

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IN SEARCH OF HIGHER INTELLIGENCE: THE DAIMONIC MUSE(S) OF ALEISTER CROWLEY, TIMOTHY LEARY, AND ROBERT ANTON WILSON¹

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In this chapter, I explore the experience and practice of creativity (especially in relation to writing) as a felt engagement with an autonomous entity or intelligence that is separate from the ego. I argue that deliberately personifying one's creativity in the mode of the classical muse, daimon, or genius is a particularly effective tactic not only for enhancing creativity but for discovering an organic life direction, vocation, or calling. I also delve into the obvious and compelling question of this creative intelligence's ontological status. Is the muse, the daimon, the personal genius—that gravitational centre of our creative energy and identity—truly a separate being/force/entity with an autonomous existence? Or are such words and the experience to which they refer simply convenient fictions that serve as metaphors for the unconscious mind? Obviously, this is a question that relates to and resonates with many diverse fields of study: religion, anthropology, esotericism, parapsychology, and even biology and neuroscience.² But regardless of the angle of approach, the first thing we find when we seriously begin to consider the matter is that arriving at a viable answer will not be, and cannot be, a straightforward affair, since we are dealing with an issue whose reality is bound up with the very subjectivity of we-who-ask-the-questions. This means that all of our attempts run us into immediate difficulties, because whichever side we try

¹ This chapter also appeared in *Paranthropology: Journal of Anthropological Approaches to the Paranormal* 3 (4): 18-28. Used with permission of the editor.

² An example is the muse-like and "sensed presence" experiences reported by Michael Persinger in relation to his famous "God machine" experiments.

to choose—the daimonic muse as somehow “real” or the daimonic muse as mere metaphor—we find that our thinking, and more fundamentally the nature of our perspective and its elaboration in the cultural-philosophical worldview that underlies our thinking, proceeds from presuppositions that automatically lead us to skirt important issues, ignore certain data, beg crucial questions, and generally disregard, flatten, and bulldoze over entire realms of pertinent and potentially conflicting actualities.

Hence the value of reviewing some of the various ways in which intelligent individuals have understood the experience of guidance and communication from a muse-like source. And of all the myriad strands in the lively cultural conversation about this issue, it would be hard to identify a more pertinent—or fascinating (and entertaining)—one than the line of influence connecting twentieth-century occultist Aleister Crowley to psychedelic guru Timothy Leary to counterculture novelist-psychologist-philosopher and “guerrilla ontologist” Robert Anton Wilson. The dividing line between objective and subjective interpretations of the experience of external-seeming communication from an invisible source is highlighted not only in the individual stories of these three figures but in the plotline that interconnects them with each other. In particular, Wilson’s final “resting point” in terms of a belief system to encompass the whole thing is helpful and instructive in any inquiry into the daimonic muse’s ontological status, and can prove a helpful tonic for dogmatism, because the outlook that he ended up inhabiting was more of an *anti*-belief system that highlighted and hinged on the irreducible indeterminacy of any possible answer.

The Great Beast and his Holy Guardian Angel

Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) was arguably the most influential occultist of the twentieth century, and his relevance to the muse-based or daimon-based approach to writing and creativity is found in his lifelong engagement with the idea of the Holy Guardian Angel, which stands as a specific iteration of the fundamental concept of the muse, daimon, or genius. By the time of Crowley, the concept of the Holy Guardian Angel as a person’s presiding spiritual guide, helper, and exemplar, the accessing of which was the chief goal of magical or esoteric work, had already been around for several centuries in Western occult and mystical circles—or even longer if you factor in its long prehistory in neoplatonism and various sister schools of philosophical mysticism. Crowley himself borrowed the term from an English translation of a mediaeval occult text, so there was nothing particular original in his use of it, or even in his fundamental

philosophical framing of it. But it was he who made it central and definitive for subsequent generations when he founded the new religion of Thelema and devoted the remainder of his life to explicating and promoting its principles.

