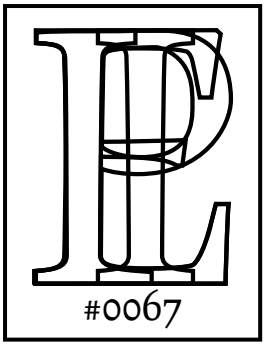

Gnostic Psychedelia and the Archetype of the Archons

By Erik Davies
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I wrote the recent paper “Gnostic Psychedelia” for Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies, a newish journal edited by April DeConick, who I had the great fortune of being able to study Gnosticism with during my time at Rice. This article first draws out one particularly important feature of gnostic myth—the idea of the archons, or fallen “rulers” against whom the gnostic wages spiritual warfare. In contemporary conspiracy culture, the archons now hold a prominent place at the table, but they are also described in both orthodox and heterodox texts of antiquity. Since I am describing a type rather than analyzing a particular sect or text, some scholars will probably find my use of the term too loose to be of value, but my goal is not to dig deeper into the ancient world.

Instead, I use the concept of the archons to illuminate an important feature of modern western psychedelic culture that tends to get short shrift: an agonistic and critical spirituality directed against social reality, rather than the dominant perennialist emphasis on unity, interdependence, and Oneness. In studying modern psychedelic texts from Alan Watts, Timothy Leary, Jim DeKorne, Robert Anton Wilson, and Jonathan Talat Phillips—some of whom explicitly invoke the archons of old—I find a gnostic psychology that has much to say to our time of crisis, and that features a more explicitly political dimension to entheogenic vision.

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Gnostic Psychedelia

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Abstract

Today the clinical return of research into psychedelic medicine has been accompanied by a model of religious experience that stresses the healing effects of unitive, immanent experiences. This paper instead unearths a counter-narrative of psychedelic religiosity: a more suspicious and critical sense of spiritual encounter that I illuminate through the classic gnostic mythology of the archons. In a number of movement texts from the 1960s through the 2000s, I trace the appearance of archon-like figures—both explicitly linked to gnostic traditions and not—and how their appearance motivates social critique and a more engaged politics of consciousness.

Keywords

gnostic mythology – psychedelia – archons – religious experience – mysticism – consciousness

1 Entheogens, Esoteric and Exoteric

Today's world, we are told, is in the midst of a "psychedelic renaissance": a multifaceted and increasingly visible public engagement with the transformative possibilities of psychedelics—whether medical, psychological, or spiritual. This remarkable mainstreaming of psychedelia after decades of drug war repression and countercultural resistance depends on a number of factors, at the center of which lies the revival of authorized psychedelic research, both clinical and neuroscientific, in both Europe and the United States. But there are other factors as well: the global embrace of the powerful Amazonian brew *ayahuasca*; the increased visibility of festival culture and other formerly underground drug-identified (and mind-bending) subcultures; the decriminalization of cannabis culture; and a significant shift in mainstream media

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discourse, with laudatory responses to psychedelic therapy voiced from organs as varied as the *New York Times* and Breitbart News.

Despite the clinical nature of much of the current research, the psychedelic renaissance has also brought questions of religious experience back to the table. Even as all manner of "shamanisms" (which may or may not involve indigenous experts) are flourishing in the broader psychedelic movement, the issue of psychedelic mysticism has become deeply entwined with today's therapeutic, clinical, and even neurological research. The most important of these studies remains a 2006 paper from Roland Griffiths's group at Johns Hopkins, which asserts that psilocybin—the active ingredient in *psilocybe* or magic mushrooms—can occasion a "mystical-type experience" in subjects unfamiliar with the substance.[1] Other, more recent research projects, at Johns Hopkins, New York University, and elsewhere, involve giving psilocybin to religious leaders, as well as to terminal cancer patients wrestling with mortal anxieties and the spiritual questions often bound up with such challenges. In the spring of 2018, Griffiths's group at Johns Hopkins also began conducting an online survey addressing the enigmatic nonhuman "entities" that users of the potent tryptamine DMT frequently report.

Clearly this is a territory that historians and humanistic scholars of religion should be paying attention to. With some important exceptions, however, scholars working on contemporary religion, alternative spirituality, Western Buddhism, yoga, the New Age, and postwar occult revivals have only just begun to reckon with the extraordinary and constitutive influence that psychedelics and psychedelic experience have had on their subjects of concern.[2] A significant step in the field of esotericism was taken by Wouter Hanegraaff in a 2012 essay on "Entheogenic Esotericism," in which the historian admitted that the short shrift given to psychedelic experience in the scholarship of the New Age—including his own *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (1996)—was naive. Hanegraaff instead argued that, following the visible excesses of the 1960s drug culture, psychedelics remained covert but absolutely central sources for transformative spiritual experiences in the 1970s and 1980s, and should be studied accordingly.[3]

Beyond the enigma of psychedelic influences lies the more complex issue of psychedelic spirituality in itself—that is, how psychedelic experience among

1 Griffiths et al. 2006. The study's claim, which hardly escapes the problem of expectancy, also relies on a "Mystical Experience Questionnaire" whose framework—which derives from perennialist scholarship by W. T. Stace over half a century old—remains untouched by fierce debates within religious studies about mystical experience.

2 One significant exception here is the work of Partridge 2006, 82–134.

3 Hanegraaff 2012, 396–400.

modern individuals has come to be seen by both participants and observers as potentially or explicitly spiritual, religious, occult, or mystical. How do we understand the moments of divine fusion that populate trip reports, or the god-forms and esoteric symbols that saturate psychedelic art, or the seemingly religious forms of celebration and ritual that appear within otherwise secular and hedonistic psychedelic subcultures, such as those surrounding the Grateful Dead, or global psy-trance music, or Burning Man?

To explore the current of psychedelic mysticism, or modern psychedelic religion, we need to examine the phenomenological content of individual experiences, the accounts of those experiences, and the vexed relationship between account and experience, cultural text and phenomenal immediacy. We also need to look at the various symbolic practices, authoritative narratives, and conceptual frameworks that have emerged from and recursively underscore such "religious" and "mystical" experiences.

