

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FIREFLIES AND SHOOTING STARS: VISUAL NARRATIVES OF DAIMONIC INTELLIGENCE

ANGELA VOSS

Man, in his inability to grasp the divine, requires the gods to be revealed in a palpable form, and this requirement is met, at the gods' behest, in the form of light or fire.¹

Paranormal events happen. In general conversation about such things, most of us have an anecdote about an experience which has no rational explanation, and which everyone recognises as arising from an underground of “(un)common sense”, a counter-cultural stratum whose mysterious *modus operandi* has no place in the knowledge-systems which inform our education and day-to-day lives. As Gregory Shaw has observed, “we live in a profound disconnect between private experience and public discourse.”² He recommends that researchers and academics can begin to heal this disconnect by “intelligently exploring” the hidden dimensions of existence, thus building bridges between the anecdotal event involving sensory, lived experience and the theories that inform our understanding and explanation of such events. This is also my intention in devoting this chapter to the examination of one particular kind of non-rational phenomenon—that of anomalous moving lights, and their identification with non-material intelligent beings or daimons.³ I shall address this theme primarily from the viewpoint of neoplatonic metaphysics, because here we find a metaphorical scheme which encompasses a multi-layered vision of epistemological possibilities within a coherent whole, and it is my suggestion that such a model can help us elucidate the claims and contentions of both contemporary psychics and their sceptical opponents.

I want to focus primarily on the questions of ontology and perception: how can we begin to evaluate the “truth” of these apparitions in terms of their apparent objectivity, and what mode of vision is required for humans to “see” them accurately enough to gain some deeper insight into their provenance and purpose (as opposed to analysing their visible form alone)? Often a purely material explanation is pitted against a naive assumption of other-worldly agency, without acknowledging that there may be another way of looking altogether. I would suggest that empirical methods of evaluation are inadequate for assessing the liminal nature of these light manifestations—for despite the fact that many claim that they can be captured for all to see on video or digital photographs,⁴ it does not follow that they *originate* from the earthly dimension or that sense-perception and material science are adequate tools for fathoming their extra-ordinary, numinous, and often seemingly intelligent activity. We live in an age where the bottom line of “truth” is the rational explanation in terms of physical and material causation, even if that explanation pushes credulity to its limits.⁵ But neither should we buy in to the equally unsophisticated identification of strange lights as UFOs or aliens as objectively “real” visitors from an objectively “real” outer space. In both scientific and science-fiction paradigms, there is an in-built assumption that such a “reality” has an external, verifiable existence independent from the observer’s own visionary frequency (as it were). This literal approach denies the supremely important idea, long recognised in traditions of esoteric wisdom, that there are echelons of deepening modes of perception available to humans which far exceed the limits of either sense perception or critical reasoning, and which move towards a closing of

¹ Clarke: 101.

² Shaw 2011: 18.

³ For a general survey of the many varieties of anomalous lights reported by witnesses, see Harpur: 1-21. Harpur also advocates a neoplatonic explanation, commenting that “One way [...] of regarding luminous apparitions is as images of the soul projected by the soul itself” (16).

⁴ The epistemological issues which arise in relation to technological “evidence” of spirit phenomena including ITC (instrumental transcommunication) deserve fuller attention. Celluloid, analogue and digital films and photographs may appear to pick up images which elude the naked eye, whilst recordings of “spirit voices” are often indistinguishable from normal radio interference. Both forms have a liminal and ambiguous ontological status. See Cardoso, Cooper, Harvey, Solomon.

⁵ A good example being the insistence that all crop circles are made by people with planks and rope in the night (see Rowlandson, also Ferrer 2008).

the subjective-objective epistemological divide. It also denies a sense of the *sacred* as an epistemological category with its own distinct modes of expression—always understood as gateways to higher (or deeper) consciousness—which have now come to be regarded as inferior and unreliable in relation to rationality, i.e. “merely subjective”, in a radical “ontological inversion” of cognitive value.⁶ I am referring to the intellectual intuition (in neoplatonic terminology) and the creative imagination which conveys it through form and image, engaging the knower in a symbolic mode of understanding which is *participatory* in that it reveals something about the nature of his or her own soul, and opens into realms which the critical reason can only characterise as paradoxical, para-normal or downright impossible.⁷

To begin, let us explore the connections between visible and invisible worlds through daimonic epiphanies, luminous soul-vehicles and the divine imagination. Daimonic or spiritual intelligences have long been associated with the stars as points of spherical light, as well as with invisible spirit or soul-bodies which manifest in the form of such light. One of the earliest suggestions we have that stars embody divine spirits is found in Hesiod (active 750-650 BCE):

To Kephalos [Eos] bore a brilliant son,
 Strong Phaeton, a man much like the gods.
 When he was young and had the fragile bloom
 Of glorious youth, and tender, childish mind,
 The laughter-loving Aphrodite seized
 And took him to her shrine and made him serve
 As temple-keeper, bright divinity (Daimon dios) [i.e. a star].⁸

