effect how mind can be experienced by that particular subject. All that we know is that a laptop at the bottom of the swimming pool won't work anymore.

It might be the case that brain equals mind. Or it might be the case that the laptop computer called a brain has been damaged or destroyed and will no longer project a particular personalized desktop and social media system, but that the Internet of Mind is just fine, thank you very much. The facts are the same facts in either interpretation. The materialist scientists presume the materialist interpretation because they presume materialism, not because the facts require that particular interpretation. In essence, they are confusing an interpretation of the results of science with science itself.

But there are thousands (no doubt millions) of other "rogue" facts, conveniently ignored, wished away, or crudely pathologized as "crazy" or "delusional" by the same materialist interpreters of science, that support the Internet metaphor of mind beyond brain.¹⁷ Among them we might wish to place Whitley's eerie experience of seeing an old school buddy who had joined the CIA among his alien abductors, a friend who he later learned had passed away a few months earlier.

Whitley uses the experience to humorously call into serious question the typical extraterrestrial hypothesis: "What possible connection could there be between alien scientists from another planet and ectoplasmic manifestations of dear aunt Ethel?" But the same kind of experience can just as easily be used to call into question the typical materialist hypothesis. It is easy enough to dismiss a vision of a dead friend who one knows is dead as a subjective hallucination. It is not so easy to dismiss a vision of a dead friend

one does not know is dead. The latter suggests, though hardly proves, some kind of survival and postmortem communication.

Still, perhaps it was all just a coincidence. Whitley, after all, did not know the friend was dead in the vision, and he may have simply put the two things together afterward, like this: vision of friend, news of his death, interpretation that the earlier vision of the friend was a vision of the dead. This kind of coincidental reading, though, loses much of its power when we put it in a larger context. Hence the discovery of Anne, who noticed a spate of similar reports among the letters they received in response to *Communion*.

Whitley also recognizes that the broader shapes and themes of his visions are shared by a veritable crowd of corresponding witnesses. By publishing *Communion* and being honest about what he saw and experienced, he had, in effect, accidentally "uncovered a human experience of vast size that was completely hidden." Whitley is a fine comparativist here, particularly when he notes both the similarities of these different reports, but also their real and genuine differences, which number into literally hundreds of types or patterns. In his own words, he wants "to expose the large-scale structures that are present beneath the immediate narrative surface. For such structures most certainly exist." That is *exactly* how comparativists and phenomenologists talk.

But the letter writers are not alone either in their visions of the dead. This kind of apparition, of someone familiar who the visionary did not know had died, has been known and commented on for almost a century and a half now. They even have a technical name in the parapsychological literature. They are called "Peak in Darien" experiences after a book of the same title published by Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904) in 1882. Cobbe adapted the expression from a poem by John Keats in which the poet describes the Spaniards climbing a peak in Darien (now Panama), expecting to see a landmass, but instead seeing another ocean, in this case, the Pacific Ocean. The expression thus carries the sense of surprise at seeing

something unexpected, vast, and disconcerting. Over four decades later, the knighted English physicist Sir William Barrett (1844–1925) called systematic attention to these cases again in his classic study, *Deathbed Visions: How the Dead Talk to the Dying* (1926), in his opening chapter, "Visions Seen by the Dying of Persons Unknown by Them to Be Dead."¹⁸

So much for the "anecdotal" nature of these visions of the dead. In actual historical fact, there is nothing anecdotal about these visions at all. They are part of a stable and consistent pattern in the history of visionary experiences around death that has been reported for a century and a half in the modern English-speaking world. And that, of course, is only what we know in the modern West. The real landscape seen from a higher cross-cultural peak is no doubt much more vast and impressive, if only we would take the time and spend the resources to look.

The Secular Soul

The language of "spirit" and the "spiritual" appears quite a bit in Whitley's writing, and usually in very positive ways. The language of "religion" and the "religious" also appears, but usually in much more critical ways. This, of course, places Whitley quite squarely within a rising new demographic of secular people who nevertheless report spiritual experiences or spiritual orientations to the world. They are sometimes called the "spiritual but not religious," a phrase that emerged from, of all things, a set of questionnaires that sociologists were using. People would check the two boxes marked "spiritual" and "not religious." Hence the expression.