The field of psychedelic discourse is itself rather dizzying, a heterogeneous array that ranges from a number of social sciences—including anthropology, transpersonal psychology, cognitive science, and so forth—to strongly independent scholars and researchers, some of whom are interdisciplinary, and others undisciplined. Finally, there is a panoply of vivid and sometimes eccentric voices minting novel spiritualities within the psychedelic underground. Further complicating the matter is the fact that the contemporary construction of psychedelic experience as "religious" confers distinct cultural and even legal benefits, especially in the United States, and so remains bound up with concrete power struggles not always visible on the surface.[4]

Despite its heterogeneity, the contemporary discourse of psychedelic religion—which remains strongly perennialist, Jungian, and increasingly neo-shamanic—is largely untouched by the sorts of questions about power, constructivism, and language favored by critical scholars of religion, and especially those investigating the vexed issues of "religious experience."[5] This present essay attempts something rather more modest. Here I want to use a broad conceptual framework or pattern of sensibility drawn from the history of religions in order to illuminate certain buried features of modern psychedelic culture and consciousness, features related not only to spirituality but to power and politics. In simpler terms, I want to talk about *gnostic psychedelia*.

4 For example, many small "churches" are currently trying to figure out how to take advantage of the religious exceptions granted by the Supreme Court to the Brazilian ayahuasca sect União do Vegetal in 2006.

5 For a refreshing counter-example, see Strassman 2018, 1–4.

To understand gnostic psychedelia, however, we must look at sources that the instigators of the current psychedelic renaissance would prefer we ignore. Scholars of esotericism know that behind every visible "renaissance" lurks older and sometimes more Hermetic (or Hermeticist) streams of concepts and practices. In the case of today's psychedelic renaissance, these motivating streams emerge largely from the counterculture—a complex, multi-generational underground of alternative religious, spiritual, political, and psychological discovery, contestation, and bricolage. Much of the official discourse of the current psychedelic renaissance is, for obvious reasons, concerned with moving away from and even rejecting this sometimes rather feral legacy, and especially the notorious Timothy Leary. And yet, if we are to wrestle with the religious and mystical spirits loosed by contemporary psychedelic use, both inside and outside the clinician's office, we must balance the current normalizing discourse with a direct and unapologetic investigation of the sometimes baroque mystical, esoteric, and heterodox currents that surged (and continue to flow) through the psychedelic underground.

Given the relatively minor role that the language of gnosis or of ancient gnostic texts played in postwar psychedelic discourse, this will not be a work of archaeology so much as comparison. How do the conceptual and mythological affordances of gnosis and gnosticism help illuminate psychedelia? My goal is not to ground psychedelia as an "essentially" mystical or esoteric path, but to probe how gnostic frameworks, defined both etically and emically, help clarify the ongoing negotiation about the meaning and purpose of psychedelic experience—a negotiation in which religious, mystic, hedonistic, neuroscientific, political, and existential registers are always in play. Despite the conceptual fuzziness of patterns drawn from the history of religions, like "mysticism" or "shamanism" or "gnosticism," they can still help us make sense of psychedelic consciousness and culture. But we should remember that this sense-making remains a *making*, a construction we are contributing to, just as much as the design of today's clinical psychedelic therapy sessions—the red rose, the blindfold, the pep talk, the Bach soundtrack on the headphones—help construct the "mystical experiences" that patients now discover in their sessions.

2 Psychedelic Gnosis?

First, a word of caution. In the critical discourse of the twentieth century, the labels *gnosis* and *gnosticism* have proven exceptionally plastic, signifying everything from existentialism to Marxist revolution to Thomas Pynchon and the plots of films like *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show*. At the same time, the

historical basis for these terms within the scholarship of ancient religion has also become an intellectual battlefield, with some arguing for their retirement.

That said, even if "gnosticism" is banished from the halls of academe—which seems unlikely—the term and its cluster of associations will still play a vital role within the history of esotericism, whose direct if minor influence on psychedelic mysticism also needs to be tracked if we are to fully reckon with Hanegraaff's zone of "entheogenic esotericism." As such, I want to draw attention to some psychedelic thinkers who productively employ the language and tropes of gnosis and gnosticism. At the same time, I am equally interested in seeing how these analytic and historical categories—however slippery—can help us unpack psychedelia, and particularly what we might call its politics of consciousness.

Let us begin with the term *gnosis*, by which I mean something like a punctuated mode of spiritual knowing—an extraordinary intensification of conscious immediacy that functions as a source of knowledge that in turn transforms the knower.[6] While we might further refine this definition through an interrogation of its terms or a selective historical reflection on ancient and modern lore and practice, we might equally look to the preeminent training manual of modern "spiritual but not religious" mystics: William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience.* In this book, which is cited like clockwork in later psychedelic movement texts, James famously characterized one of the four essential features of mystical experience as *noetic*. "They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect," he writes. As with my definition of gnosis above, these states also take the form of a *knowledge* that "retain[s] a curious sense of authority for after-time."[7]

In catalyzing powerful, ecstatic, and frequently revelatory events within individual minds, psychedelics provided a sociological, psychological, and even spiritual analog to gnosis. This is primarily an etic observation, however, given that the dominant terms and metaphors of classic psychedelic mysticism—from Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (1954) through Timothy Leary's Tibetan *bardo* remix *The Psychedelic Experience* (1964) to Ram Dass's *Be Here Now* (1971)—are largely drawn from Eastern religion. How we link the Eastern turn of the sixties and seventies with already existing currents of Western religion and esotericism remains a vexed question, in and outside of psychedelia. But it does seem that the action of comparison was itself part of the turn. Esotericists had been gazing East for centuries, of course,

6 In the parlance of the sixties, we might refer to the verb "grok," which first appeared in Robert Heinlein's 1961 science-fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

7 James 1906, 367.

while contemporaneous religious scholars like Edward Conze, who famously translated the Sanskrit term *jñāna* as *gnosis*, drew extensive comparisons between gnostic spirituality and Eastern enlightenment.[8]

But we still need to get from gnosis to the properly gnostic. One route is to recall a fundamental tension between what André-Jean Festugière pegged as *gnosis optimiste* and *gnosis pessimiste*, and what subsequent writers have described as Hermetic versus gnostic sensibilities.[9] At the core of this difference is the adept's attitude toward the cosmos. As Dan Merkur writes, "Hermetic ethics celebrated the divine within the world; gnostic ethics were abstemious, ascetic efforts to escape from the world."[10] The optimistic gnosis of Hermeticism is—comparatively at least—immanentist, world-affirming, and alchemically, even erotically transformative. Pessimistic gnosis, on the other hand, is militantly otherworldly, and sometimes bracingly hateful towards the world.