Phaeton, a child of immortal mother and mortal father, becomes a *daimon* or disembodied spirit, the immaterial essence of the visible star Jupiter.⁹ By the time of Plato (424-348 BCE) we find the notion that all human souls are sown into the stars before they become incarnated into bodily existence, and to their stars they will return at death.¹⁰ Plato’s Demiurge in the *Timaeus* creates the eternal soul as the informing intelligence of the world, inserted into its centre, and it is from this soul that each star receives its sphere of light. We might best understand Plato’s concept of “soul” as eternal life-principle, and in its original pristine form soul manifests as a sphere, the most universally perfect mathematical form.¹¹ Indeed Plato’s archetypal cosmos is itself spherical, its motion circular, and these two qualities are mirrored in the composition of the human soul which is formed from the same substance as the soul of the world. However, the upheaval of the soul’s incarnation into the body means that it can easily be overpowered by material existence, become distorted and forgetful, and lose sight of its innate visionary capacity.¹² The purpose of the philosophic life is therefore to overcome earthly limitations and restore the soul’s spherical and perfect nature, with its intuitive perception of (what we might term) supra-rational dimensions of being. In the words of Proclus, the incarnated soul should “pursue the uniform and the simple energy of the circle of sameness”¹³ so that at physical death it may move swiftly to its spiritual home.

In attributing each soul to a star, Plato introduces the idea of the soul’s vehicle, its astral body, which accompanies it in its descent into matter. In this subtle body the soul is “systematically moulded, framed and controlled by the spheres of light called the wanderers or the planetary gods”.¹⁴ We must remember that for Plato there are supra-sensory realities behind and within physical phenomena, the *eide* or “patterns fixed in the

⁶ On the ontological inversion, see Milne: 5. For a discussion on the exclusion of the sacred within academic discourse, see Kripal 2010: 253-255.

⁷ On participation as a research method, see Ferrer & Sherwood: Introduction; Kripal 2001: Introduction. Of course such an intuitive (or “psychic”) insight then requires interpretation and elucidation if it is to be communicated to others, a process which McGilchrist sees reflected in the correct functioning of the brain hemispheres (see McGilchrist 2010: e.g. 199, 208, 209). On Platonic epistemology see the “divided line” metaphor in *Republic* Book 6 (509d-513e). In summary, the path of gnostic knowledge progresses through sense perception, opinion and fantasy (“human” and unreliable modes of knowing), to dialectic, reason and intellectual intuition as more stable and unified modes, before finally attaining union with the divine mind. Chittick (2007) notes “Knowledge only qualifies as intellectual when knowers know it at the very root of their own intelligence and without any intermediary [...] [philosophy] was a path to discover the ultimate truths of the universe within the depths of one’s own soul” (61). Later Platonists drew a distinction between arbitrary fantasy and a more noetic imaginal faculty which perceived divine truths via symbolic images presented to the senses, thus establishing two kinds of imagination—one illusory, the other archetypal or transcendent. On Plato and the relationship between *dianoia* and *phantasia* see Addey 2002; Cocking: 1-26; Tanner: 89-120; Watson: 1986, 1988: 1-14. On the neoplatonic development of the cognitive imagination, see Plotinus IV.3; Cocking: 49-68; Corbin 1997, 1999; Couliano: 3-27; Dillon 1986; Voss 2009. On the Renaissance debate between the two forms of imagination see Giglioli 2010.

⁸ Hesiod: 55-56, lines 986-992.

⁹ For a classical reference to the relationship of Phaeton with the planet Jupiter, see Cicero: 2.20.

¹⁰ Plato, *Timaeus* 41e; *Phaedrus* 246a.

¹¹ On the soul as sphere, see Critchlow: 7.

¹² Plato, *Timaeus*: 42e-44a.

¹³ Unreferenced passage in Critchlow: 12.

¹⁴ Critchlow: 15.

nature of things” which participate in the eternal forms through sympathetic resonance because they are made in their image.¹⁵ These patterns then act as mediators between the divine intellect and human senses, and are given visible or audible form as universal or cultural-specific archetypal images. The sphere is the most perfect of these *eide*, being reflected poetically in the perceived shape of the cosmos itself, and the planetary motions within it. This is why for Plato, the very beginnings of philosophy occur in the contemplation of the perfection of the visible heavens, as the soul seeks to become aligned with its proportions and awake to its own former sphericity, so that it may rotate in harmony with the world soul.¹⁶

At this point I should remind the reader that when evoking the “reality” of a dimension beyond the sensory, esoteric philosophy speaks in a metaphoric voice, recognising that the ability to grasp the meaning of a poetic or symbolic image is an essential process in the soul’s cognitive journey beyond discursive thinking.¹⁷ This is not easy to capture in an academic discourse, but perhaps it can be done through a kind of hybrid writing which continually refers the objective or outer form of the event to both an inner sense of its noetic significance and its lived reality, or as McGilchrist would put it, to the “bigger picture” facilitated by right brain hemisphere understanding.¹⁸ The French historian of religion Henry Corbin’s articulation of the *mundus imaginalis* as an “inter-world” corresponding to and entered into by the creative imagination as a faculty of perception, forming a bridge between material and spiritual modes of knowledge is relevant here, as it provides a context for the reality of non-physical phenomena which neither reduces them to the status of material substance (such as tables and chairs) nor elevates them to transcendent principles beyond the direct experience of human beings. This medial world is “A world as ontologically real as the world of the senses and the world of the intellect, a world that requires a faculty of perception belonging to it, a faculty that is a cognitive function, a *noetic* value, as fully real as the faculties of sensory perception or intellectual intuition. This faculty is the imaginative power.”¹⁹