The founding event itself, which Thelemites still celebrate every year on the spring equinox as the Feast of the Equinox of the Gods, was the writing of *Liber AL vel Legis* or *The Book of the Law*. As the story goes, in April 1904, while Crowley was on honeymoon in Cairo with his new wife Rose, the book was dictated to him over a span of three days by a voice that identified itself as Aiwass or Aiwaz, messenger of the Egyptian god Horus. The book became Thelema's central scripture, and Crowley identified Aiwass as his own Holy Guardian Angel. He also identified the event as a dividing point in history that signalled the end of the former "Aeon of Osiris," a period characterised by belief in patriarchal monotheism and all that goes with it, and the new "Aeon of Horus," whose guiding ethos would be individual liberty and the discovery of each person's "True Will" in communion with his or her own Holy Guardian Angel.

Interestingly and importantly, Crowley's championing of Thelema and *Liber AL* did not happen right away in the immediate wake of his Cairo experience. In fact, he was initially not all that enamoured of the book, and spoke more than once of the way its ideas were distasteful and contrary to his own thoughts. Robert Anton Wilson and co-author Miriam Joe Hill elaborate on this briefly in their encyclopaedia *Everything Is Under Control: Conspiracies, Cults, and Cover-ups*, and their comments again underscore the question of what Crowley's experience with Aiwass "really was":

At first, Crowley did not like the experience or the book, and managed to largely ignore them for ten years. After 1914, however, he felt increasingly under their spell, and eventually he devoted the rest of his life to the "mission" the book imposed on him. After 1919, he spoke of the Cairo experience as an encounter with a superhuman intelligence; one of his disciples, Kenneth Grant, has claimed the communicating entity emanated from the system of the double star, Sirius, while another student, Israel Regardie, prefers to say Crowley reached the depths of the human evolutionary unconscious unknown to either Freud or Jung.³

Thelema is erected entirely upon and around the idea of the Holy Guardian Angel. Its central organising concept is the necessity for each adherent to achieve the "knowledge and conversation" of his or her own Angel, and

³ Wilson and Hill: 134.

thereby to discover the aforementioned True Will, a term that is basically coeval with the idea of a life mission or divine purpose. The most famous statement from *Liber AL*—the oft-quoted “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law”—was borrowed and modified from Rabelais, but in Thelema it assumes the radically specific and transformative meaning of *discovering one’s guiding daimon and thereby accessing, activating, and actualizing one’s cosmic/divine destiny*. The classical daimon/daemon or genius encapsulated the idea of an invisible spirit that accompanies a person through life and exerts a kind of existential gravity or magnetism that evokes experiences in accordance with the divinely ordained life plan. When Crowley spoke and wrote about the Holy Guardian Angel, and also, significantly, when similar-minded people and organisations in his time did the same—as with the influential Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, whose founder was in fact the translator of the book that provided Crowley with the term “Holy Guardian Angel”—he was pursuing the very same thing from a different angle.

His experience is also relevant because his interpretation of it, which continued to evolve throughout his lifetime, underscored the tension or confusion between objective and subjective views. Until the end of his life he kept issuing what seemed to be contradictory statements about the matter. Sometimes he even planted them side-by-side in the same writing, as in *The Equinox of the Gods* (1936), the book where he tells the story of how *The Book of the Law* came to be written. At one point he describes the Holy Guardian Angel as “our Secret Self—our Subconscious Ego,” clearly favouring an interpretation of the Angel as a layer or presence within the psyche. But in the same chapter he says that even though the words of *The Book of the Law* were physically written by him as “ink on paper, in the material sense,” still they

[...] are not My words, unless Aiwaz be taken to be no more than my subconscious self, or some part of it: in that case, my conscious self being ignorant of the Truth in the Book and hostile to most of the ethics and philosophy of the Book, Aiwaz is a severely suppressed part of me. Such a theory would further imply that I am, unknown to myself, possessed of all sorts of praeternatural knowledge and power.⁴

In other words, Crowley says here that the simplest and therefore the best explanation is to consider the Holy Guardian Angel an independent intelligence, since the subconscious explanation strains credulity even more.