Again, these distinctions should be taken as general patterns of spiritual sensibility, not as specific historical claims about this or that text or sect. Still, the contrast between Hermetic and gnostic patterns can still help us illuminate a tension that plays itself out in the psychology of psychedelia. To use the tripartite gnostic jargon of *hyle*, *psyche*, and *pneuma*—body, soul, and spirit—we might say that whereas the Hermeticist actively engages the middle ground of the personal psyche as an erotic and magical field of power and potential, the gnostic seeks to overcome and even assault the alien psychic formations of the personality in light of the higher call of the pneuma. While the Hermetic strain has been dominant in modern psychedelic culture, it is its more antagonistic gnostic counterpart that I want to tease out below.

Here I need to emphasize the *critical* character of the gnostic position, which covers a more combative and subversive set of features than are suggested by the ecstatic illuminations of *gnosis optimiste*. In her book *The Gnostic New Age*, April DeConick underscores this transgressive dimension, a quality she believes is actually more essential to the gnostic mode or mood than any particular religious or esoteric current, and that depends in addition on an explicitly "countercultural method of interpretation."[11] Gnostic spirituality, we might say, is gnosis against the grain. Its antinomian illuminations and agonistic hermeneutics are directly posed against those concentrations of power that wield control over cosmic, worldly, and psychological existence. It is the mythological presence of these *archons*, who serve the demiurge in his domination

8 Conze 1967.
9 Festugière 1967, 28–87.
10 Merkur 1999, 81.
11 DeConick 2016, 12.

of cosmic and psychological reality, that takes us from optimist gnosis to the antinomian gnostic. These personified demonic ministers, Paul's principalities and powers (Ephesians 6:12), intrinsically define the gnostic position by way of critical opposition.

In the first volume of his series on the language of power in the New Testament, Walter Wink notes that, in the ancient world, the cluster of Greek scriptural terms centering on the root *arche—archai, archonte, archein*—generally refer to political or economic positions of power and the individuals who hold them.[12] To oversimplify, both Paul and the gnostic writers behind texts like The Nature of the Rulers or The Secret Book of John spiritualize this language of worldly power. This foot in the real world distinguishes the archons from the company of more purely eschatological agents, like gods, or *elohim*, or watchers, or demons, or *daimons*. For Wink, writing in a theological key, this suggests that "the Powers are simultaneously the outer and inner aspects of one and the same indivisible concretion of power."[13] As an example of this dual "domination system," he points to the popular ancient trope of the "angels of the nations," a mythologization of sovereign power that precisely reflects the archons' blend of worldly and spiritual agency.[14]

Though archons are in essence demonic figures, their origins in the institutional world of human power and politics suggests an important mythological difference between them and demons, and especially with orthodox conceptions of devils as figures of sin, or temptation, or false doctrine. The archons do not tempt—they dominate and imprison. To combat such powers, in psychological terms, does not mean to resist their wiles so much as to understand and subvert, if possible, the power they *already* wield over you. Here it is helpful to recall the gnostic association of the archons with the planetary powers of astrology, which control human destiny from birth. While the occult revival that emerged in the psychedelic sixties embraced frameworks like astrology in a positive "Hermetic" fashion, the more gnostic position—the revolt against the archonic system of the world—waited in the wings. And it is the presence of this more totalizing critique that, I believe, allows us to speak of a properly gnostic psychedelia. For as my colleague, the religious scholar Matthew Dillon has suggested, the gnostic position is ultimately *dependent* on the mythological and conceptual presence of the archons, without whom it melts into mere perennialism.[15]

12 Wink 1984, 13–15.
13 Wink 1984, 107.
14 Wink, 1984, 26–35.
15 Personal communication, March 2018.

Dillon's comment is particularly relevant to psychedelic mysticism, which was and in many ways still is drenched with perennialism, world-affirming Hermeticism, and the embrace of the universal liberating immanence of "the One." But the more visible *gnosis optimiste* of psychedelic religiosity has, as we will see, always been shadowed by a more antagonistic—and hence more specifically *gnostic*—attitude of contest and critique. By tracking the psychic footprints of the archons inside psychedelia, then, we can illuminate an esoteric politics of consciousness that is too often lost under the dominant images and rhetoric of unitive psychedelic mysticism.

Indeed, while unitive mysticism can and has been critiqued for its apolitical escapism, the anxious awareness of power implied in the gnostic attitude toward the archons—whether we think of that attitude as dualist or not—produces a fundamentally different relationship to worldly agents and institutions. It has become a chestnut of countercultural history that the youth movement was split between the activists of the New Left and the drop-out culture of the hippies, between, in Northern California terms, Berkeley and the Haight. But though it is true that many heads rejected the militancy of the street activists, some psychonauts saw themselves less as pantheistic contemplatives than as mystical warriors who were, like the ancient gnostics, fighting within and without "to control the cosmic rulers through personal warfare that conquered the demons in charge of the world."[16]

3 Resisting Robots

As noted, the psychedelic mysticism associated with the postwar counterculture was, in the terms sketched above, Hermetic rather than pessimistic. And almost overwhelmingly so. From the shimmering trouser folds in Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (1954) to the sensual flux of Watts's *The Joyous Cosmology* (1962) to the "Oneness" and ego death pursued by Haight Street hippies, the most visible modes of psychedelic gnosis—naturalistic pantheism, neo-*tantra*, vaguely Eastern perennialism, and an attenuated Christian mysticism of grace and transfiguration—all underscore the unitive, embodied, sensual, and immanent possibilities of psychedelic consciousness.[17]

But there is one crucial aspect of sixties psychedelic consciousness that can be seen as gnostic in the darker, more agonistic sense we are pursuing here. As Dan Merkur explains, one common feature of psychedelic experience in

16 DeConick 2016, 279.

17 For a good overview, see Merkur 2014. Also Miller 2011.

the postwar West was an awareness of the constructed character of ordinary perception and cognition. Sometimes this "epistemological experience" catalyzed a "sociopolitical analysis" that was "both liberating and disillusioning."[18] While seeking love and communion in the psychedelic "here" and "now," countercultural psychedelic seekers thus simultaneously confronted the oppressive "System" within themselves. This assemblage of social, technological, and ideological forces not only imprison and repress the true, liberated self, but actively "program" ordinary personality and perception to operate as an agent in a world that the tripper now sees is a cruel and oppressive game. When these social forces are mythologized or perceived as active incorporeal agents themselves, then spiritual realization must include the confrontation and overcoming of archon-like forces both inside and outside the self.[19]

Alan Watts articulates this logic in his 1961 book *Psychotherapy East and West*, which was published a year before his pantheistic psychedelic masterpiece *The Joyous Cosmology*. Beholden less to depth psychology than to transactional analysis—which paradoxically would become at least as important for psychedelic psychology as C. G. Jung—Watts proclaimed that the goal of the therapist was to "help the individual liberate himself from various forms of social conditioning." To bring this goal into accord with the Eastern metaphysics Watts was busy popularizing, he redefines the term *maya*, describing it as "the Hindu-Buddhist word whose exact meaning is not merely 'illusion' but the entire world-conception of a culture."[20] Watts' cultural critique also extended to the sense of the self as a rational agent, a consumer, or even a psychological personality—the "skin-encapsulated ego" that Watts castigated as, in now familiar terms, a "social construct."