Corbin was writing from within the framework of Sufism, which derived the recognition of the imagination as *cognitive* from the later neoplatonists, and it was they who connected it directly to the “subtle body” and daimonic activity.²⁰ So let us now explore this further. In esoteric traditions, the soul’s vehicle or “subtle body” is traditionally divided into two kinds, which merge into each other as the vehicle becomes increasingly purified of material elements. These two vehicles are the pneumatic (sometimes called etheric or spirit body) and the celestial or luminous (sometimes called the astral body).²¹ According to Aristotle, the former (the *soma pneumatikon*) is not elemental, but is of a rarer, finer quintessence, moving in a circular fashion and taking the image of the physical body when it descends; it is “analogous to the element comprising the stars”.²² The seventh century CE Alexandrian Philoponus suggests that the *soma pneumatikon* can make itself visible through setting its own imagination in movement, and according to G.R.S. Mead, this would explain visions of ghosts.²³ With the help of “daimonic co-operation,”²⁴ it may also disappear at will, becoming absorbed back into its non-material essence. Porphyry is the earliest philosopher to link imagination and pneumatic vehicle,²⁵ but the most succinct connection is made by Synesius (365-c.430 CE) in his treatise *De insomniis*. Synesius suggests that it is the *pneuma* which “brings the imagination into play” as a kind of “common sense” which is of a higher order of cognition than sense-perception.²⁶ This *phantastikon pneuma* must be kept pure through ritual activity, as it comprises the “borderland between reason and unreason, between body and the bodiless [...] by its means things divine are joined with lowest things.” He adds that “therefore it is difficult for its nature to be

¹⁵ See Critchlow: 25.

¹⁶ See for example Plato, *Epinomis*: 986c-d; Plato, *Timaeus*: 47a-d.

¹⁷ On metaphor and symbol as the language of sacred knowledge, see Barth; Chittick 2007, Corbin 1999; Needleman: chap.1; Versluis: Introduction.

¹⁸ See McGilchrist, e.g. 191, 195, 199, 208. It is interesting to note a resonance between the Platonic divisions of “rational” and “intellectual” knowledge and the functions of the left and right brain hemispheres as researched by McGilchrist.

¹⁹ Corbin 1999: 5.

²⁰ See sources in fn.7, also Addey 2012; Cocking: ch.3; George; Mead: 56-81; Shaw 2010.

²¹ I follow Mead here, who derives the doctrine of the duality of the subtle body from the Western esoteric tradition as formalised by the Theosophy of Helena Blavatsky and Anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner (34-37); but the essential distinction between the two forms is of neoplatonic origin. Proclus suggests two soul vehicles, one immortal, the other temporary, surviving death but not immortal (in *In Timaeum* and *Elements of Theology*; see Addey 2010: 5, Finamore: 86). On Porphyry’s and Iamblichus’ notions of the soul-vehicle and their differences see Addey 2010; Finamore: 11-32.

²² Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals* 73b. 35-39 (see Addey 2010: 2). The subtle body is not associated with the daimon or the imagination until Porphyry and Synesius: for Aristotle, the personal daimon communicates the “first principles” of knowledge to the mind before they are taken up by the reason, and it binds the soul to the body as it descends (*Analytica Posteriora* A 3, B19: see Dillon: 4; Critchlow: 32; Finamore: 2). For Aristotle on imagination see White: ch. 1.

²³ Mead: 49.

²⁴ Philoponus’ Commentary on Aristotle’s *De anima* 19 24 ff. in Mead: 48.

²⁵ See George: 78; Watson: 103-109.

²⁶ Synesius, *De insomniis* 7, 135, in Mead: 69.

comprehended by philosophy”,²⁷ if by “philosophy” is meant rational enquiry alone. Intimations again of Corbin’s *mundus imaginalis* as an order of reality where spiritual essence takes on visual form, entered via altered states of consciousness such as dreams and waking visions.²⁸ Furthermore, Synesius associates this imaginative essence with the daimons, who are “supplied with their substance by this mode of life”.²⁹ They add imagination to human thought, and may even “take on the appearance of happenings” which implies that they can become visible as events in the world.³⁰ The ultimate destiny of the daimonic soul is to become absorbed into the pure radiant light of the divine realm, but on the way it may assume a variety of coverings or vehicles, from the gross and quasi-material (i.e. misty) to the luminous.³¹

The *astroeides* or luminous body seems to be a more direct and purer manifestation of divine essence than the *pneuma*. In Plutarch’s (46-120 CE) “Myth of Timarchus”, a colourful narrative about an after-death journey, Timarchus is shown a vision of discarnate human souls by a spirit guide. He sees many star-like lights hovering around an abyss, falling into it from above, and shooting up into it from below. His guide confirms that these are “the daimons themselves”, and tells him:

In the stars that are apparently extinguished [...] you see the souls that sink entirely into the body; in the stars that are lighted again [...] you see the souls that float back from the body after death, shaking off a sort of dimness and darkness as one might shake off mud; while the stars that move about on high are the daemons of men said to “possess understanding”[...] hearing this, [Timarchus] attended more carefully and saw that the stars bobbed about, some more, some less, like the corks we observe riding on the sea to mark nets.³²

