

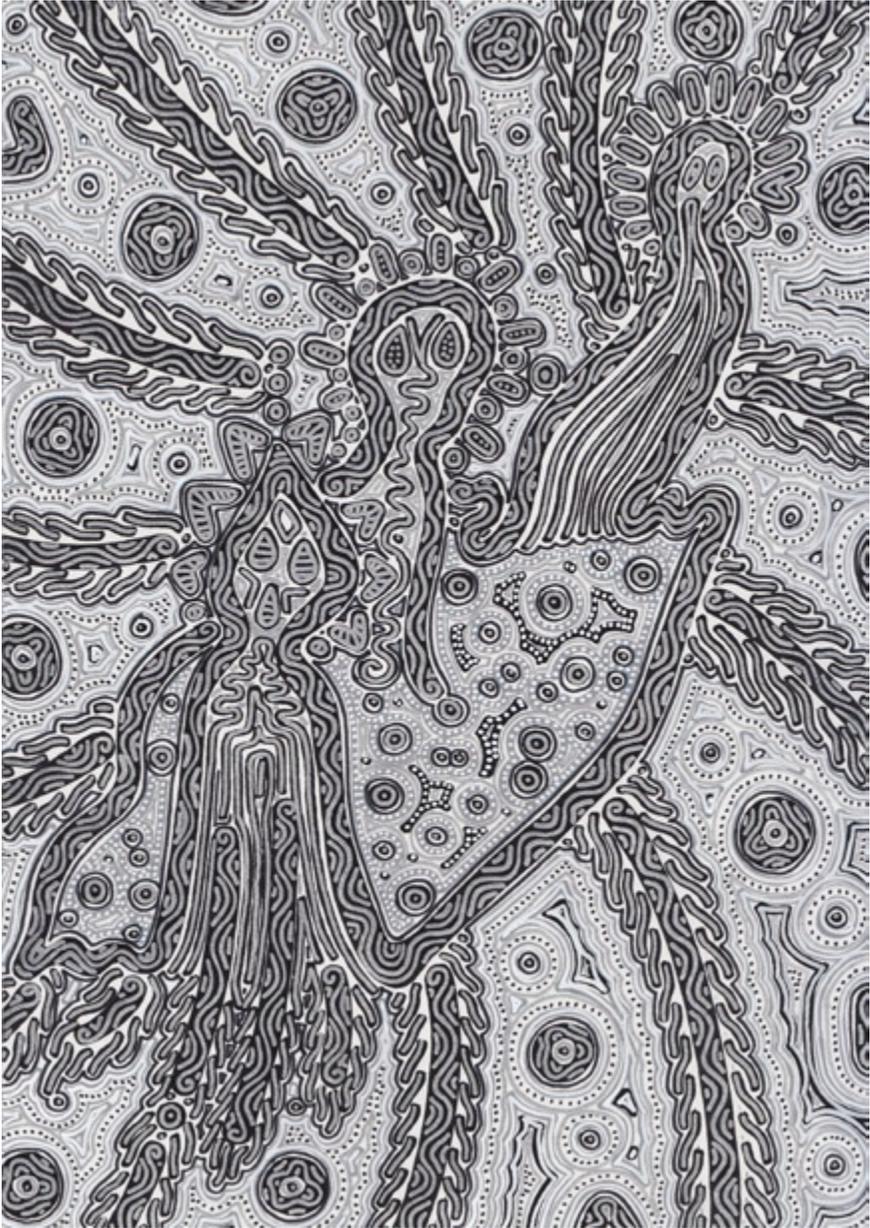
THEY SHIMMER WITHIN

**Cognitive-Evolutionary Perspectives
on Visionary Beings**



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Chapter One - Preview



“Three Strangers”

1. Encounters with Visionary Beings

The apparition of visionary beings in one form or another appears to be a steady and constant phenomenon in the experience of modern human beings. Some examples will help illustrate this and simultaneously suggest an implicit working definition of what we mean by the phrase 'visionary being'. Firstly, a personal experience with the Mexican entheogenic herb *salvia divinorum*:

*"Sitting mesmerized as a waterfall ripple of energy fell onto me from the daylight window, my gaze fell to the floor in front of me. I became aware of presences beside me. Three 'strangers' appeared, undulating into view as little hooded glowing lights shimmering there in front of me, their eyes on me as I watched them. Little flames like the others, and I could feel they had come simply to watch, to make contact with this strange human visitor. The thought suggested itself that I should try to return the gesture of contact, but they were already beginning to fade..."*¹

A longer lasting and more remarkable personal report some years later when I was experimenting with a combination of two psychedelic drugs, 2-C.B. and 2-C.I. The experience began with the apparition of glowing pale and beautiful young women swirling around me and seeming to coordinate their flowing movements with mine as I danced or walked. As the distinctly synaesthetic effects of the latter drug began to make themselves known, these visions faded and I beheld the arrival of beings and intentionality:

"The world moves from swirling women and naturalistic shapes into hexagonal forms, undulating like neon-electric barley fields but infinitely recursive. All of it is filled with intention, the whole world seems to be watching me, intent upon bringing its focus upon me..."