Never a fan of the world-denying gnostics, Watts has little truck with the transcendental implications of gnostic psychedelia. Here, as in *The Joyous Cosmology*, Watts paints a picture of liberation as the flowing, hedonic, and sensory freedom of purposeless play. Nonetheless, in *Psychotherapy East and West*, he acknowledged that the work of liberation included a critical or agonistic function as well. "The negative aspect [of "liberation"] is criticism of premises and rules of the 'social game' which restrict this freedom and do not allow what we have called fruitful development."[21] Here we can see how, for

18 Merkur 2014, 232.

19 While the availability of such conceptual animism can be ascribed to the enchanting tendencies of psychedelic perception, it can also be seen as the literalization of the structuralist discourse of sociology, whose "forces" and "systems" take on a life of their own.

20 Watts 1961, 8–9.

21 Watts 1961, 16.

psychedelic thinkers like Watts, leftist or Frankfurt School critiques of "ideology" have been laminated with interpretations of metaphysical "maya" as a form of repression.

With his emphasis on the pernicious character of social games, Watts was not so far off from the pre-psychedelic social psychology of Timothy Leary, whose first book, *The Interpersonal Diagnosis of Personality* (1957), offered a dense personality typology based on social "games" and interpersonal "scripts." By 1962, the psychedelicized but still professional Leary had pushed the psychological concept of game beyond secular social interactions and into metaphysics. The "subject-object game," for example, structured ordinary perception and science alike, while the most dominant and tragic game of all remained the "ego game." In its place, Leary outlined a pragmatic program of "applied mysticism" that used psychedelic trauma to "shatter the gamesmanship" out of people. For Leary, the mystic experience—what the *bardo*-influenced Leary called the "Clear Light," or what we might call the "gnostic flash"—revealed "the non-game, meta-game experience."[22]

In 1967, now bedecked in the clothes and public persona of a spiritual leader, Leary put out a pamphlet called *Start Your Own Religion*. It was, in part, a grab for power. In consort with the League of Spiritual Discovery that he had recently founded, Leary wanted to reframe psychedelics as the object of a collective *religious* pursuit, and thereby invoke the Free Exercise Clause and related legal arguments based on the First Amendment. At the same time, however, Leary also wanted to continue the psycho-spiritual fight against the forces of social conditioning. Indeed, Leary's 1968 essay collection, which included the aforementioned pamphlet text, was called *The Politics of Ecstasy.*

The pamphlet begins, like so many gnostic tracts, with an ironically reframed Eden story. Our planetary home is a garden, a "dancing, joyous harmony of energy transactions" in which each human being—crafted by two billion years of evolving DNA code—is "born perfect." But at the same time, each human baby also finds himself in an "imperfect, artificial, disharmonious social system which systematically robs him of his divinity." Where did this fallen system come from, Leary asks? Though both societies and individuals begin their lives harmoniously adapted to the environment, they get trapped—for reasons that are not explained—into "nonadaptive, artificial, repetitive sequences." Leary calls this process "robotization."[23]

Is the critique of robotization a politics? By 1967, Leary's career as a psychedelic guru had put him at odds with the politic activists in the youth movement,

22 Leary 2014, 27–28.

23 Leary 1990, 222.

who sometimes vocally opposed what they saw as the druggy escapism of the hippies. In Leary's view, many of these militants demonstrated "robot" behavior, an aggressive reactivity unmotivated by expanded consciousness. In *Start your Own Religion*, he proclaims that conventional politics is nothing but a "fake prop TV-studio stage set." Rather than play such games, the trick is to drop out of the game entirely, and for you and your tribe to create your own "do it yourself" religion.[24]

Leary did not see or at least present this line of flight as pure escapism, but rather as a reformulation of a central biblical lesson about religion and power. "Everything that exists outside your body and your shrine belongs to Caesar," he writes. "Caesar has constructed the fake-prop studio for his king-of-the-mountain game, and he can have it. Highways, property, status, power, money, weapons, all things, all external man-made objects belong to him. The spiritual life is completely detached from these props."[25] There is a strong call of disinterestedness here, but in stark contrast to classic gnostic dualism, Leary mixed such transcendental overcomings with a portrait of the spiritual life as deeply embodied, sensually rich, even hedonistic. But from our agonistic gnostic perspective, what is important here is the internalization of spiritual warfare as an *ascesis*, a nearly totalizing rejection of what William Burroughs called, in 1964, the "reality studio."[26]

Arthur Kleps, who lived at Millbrook during Leary's reign there, founded the Neo-American Church in 1966 to similarly assert psychedelic use as a religious right. Unlike Leary, Kleps used the occasion to viciously satirize religion and society with the sort of wacky psychedelic humor we can also associate with the Yippies, the Discordian society, and, in the 1970s and 1980s, both Robert Anton Wilson and the Church of the SubGenius. The ministers of Kleps's church were called "Boo Hoos," their mascot was a three-eyed toad, and their supreme goal the bombardment and annihilation of the planet Saturn.

That said, Kleps was far more than a sarcastic partier. For one thing, he sincerely accepted the mystical sublimity of peak psychedelic experience. But Kleps attacked the usefulness of religious models, such as Leary's earlier use of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and he especially distrusted the "programming" proffered by Asian gurus. Kleps considered that, in contrast to models based on spiritual authority, he and his fellow Boo Hoos were inheritors of a "more honorable (if less popular) western history of visionary and mystical experience coupled with the vigorous advocacy of human liberty and political

24 Leary 1990, 223, 232.
25 Leary 1990, 233.
26 Burroughs 1964, 7.

radicalism of every kind."[27] Here we can recognize a crucial feature of gnostic psychedelic politics: though avowedly political, it leans less left than anarcho-libertarian, and holds as its essence a critique of authority both inside and out.