I study and write about new religious movements. Not surprisingly, I am often asked what sets apart the modern orientation of "being spiritual" from the traditional orientation of "being religious." At the risk of simplification, I would say that there are three clear markers.

One is the location of religious authority. The traditionally religious

place that authority outside the self in a scriptural text or institution. The spiritual but not religious place that authority inside the self. Two other clear markers are the temporal relationship to revelation and the nature of those past revelations. The traditionally religious locate full revelation in the past and understand the religious life to be a faithful remembering and reliving of some singular revelation. The spiritual but not religious might appreciate multiple past revelations, but they do not consider any of them to be absolute. Further revelations are available in the present and fuller revelations will appear in the future.

Crystallized down to their most basic forms, these three basic markers of the religious and the spiritual become:

on religious authority: outside/inside

on the nature of revelation: singular-perfect/multiple-partial

on the temporal locus of full revelation: past/future

Whitley displays all three markers. He does not think of any of this, of course, as "being spiritual." He thinks of it as "being secular," but in a very special, soul-filled way. Obviously, secularism does not preclude spirituality. If anything, it makes such an orientation possible.

Whitley describes the history of religions as "our long struggle to come to terms with it," "it" being this hypothetical mind outside brain. His final lines pertain directly to these secular-spiritual commitments to looking in, to multiple incomplete revelations and, above all, to a more hopeful future:

We started the journey on our knees, cowering before the ruthless and intemperate gods of antiquity. We followed our many religions deeper into the forest, until finally that path played out, disappearing into the current dark mutter of ritual, sloganizing, and murder. Now we

THE SUPER NATURAL

are at a crucial turning point. Either we journey on, this time along the secular path, or we take another fork, embarking on an even darker, more dangerous, and twisted journey.

We do not have an adequate vocabulary, much less a worldview or a set of institutions, to come to terms with such a human future. Maybe we never will. Maybe the super natural is just too much for us. I doubt this is the case, though. I doubt that the super natural is too much for us for one simple reason. I think we are an expression of it. I think we *are* it.

A Context in the Sky

JEFF

We have only faith to guide us, say the theologians.

Which faith?

It is my acceptance that what we call evidence, and whatever we think we mean by intuition and faith are the phenomena of eras, and that the best of minds, or minds best in rapport with the dominant motif of an era, have intuition and faith and belief that depend upon what is called evidence, relatively to pagan gods, then to the god of the christians, and then to godlessness—and then to whatever is coming next.

. . . . If now, affairs upon this earth be fluttering upon the edge of a new era, and I give expression to coming thoughts of that era, thousands of other minds are changing, and all of us will take on new thoughts concordantly, and see, as important evidence, piffle of the past.

CHARLES FORT, *Lo!*

History is not what we think it is. Certainly its meanings change as we engage it differently. Piffle of the past—odd things in the historical record that make no sense to us because of our convictions about how

the world works. Until, of course, those convictions pass and the piffle of the past appear as the unrecognized codes of some future knowledge.

Back to the piffle. I think most readers are probably like me when they encounter the story about the blue trolls bouncing around the Striebers' cabin living room as their paralyzed guests watch the show. I have never seen any squat blue aliens. I think most readers are like me again when they hear about the couple who witnessed an old (dead) friend show up in perfectly good form—a "solid ghost . . . entirely solid and real." I have never seen a ghost, much less a resurrected woman. For that matter, I think most readers are like me again when they hear almost *any* UFO story. I have never seen a UFO of any kind.¹⁹ When it comes to these sorts of things, I am a veritable genius of nonexperience. I am an amazing spiritual dud.

So why do I believe Whitley? Why listen to this professional storyteller tell us more stories? I have numerous professional reasons and one deeply personal reason to listen. I will get to the personal reason in chapter 9 (turns out that this dingbat is not a total dud). For now, let me focus on the professional ones. These are not simply professional reasons. They are also methods or practices, that is, they are highly developed "tools" with which to make some sense of otherwise impossible things. If you know where to find these tools (in the professional study of religion) and take the trouble to learn how to use them well, you can build the most astonishing things. Like a new world.