For Plutarch then, the highest part of the soul, the intuitive understanding, does not mingle with the body but is “like a buoy attached to the top, floating on the surface in contact with the man’s head, while he is as it were submerged in the depths”. However, raising the problematic question of whether this daimonic intelligence is “inside” or “outside” the soul, Plutarch says that those “who take it to be within themselves, as they take reflected objects to be in the mirrors that reflect them” are mistaken, but that those “who conceive the matter rightly call it a daemon, as being external”.³³

Plato had in fact raised this very question of the ambiguous ontological status of the daimon, and Plutarch would have found his source for daimon-as-intelligence in the *nous-daimon* of the *Timaeus* (90 a-c): “God gave the sovereign part of the human soul to be the divinity of each one, being that part which, as we say, dwells at the top of the body, and inasmuch as we are a plant not of an earthly but of a heavenly growth, raises us from earth to our kindred who are in heaven.” But in the *Phaedo* (107d) and the *Laws* (713c-d) the daimon is seen more as a separate entity or guide to the afterlife, a superior being or guardian spirit. Socrates’ daimon can be seen to have elements of both, manifesting as a voice which is both “other” and yet also as his own moral nature.³⁴ The author of the Platonic *Epinomis* characterises the daimons as “external” elemental creatures, visible because they mainly partake of fire, although they also contain varying portions of earth, air and water. These daimons, he says, are “the divine host of the stars”.³⁵ We find the same image used by Plotinus (204/5-270 CE), who likens the daimons’ relationship to the gods to “the radiance around every star”.³⁶ He also takes up Plato’s theme of the duality of the daimonic; on the one hand he refers to celestial daimonic intelligences which straddle the divine and human realms: “we say that they are eternal next after the gods, but already inclining towards us, between the gods and our race.”³⁷ Yet on the other, he asks “are they the trace left by each soul when it enters the universe?”³⁸ suggesting that they comprise the intellect, the highest part of the soul, that which remains undescended from its divine origin. In *Enneads* III “on the tutelary daimon” he explains:

One must think that there is a universe in our soul, not only an intelligible one but an arrangement like in form to that of the soul of the world: so, as that too, is distributed according to its diverse powers into the sphere of the fixed stars and those of the moving stars, the powers in our soul also are of like form to these powers, and there is an activity proceeding from each power, and when the souls are set free they come there to the star which is in harmony with

²⁷ Synesius 137a, in Mead: 71.

²⁸ See Corbin 1977. Synesius also suggests the identity of dream-images with the afterlife state of the soul at 137d (Mead: 72-73).

²⁹ Synesius 137b, in Mead: 71-72.

³⁰ Synesius 137b, in Mead: 72.

³¹ Synesius 141c-142a, in Mead: 80-81.

³² Plutarch: 471-3.

³³ Plutarch: 471.

³⁴ See Allen 1998: 131.

³⁵ Plato, 1517-1533: 908.

³⁶ Plotinus: III.5.6.

³⁷ Plotinus: III.5.6.

³⁸ Plotinus: III.5.6.

their character and power which lived and worked in them; and each will have a god of this kind as a guardian spirit, either the star itself or the god set above this power.³⁹

The soul's daimonic powers are then analogous to the powers in the cosmos, yet they also have an aspect which is experienced as "other", a guardian principle which helps us to fulfil our destiny. Damascius (458-c.538 CE) describes the stellar power of the soul as "a certain radiant vehicle, star-like and eternal [which is] securely shut away in this gross body".⁴⁰ This light-filled body, in the theurgic rituals of later Platonists, becomes the means by which the soul may ascend to the god and achieve deification.⁴¹ Iamblichus (250-325 CE) preferred to think of the daimon as partaking of a superior order to the human soul, beyond the intellect, whose powers are invoked during theurgic ritual.⁴² We should refer at this point to the source of Iamblichean theurgy, the Chaldean Oracles of the early centuries CE, which describe ritual practices directed towards the freeing of the soul of the initiate from his or her body and its elevation to the "heart of the sun" as a metaphor for achieving divine consciousness.⁴³ Many extant fragments dwell on the fiery manifestation of spiritual energy; for example, "a lightning bolt, sweeping along, obscures the flower of fire as it leaps into the hollow of the worlds";⁴⁴ the Twice-Transcendent deity sows "lights which are set free" in the world;⁴⁵ the purified soul "shines as an angel";⁴⁶ "on all sides, the reins of fire extend from the unformed soul";⁴⁷ and after an invocation, "You will either see a fire, similar to a child, extended by bounds over the billow of air, or you will see a formless fire, from which a voice is sent forth, or you will see a sumptuous light rushing like a spiral around the field".⁴⁸

For Iamblichus, as for Synesius, the power of affective concentration is required to harness the soul's fiery vehicle and reform its spherical integrity, for it becomes ever more material as it descends into the body and this process must be reversed.⁴⁹ The question of how an individual's desire or focussed attention may provide psychic energy for spiritual epiphanies is hardly discussed today, and yet it was central to the Platonic theory of *eros* as a magical, connective power, harnessed through the "intention of the imagination" as Ficino would put it.⁵⁰ Iamblichus associates the soul's eternal aetheric vehicle (the *ochema*) with the *phantasia*, and remarks that it is prayer which facilitates the alignment of the soul with its higher or divine nature: "our *ochema* is made spherical and is moved circularly whenever the soul is especially assimilated to *nous*."⁵¹ It then becomes like the subtle body of the god, which "is utterly liberated from any centripetal or centrifugal tendency because it has neither tendency or because it is moved in a circle."⁵² During the theurgic ritual of *photogogia*, the soul's subtle body became illuminated and revealed the presence of the god via the imagination: "*Photogogia* somehow illuminates with divine light the aethereal and luminous vehicle of the soul, from which divine vision, set in motion by the gods, take possession of our imaginative power" says Iamblichus.⁵³ This can happen either through the presence of the gods in the soul, or through the shining of a light onto the soul, again raising the question of the internal or external provenance of daimonic energy.⁵⁴