4 Profane Illuminations

Though often envisioned as nothing more than the crepuscular tail end of the 1960s, the 1970s represented a darker, weirder, and arguably more influential era of counterculture. It was a period when revolutionary dreams—whether political or spiritual—ran aground, when the debacle of Watergate unfurled and the revelations of the Church Committee confirmed political paranoia. The United States was struck with economic recession, psycho-social malaise, and a peculiar rise of authoritarian cults and new religious movements. Not coincidentally, it is in this period when we can start talking about an overtly gnostic counterculture rather than a Hermetic one.

Exhibit A for such a discussion is the *Illuminatus!* trilogy by Robert Anton Wilson and Robert Shea, which was written in the late sixties and early seventies but not published until 1975, where it appeared in three paperback volumes—*The Eye in the Pyramid*, *The Golden Apple,* and *Leviathan*—with suitably garish occult-pulp covers. Wilson met Shea at Playboy Enterprises in Chicago, where they were both editors of the politically rambunctious Playboy Forum. The Forum received all manner of conspiratorial and crank letters, and Wilson and Shea started playing with the idea of crafting a fiction in which all these conspiracies were somehow true.

When it appeared, *Illuminatus!* was perfectly keyed to a countercultural readership both confused and transformed by sex, drugs, radical politics, and the occult revival. The trilogy wove the lore of conspiracy theory and esoteric secret societies into a satirical, experimental, and willfully pulp provocation aimed at political, sexual, and mystical liberation. As such, much of the back-story of the novel was devoted to delineating various archon-like powers—the term itself is never used—who manipulate history behind the scenes using spiritual, economic, institutional, and technological means. At the core of the novel's octopoid webwork of powers and principalities lies the nefarious Illuminati, who exert control over consciousness and culture partly through the management of extraordinary and sometimes "religious" experiences. Here is one early conspiracy theory about the Illuminati floated in the book, loosely based on the Burroughsian lore of Hassan-e Sabbāh:

27 Kleps 1971, 22.

> The theory, in essence, was that the Illuminati recruited people through various "fronts," turned them on to some sort of illuminizing experience through marijuana (or some special extract of marijuana) and converted them into fanatics willing to use any means necessary to "illuminize" the rest of the world. Their aim, obviously, is nothing less than the total transformation of humanity itself, along the lines suggested by the film *2001*, or by Nietzsche's concept of the Superman.[28]

Though *Illuminatus!* blames the Illuminati for the political assassinations that devastated sixties America, the group are here also linked to the sorts of extraordinary experiences associated with the counterculture's embrace of drugs, sexual magic, and mysticism. In other words, the novel's black hats are not reactionaries, royalists, Straussian fascists, or law-and-order cops. Like the anarchist Discordians that make up their bohemian anarchist foes in the novel, the Illuminati are instead characterized as *homo neophilus*—novelty-seekers who shun traditionalism and want to accelerate the deterritorializing and hence "mind-blowing" forces associated with capitalism, technology, hedonism, and secular modernity. The end result of their science, then, is not simply domination but a sort of diabolical transhumanism. Here, in a postmodern gnostic twist, the archons themselves are mutant powers who exert control through their own nefarious forms of gnosis.

Eventually, we learn that four of the five leaders of the Illuminati are in a German rock band named the American Medical Association, whose headlining appearance at a huge free festival in Bavaria forms one of the climaxes of the novel. The ultimate goal of the AMA is to use mass human sacrifice to "immanentize the eschaton," a signal phrase popularized by William F. Buckley in the early sixties. Buckley drew the phrase from the conservative historian Eric Voegelin, who warned that modern totalitarian movements were attempting to forcibly realize the Christian millennial kingdom—the *eschaton*—on earth. In his *The New Science of Politics* (1952), Voegelin traced the origin of this heretical usurpation of God's plan to the medieval mystic Joachim of Fiore, whose revolutionary "age of the spirit" Voegelin linked directly to Marxism and other utopian and collectivist movements that he helped no-one by labeling "gnostic."[29]

28 Shea and Wilson 1975, 51.

29 The historian Norman Cohn helped shore up this thesis in his influential text *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (1970).

Within the esoteric pinball machine of *Illuminatus!,* the political ambiguity of gnosis—which both supports and resists the machinations of the Illuminati—doubles as an epistemological ambivalence. Wilson and Shea were not naive hippie ideologues but skeptical pranksters who found their visionary home in the libertarian current of Kleps's "honorable tradition." As such, while the gnostic experiences that pepper *Illuminatus!* provoke freedom from social programming, these moments of cognitive dissonance do not provide religious or metaphysical certainties. *Illuminatus!* does not hold out the hope, dear to both psychedelic mysticism and the subsequent "self-spirituality" of the New Age, that individual gnostic experience can provide a solid metaphysical or psychological ground. "Illumination is on the other side of absolute terror," one character is told early on. "And the only terror that is truly absolute is the horror of realizing that you can't believe anything you've ever been told."[30]

Revelation in *Illuminatus!* is principally a centrifugal force, a disruption that knocks the perceiver out from known frames of reference, a vertiginous limit experience whose existential force—and potential for eros, humor, beauty and insight—requires apotropaic doses of skepticism to manage. Though Wilson himself explored LSD, sexual magic, and other "experiments in brain change" before and during the years he was writing *Illuminatus!*, the trilogy also recognizes the potential costs of such extraordinary experiences. The illuminated (like the reader) begin to recognize the puppet mastery of the archons, but they face all manner of subsequent traps: they become paranoid, they start seeing things, they go psychotic. For all their liberatory force, the profane illuminations illustrated in *Illuminatus!* also threaten to unleash precisely the sorts of problems that religious conservatives like Voegelin or R. C. Zaehner had come to blame on heretics and wayward psychedelic mystics.