So far, I have introduced two such practices. It seems helpful to begin a list, as there will be quite a few others. Indeed, before we are done here, you will have an entire "practice kit" or "toolbox" at your disposal, which I will summarize at the end of the book in an appendix.²⁰

We encountered the first practice in chapter 1. This is the first and most important of all the practices in the study of religion. We call it simply *comparison*. This is a deceptive word, mostly because it is so familiar and seems so common. Consequently, we always underestimate the power of

what this mental technology can do. We also underestimate the sheer havoc and embarrassing mistakes this tool can create, if it is not handled expertly and used well. As we shall repeatedly see, *everything* depends on what you "put on the table," that is, everything depends on your comparative practice: what you compare with what to conclude what.

In our opening pages, I explained that if we collect enough seemingly "anecdotal" or "anomalous" experiences from different times and places and place them together on a flat and fair comparative table, we can quickly see that these reports are neither anecdotal nor anomalous. We can see that they are actually common occurrences in the species. They are part of our world. They are "natural," as we say, even if each of them is also rare with respect to any particular individual, and all of them are "super," that is, beyond how we presently understand how this natural world works. But—and, again, here is the big point—we can only begin to perceive and understand these super natural things through a careful comparative practice. Otherwise, they are more or less invisible. Otherwise, they seem coincidental, accidental, meaningless. Or they seem to mean what they, as a whole now, almost certainly do not mean: that there are spacemen out for sex, or UFOs are demons.

We encountered the second tool or practice in chapter 3: *phenomenology*. We learned to "make the cut" between "what appears" on our comparative table and "what actually is." We also learned that our sensory systems are simply not set up to know the latter. This cut allows us to take seriously even the most fantastic appearances of human experience without naively equating them or their interpretations with the truth of things (and the truth of things may well be weirder still). We can put the damndest things on our comparative table.

There is a third tool or practice. I want to take it up now. It is a very simple and effective way to make the impossible possible. As with comparison and phenomenology, historians and humanists have given this third practice a technical name. They call it *historical contextualization*, or, more

simply, *history*. This is what I want to do in the present chapter. I want to historically contextualize Whitley's abduction experience. I want to place it in a larger history.

These three practices, I should immediately observe, are often performed together. Whitley performs comparison and contextualization at different points in his narrative, for example: when he locates his troll experiences in the larger European history of blue troll folklore; or when he tells us of the child who saw the little blue men and whose dead brother, Frankie, was with them; or when their neighbor-secretary Lorie Barnes tells Whitley about the squat black figures who took such an interest in her unborn daughter; or when he talks to his neighbors and looks for other stories of things seen in the sky in that area at that time.

Anne took up the comparative method again when she read through the *Communion* letters, created a chart and classification scheme on the wall, recognized patterns in the data, and came to the working hypothesis: "This has something to do with what we call death." Actually, Anne had moved beyond collection, classification, and comparison, beyond the phenomenological cut, and beyond historical contextualization with such a sentence. She had moved into the act of theorizing her comparative data.

For now, let us take up this third tool or practice of historical contextualization. I want to bring it out into the open and make it more explicit and conscious. I also want to show how contextualization can have a most ironic and unintended result, ironic and unintended anyway for the conventional historian.²¹ As we will now see, robust historical contextualization, like robust comparison across historical contexts, does not always end up explaining everything. Sometimes it ends up making our world much weirder than we thought.

Hudson Valley, 1909–1986

Historians, and humanists in general (by which I simply mean professionals who work in the humanities), are expert in insisting on the "historical context" of every human experience, idea, value, or expression. What they mean by this is that every human experience takes place in a very particular historical context and so is profoundly shaped by that place and time. Think about who you are. You are who you are largely because of where and when you were born, who your parents were and how they raised you, what language or languages you speak, and so on. Change any of these variables and you would be a different self, a different person.