"And then, who are you? Two beings, just behind each shoulder, hexagonally constructed and glowing, their shimmering hands holding my collar-bone and neck to stay attached to me. I can see them in my peripheral vision, and I can sense their gaze upon me, but when I turn to look at them they turn transparent and unseen, but still I know they are there..."

*"I can taste them! It's the strangest taste, like mint lilac. I am tasting their colours. They speak into me things like: 'We are pleased with all this information' (I think they are talking about me) and 'We are making neurocosmic your hind-mind'. Their language has physical effects that I can feel but it comes to me without words. It's kind of like a psychic connection and partially through the forms and colours of the visions that they communicate these things. I am mind-blown but happy they are here. They accompany me and subtly direct my every movement, thought and action for the next few hours. It feels incredible..."*²

A visit to Amsterdam, and the consumption of a brownie from one of the city's famous cannabis cafés, led to a jarring and disturbing experience during a sleepless night in a hotel room:

"Each time I close my eyes, my mind dissolves into myriad exploding lights

and stars. This sensation soon starts to act upon my body. I feel a severe shaking then my whole being, my whole physicality shatters into thousands of jagged shards. I fall into the pieces, spending hours of wandering from one fragmented situation to another, each one populated by beings and half-beings who ask me what I'm doing there. I can't reply and nothing that I see makes sense. Some of the beings just watch me, others try to grab me but before they can, I fall away into another room or scene and the whole thing starts up again. Nothing finishes, everything feels half-constructed, half-envisaged, half-done, half-acted-out, incomplete. It just goes on and on..."³

An encounter from my husband Chris, during the time when he began taking anti-depressants for a bout of mental illness, demonstrates that strong psychoactive plants and drugs are not necessarily required to spontaneously elicit an experience:

*"One morning as I was waking up, [I had] a half-dream of little people of uncertain form but which I thought of as 'brain elves taking my brain apart'. I didn't see them but I felt them there. It happened at a time when I felt in general that my mind was being disassembled and reassembled."*⁴

In his research work with the extremely potent psychoactive drug D.M.T. (dimethyltryptamine), Strassman gives a wealth of reports from his experimental subjects of varying types, but contact with elf-like and other visionary beings appears to be a common theme:

*"There were... elves. They were prankish, ornery, maybe four of them appeared... They commanded the scene, it was their terrain!... They held up placards, showing me these incredibly beautiful, complex, swirling geometric scenes in them... They wanted me to look! I heard a giggling sound – the elves laughing or talking at high-speed volume, chattering, twittering."*⁵

Perhaps the most prominent and entertaining accounts of visionary beings are those given by psychedelic researcher and author Terence McKenna, who was fond of narrating his experiences with what he termed 'machine elves'⁶. He relates that he encountered these beings on his first D.M.T. 'trip':

*"I fell through... into another place that didn't seem like a state of mind... [W]hat was happening was that there were a lot of beings in there, a lot of what I call self-transforming machine elves. Sort of like jewelled basketballs all dribbling their way toward me. And if they had faces they would've been grinning at me, but they didn't have faces. And they assured me that they loved me, and they told me not to be amazed, not to give way to astonishment..."*⁷

Elsewhere, he described what he held to be the customary actions of these elves during his D.M.T. visions:

"[T]hey do a very disconcerting thing, which is they jump into your body and then they jump back out again and the whole thing is going on in a high-speed mode where you're being presented with thousands of details per second... What they're doing is making objects with their voices, singing structures into

existence. They offer things to you, saying 'Look at this! Look at this!' and as your attention goes towards these objects you realise that what you're being shown is impossible."⁸

These episodes of 'contact' are not isolated or rare occurrences. Neff reports that in Strassman's D.M.T. research that:

*"Over 50% of the 1,000 pages of [his] notes had some kind of reference to interactions with entities. Likewise, [Peter] Meyer spent two decades collecting over 300 DMT trip reports and identified contact with sentient, independently existing beings in over 66% of them."*⁹

Gallimore & Luke's survey¹⁰ of the history of D.M.T. from its first synthesis in 1956 also contain a wealth of similar reports from the first Hungarian studies to the present day. But visionary beings are not restricted to D.M.T. or *ayahuasca*, an Amazonian entheogenic brew which contains D.M.T. As my reports at the opening to this chapter can attest, encounters are possible with other drugs and plants as well. Hanna notes in the vast Erowid experience vaults that

*"...entity contact is associated with nearly a hundred different substances, although over half of those substances have only one or two entity-related reports..."*¹¹

and Arthur's lively account of his *salvia divinorum* experiences¹² contain a diverse array of stories of contact with what he perceived as spirits or people from another world. Two brief reports should illustrate, demonstrating that encounters with visionary beings is a constant feature of salvic¹³ visions. In the first, Arthur narrates a nest of undefined organisms:

*"I suddenly found myself staring at a 'nest' of organisms. Their shape was rounded, undefined – soft and egglike. There were dozens, perhaps hundreds, of them immersed in some type of thick fluid matrix... I heard a voice say... 'It's all right, you only wanted to be among your own kind'... [T]here was an overwhelming feeling of affection for these organisms... [T]his feeling of kinship... [had] familial or tribal overtones."*¹⁴

A second report, of beings and tactile language, of insects and hives, is of such dazzling visionary intensity that it could be easily mistaken for a D.M.T. experience:

*"Made some sort of breakthrough... They were aware that I was 'making a bridge' to their world... I was led upward, apparently by a woman, into an 'upper room' or state of language. She was showing me the secret of their language, which entailed physiological or somatic-tactile elements, rather than verbal formulations. I found myself emerging into some sort of viscous cocoon or hive-like structure, peopled by insects or some sort of insect-type beings, of which I was one. We were not unlike mantises..."*¹⁵

What is taking place here, and what suite of phenomena (for such strangeness and visionary complexity surely cannot be down to a single underlying cause) is responsible for the emergence of these visionary beings into conscious

attention? It is easy enough, in the moment and indeed afterwards, to get caught up in the profound and seemingly all-encompassing reality of these encounters, and begin to think of them as literally real. Indeed, the sensations of extremely strong visionary experiences often appear to cause the majority of people – myself included at times – to go through a stage of radically questioning one’s reality models¹⁶, and in particular to doubt the fundamental Western scientific foundation that consciousness and agency cannot exist without biology. Is it really necessary to do so?

The perceived reality – or ‘hyper-reality’ – of visionary experience has been remarked upon before. Lewis-Williams’ neuropsychological model of visionary experience narrates three stages along what he calls an ‘intensified trajectory of consciousness’¹⁷. It begins with an ‘entoptic’ stage of geometric forms, followed by a ‘construal’ stage where the visionary subject unconsciously attempts to draw out patterns, associations and images according to her disposition. Finally there is a third stage of intense and iconic visions that bear little resemblance to anything in the ‘real’ (which is to say ‘everyday’) world. Despite this seeming unreality, the intensity of the experience causes the subject to remove all doubt that what she is seeing is wholly real:

*“There is a progressive exclusion of information from outside... Images change one into another. This shift in iconic imagery is also accompanied by an increase in vividness. Subjects stop using similes to describe their experiences and assert that the images are indeed what they appear to be. They lose insight into the differences between literal and analogical meanings.”*¹⁸

Noll agrees, noting that the apparent ‘vividness’ of visions is in some sense a perceptual metaphor borrowed from everyday experience¹⁹. He asserts that the mental imagery seen in visions elicits certain unconscious impulses, activating

*“...non-volitional levels of the psychopathological apparatus in response to the [visionary] imagery... and increases the affective acceptance of visionary experiences... on a deep psychophysiological level.”*²⁰

To account for this ‘affectiveness’ of vision – that is, its sense of reality – Noll briefly narrates²¹ two possibilities: first, that imagination is distinct from perception which displays as autonomous action independent and wholly different to perception, and second, that mental imagery can activate visual processing facilities directly in the brain, causing visual faculties to respond in the same manner as if real-world events were being perceived. In other words, he remains somewhat agnostic on the question of whether mental imagery is continuous or discontinuous with perception.