Early in the novel, two detectives on the trail of the Illuminati visit Father Muldoon, a conservative Catholic theologian who provides them (and the reader) with a potted historical account of "gnosis" among the Cainites, the Manichaeans, and modern Satanists. Muldoon is no fool, nor is he represented as one. Defining gnosis simply as the "direct experience of God," the priest argues that such illuminations almost inevitably go awry when they flare up outside the institutional boundaries and deep grooves of established tradition. Seers veer off into megalomania, cruel license, and apocalyptic violence. "Rationalists are always attacking dogma for causing fanaticism, but the worst fanatics start from gnosis," says Muldoon.[31]

30 Shea and Wilson 1975, 278.

31 Shea and Wilson 1975, 170.

Muldoon's vision is given a more paranoid and Lovecraftian twist later in the novel by a psychic named Mama Sutra. In Sutra's bleak vision, the world's religious leaders are all members of the Cult of the Yellow Sign, an ancient sect that hoaxes the rest of us on behalf of dark cosmic entities known as the *lloigor*, a Lovecraftian term behind which we can recognize the oppressive lineaments of the archons. According to Mama Sutra, religious experience is a central vector of this insidious control of consciousness. "Revelations, visions, trances, miracles, all of it is a trap." For her, the only hope for the liberation of humanity is the Illuminati, whose pursuit of reason and science remains the sole path that can counter the lloigor.[32]

By serving up authoritative narratives that contradict the Discordian anarchists who oppose the Illuminati in the novel, Muldoon and Mama Sutra work to further disorient the reader of *Illuminatus!* by destabilizing the political and metaphysical fruit of revelation. White hats become black hats, and vice versa, not unlike the coincidence of opposites pictured in the yin-yang symbol, in which a dollop of yang appears in the wave of yin. This confusion is emblematic, at once, of the political limits of psychedelic mysticism and the birth of cultural confusions that would come to be dubbed "postmodern" and, far more recently, the "post-truth" era.

At the same time, there remains something profoundly liberatory about the pulp peregrinations of *Illuminatus!*. Its warnings about gnosis, drug-induced or otherwise, should also be seen as further iterations of an anti-authoritarianism so radical that its' practitioners are willing to attack their own pieties—including the dogmatic interpretations of even their most precious experiences. In this sense, Shea and Wilson's spiritual politics represent a skeptically freethinking libertarianism rather than the easy liberation theology of psychedelic mysticism, where just "having" the experience was enough. At the same time, their war with the archons who control consensus reality is itself profoundly esoteric, utilizing visionary drugs, magical praxis, and Zen-like paradoxes. But even as *Illuminatus!* seeks to free the reader with its critical illuminations, the novel offers no safety net—an absence that has only grown more harrowing given our current post-truth reality show.

32 The Illuminati, she says, "are those who have seen the light of reason"—a light she directly contrasts to the mystic's irrational illumination, "the stupefying and mind-destroying light in which the lloigor sometimes appear to overwhelm and mystify their servants in the Cult of the Yellow Sign" (Shea and Wilson 1975, 526–27).

5 Gnostic Shamans

Psychedelia went deeply underground in the 1980s, and, with a few exceptions, did not revive as a self-conscious cultural movement until the early 1990s, when the spread of raves, MDMA, and chill-out rooms created a new cultural context for drug mysticism. That era also saw an uptick in conferences, publications, and underground discussion around psychedelics, an upwelling of discourse whose most significant figurehead was Terence McKenna. Though by no means a mystical seeker, McKenna was a metaphysician of sorts, and possessed a rich intellectual background in Hermeticism, alchemy, and Western esoterica; unlike most psychedelic leaders, he directly addressed gnosticism in some of his lectures and writings.[33] Wouter Hanegraaff has explored some ways that these sources influenced McKenna's infectious ideas about DMT and the *eschaton*, and I have done more of this spade-work in a journal article and in *High Weirdness,* my forthcoming book.[34] Here however I want to draw attention to a more unsung psychedelic hero of the 1990s, an influential writer and researcher who owed his inspiration to McKenna, but pursued entheogenic esotericism with an even more explicitly gnostic attitude.

Jim DeKorne participated in the psychedelic high days of the Haight-Ashbury, but grew disenchanted with the scene and moved to New Mexico, where he researched new methods of hydroponic farming while plunging into studies of Jung, the kabbalah and the *I Ching*. He went rather deep down the esoteric rabbit hole; by his own account, he went a little crazy. McKenna's viral talks and interviews reignited his interest in psychedelics, and in 1992, DeKorne founded *The Entheogen Review*, a publication that seeded a vital underground network of research psychonauts, drug nerds, and do-it-yourself botanists interested in the cultivation of psychedelic plants and the extraction, preparation, and consumption of their potent alkaloids. Though *The Entheogen Review* was primarily a practical organ stuffed with recipes and debates about pharmacology, DeKorne made his esoteric interests—and particularly his interest in visionary beings—known right from the get-go. These concerns also informed the first section of his important book *Psychedelic Shamanism: The Cultivation, Preparation, and Shamanic Use of Psychotropic Plants,* which was published by the aggressively antinomian press, Loompanics, in 1994.

At the root of *Psychedelic Shamanism* lies DeKorne's novel neo-shamanic articulation of the archons, a topic he also explored in a 1992 article for an issue of *Gnosis* magazine entitled "Attack of the Archons." Drawing heavily

33 McKenna 1992.

34 Davis 2016.

from Jung, DeKorne argues that the archons, daimons, or gods encountered in esoteric and psychedelic visions can be understood as sub-personalities or archetypal complexes buried deep within the psyche. But at the same time, and not unlike Jung in his more "religionist" moments, DeKorne embraced a "shamanic" pragmatism about these entities. In other words, while allowing for unconscious sources, DeKorne embraced the modalities of supernatural realism. "Since it's all a Mystery anyway, what useful data might we acquire by provisionally accepting the notion that plants are sentient entities able to communicate with those who ingest them, or alternatively, that the molecules within certain plants can evoke dissociated incorporeal intelligences within the psyche that present themselves as sentient teachers?"[35]

Drawing from the anthropology of shamanism, the history of religion, and the literature of psychopathology, DeKorne characterizes the archons as bounded monads within a larger and multidimensional ecology of mind that psychedelic and other "gnostic" experiences give us access to. Their lack of integration into this larger field provides them their separate, fiercely-defended identity. Following Jung, DeKorne names this larger multiverse of dimensions and entities the *pleroma*, and invokes the gnostic notion of the archons as "primarily demonic organisms dwelling in the Pleroma, unconscious psyche, or mind-space."[36] Note, however, their ultimately naturalistic origin as "organisms."

As a gnostic pessimist of sorts, DeKorne approaches the visionary entities sometimes glimpsed on psychedelics far more cautiously than more "Hermetic" thinkers like McKenna. "One of the most important lessons," DeKorne tells us, "is that not all of the entities of hyperspace are reliable teachers or allies."[37] DeKorne is particularly keen to maintain his autonomy, spiritual and otherwise. He notes, for example, that many seemingly external teaching voices, whether encountered in schizophrenic attacks, New Age channeling, or psychedelic encounters, are ponderous, commanding, and arrogant. "The consistently overblown language broadcast through these channels suggests the existence of incorporeal forces infesting human awareness which are primarily concerned with impressing us with their importance."[38] The archons, here, dominate through a language of power.