But many humanists often want to push this obvious truth further. They want to replace my carefully chosen "shaped by that place and time" with another expression: "constructed by that place and time," by which they really mean: "completely determined by that place and time." For them, everything about human experience and expression is not just shaped or mediated by a historical context. It is constructed out of that historical situation and, or so it is implied, is *nothing but* that historical situation. Everything human can finally be reduced to and explained by "history," which is to say: by its historical context.

This move, of course, makes every human experience relative to a particular place in time. Taken to its logical end, it turns us all into psychological silos, silos that have no real way of communicating across space and time (hence, logically speaking, "history" should not be possible). It also sucks any bigger meaning out of the world. No single experience now can be taken as a sign or expression of some larger cross-cultural reality or shared human nature, much less as a revelation of some cosmic truth. It's all history. It's all context. It's all constructed. Put in the terms of our earlier analogy, it's all appearance. There is no projector behind or above us. There is no real behind the show.

This is brilliant

The ideological debunkers of anomalous phenomena have a very similar strategy in mind when they label the extraordinary data of this realm anecdotal. Basically, what they are arguing is the same point, but now in reverse. They are arguing that these experiences have no larger context or bigger point to make (this is what "anecdotal" means). They are arguing that these pure anomalies can be fully explained (away) as local constructions of a single human psyche and so should not concern us as either meaningful or real in the sense that other things are real, that is, in the sense that they can be experienced by multiple individuals in more or less the same way in other times and climes. In their opinion, such anomalous experiences can tell us nothing about the real world or our real nature because they sit entirely alone among our other more public and so more reliable perceptions and experiences. "No broader context" equals "unreal." These anomalies are best left ignored; then, as meaningless blips, as statistical flukes, or as neurological hiccups.

★ There is a real insight here. The meaning of something, after all, *does* depend on its context, be that a text, a grammar, or a social event. To take a simple, mundane example, I know that a long flowing piece of cloth attached around a person's shoulders and neck is interpreted differently in a superhero comic book than it is at an elite social event. The meaning of the "cape" is determined by its literary, artistic, and social contexts. This is why completely anomalous experiences would in fact be "meaningless" in the simple sense that we would have nothing else to compare them to, no context in which to place them, and so no way of understanding what they are or how they are functioning.

But here is the funny thing. Such historical and contextual insights are helpful enough, but, if applied fairly and systematically, they can easily backfire on the conventional historian and the dogmatic debunker. Sometimes, after all, what initially looks anomalous or "without a context" turns out, on closer historical inspection (that is, with better history), to be neither. A truly robust historical perspective here does not relativize or dis-

miss. Sometimes it ends up confirming the anomalous experience as part of a much larger pattern or context. In this way, good history, like good comparison and good phenomenology, makes the impossible possible.

Consider, for example, the historical contexts of the events recounted in *Communion* and in Whitley's later nonfiction books on this same series of events. These events may seem to the uninformed reader to be completely anomalous, just plain weird, but they are in historical fact anything but. If we look carefully at either the big picture or the little picture, a very different image on our comparative screen emerges, as if tens of thousands of little tiny pixels were flashing in and out on our flat-screen TV to take a definite, and quite eerie, shape and story.

First, step back a bit from the television. Way back. The visitors, of course, are not anomalous at all. They possess *countless* precedents in the general history of religions. And that is an understatement. I do not think it is too much of a simplification to suggest that the entire history of religions can be summed up this way: strange superbeings from the sky come down to interact with human beings, provide them with cultural, technological, legal, and ethical knowledge, guide them, scare the crap out of them, demand their submission and obedience, have sex with them (often forcefully), and generally terrorize, awe, baffle, inspire, and use them. This history of religions is the broadest context and grammar of *Communion*. Nothing anomalous or meaningless there, even if it is all, of course, impossible in our modern materialist register and assumptions, themselves all very recent, and no doubt very temporary.

Now step forward, say, halfway to the TV screen: not so close that you just see individual pixels, but not too far away either, so you can still see the images and stories on the screen. Similarly, this "little picture" or more immediate temporal and spatial context of Whitley's initial experiences work powerfully against any anecdotal reading.