However, he appears to remain fairly sure that visionary imagery emerges from the imagination, rather than from another source. Lewis-Williams concurs, considering that the perceptual contents of visionary experiences are dependent upon *“process[es]... linked to the disposition of the subject”*²² and most commonly derive from *“memory and are often associated with powerful emotional*

experiences.”²³

Horgan reports Shanon’s view which broadly agrees with Noll and Lewis-Williams, but considers that the dependence upon imagination as an explanation does not close the matter or render further study pointless. Coming from an *ayahuasca* context, Shanon shows that a dispositional perspective on visions can liberate a great many questions:

*“He [Shanon] suggests that ayahuasca visions are products of the imagination rather than glimpses of a supernatural realm... This proposal will sound reductionistic to some, but it... raises many questions... Why does the imagination, when stimulated by ayahuasca, yield visions so much stranger and more powerful than those we encounter in, say, ordinary dreams? Why do ayahuasca-drinkers from widely disparate cultures so often hallucinate similar phenomena, such as jaguars and snakes, or palaces and royalty? Why are the visions of even an atheist like Shanon so often laden with religious significance?”*²⁴

We may uncover tentative answers to some of these questions during the course of our journey. However, this assumption, that imagination and disposition can wholly account for the intensely perceived reality of the imagery, rests upon approaches which are relatively easy to integrate into currently-understood scientific phenomena, such as unconscious (but ontogenetically-derived) psychological phenomena or the actions of neurology. When viewed from a cognitive perspective – one which we will be developing at some length later in our journey – this dispositional viewpoint might seem somewhat limited, and reports exist which appear to directly contradict dispositional assumptions, particularly in the context of visionary beings.

One of Strassman’s D.M.T. subjects reported a vision of contact with unseen intelligences and beings watching over him, which concluded that *“I couldn’t have anticipated it or even imagined it. It was a total surprise!”*²⁵ This sense of the unbidden and unexpected – to which incidentally I can also personally attest from my *salvia divinorum* visions – attracted Strassman’s interest:

*“I found this last comment especially interesting because it challenged my assumption that what [the subject] encountered was a product of his mind, rather than a ‘true’ perception... If what [he] had just encountered was only a product of his own imagination, he may have been able to alter his reactions [or the experience].”*²⁶

This appears to be an incipient challenge to the dispositional stance, but implicitly it favours the notion that what is happening is ‘real’ in some sense. Strassman hesitates to apply a literal meaning to the nature of this perceived reality at first, focussing on the relationship between D.M.T. visions and mystical states from religious experiences.²⁷ But later, and perhaps in response to the ubiquity of his subjects’ resistance to biological, psychological or pharmacological explanations²⁸, he begins to entertain the possibility of literalism as a kind of useful standpoint from which to support and interact with the visionary subjects in his study:

*“At a certain point, I decided to accept at face value volunteers’ reports. This thought experiment replaced my original tendency to explain away, interpret, or reduce their experiences into something else.”*²⁹

However, he subsequently reports that after further “*additional study and reflection*”³⁰ he has become more prepared to take a literal flavour and engage in some metaphysical speculations in what we might critique as a kind of creative apophenia springing from a deep-seated human desire to believe in that literal reality. In Part II we will discover that such a yearning may be driven by much more deep-seated mental impulses than have hitherto been proposed, but for now it is enough to suggest that this desire to literalism – on Strassman’s part as well as his subjects – emotively and compellingly answers to the strangeness of the D.M.T. being contact reports which left him “*baffled and nonplussed*”³¹ and for which no clear explanatory model appeared to be forthcoming.

In any case, his speculations include the possibility that the beings inhabit an aspect of reality which is customarily hidden from the everyday senses³², using an analogy of broadcast channels being received by a television applied to the human brain, and a somewhat pseudo-scientific approach of the Many Worlds Interpretation of quantum mechanics³³ to the possibility that D.M.T entities dwell in a parallel universe into which it is possible to travel with the use of a strong entheogen. He even makes an odd and extremely vague speculation upon dark matter, with D.M.T. providing “*a ‘visualization of information’ [into]... dark matter ‘life’...*”³⁴ to which one barely knows how best to respond!