What kind of lights are manifested to human sight in these rituals? Iamblichus gives us a detailed taxonomy of spirit-beings, their hierarchies extending up from human souls through material and sublunary archons, heroes and daimons, to angels, archangels and gods.⁵⁵ Each will be accompanied by a light whose intensity is

³⁹ Plotinus: III.4.6.

⁴⁰ In the lost *Life of Isidorus*, Mead: 60, n.2.

⁴¹ See Addey 2010; Finamore; Shaw 2007, 2010; Uzdavynys: ch.5.

⁴² On the nature and theurgic function of the daimon see Iamblichus *Dm*: II.1-10, IX; Clarke: 107-111; Dillon 2001; Shaw 1995: 131-142.

⁴³ See Majercik fr.115, Uzdavynys: 115-118.

⁴⁴ Proclus, *In Timaeum* 1.451, Majercik fr.34.

⁴⁵ *Anecd. Oxon.*, III, 182, Majercik fr.125.

⁴⁶ Proclus, *In rem p.* II, 154, Majercik fr.137.

⁴⁷ Psellus PG 122, Majercik fr.127.

⁴⁸ Proclus *In rem p.* 1.iii, Majercik fr.146. This fragment has interesting resonances with contemporary crop circle light phenomena, where bright lights have been seen flying in circular motion around wheat fields.

⁴⁹ See Iamblichus, *In Timaeum*, Majercik fr.49: "[The sphere] is both itself one and capable of containing multiplicity, which indeed makes it truly divine", quoted in Shaw 1999: 134. Shaw describes the sphere as "the hieroglyph—of the One itself".

⁵⁰ See Ficino 1989: 351,353,355. Ficino refers to the Arabic astrologers and magi as being experts in the art of magical attraction through the powers of imagination. The idea of love as the supreme magician, attracting through affinity, is found in his *De amore* VI.10. See also Couliano: part II. Note also the etymology of the word "desire", from *de-sidere* (lat.), "from the star or constellation", implying that our deepest desire is connected to the stars.

⁵¹ Iamblichus *In Timaeum* frag. 49, 13-15 trans. Shaw 2010: 11.

⁵² Iamblichus *On the Mysteries [Dm]* V.4. trans. Shaw 2010: 10. See also Damascius "it is certain that the circular figure is common to all the intellectual gods as intellectual" in Shaw 1999: 134.

⁵³ Iamblichus *Dm*: III.14. See also Finamore, 1985, Shaw 2010, Addey 2012, George.

⁵⁴ *Iamblichus Dm* III.14. See Shaw 2011: 13-15; Uzdavynys: 168-171 on the nature of divine or "super-celestial" light and its perception via the soul's luminous vehicle.

⁵⁵ Iamblichus *Dm* II.3; also, see Proclus *In Alcibiades* 71-77 on 6 levels of daimons and their functions (Dillon 2001: 8-9). See also Plaisance on the ambiguous status of Iamblichus' archons.

mediated by their degree of materiality;⁵⁶ thus gods' lights are unchanging, "flashing forth with an indivisible and inexpressible fire". Archangels are similar to gods, being "full of supernatural light"; angels have a more "divided" light, whereas daimons "appear to the view at different times in different forms, the same forms appearing great and small". They "glow with smouldering fire" which can be "expressed in speech", and which "does not exceed the power of vision of those who are capable of viewing superior beings". The Heroes' light is apparently similar to the daimonic, whereas the cosmic archons produce a pure fire and the material ones a murkier light. Human souls appear as "fitfully visible" as they are heavily soiled by the "realm of generation". Now we should pay attention to Iamblichus' assertion that such lights are visible only to those who have developed the degree of imaginal vision which conforms to them. For as these subtle light bodies do not mingle or participate in matter, they are not "seen" in the same way as living bodies.⁵⁷ However, their light may be conducted in ritual activity through sunlight, moonlight, air or aether, symbolic objects and incantations, water, or on a wall prepared by sacred inscriptions. In such instances, Iamblichus describes the light as "from without", serving the will and intelligence of the gods.⁵⁸ Yet it is clear that it is also the soul's imaginative faculty which *perceives* the light as a supernatural energy, although it can also observe it "as if" it is an objective phenomenon—the corollary being that sense-perception alone would simply see light with no understanding of its provenance. This epistemological subtlety is explained more clearly by Proclus (412-485 CE), who points out that:

[...] the gods themselves are incorporeal, but since those who see them possess bodies, the visions which issue from the gods to worthy recipients possess a certain quality from the gods who send them but also have something connatural with those who see them. *This is why the gods are seen yet not seen at all.* In fact, those who see the gods witness them in the luminous garments of their souls. The point is, they are often seen when the eyes are shut.⁵⁹ (my italics)