A seed crystal for DeKorne's critique of such gods lies in a citation he provides from the Upanishads: "Now if a man worships another deity, thinking

35 DeKorne 1994, 22.
36 DeKorne 1994, 32.
37 DeKorne 1994, 41.
38 DeKorne 1994, 47.

the deity is one and he another, he does not know. He is like a beast for the Devas."[39] DeKorne interprets being a beast of the *devas* as being their food, all of which takes place in a universe where organic, if incorporeal entities eat and are eaten. The gods, who are composed of "thought and feeling" as we are composed of flesh and blood, are simply trying to survive by consuming our worship and belief. "They feed off of our allocation of energy to their dimension, and compete with other Archons on other levels in the overall hierarchy for their nourishment." Here DeKorne cites both Gurdjieff and Epiphanius, but gives his vision an earthier, more secular twist. "What may be a belief in the Christian Trinity or Islamic jihad to humans, may be the equivalent of a T-bone steak to entities of the imaginal realm who depend upon that belief for their existence."[40]

DeKorne embeds his psycho-spiritual critique of the archons into a neo-shamanic cosmology that combines esoteric templates with an evolutionary naturalism. He does not seem overly concerned with the ultimate ontological source of the archons (interior or exterior), because whatever their origins, the remedy is the same: the quest for spiritual liberty. By coercing our worship, gods and powers reduce us effectively to children. Citing Aleister Crowley and magical literature, particularly on the necessity of testing spirits, DeKorne instead counsels spiritual individuation. The more we mature, question, and integrate, the more we enhance our personal power and our capacity to negotiate with the powers and not become enmeshed in their commanding stories. This is not, in other words, the usual psychedelic mysticism of unified pantheism.

Demonstrating his own anti-authoritarian politics of consciousness, DeKorne makes it clear that—like the conspiratorial fictions of Wilson and Shea—he holds his own neo-shamanic realism lightly. "Whether plants 'contain' spirits or entities is doubtful to me, but I'd be the last person to insist on the hypothesis that they don't. Quite simply, I do not know; I have had the DMT vision, and claim nothing beyond agnosticism." Paradoxically, it is this *not knowing*, this gesture of negative capability, that for DeKorne is the "true meaning" of gnosis. "To know that you don't know is to know at least one thing for certain." Though admitting this is not the most comforting metaphysical doctrine, DeKorne implies that it may be the only confirmation we get in our fallen world of shadows. In his personal life, he notes, he checkmates the nihilism such a perspective opens up with a quality of boundless curiosity that, he

39 DeKorne 1994, 48.
40 DeKorne 1994, 48–50.

offers, renders our infinite ignorance not so much depressing as an "incomparable challenge."[41]

6 Millennial Light

In contrast to Wilson and Shea, DeKorne takes a rather subdued political stance in *Psychedelic Shamanism*, something we could perhaps trace to his off-the-grid isolated lifestyle or the drop-out anarchism of so much of the early nineties underground. As with many New Age thinkers of that time, DeKorne did proclaim that humanity was on a self-destructive course of environmental disaster and consumerist overdrive, and offers hope—without much conviction—that entheogenic shifts in consciousness may help right the apocalyptic ship. But he downplays the worldly dimension of the archons glimpsed within and without the pleromatic hyperspace.

Such is not the case with a gnostic psychedelic autobiography that appeared over fifteen years after *Psychedelic Shamanism*: Jonathan Talat Phillips's *The Electric Jesus: The Healing Journey of a Contemporary Gnostic* (2011). A vivid memoirist, Phillips injects some of the spirit of *Illuminatus!* into his account of millennial hipster Brooklyn. When we first meet him, Phillips is an atheist prankster and media-savvy political performer in a New York activist group called Greene Dragon. Thrust into despair after the re-election of Bush in 2004, Phillips takes refuge in MDMA sessions and the psychedelic underground, a circuit that by this time links the Burning Man festival, ayahuasca circles, UFO conspiracy culture, neo-tantric yoga mysticism, and electronic dance music. But the central spiritual template Phillips uses for his subsequent transformation into an energy healer and psychedelic warrior is gnosticism.

Compared to DeKorne, Phillips's vision of psychedelic illumination presents some new millennialist features as well as some 1960s flashbacks. To begin with, Phillips's psychedelic awakening is powerfully *embodied*, mediated by quasi-hedonistic energy awakenings occasioned by MDMA and, later, ayahuasca. During one journey on the jungle brew, Phillips writes that "I had never encountered the chakras physically before, but in my heightened state of awareness, these formerly subtle centers were now powerful pneumatic motors."[42] Such visceral good vibrations recall Leary's classic vision of the body as a DNA mutant requiring only a few chemical keys to turn on.

41 DeKorne 1994, 142.
42 Phillips 2011, 93.

At the same time, and in consort with broader psychedelic society of the 2000s, Phillips shifts the discourse away from metaphysics. While Phillips's openings provide visionary insights, and are accompanied by beings he calls "spirit guides," their influence is ultimately more healing than illuminating. His experiences do not send him off on a quest for a guru or shaman, but towards yoga and reiki and jungle "medicine." While DeKorne and McKenna were primarily interested in plant teachers as vehicles of esoteric and metaphysical discovery, Phillips represents a generational modulation of psychedelic transformation that places holistic healing rather than knowledge or insight at the center of the mystical paradigm.

For idiosyncratic reasons that are not explained beyond his Christian upbringing in Colorado, Phillips is also drawn to think through his psychedelic experiences using the language of Christian esotericism. He cites *The Jesus Mysteries*, where Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy describe the gnostics as "psychonauts" opening up inner space. For Phillips, *pneuma* becomes something more like *prana*, with *kundalini* openings confirming verses in the Gospel of Philip. This energetic transformation of gnostic *topoi* is also reflected in how Phillips reworks some classic Christian vocabulary. Arguing that *metanoia*, usually translated as repentance, is better understood as "a shift in mind or consciousness," Phillips goes on to explain that such transitions can occur "when one absorbs higher frequencies from someone who is closely connected to source-energy such as Jesus."[43]

Phillips's energetic reframing of Christian illumination is of less consequence in this paper than his re-description of the archons, those "devilish autocrats" that Phillips understands in explicitly political terms. "The Gnostics' description of archons immediately intrigued my activist side," he explains. "Bush and the neocons, the Halliburtons and Bechtels have followed a long, shadowy lineage of hierarchical powers profiting from human suffering while expanding their empires." Yet even as Phillips emphasizes the worldly reach of these ancient powers, he shifts the arena of resistance and activism away from the street. Immediately after invoking all-too-real corporations like Halliburton, Phillips nonetheless suggests that "the Gnostics understood that we needed mystical agents of transformation smuggling in celestial light to liberate lost souls on our planet."[44] With this image of undercover mystics struggling to awaken the benighted behind enemy lines, Phillips recalls the spiritual politics of Philip K. Dick, though the science fictions that the younger man uses to flesh out his vision are drawn from even pulpier waters: conspiracy theory.