Strassman’s views on the nature of visionary beings has been influential, and to be fair the hesitancy with which he arrived at and suggested the speculations briefly narrated above must be noted. He has since expressed some frustration on the uncritical reception of his wilder ideas in many internet counter-culture and visionary circles on the internet:

*“[M]any of the theories that I speculate about in my DMT book have been taken as fact, despite my having placed as many brackets and caveats around those conjectures as possible, distinguishing them from objective data.”*³⁵

Luke is less hesitant³⁶ to be speculative but more wide-ranging in his approach. In his explorations of the phenomenology of D.M.T. beings, he is willing to entertain literalist models but lends them equal weight to other interpretations springing from neuropsychological and cultural fields of enquiry, and he notes³⁷ that studies into the actions of D.M.T. on neurological and pharmacological levels are still very much incipient endeavours. By implication, then, there is much that is unknown, and this must also apply to the contents and actions of D.M.T. visions as well.

With respect to visionary entities – or in his words, “*seemingly sentient discarnate beings*”³⁸, which seems as good and concise a definition as any other – he provides a useful summary of some of the entities that have been reported on both D.M.T and *ayahuasca*, drawing on the work of Strassman and Shanon, among

others. This summary will have much resonance throughout our subsequent journey and is hence worth quoting at some length:

“Commonly they [are] described as ‘entities’, ‘beings’, ‘aliens’, ‘guides’ or ‘helpers’, and would appear as something like ‘clowns, reptiles, mantises, bees, spiders, cacti, and stick figures’... as well as dwarfs, elves, imps, angels, spirits, gods, or just as a presence, the latter four of which were commonly supremely powerful, wise, and loving. Encounters with serpents and large felines, particularly black pumas, are much more typical on ayahuasca... Mythological beings... gnomes, elves, fairies... Chimeras or hybrids... Extraterrestrials... Angels and celestial beings... Semi-divine beings... Demons, monsters and beings of death... Another category, of plant teachers or plant spirits, should be added... Reports [also] abound of mantis-like creatures performing ethereal brain surgery to DMT... experients, in a manner reminiscent of alien abduction cases...”³⁹

In attempting to come to some understanding of this wild array of experiences, Luke explores the ontology of D.M.T beings in several categories. The first of these is the subjective hallucination, which he considers “materialist reductionist”⁴⁰, but he confines his view of this interpretation to the neuropsychological. He notes the view of James Kent, who considers them to be ‘information generators’:

“For Kent... the question of the entities’ reality is redundant given that they generate real information, and sometimes this seems to go beyond the experient’s available sphere of knowledge.”⁴¹

There are hints of usefulness in this view, in particular the sense that entity contact provides information from beyond the boundary of the known, a theme which we will return to in due course. That said, this category’s exclusive focus upon the interactions of neurology and pharmacology upon the mind to generate experience is not entirely sufficient for a full understanding of the visionary being phenomenon. The characterisation of the neuropsychological view as ‘materialist reductionist’ also implicitly suggests something perhaps of Luke’s own favoured perspective.

His second category is that of the psychological or transpersonal, in which “[t]he communicating entities appear alien but are actually unfamiliar aspects of ourselves”⁴² which at first glance appears to be a re-statement of this first category, but Luke suggests a speculation that our reptilian brain or the cells and molecules which make up our neurology interact with our direct experience through the action of the psychoactive drug, and these appear to us as beings. This is similar to a speculation of mine in a previous work⁴³, and as may be seen from my words in the ‘Introduction’ to this volume, one I have largely rejected.

Luke’s final category⁴⁴ is to speculate that the entities seen in visions are indeed literally real, and that they live on other worlds, or are found in alternate dimensions. This is familiar enough from Strassman to not require further critique, except to say that the burden of proof here – which is beyond enormous – for the

existence of such parallel dimensions, and for the position that supernatural agency can exist without biology, and yet further for the implicit proposal that a mind under the influence of an entheogen can perceive into the said hidden dimensions, must surely rest with those who make the assertions, even if speculatively, and it is my firm belief that no such outlandish claim is really required for an integrated and humanist understanding of visionary beings and related phenomena.

In a conference presentation given in 2015, Luke refines this trivalent system of ontology into four categories and seven subcategories⁴⁵ as follows: i) ‘constructivist/neuro-theological reductionism’, in which contact with visionary beings is caused simply by brain chemistry, or that it is hard-wired into the brain, ii) ‘contextualist’, in which experiences depend upon the local setting and mindset of the visionary, and are culturally-mediated, iii) ‘essentialist-perennialist’, in which the contact reveals a ‘higher’ reality, or that the beings “*may/may not be real, but belong to a higher realm*”⁴⁶ and iv) the ‘literalist’ position, that the beings are incarnate but real in the existential sense.