I would agree with Proclus that this *is* exactly the point. To assume a "bottom line" of objective, sense-perceptible truth about anomalous lights means that any further directly intuitive or imaginative interpretation is rendered "untrue" or fanciful, whereas from the neoplatonic perspective, such an assumption is the result of limited perceptual capacity, unable (or unwilling) to "tune in" to a more subtle visionary potential. As Leonard George has elegantly put it, "the truth sought beyond extension and shape hides within the extended and shaped geometric objects of imagination".⁶⁰ This is where neoplatonic thinking diverges radically from physical science, being based on the principle of *adaequatio* or similitude between knower and what is known. The question becomes, as Shaw observes, not *what* one sees, but *how* one sees, for the presence of the gods "reveals the incorporeal as corporeal to the eyes of the soul by means of the eyes of the body".⁶¹

Visual perception for Iamblichus can be of three kinds, divinely inspired, imaginative or sensual. The imagination may receive images from both the sensory and intellectual powers of the soul, and indeed an image may be transferred from the imaginative vehicle to the sense organ in order to "mold the incoming sensory image" and enhance its perception.⁶² It is true that in Iamblichean theurgy, supernatural powers are revealed through and in nature, in symbolic objects, audible and visual images—in other words, in matter.⁶³ Indeed Iamblichus tells us that the fullest divine revelations include both intellectual and physical perception—as George puts it, "the higher imaginative faculty adds a theophanic dimension to the lower faculty's sense image, resulting in a more complete perception of the object's true nature."⁶⁴ Shaw has also convincingly argued for the fully embodied life of the theurgist, for whom the light of superior beings is revealed to his or her bodily vision whilst simultaneously kindling an inner "enlightenment" which will eventually lead to the practitioner's own realisation of their own divine nature.⁶⁵

So where do our excursions into neoplatonic daemonology lead us? I would argue that there are profound implications here for our understanding of paranormal visions, through recognising that imaginal and sensory modes of perception are not mutually exclusive but simply different registers along a spectrum of frequencies. Indeed it is possible that what one person perceives via their purified *ochema* will remain invisible to another whose imagination is not so finely tuned, so it is rarely a clear-cut case of reality or illusion.

Moving now to the Renaissance revival of neoplatonic metaphysics and magic, we find the Florentine magus Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) incorporating elements of both contemplative and theurgic neoplatonism in his

⁵⁶ Iamblichus *Dm* II.4-5.

⁵⁷ Iamblichus *Dm* II.4-5; see Clarke: ch. 6.

⁵⁸ Iamblichus *Dm* II.4.

⁵⁹ Proclus *In Remp* 1.39, 5-17, in Shaw 2010: 24.

⁶⁰ George: 80.

⁶¹ Shaw 2010: 14, Iamblichus *Dm* II.6.

⁶² George: 79.

⁶³ Iamblichus *Dm* 65 7-8, 23; Shaw 2007.

⁶⁴ Iamblichus *Dm* III.2; George: 81.

⁶⁵ Shaw 1999: 130; 2010.

understanding of the daimonic element in humans and the cosmos. In Ficino's Christian Platonism, the good daimons become God's messengers and guides, helping us "by means of prophetic signs, omens, dreams, oracles, voices, sacrifices and divine inspiration".⁶⁶ As Michael Allen has remarked, Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Apology* contains his most detailed analysis of daimonic activity,⁶⁷ although we also find considerable speculation on their nature in his commentaries on Plotinus and in his treatise on astral magic, *De vita coelitus comparanda*. In the first of these texts, Ficino posits three kinds of spiritual intelligence: elemental daimons, celestial spirits within the cosmos (i.e. planetary deities), and supercelestial spirits or angels. Both the latter he says are called gods by the "ancient theologians".⁶⁸ The daimons are subject to the planetary gods and dwell in the elementary spheres, mediating the planetary gifts to the human soul in Ficino's system of natural magic.⁶⁹ The first two categories are visible, the last invisible, and both here and in his commentary on Plotinus' *Ennead* III, Ficino assigns the daimons primarily to the element of air, whereas pure fire is more characteristic of gods. The daimons of the upper, fiery air preside over contemplation of sublime things, the daimons of pure air preside over reason and the active life, and the daimons of watery air preside over the sensual and vegetative powers of nature.⁷⁰ Each of these then also corresponds with a human cognitive faculty: fiery air with the intellect or intuitive understanding, pure air with reason and smoky or vapour-laden air with imagination and sense-perception—and it will be through these corresponding modes that they will be perceived:

If we live according to the imagination, our outer daimon is an airy one: it is a daimon which belongs to the lower region of the air and which, by acting on our imagination, forcefully propels our soul by means of its own imagining. If, however, we live according to reason, our outer daimon which belongs to the middle region of the air, drives human reason with its own reasoning. Finally, if our life is intellectual, a daimon belonging to the highest region of the air assists our intellect by means of its intellectual activity.⁷¹

What, then, on the visibility of these entities? Ficino describes them as spherical, moving in circular motion as the "stars of the sphere of air", emitting rays which, he says, the magician knows how to make visible in thickened air—air that is which may be filled with the smoke of incense in invocatory rituals.⁷² So yet again we find the paradoxical yet intrinsic relationship between inner and outer aspects of the daimonic. Although Ficino tends to emphasise the externality of the daimon ("our daimon and genius is not only, as is thought, our intellect, but a numinous being"),⁷³ suggesting that it communicates by imprinting meaning on the imagination by means of perceptible rays,⁷⁴ he also acknowledges that "what imagines in us is in some respect a daimon."⁷⁵ This imagination is powerful enough to imprint images which it receives from noetic sources into the world of the senses, and in the *Platonic Theology* we find a passage which re-iterates Proclus' concern with the dangers of confusing these projected images with those which arise from the material world:

For the most part, the phantasy, which most guides the way we live our life, is so intent that with the sharpest gaze it ponders its own images within itself. These intensely envisioned images blaze out to the common sense, which we call in the Platonic manner the imagination, and beyond to the lower senses and the spirit. But it is common to claim that this image shining back in the senses and in the spirit is a reality. For people who are awake say that they see a man when they turn to the image of a man flickering in their senses. Similarly people who are asleep say that they see a man when an image of him shines out from the phantasy preserving it and passes through the imagination into the sense and the spirit.⁷⁶

There is a difference then between a visual image which is only an outward representation, and an image which maintains an identity with the noetic realm sown deep within the soul, and whose meaning arises from the recognition of this very consubstantiality.⁷⁷ This is precisely why the daimon is simultaneously without and within the psyche. As the sixteenth century physician Paracelsus puts it, "[man] can be understood only as an image of the macrocosm [...] only then does it become manifest what is in him. For what is outside is also

⁶⁶ Ficino, "Argument for the *Apology*" in Allen 1998: 204.

⁶⁷ Allen 1998: 131-2; his translation of Ficino's *argumentum* is at 202-208.

⁶⁸ Ficino, "Argument for the *Apology*" in Allen 1998: 202.

⁶⁹ Ficino 1989.

⁷⁰ Ficino 2000; see also Allen 1998: 135.

⁷¹ Ficino 2000: 1708.

⁷² Allen 1995: 79-81. In his sermon "The Star of the Magi" Ficino suggests that the star is in fact a comet made of air condensed by the Angel Gabriel (Ficino 2006b).

⁷³ Ficino 2000: 515; see Allen 1995: 64n; Allen 1998: 143.

⁷⁴ Ficino 2000: 1708.

⁷⁵ Ficino, Commentary on Plato's *Sophist* quoted in Allen 1989: 270.

⁷⁶ Ficino 2004: ch. XIII, 151.

⁷⁷ See Giglioli 2010 for the Renaissance development of the Platonic distinction between mimetic and icastic art. Proclus developed a sophisticated theory of symbolic perception as a theurgic process, contrasting mere resemblance with sympathetic resonance and ultimately identity of image and referent. See Struck: 227-253, Voss 2006b.

inside, and what is outside man is not inside.”⁷⁸ Or Corbin, on the truth of all knowledge as the soul’s knowledge of itself:

In contrast to representative knowledge, which is knowledge of the abstract or logical universal, what is in question is presential, unitive, intuitive knowledge [...] a presential illumination which the soul, as a being of light, causes to shine upon its object. By making herself present to herself, the soul also makes the object present to her [...] the truth of all objective knowledge is thus nothing more nor less than the awareness which the knowing subject has of itself.⁷⁹

We are talking here of the kind of knowledge aroused by the symbolic or archetypal image, and it is this possibility of a visible entity pointing to a *participatory* (and not merely subjective) meaning through the engagement of the imagination which poses a challenge to empirical or scientific investigations into the paranormal.

In an interesting passage from a sermon on Colossians 3, Ficino speaks of the possibility of manifesting the soul’s luminous subtle body to human sight. Christ, he says, decided to reveal his spiritual body “by containing his own rays so that they do not shine forth too copiously, or by strengthening the rays of the man who is gazing upon him.” He has the ability to “shape the ambient air in his own image to the extent he pleases; and in this shape he can adjust himself to the onlooker”.⁸⁰ In his *Epitome* to Plato’s Sixth Letter, Ficino refers to the diaphanous angelic body, which can emit light from within and without,⁸¹ and in his *Platonic Theology* he refers to the innate spherical shape of the luminous or celestial body which transforms itself into the human shape of the aetheric body upon incarnation.⁸² To transform the aetheric back into the celestial requires, it would seem, attention to the daimonic voices which speak through our symbolic imagination via poetic metaphor, synchronicities and demonstrations of luminosity, and which were cultivated by Ficino through his practices of astral, musical and talismanic magic.⁸³

For the remainder of this essay, I want to draw some parallels between these pre-modern understandings of daimonic manifestation and contemporary eye-witness accounts of anomalous lights, bearing in mind the arguments I have outlined above for their “existence” in a very real, but non-quantifiable, ontological field. Firstly, I was struck by the descriptions of disembodied souls in Michael Newton’s accounts of his life between lives therapeutic sessions.⁸⁴ In this hypnosis work, individuals are put into deep trance and experience what Newton purports to be the life of their disembodied soul in between particular incarnations. In this liminal place, they observe the following strange entities: “blobs of energy”,⁸⁵ “half-formed human shapes”,⁸⁶ “myriads of sharp star lights”,⁸⁷ “patches of light bobbing around”,⁸⁸ and “bunches of moving lights buzzing around as fireflies”.⁸⁹ Remarkably similar to Timarchus’ vision of the daimons, and seemingly dependent on the accessing of a level of awareness beyond the conscious mind. Newton however appears somewhat immune to the symbolic significance of what his clients report, preferring a tone of apparent objectivity as if the spirit world can be considered to be of the same ontological status as our own—a problem we encounter in much “new age” literature.⁹⁰