Whitley briefly invokes these larger historical contexts in the previous

chapter when he writes: "As yet, I was not aware of all the strange sightings across the Hudson in Dutchess County, which would become famous as the Hudson Valley UFO sightings." Indeed. The geographical locale of Strieber's abduction experience is a well-known and well-documented hot spot for UFO activity throughout the twentieth century. Consider the following.

The first major "UFO flap" in the United States was the airship mystery of 1896-97, during which hundreds of sightings of craft flying over major U.S. cities, often with spotlights or "lanterns" no less, were reported in the newspapers from California to New York. According to Whitley, an airship floated over San Antonio in May of 1897 and must have flown over Strieber's great-grandmother's house.²² This was six years before the Wright Brothers managed to get their first dangerous contraption a few feet off the ground in Kittyhawk, North Carolina. The nature of these sightings remains controversial and ambiguous, and many of them were no doubt hoaxes or misreported, but one thing is clear: they were widely reported, and these reports are part of the historical record and so a part of the larger historical context of the later sightings.

Another major wave of sightings occurred about a decade later, in 1909-10, this time centered in the Hudson Valley region. On July 26, 1909, the *Newburgh Daily Journal* ran this headline: "AIR SHIP" IS SEEN AGAIN FROM WASHINGTON HEIGHTS: SHE WAS SWOOPING: TOO DARK, IT IS SAID, TO DISCERN OUTLINES OF THE "SHIP." And here is what *The Sun* of New York City reported a few days later, on August 1: "A mysterious airship which flies only at night is causing considerable excitement and keeping the people of Orange county residing between Goshen and Newburgh up nights in their efforts to get a look at it." And here is my favorite piece, under the headline "HUMAN VOLCANO ERUPTS," from the *Goshen Democrat* four days later, on August 5:

Otto Pushman, Newburgh's champion cusser, had been sent to jail for thirty days for using sulfurous language. During the nocturnal hours

of Tuesday he was discovered on Grand Street looking for that ding-blasted airship that the Newburgh papers tell about and cursing fervently at the blanky-blanked moon.

As this precious piece reveals and as author Linda Zimmerman emphasizes through an analysis of other newspaper pieces from the same year (one of which featured mocking cartoons and an invocation of Santa Claus), one can see "all the elements of denials, ridiculous excuses, hoaxers, and belittled witnesses already in place, more than 100 years ago!"²³

Zimmerman has written two books tracing the UFO phenomenon in the Hudson Valley region from 1909 to the present. What she finds is a dizzying array of phenomena not unlike those we find later in the century: "airships" and later "spaceships" in the sky ranging from baseball size glowing balls to huge floating Vs (including her own sighting); an immense circular metallic craft with colored lights and symbols that hovered just above the heads of a mother and her twelve-year-old son close enough to hit with a rock; two early abduction reports (from 1929 and 1937) involving things like time standing still, floating humanoids in "diving suits," and a sense of being in two worlds at once; encounters that result in the witnesses developing various psychical capacities, particularly telepathy and precognition (an extremely common pattern in such encounters to this day); a bizarre vision of two immense "wheels" on their side (vaguely reminiscent of Ezekiel's "wheels" and also reported as a spinning "ferris wheel" in the 1980s); an eyeball-to-eyeball encounter with a long-necked green humanoid flying in a circular craft right beside a traveling car; a large pile of sand blown to smithereens with circular landing marks burned into the cement (with attending photographs); UFOs surrounded by helicopters or helicopters apparently searching for UFOs; and numerous stories of scared dogs, cats, and birds.²⁴

Zimmerman also deals with some cases outside the Hudson Valley, including my personal favorite: a sighting in a backyard outside of Chicago

in 1992 of a seven-foot humanoid with an apparent tail teleporting from tree to tree whose description sounds, to me anyway, *exactly* like Nightcrawler of the X-Men. The thing even displayed Nightcrawler's signature cobalt blue flash when it instantaneously "jumped" from place to place.²⁵ This is well before the movies, but not before Nightcrawler himself, who was introduced in a comic book in 1975. What to do?