Four decades after Crowley wrote these words, in June 1973, Robert Anton Wilson took “a programmed trip on something an underground

⁴ Maroney: 168-9.

Alchemist told [me] was LSD,” where part of the “program” involved listening to a taped reading of Crowley’s Invocation of the Holy Guardian Angel. As Wilson recounted in *Cosmic Trigger: The Final Secret of the Illuminati*, he achieved, among other experiences, “a rush of Jungian archetypes, strongly influenced by the imagery of Crowley’s Invocation, but nonetheless having that peculiar quality of external reality and *alien intelligence* emphasised by Jung in his discussion of the archetypes.”⁵ He also “laughed merrily at Crowley’s joking seriousness in telling one disciple, Frank Bennett, that the Holy Guardian Angel invoked in this ritual is merely ‘our own unconsciousness’ and meanwhile telling another disciple, Jane Wolf, that the Holy Guardian Angel is ‘a separate being of superhuman intelligence.’”⁶ Again, the paradox or contradiction is deliberate and central.

The reference to Frank Bennett, not incidentally, comes from a conversation that Bennett and Crowley both recorded separately, Crowley in his autobiography and Bennett in his diary of the time he spent with Crowley in 1921. Bennett was a British-born Australian who became one of Crowley’s chief disciples, and Crowley wrote in his *Confessions* that he once revealed something to Bennett that shocked him into an initiatory experience of his Holy Guardian Angel. Editors John Symonds and Kenneth Grant filled in the other half of this story in a footnote to their edition of the book: “We know from Frank Bennett’s diary what Crowley said to him on this occasion [...] Crowley told him that it was all a matter of getting the subconscious mind to work; and when this subconscious mind was allowed full sway, without interference from the conscious mind, then illumination could be said to have begun; for the subconscious mind was our Holy Guardian Angel.”⁷

For our present purposes, perhaps the most helpful expression of this interpretive tension comes from Israel Regardie, who served as Leary’s personal secretary from 1928 to 1932 and went on to become one of the most influential figures in modern Western occultism. In his introduction to *The Law Is for All*, a collection of Crowley’s commentary on *The Book of the Law*, Regardie wrote, “It really makes little difference in the long run whether *The Book of the Law* was dictated to him by a preterhuman intelligence named Aiwass or whether it stemmed from the creative deeps of Aleister Crowley. The book was written. And he became the mouthpiece for the Zeitgeist, accurately expressing the intrinsic nature of

⁵ Wilson 1977: 83.

⁶ Wilson 1977: 84.

⁷ Crowley: 936, n. 4.

our time as no one else has done to date.”⁸ One is free to disagree with Regardie regarding Crowley’s prophetic value and insight, but his basic point—that it does not matter whether one opts for the supernatural or psychological explanation, because the end result is the same—is worth pondering at length and in depth by those who seek to navigate a relationship with their own deep creative selves.

The strange case of Timothy Leary

The leap from Crowley to Leary and Wilson is, culturally speaking, a drastic one. It is a leap from Edwardian and post-Edwardian England to the America of Woodstock and rock and roll; from World Wars I and II to the Vietnam era; from black-and-white movies and the age of radio to the shimmering visual-electronic culture of McLuhan’s global village. But even so, the basic theme of perceived guidance and communication from an invisible, alien presence remains constant. Moreover, the fact that the early twenty-first century saw a surge of fresh interest in Leary’s life and legacy, and also in the general history of the psychedelic movement and the possible therapeutic and spiritual uses of psychedelic drugs, only reinforces the pertinence of attempting to understand the nature of this internal guidance and its emergence as an alien-seeming force—something that is characteristic, as we may non-tangentially note, of many psychedelic experiences.