43 Phillips 2011, 78.
44 Phillips 2011, 81.

In the early 1990s, there was relatively little overlap between the psychedelic underground represented by DeKorne and the conspiracy culture being refashioned at the time by David Icke and the most feverish New Age writers. By Phillips's time, however, these discourse networks had crashed into each other like wayward art cars at Burning Man. Phillips plunges into this literature, recognizing the lineaments of the archons in lore about extraterrestrial lizard overlords who use "psychotronic devices in the fourth dimension to cage Earth in a dense, low-vibratory reality and were feeding off our negative energies for lunch."[45] He initially reads this stuff as modern mythology, but things take a more reptilian turn once scaly astral creatures try to take over his aura during a drug experience—an encounter he compares to channeling a creature from the Black Lagoon.

These and other challenging trips not only increase Phillips's metaphysical realism, but also undermine his initial utopian hopes in world-wide kundalini awakenings and magical shifts in global consciousness. Rather than give up his emerging identity as a gnostic light-warrior, however, he instead returns to a spiritualized version of his earlier activist mindset. He recognizes that earlier holders of gnosis had similar "concerns about authoritarian structures," but that they fought them through the inner work alluded to in texts like the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Phillip. To overcome the archons that rule reality, Phillips similarly vows to "turn inward, safely activating my own latent power, mastering and balancing the forces of the right and the left, the upper and the lower, to access the high vibrations of the pleroma, the heavenly realms."[46]

The goal of such inner work is not envisioned as individual transcendence but as an immanent practice within a collective organization of light-workers—a "massive, compassionate battalion" of "spiritual warriors." Struggling towards a "new, equitable, and ecologically sound society," such gnostic ninjas would be devoted to both critical illumination *and* healing. On the one hand, they would teach "people to deprogram from the predominant death paradigm," while, on the other, helping them "heal from the trauma of parasitic institutions."[47] Indeed, Phillips's turn towards the pervasive twenty-first century concern with trauma—a complex phenomenon that hopelessly entangles physical and psychological causes—allows for a deeper conceptual blending of gnosis and healing, cognitive and clinical transformations, internal and collective activism.

45 Phillips 2011, 87.

46 Phillips 2011, 120. The language of the "right and the left" here recalls the Gospel of Phillip.

47 Phillips 2011, 142.

With Daniel Pinchbeck, the messianic Generation X spokesman of the psychedelic 2000s, Phillips attempts to manifest his vision through the online magazine *Reality Sandwich* and the Evolver movement it helped spawn.[48] Evolver was an alternative network of turned-on Burning Man activists, psychonauts, healers, visionary artists, and new paradigm entrepreneurs who attempted through a decentered network of "spores" to realize "the next level of activism, integrating soul and spirit with practical and tangible solutions."[49] One imaginal spur for the vision, at least for Phillips, is the systems mysticism associated with the idea of a distributed network, the sort of non-hierarchical peer-to-peer webwork embodied and made possible by the internet, and deeply exciting to a certain breed of consciousness change-agents not so long ago.

The vision had, at best, minor success. Though *Reality Sandwich* launched the careers of some important alternative writers like Charles Eisenstein, the magazine's bottom-up approach to editing furthered the online spread of delusional pap and adolescent conspiracy theories—even flat earth fantasies. Despite its good intentions, the Evolver network is today largely moribund, overtaken by the narcissistic wellness blooms of Goop and other forms of celebrity spiritual pampering. Today, Phillips's visions of turned-on alternative digital networks have been largely eclipsed by dark intimations of a social media mind-control regime based on big data profiles, affect management, consumer surveillance, and the algorithmic manipulation of news feeds.

As such, one of the truest notes in Phillips's memoir is struck at the end. After leaving a spore event in Texas, a trip to the airport presents a series of billboards and signs of urban blight. This experience becomes for him "a bleak reminder that we in the consciousness movement were hugely outnumbered, ridiculously outspent, and flat-out overwhelmed by spirit-crushing religious doctrines and a consumer culture that kept people under its powerfully destructive trance."[50] Here, then, is the reverse gnosis of the spiritual light-warrior: in the midst of a thriving alternative culture of enchantment, ecstasy, and striking wardrobes, it does not take much to discover reminders of how heavily consensus sleep lays across the land.

48 Full disclosure dictates that I acknowledge that I worked on an early version of the Evolver project with Pinchbeck.

49 Phillips 2011, 169.

50 Phillips 2011, 212.

7 Remember the Archons

For all the unquestionable clinical and scientific value of the current psychedelic renaissance, its emphasis on the wellness of the individual patient risks overlooking and even burying the gnostic politics of consciousness potentiated by psychedelic experience, whether that politics is focused outwards or inwards. Within the official clinical discourse, at least in America, the key to individual healing is largely tied to the capacity of psychedelics to trigger transcendental unitive and ecstatic experiences whose "mystical" character is vouchsafed, it must be said, by scholarship that is over half a century old. The value of unitive experience also continues to influence many underground therapists as well. There is little room in this discourse for affirmation of weirder, more frightening, and even paranoid psychedelic experiences. Encounters with archons—with visions of cosmic jailers, meddling aliens, and creepy mind parasites—are either swept under the carpet, or cast as unnecessary features that result from bad clinical protocols or improper set and setting.

But perhaps we are throwing the gnostic baby out with the bathwater. Perhaps the mystical ecstasies that psychedelics can occasion act as recharging, renovating experiences that give psychonauts the energy to continue the struggle against more malefic concentrations of power that manifest both inside and outside the self. While the psychedelic politics of unitive ecstasy may well deplete the force of "dualistic" political engagement, the more internalized struggles against the archons may prove increasingly necessary as humans—psychedelicized or not—navigate a near future in which algorithmic operations, predictive affect management, media bubbles, and hypertargeted propaganda bring William Burroughs's forces of control into ever more intimate contact with the self. Gnosis in such a world cannot forget the archons, just as they, perhaps, have not forgotten us.

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