The spooked dogs, cats, and birds are also especially interesting, as they strongly suggest that these events had some kind of biological or physical existence outside the subjective psyches of the witnesses, that is, outside the phenomenological cut. I think an entire book could easily be written on UFOs and our canine and feline companions. Whitley himself has written about the physiological effects different visitor phenomena had on their pet cats, including above again.²⁶

Moreover, and worse still for the anecdotal thesis, it was the 1980s that saw the strongest spike in reports of sightings and up-close encounters in the Hudson Valley. The Northwestern University astronomer and air force scientific consultant J. Allen Hynek, the researcher Philip J. Imbrogno, and the journalist Bob Pratt dedicated an entire volume to this subject, with a later edition (after Hynek's death) claiming some 7,046 reported cases in the Hudson Valley from 1982 to 1995.

Particularly important here, since it temporally wraps around the Strieber case, is the three-year flap—beginning on New Year's Eve, 1982, and petering out throughout 1986—that featured something that came to be known as the "Westchester Boomerang," basically an immense triangular-shaped craft repeatedly floating over the region. The thing was described variously as "a flying city," "as large as an aircraft carrier," "as big as a football field," and like "something out of the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*."²⁷ As is so often the case, the sci-fi references were irresistible.

Not that the immense thing behaved like a thing. It could appear and disappear instantly, vanishing, as one witness put it, "like the Cheshire

Cat's smile." It was often described as completely silent. Or in uncanny religious terms: "It just hung there motionless in the sky. It was like seeing a ghost." Squadrons of helicopters were seen in the night skies during some of these sightings, as well as unidentified planes flying in formation, which the witnesses believed were sent up by the military to confuse the matter and provide a bogus explanation to the public.²⁸ The public was not tricked, or amused.

After two books on the Hudson Valley material, Zimmerman's conclusion seems reasonable enough: the Hudson Valley region is a UFO hotspot. And it was *here* that Whitley Strieber had his own abduction experiences over the Christmas holidays of 1985, right smack in the middle of the most active decade of the twentieth century, during a spike in that same decade, and after at least seventy-seven years of similar encounters in the same area that included not one or two reported sightings, but *thousands*.

Such cultural and geographical contexts do not explain these experiences or offer us any definitive answer. I am certain that the reports are not all of the same quality or reliability, and, as we have seen, some of them were simply mocking. Accordingly, I do not wish to take a particular position on these records, much less on this or that individual sighting. We simply have not done the hard historical, textual, ethnographic, and scientific work that would warrant or authorize any such definitive position. As a culture, we have barely begun such a project. But, taken as a whole, such historical materials certainly dispel any notion that Strieber must be a kook, or that his honest descriptions and dramatic sufferings can somehow be brushed aside as lacking any meaningful context, as anecdotal or anomalous. They were in historical and contextual fact nothing of the sort.

That is one big reason I continue to listen to Whitley Strieber.

Intro to
ERM

The Earth-Farm

There is one other thing to say about the Hudson Valley, and it is a biggie in my opinion. It is obvious enough, but no one, to my knowledge, has noted it. It is this: Albany, New York, was the birthplace and childhood home of the man who did more than *anyone* to shape the American paranormal: Charles Fort. Jim Steinmeyer has given us a wonderful biography of Fort.²⁹ I have done my best to summarize Fort's sophisticated comparative practice.³⁰ Here I can only sketch the barest of outlines.

In four weird and wonderful books written between 1919 and 1932 (*The Book of the Damned*, *New Lands*, *Lo!*, and *Wild Talents*), Fort laid down the paradoxical, both-and, real-unreal, mental-material nature of paranormal phenomena, which he humorously called "the damned" for the ways that religion and science so anxiously denied, condemned, and ignored these constantly reported events/experiences. It was Fort again who began to speculate about the meaning and purpose of what he called "super-constructions" in the sky. There were no "UFOs" or "flying saucers" yet, although many of Fort's descriptions are astonishingly close, like the man's in 1871 who saw a thing fall from the sky, "oscillating from side to side like a disc falling through water," that is, exactly like flying saucers would be seen descending in the next century.³¹ Then there were his many speculations about abductions, which he framed in his typical humorous, not quite grammatical way, like this: "Whether spacarians have ever dredged down here or not, or 'sniped' down here, pouncing, assailing, either wantonly, or in the interests of their sciences, and I have strong objections against lugging in the fourth dimension, because then I am no better off, wondering what the fifth and sixth are like."³²