More than just well-known, the basic outline of Timothy Leary’s life is legendary. His “first career,” as it were, was as a mainstream psychologist and professor. In the 1950s he taught psychology at Berkeley and performed research for the Kaiser Family Foundation, and then, most famously, he taught at Harvard from 1959 to 1963. Some of this early work has had a lasting influence; while serving as head of psychological research for the Kaiser Family Foundation, Leary came up with a system of analysing human personality along two axes, love-hate and dominance-submission, that produced eight possible personality types with two subdivisions each. It was a brilliant idea (with roots in the work of earlier psychologists) that ended up expressed in a diagram that has come to be known as the “interpersonal circle” or the “Leary circumplex.” Leary’s insights helped to lay the foundation for what would become the standard personality tests that are still in use today, e.g., the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (which is mostly extrapolated from Jung—who had deeply influenced Leary).

⁸ Quoted in Sutin: 133.

Leary's progressive fall (or ascent, depending on your perspective) from formal respectability was initiated in 1960 when, encouraged by the cultural tenor of the time and the specific incitements of friends and colleagues from both academia and the emerging counterculture, he travelled to Mexico and ingested psilocybin mushrooms. Some years later he said, "I learned more about my brain and its possibilities, and I learned more about psychology, in the five hours after taking these mushrooms than I had in the preceding fifteen years of studying, human research and psychology."⁹ When he returned to Harvard, he enlisted the aid of his colleague Richard Alpert, who would later achieve fame as writer and spiritual teacher Ram Dass, to launch a formal study of the psychological effects and possible therapeutic uses of psychedelic drugs.

The story of how the whole thing spun out of control is long and fascinating, but the short version is that after achieving some interesting and promising initial results—such as an indication that the integration of psychedelics into the counselling programmes offered to criminal offenders might drastically reduce recidivism rates—Leary, who was naturally antiauthoritarian and free-wheeling, grew fed up with the constraints of conventional research, reputation, and respectability, and in 1963 ended up getting fired from Harvard along with Alpert. The university shut the research programme down, and within a few years the US government had banned the use of all psychedelic drugs for any purposes, scientific or otherwise.

The provocation for the government ban was traceable at least partly to Leary himself, who upon his departure from Harvard rapidly transformed himself into the colourful prophet of psychedelic liberation that he is best remembered as today. Naturally, this incurred the wrath of civil authority, and so began a trend that was eventually epitomised by Richard Nixon's televised proclamation circa 1970 that Leary was "the most dangerous man in America."

Irrepressible to the core, Leary refused to back down, and his life path rapidly mutated into something like a thriller novel with a plot involving imprisonment, escape, flight from the US, entanglement with prominent anti-government groups (e.g., the Black Panthers, the Weather Underground), kidnapping, flight from country to country, and eventual return to the US in 1973, at which point he was thrown back in prison, first at Folsom and then at the Vacaville California Medical Facility. At Folsom he was kept in solitary confinement, and also, for a time, in a cell next to Charles Manson.

⁹ Lemle.

It was in those prisons that his story dovetailed with our overarching theme of guidance by the muse/daimon/genius, for it was there that he began to experiment consciously with opening himself to thoughts and ideas that, as it seemed, “wanted” to be expressed through him—in other words, with channelling. Viewing the operation as a form of telepathy, and setting as his goal the contacting of “Higher Intelligence” (his specific term) of an expressly extraterrestrial sort, he recruited his wife Joanna, a fellow prisoner named Wayne Benner, and Benner’s girlfriend, a journalist, to participate. The resulting writings—*Starseed* (1973), *Neurologic* (1973), and *Terra II: A Way Out* (1974)—introduced his famous eight-circuit model of consciousness and advanced the idea that life originally came to earth from outer space, and that humanity is destined by DNA coding and evolutionary impulse to colonise space and return to the stars for transcendence and fulfilment via reunion with the galactic source of our being, which is none other than the Higher Intelligence that Leary and his team were in contact with.