Many of Luke’s categories are relevant for the ontology of visionary beings – it is surely the case that culture, brain chemistry, neurological structure and neuronal interconnections as well as individual psychology and imagination all have their part to play in any understanding of how such visions come to be experienced – but it is the conceptual leap-frogging of the cognitive which is most notable. Indeed this sphere of enquiry, which deals with neither brain hard-wiring nor neurochemical models, nor for that matter psychological disposition, is conspicuous by its absence in many approaches and speculations, and researchers seem only too eager to jump⁴⁷ from strictly materialist or individualist approaches, where the brain or the individual’s unconscious mind and imagination are the focus of study, to metaphysical and literalist positions, in which the beings are real and dwell in a ‘higher realm’, whatever that may mean and however it may be conceived.

To borrow a phrase from Scott Atran⁴⁸, all of these approaches – and I include those of Lewis-Williams and Noll as well as Strassman and Luke here – are somewhat ‘mind-blind’ in that they are able to acknowledge an individual’s imagination, her ontogenetically-shaped unconscious mind (her ‘disposition’ or her ‘set’ in psychedelic terms⁴⁹), and perhaps her archetypal heritage⁵⁰, in shaping visionary experiences and entity contact, but cannot integrate cognitive enquiries into evolved and innate reality-structuring propensities of the human mind which to a certain extent *precede* perception and experience, rather than implicitly *following* or *shaping* them, as the former models tend to assume.

How our cognition functions, and how our species’ evolutionary history has shaped our minds in the most fundamental of ways – far beyond the kind of ‘unconscious mind’ we are accustomed to thinking about from Freud, Jung and others – are active and productive areas of research in diverse fields, not least in how our minds generate both supernatural and intuitive concepts and turn them into cultural realities.

I propose to apply some of these cognitive approaches to the present question of visionary beings, beginning with their apparent manifestation in a range of cultural contexts – many of which are non-visionary in nature and as such they demonstrate that one does not need to ingest strong psychoactive substances to ‘know’ that such beings are there – and culminating in a model which takes in a complex network of evolved mental propensities to account for their origin and persistent appearance in visions, and which communicates to a wide variety of related human phenomena including many in Luke’s systems of ontology.

I hope to demonstrate that this ‘cognitive-cultural’ view, which is not so much subjective as it is collective or ‘collectively unreal’, can answer to the emotive, affecting and ‘hyper-real’ nature of intense visionary experiences by connecting the phenomenology of such experiences to a much wider array of human phenomena. I hope to do so in a rational, scientific and occasionally speculative manner that nonetheless retains the psychedelic vitality and visionary intensity of the contact experiences which have inspired this journey.

Shanon reminds us that “[i]nner space... truly is the last great frontier of science, and its reaches are vast and wild and strange.”⁵¹

While I am not so sure the mind is necessarily the last frontier of human knowledge, it certainly is a profound one, and I believe that only the kind of cognitive-cultural approach I take here can successfully answer what I consider to be two particularly pertinent but rarely-asked questions about the visionary phenomena under discussion: *why beings? and why ubiquitous intentionality?*

All other approaches, whether literal or non-literal, implicitly take the contents of the visions as experienced at face value, and assume that the apparition of beings and entities is a perfectly natural and predictable phenomenon, but why should this be so? Why not a succession of extremely interesting but counter-intuitive and multi-dimensional inanimate objects? Why not beautifully visualised abstract concepts with no discernibly apparent conscious agency? Why not synaesthetic music, mundane snippets of everyday life or mere visual incomprehensibility that is nonetheless aesthetically pleasing? The ubiquity of beings, spirits, gods, messengers, elves, angels and so on – and not non-beings or an absence of intentionality – requires an explanation beyond the mere assumption that this is simply what occurs when humans have visions. Why do we seem trip-wired to envision them?

With such questions, I believe the possibility exists for a new type of conversation to be opened in regard to these apparently ‘discarnate entities’, one which I may term ‘humanist expansionist’, since it takes the view that order to understand any given human phenomenon – and belief in and experience of visionary beings is as much a human phenomenon as art, language, religion, science and anything else we do – we cannot view it in isolation. What we know from all other human phenomena must ultimately be brought to bear on the matter, since we have emerged from evolutionary processes that appear to determine that everything we are holistically interacts with everything else that we are, and in such

complex ways that we may reasonably suggest that the given phenomenon under study is effectively delocalised across the whole human being.

At the outset of our journey, this epistemological statement may seem overly abstract, but I hope in due course to demonstrate its veracity, and the interactions between the cognitive and the cultural with regard to visionary beings, and thence between those two aspects and everything else which is human, will begin to be seen.