Or more bluntly: "I think that we're fished for."³³

But all of this, at least as we think we know it now, would come later, partly because of Charles Fort. It was this man's speculations that were picked

up by the pulp-fiction subculture of the 1930s and '40s (the pulps even serialized sections from his books), which in turn morphed into modern science-fiction literature in the 1950s and '60s. Fort is one of the fathers of all of this.

Fort, however, did not make the mistakes of the reductive and religious comparativists of today. He was a very special kind of skeptic. Indeed, he was extremely critical of two common ways of demonizing or dismissing anomalous events: what he called the Dominant of Religion (related to what I have called religious comparison) and the Dominant of Science (related to what I have called reductive comparison). He made fun of both by simply demonstrating how they really didn't work to explain the full scope of the data and how they both took certain things off the table so that they could pretend that they were explaining everything.

It is worth repeating. It is very easy to claim a theory of everything if you get to decide what that everything is. It is very easy to explain everything on the table if you have put everything you cannot explain underneath it in the wastebasket.

Fort sought to move beyond these two dominant ways of knowing into a third Dominant, what he called (not so eloquently) "Intermediatism" or (a little better) the "philosophy of the hyphen," by which he basically meant to refer to events that were physical and mental or real and unreal at the same time. It is a similar still future, frankly paradoxical, deeply spiritual, deeply materialist way of knowing and understanding our world that Whitley and I are re-visioning as the super natural.

Fort, who spent his adult life reading and writing at the southern end of the Hudson Valley, that is, in New York City, considered some very entertaining, and occasionally very dark, possibilities with respect to all of these superstructures in the sky. For example, he often invoked the experience of the Native Americans around 1492, when they first witnessed those immense, anomalous ships floating in the bays. It would not go well for them, Fort noted.

Then he got darker (and weirder). Earth might not be a “new land” or a galactic colony. It might be a farm. This would certainly explain why the visitors do not establish any open contact or attempt communication with us. Why should they?

*Would we, if we could, educate and sophisticate pigs, geese, cattle?
Would it be wise to establish diplomatic relation with the hen that
now functions, satisfied with mere sense of achievement by way of
compensation?
I think we're property.³⁴*

Or again: “I should say that we're now under cultivation; that we're conscious of it, but have the impertinence to attribute it all to our own nobler and higher instincts,” which is to say: to our religious instincts and beliefs.³⁵

This dark thought of a kind of galactic seeding, alien husbandry, or earth-farm secretly working below (or above) our mythologies and religions would have a long and rich history in the later science fiction, of course, up to and including Ridley Scott's recent film *Prometheus* (2012). But it is not just a sci-fi notion. None other than the Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James had advanced a more domestic, less sci-fi version in a related context, that of the spirit world suggested by his own extensive psychological research with mediums. More specifically, James wondered if our relationship to the otherworld of the spirits and the dead was not like that our pets have in relationship to our world. He wrote the following stunning lines in *A Pluralistic Universe*:

*In spite of rationalism's disdain for the particular, the personal,
and the unwholesome [the modern debunker's anecdotal], the drift of all
the evidence we have seems to me to sweep us very strongly towards the*

*belief in some form of superhuman life with which we may, unknown to
ourselves, be co-conscious. We may be in the universe as dogs and cats
are in our libraries, seeing the books and hearing the conversation, but
having no inkling of the meaning of it all.³⁶*

In any case, James's “superhuman life” is precisely what Fort was writing about. Hence his affection for the prefix super-, which he attached to pretty much everything: super-constructions, super-vehicles, super-mind, super-sight, super-imagination, super-religion, even super-sociology. Hence also his extensive focus on the “wild talents” or superpowers of paranormal people.