To back up a bit and draw a crucial connection, by this point in his life Leary had come to see himself as deeply connected to Aleister Crowley. He had long felt an interest in Crowley’s life and ideas, but by the time he arrived at Vacaville in 1974 this had advanced to a point where he viewed his own life as a “continuation” (as distinct from a reincarnation, since his and Crowley’s lives overlapped) of Crowley and his work. In the words of John Higgs, author of *I Have America Surrounded: The Life of Timothy Leary*, in the early 1970s Leary came to believe “that his role in life was to continue Crowley’s ‘Great Work’, that of bringing about a fundamental shift in human consciousness.”¹⁰ This was the result of several mind-blowing events that seemed to indicate a profound connection to Crowley. Most dramatically, in 1971 Leary and English beatnik artist and writer Brian Barritt tripped together on LSD in the Sahara desert at Bou Saada, “City of Happiness,” reputedly a site of magical influence. It was the night of Easter Saturday and Sunday, and Leary and Barritt witnessed massive celestial imagery and visionary symbolism. A year later they discovered that some of the things they had seen and experienced paralleled in eerie fashion a series of visions reported by Crowley in his *Confessions*. Unknown to them at the time of their Sahara experience, Crowley had engaged in a weeks-long magical ritual in 1909 with the poet Victor Neuberg on the very same site in the very same river bed at Bou Saada. Barritt later wrote that he and Tim were “pretty freaked out” when they discovered this, and he speculated about a “mysterious force” in the form of an “unconscious directive” that had dictated in parallel fashion the

¹⁰ Higgs: 15.

motivations and even the life events and circumstances of Crowley-Neuberg and Leary-Barritt across a span of decades.¹¹

Augmenting the Crowleyan vibe, in 1972 Leary asked a deck of Crowley-designed tarot cards, “Who am I and what is my destiny?” and then randomly cut the deck to the Ace of Discs—the very card that Crowley had identified as his own representation. In his autobiography, *Confessions of a Hope Fiend* (a title he chose as a deliberate blending of Crowley’s *Confessions* with his *Diary of a Dope Fiend*), Leary wrote, “The eerie synchronicities between our lives [i.e., his own and Barritt’s] and that of Crowley, which were later to preoccupy us, were still unfolding with such precision as to make us wonder if one can escape the programmed imprinting with which we are born.”¹²

It was in the wake of all these Crowleyan synchronicities that the incarcerated Leary began his channelling experiments. He approached them in the full sway of his sense of carrying on Crowley’s planetary consciousness-altering mission, and in full view of the fact that Crowley had attempted similar contact with a higher intelligence. Although Leary made no mention of the Holy Guardian Angel, his emerging extraterrestrial hypothesis corresponded with the views of a subset of Thelemites who thought contact with one’s Holy Guardian Angel was actually a form of contact with a literal extraterrestrial intelligence (others, by contrast, vehemently insisted and still insist today that such a view is false, ridiculous, and detrimental).

Wilson began exchanging letters with Leary a few months after the commencement of Leary’s telepathic “transmissions,” and later offered a succinct description of the concrete nature of the experiments: “The Starseed Transmissions—‘hallucinations’ or whatever—were received in 19 bursts, seldom in recognisable English sentences, requiring considerable meditation and discussion between the four Receivers before they could be summarised.”¹³ Of prime interest to us here is that even though the resulting writings clearly proceeded from the extraterrestrial view of higher intelligence rather than the unconscious or daimonic muse-based one, other things said by other people about the Learyan view of communicating with perceived higher or external intelligences, and even things said by Leary himself, clearly link his experiences to a more traditionally muse-like view.¹⁴

¹¹ Barritt: 155, 152.

¹² Barritt: 153.

¹³ Wilson 1977: 105.