This becomes even more of an issue when we consider the appearance of strange lights on digital photographs. What appears to be a common image is that of a misty spherical object filled with a “snake” pattern and with a central nucleus, claimed by many to be a “spirit orb” which is usually invisible to the naked eye. The scientific explanation for such an anomaly is that “in digital cameras the distance between the lens and flash has decreased causing a decrease in the angle of light reflection that increases the chance of catching sub-visible particles”,⁹¹ these particles being dust or moisture. However, psychics and mediums claim that these orbs are genuine signs of spirit energy. One medium explains: “orbs usually appear as spheres of light, they can appear as tiny flashing pinpoints of light as they move.”⁹² They are often accompanied by mists or smoky wisps and can develop into full-blown apparitions: “these mists can sometimes show the actual shape and form of the

⁷⁸ Quoted in Jacobi: 21.

⁷⁹ Corbin 1993: 210.

⁸⁰ Ficino 2000: 481-2, quoted in Allen 1998: 140 n.40.

⁸¹ Ficino 2000: 1534, see Allen 140 n.40.

⁸² Ficino 2006a: XVIII.4, 105.

⁸³ Ficino 1989. See also Ficino, “Letter to Cosimo” in Voss 2006: 59-60; Allen 1995; Walker. On Ficino’s astrological music therapy see e.g. Voss 2007.

⁸⁴ See Newton 2004, 2006.

⁸⁵ Newton 1994: 31.

⁸⁶ Newton 1994: 72.

⁸⁷ Newton 1994: 72.

⁸⁸ Newton 1994: 75.

⁸⁹ Newton 1994: 98.

⁹⁰ On the question of the “literality” of Newton’s client’s visions, see Voss 2010: 215 n.12.

⁹¹ Rachel Keene at www.rachelkeene.net (accessed November 2012).

⁹² Rachel Keene at www.rachelkeene.net (accessed November 2012).

person manifesting”. The psychic explanation is that light entities result from the expenditure of energy as spiritual or daimonic intelligences attempt to become visible in the physical world. Again, not so different perhaps from Ficino’s speculation about the “airy daimons” making their presence observable in the thickened air of clouds or smoke. Now according to the neoplatonic model, there is no reason why such “sub-visible particles” should not be *both* the result of a camera fault *and* also the manifestation of imaginal entities made visible to certain states of consciousness in certain conditions, for physical analysis does not cancel out supra-physical domains of enquiry, it simply constitutes one mode of investigation.

One of the most well-documented experiments in psychic communication took place in the Norfolk village of Scole from 1993-8, known as the Scole Experiment.⁹³ Here, participants witnessed an extraordinary array of anomalous phenomena, from images imprinted on photographic film to apports and moving lights. One witness reports:

Suddenly, the room began to be filled with spirit lights that can be best described in size and appearance as resembling fireflies with constant illumination. At times, these bluish-white lights would hover in front of spectators, and at other times, they would travel across the floor and appear to climb up the table in the centre of the room and fly up through the rafters of the garage [...] a light flew from above the spectators’ heads and across from the Scole team and touched the index finger of my right hand. I was incredulous. I could feel the light physically touch me and could plainly see that it was not a fibre-optic cord or light projection, but rather a self-contained sphere of bluish-white light of indeterminate source.⁹⁴

The lights are furthermore described as “resembling shooting stars”, as darting around at great speed and performing elaborate dances “including perfect, sustained circles executed at high velocity”, entering crystals as small points of light, striking audibly the top of a table, alighting on witnesses’ bodies, moving in time to music, producing “lightning flashes”, changing shape and moving at high speed in perfect geometric patterns. Perhaps more akin to the fiery luminous vehicle than the spirit orbs, which could be seen as more airy or etheric, these lights appear to be autonomous and dynamic, not to say daimonic.⁹⁵

To conclude, I will attempt to summarise the problem raised in this brief excursion into the perception of daimonic intelligences as visible lights, which is that of discriminating between epistemological modes. I would suggest that we could take a cue from neoplatonism and reinstate the understanding of the active or creative imagination as the appropriate faculty for perceiving and recognising dimensions of being beyond our sense perceptible reality, and this would require researchers to move beyond quantifiable paradigms to uncover an inner resonance with the “supra-rational” nature of the material they are studying. Neoplatonism provides a rigorous theoretical framework for the relationship between our imaginal capacity and “supernatural” events, but also promotes a participatory model of “co-creation” in relation to such events which removes them from the arena of external objectivity and situates them in a dynamic mesocosm between the human and divine realms of time and eternity, of spatiality and imagination.⁹⁶ In this place, a strange light may be both explicable in rational terms, and yet also point to a mysterious “other”—a daimonic presence which may only be revealed as such through a radical shift in the researcher’s cognitive register.

⁹³ See Solomon.

⁹⁴ www.thescoleexperiment.com/book_01.htm (November 2012).

⁹⁵ It should be noted that flashing, darting orbs of light are also often witnessed at crop formations, reported both by believers in non-human agency and by human circle makers.

http://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/circulos_cultivos/esp_circuloscultivos21.htm (accessed November 2012).

⁹⁶ On the notion of “co-creation” as a methodology see Ferrer & Sherman: Introduction.

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