Although this is pure speculation on my part, I cannot help but wonder if behind (or above) all of this super-writing floated some personal sighting in those haunted Hudson Valley skies, or even some private “abduction” experience. Charles Fort certainly would not have been the first to see things in that sky or experience such an encounter in that haunted valley. Nor would he, of course, be the last.

Biological Gods

These speculations of James on the pet in the library and Fort on the earth-farm are highly relevant to our present subject, and this for at least two reasons. First, because, as Whitley describes in the previous chapter and as Anne discovered reading through the hundreds of thousands of letters that *Communion* invoked, the dead are often seen within abduction events. Second, many of Whitley's speculations about the meaning of his own experiences are clearly “Fortean” in their paradoxical thing-thought structure. This is especially evident in the last chapter of *Communion*, entitled “A Structure in the Air: Science, History, and Secret Knowledge.”

By far, the most difficult aspect of Whitley's “structure in the air,” for a traditional academic anyway, is his suggestion that these experiences

might represent an encounter with other actual species, invisible life-forms existing in some other dimension of the natural world that overlaps with ours and whose occasional rupture into our dimension is always mediated by our cultural imagination. This, of course, is not simply a theory about the visitors. It is a radical, and deeply critical, theory of religion as well, since it implies that these invisible life-forms have been interacting with us for millennia under various mythical forms that we have traditionally (mis) framed in supernatural terms. In Strieber's elegant phrase, it appears that the visitors "were somehow trying to hide themselves in our folklore."³⁷

Others had suggested something similar with respect to the flying saucers and the folklore, and in very sophisticated forms, before Whitley, including John Keel, Jacques Vallee, and Eddie Bullard. But there is something more "physical," "realist," or "biological" about Strieber's suggestions. Here is how he put the matter in the 2008 preface to *Communion*: "But the visitors are not only real and here. In fact, I don't think they are visitors at all. I think that the truth is that we are embedded in their world in the same way that animal species are embedded in ours. It was hard to accept, but as I got to know some of them, I began to see that their relationship to us was quite similar to ours with, say, chimpanzees. . . ."³⁸ Later in this same text, and again in this one, Whitley compares himself and his terrified reactions to the presence of the female visitor to a wild, frightened bucking ranch horse. He was being "broken."

Shades of Fort's pigs on the farm and James's cat in the library.

What sets Whitley's model apart is how interactive it is, how it relies on us to manifest the other species. This interactive model is advanced through multiple frames, including that of the triad or triangle in the history of mythology and the bizarre implications of quantum physics, which, as has been amply noted by physicists and enthusiasts alike, has reintroduced consciousness and intention back into the scientific picture in dramatic and baffling ways. In this interpretation of quantum physics, the result of an

experiment is partially determined by what the physicist decides, that is, how he or she chooses to set up the experiment. The result then is not simply "objective." It is "subjective" and "objective" at the same time. The entire system is interactive.

Whitley takes this interactive model very far, suggesting, in effect, that the visitors may rely on our beliefs to appear: "Thus the corridor into our world could in a very true sense be through our own minds."³⁹ He is not after simple belief here. He is not a fan of the contactee "eager to see the phenomenon as a dimensionless cartoon of space friends." He is after something much more complex and interesting. Here is how he ends the book:

The visitor experience may be our first true quantum discovery in the large-scale world. The very act of observing it may be creating it as a concrete actuality, with sense, definition, and a consciousness of its own. And perhaps, in their world, the visitors are working as hard to create us. Truly, such an act of mutual insight and courage would be communion. . . . Who knows, maybe really skilled observation and genuine insight will cause the visitors to come bursting to the surface shaking like coelacanths in a net.⁴⁰

Note that there is no stable subject or object here. There is a weird, mind-bending, mirrorlike moment in which the viewer and the viewed bring each other into existence through their mutual intentions and gazes. This is what Whitley means by "communion." I will take up this communion again in my next chapter, there through the conjuring practices of reading and writing and that mystery of consciousness we so banally call "interpretation."

Keep observing. Keep turning the pages. Keep letting go. Keep the apocalypse going. The Already World is shining through.