¹⁴ Leary: 15. In *Terra II*, for example, Leary asserts the truth behind humanity’s long history of belief in higher intelligences, as in religious beliefs, but modifies it

For instance, in a bit of archival footage featured in the “Summer of Love” episode of PBS’s *American Experience* series, Leary describes the LSD experience by saying, “It is a sense of being in communion with powers greater than yourself, and intelligence which far outstrips the human mind, and energies which are very ancient.”¹⁵ There is no indication of the context or time period in which he said this, but it resonates interestingly with something he told Wilson when the latter came to visit him at the Vacaville prison:

[Leary said] Interstellar ESP may have been going on for all our history [...] but we just haven’t understood. Our nervous systems have translated their messages in terms we *could* understand. The “angels” who spoke to Dr. Dee, the Elizabethan scientist-magician [who had figured in both Crowley-Neuberg’s and Leary-Barritt’s visionary experiences in the Sahara], were extraterrestrials, but Dee couldn’t comprehend them in those terms and considered them “messengers from God.” The same is true of many other shamans and mystics.¹⁶

Note that despite the outrageous-sounding nature of such speculations to the modern secular-materialist ear, Leary was not insane. Or at least that was the medical-psychological opinion of the mental health professionals who evaluated him, according to Wilson:

It should be remembered, in evaluating the Starseed signals, that, a few months before this experiment, three government psychiatrists testified (at the escape trial) that Dr. Leary was perfectly sane and possessed of a high I.Q. Since so many extremists of Left and Right have impugned Leary’s sanity, it should also be entered in the record that Dr. Wesley Hiler, a staff psychologist at Vacaville who spoke to Dr. Leary every day (often to ask Tim’s advice), emphatically agrees with that verdict. “Timothy Leary is totally, radiantly sane,” he told me in a 1973 interview.¹⁷

Nor was Hiler’s judgment made in ignorance of the telepathy/channelling experiments that Leary was engaged in. In fact, Wilson says Hiler regarded Leary’s project from an informed long-historical/psychological view, and Hiler’s actual words resonate wonderfully with the vibe of ontological uncertainty that we are exploring here:

in a science fictional direction: “The goal of the evolutionary process is to produce nervous systems capable of communicating with the galactic network. Contacting the Higher Intelligence.”

¹⁵ Dolgin and Franco.

¹⁶ Wilson 1977: 118.

¹⁷ Wilson 1977: 104-5.

I asked Hiler what he *really* thought of Dr. Leary's extraterrestrial contacts. Specifically, since he didn't regard Leary as crazy or hallucinating, what was happening when Leary thought he was receiving extraterrestrial communications? "Every man and woman who reaches the higher levels of spiritual and intellectual development," Dr. Hiler said calmly, "feels the presence of a Higher Intelligence. Our theories are all unproven. Socrates called it his *daemon*. Others call it gods or angels. Leary calls it extraterrestrial. Maybe it's just another part of our brain, a part we usually don't use. Who knows?"¹⁸

Bob Wilson's excellent adventure

As already indicated by the above discussions, Wilson resonated with the ideas of both Leary and Crowley, and was in direct contact with the former during the Starseed period. He even helped Leary in the crystallisation and promulgation of his eight-circuit model of consciousness; although the model was first laid out by Leary in *Neurologic* (1973) and *Exo-Psychology* (1977), Wilson gave it an energetic and entertaining publicity boost, and also provided a work of genuine substance, in his 1983 book *Prometheus Rising*, which featured an introduction by former Crowley secretary Israel Regardie. So it is no surprise that in addition to being aware of and interested in Crowley's and Leary's experiences in communicating with angels and aliens, Wilson had his own encounters with "higher intelligence."

The primary account of it is found in his *Cosmic Trigger* (1977, later retitled *Cosmic Trigger I* when Wilson wrote two sequels). Richard Metzger zeroes in on the emotional heart of the matter when he writes that, notwithstanding the trippy and subversive delights of Wilson's famous *Illuminatus!* trilogy (co-written with Robert Shea), "*Cosmic Trigger* was different. This time the mask came off. In this book, Wilson came clean, in the most intellectually honest way that anyone ever has, on the subject of 'What happens when you start fooling around with occult things? What happens when you do psychedelic drugs and try to contact higher dimensional entities through ritual magick?'"¹⁹

Wilson, who had a PhD in psychology, contextualised the book's content in a valuable introduction that he wrote for a new edition published in 1986. "*Cosmic Trigger*," he explained, "deals with a process of *deliberately induced brain change* through which I put myself in the years 1962-76. This process is called 'initiation' or 'vision quest' in many

¹⁸ Wilson 1977: 163.

¹⁹ Metzger: 14.

traditional societies and can loosely be considered some dangerous variety of self-psychotherapy in modern terminology.”²⁰ In the course of this “initiation” he came into perceived contact with a number of external-seeming intelligences and was thrust into the same surreal world that Leary and Crowley had likewise explored.

The high point emerged from his commencing a new “course of neuropsychological experiments” in 1971, in response to the feeling that he had deciphered a hidden message in Crowley’s *The Book of Lies*. “The outstanding result,” he wrote, “was that I entered a belief system, from 1973 until around October 1974, in which I was receiving telepathic messages from entities residing on a planet of the double star Sirius.”²¹ Although Wilson never describes anything like the experience of supernatural dictation that resulted in Crowley’s *The Book of the Law*, or like Leary’s experience of extraterrestrial telepathy that resulted in the Starseed books, the question of his supposed Sirius contact, and of the general idea of psychic contact with alien-seeming forces or entities, dominates the bulk of *Cosmic Trigger* and forms the guiding thread of Wilson’s journey through “Chapel Perilous,” his term, borrowed from Arthurian legend, for the frightening and transformative state of psychological uncertainty in which the walls of a person’s belief system have been breached by the intrusion of events that seem equally amenable to paranormal and naturalistic, or supernatural and non-supernatural, explanations.

In describing the various synchronicities and paranormal events that began to unfold in his life, Wilson forcefully foregrounds the questions of ontology and epistemology—of what’s really real and how or whether we are even capable of making that determination—and he describes various reversals and mutations in his own viewpoint. For example, he explains how it was a meeting in October 1974 with Dr Jacques Vallée, the internationally renowned astronomer and UFOlogist, that led him away from the belief that he (Wilson) was literally receiving telepathic transmissions from Sirius. Wilson says Vallée told him this type of other-worldly communication is a centuries-old phenomenon “and will probably not turn out to be extraterrestrial,” since the extraterrestrial slant can be chalked up to the influence of modern cultural beliefs. In former eras, Vallée said, “The phenomenon took other and spookier forms.”²² Wilson says Vallée’s viewpoint:

²⁰ Wilson 1977: ii (Wilson’s emphasis).

²¹ Wilson 1977: 8.

²² Wilson 1977: 9. The veracity of Wilson’s recollection here is supported by the fact that Vallée himself said largely the same things.

[...] made perfect sense to me, since I had originally gotten in touch with “the entity” by means of Crowleyan occultism. The extraterrestrial explanation was not the *real* explanation, as I had thought; it was just the latest model for the Experience, as angels had been a model for it in the Middle Ages, or dead relatives speaking through mediums had been a model in the nineteenth century.”²³

This framing of all belief systems in relativistic and provisional terms—an attitude that, as we might do well to notice, is implicit in the very concept of a “belief system” itself, since to recognise belief systems as such automatically subverts the unreflective and wholesale adoption of any of them—became for Wilson the touchstone of his entire outlook. He began that new preface to *Cosmic Trigger*, written ten years after the book’s first publication, by proclaiming in all capital letters, “I DO NOT BELIEVE ANYTHING.”²⁴ In explaining this position over several pages, he quoted approvingly Alan Watts’s characterisation of the universe as “a giant Rorshach [sic] ink-blot” and described his own position as “neurological model agnosticism—the application of the Copenhagen Interpretation beyond physics to consciousness itself.”²⁵

Most significant for the question of the daimonic muse and its ontological status are his specific thoughts about the status of all invisible entities/intelligences that are encountered in psychic space:

Personally, I also suspect, or guess, or intuit, that the more unconventional of my models here—the ones involving Higher Intelligence, such as the Cabalistic Holy Guardian Angel or the extraterrestrial from Sirius—are *necessary* working tools at certain stages in the metaprogramming process [i.e., the process of accessing and altering one’s fundamental psychological imprints]. That is, whether such entities exist anywhere outside our own imaginations, some areas of brain functioning cannot be accessed without using these “keys” to open the locks. I do not insist on this; it is just my own opinion.²⁶

With this, we’re back once again to Crowley and his continual dance on the edge of mutually exclusive interpretations. “I don’t believe anything,” Wilson insisted, and so did Crowley and Leary, at least in spirit. The question at hand is: Can we learn anything from this?

²³ Wilson 1977: 9.

²⁴ Wilson 1977: i.

²⁵ Wilson 1977: iv.

²⁶ Wilson 1977: v.

Angels, daimons and haunted artists

For our specific purpose here, what is valuable in the stories of Crowley, Leary, and Wilson is the vivid picture they show us of people struggling to interpret and live with forces in the psyche that really do present themselves as independent of the ego and possessed of their own intelligence and will. As already mentioned, the Holy Guardian Angel and its supernatural and extraterrestrial kin are explicitly connected in historical-cultural-conceptual-psychological terms to the ancient muse, daimon, and genius, and a Wilsonian attitude of thoroughgoing “neurological model agnosticism” toward them only removes categorical interpretations of what is happening in the perceived experience of inner communication, not—*not*—the fact of the experience itself. Regardless of what we think or how we feel about it, this experience of being in perceived contact with a “higher intelligence” really did happen to these three men. It really has happened to people throughout history. And it really can happen to you and me. It does not necessarily mean audible voices and telepathic transmissions, but it definitely means a sense of something impinging on or communicating with our conscious self “from the outside,” or perhaps from the deep *inside*, which experientially amounts to the same thing. The really electrifying jolt comes when we realise, as our three present case subjects all did, that such impinging and communicating is *always* happening, regardless of whether or not we are consciously aware of it, as a constant psychic undercurrent. If we are skilled and sensitive enough to tune in and hear it, the rewards in terms of creative vibrancy can be exquisite.

Entirely aside from all of the far-out details of his (possibly) paranormal experiences, at least twice in his life Wilson directly equated the autonomous-feeling force in the psyche that drives artistic creativity with the ontologically indeterminate Higher Intelligence that seemingly communicated with him, Leary, and Crowley. One of these instances came in an essay he wrote about the life and work of Raymond Chandler, under the pseudonym of one of his (Wilson’s) own fictional creations, book critic Epicene Wildeblood. In describing the fifteen-year hiatus from fiction-writing that Chandler once experienced, Wilson said, “Chandler spent 15 years, the prime years of a man’s life, in the oil-executive game before *the Daemon or Holy Guardian Angel that haunts artists got its teeth into him again.*”²⁷

The other instance is found in a 1981 interview Wilson gave to the late, great genre magazine *Starship: The Magazine about Science Fiction*. The

²⁷ Wilson 1980: 127, emphasis added.

interviewer asked him, “Is a book fully organised in your mind before you start writing or does it take shape as it unfolds?” Wilson responded:

Sometimes I have a clearer idea of where I’m going than other times, but it always surprises me. In the course of writing, I’m always drawing on my unconscious creativity, and I find things creeping into my writing that I wasn’t aware of at the time. That’s part of the pleasure of writing. After you’ve written something, you say to yourself, “Where in the hell did that come from?” Faulkner called it the “demon” that directs the writer. The Kabbalists call it the “holy guardian angel.” Every writer experiences this sensation. Robert E. Howard said he felt there was somebody dictating the Conan stories to him. There’s some deep level of the unconscious that knows a lot more than the conscious mind of the writer knows.²⁸

The unconscious mind? The daimon? The Holy Guardian Angel? All and none of the above? For purposes of accessing and aligning with the experience of creative inspiration, *does it really matter?*

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²⁸ Elliot.

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