

Anthropologists are expected to treat seriously stories of people who turn into leopards, women who eat their children and hairy monsters that live in the forest. What is important about such beliefs is not whether they are true but how they are protected from disproof, how they tie up with other ideas about the nature of the world, and how they are incorporated into a perfectly undramatic manner of living. Once a stance of the relativity of belief is adopted, it seems only permissible to make harsh judgments about the familiar, or close to home. The African witch is an acceptable research topic for anthropologists, but the witch who lives in Haslemere is dismissed as tedious or mentally ill.

Patrick Harpur and John E. Mack undermine this practice by maintaining that there is no reason to assume that encounters of the blurred kind which take place at home are any less significant than those which take place abroad. *Daimonic Reality* starts as an agreeable ramble through meetings with fairies, little men (grey rather than green), white ladies, black dogs, Big-foots, Loch Ness monsters, witches, even fake social workers. A survey of surveys gives the key characteristics of each but retains its grip on reality. Names are named, dates given. *Abduction* is more limited, being concerned solely with psychologically documented alien irruptions into the human world where victims are carried off to alien spacecraft for reproductive and study purposes. John Mack tries to illuminate his cloudy subject-matter by providing detailed case histories. Although he describes his visionaries in glowing terms – “psychically skilled”, “expanded ontology”, “spiritual growth” etc – most of them seem depressed, or desperate for distinction of any kind, even victimhood.

Both authors assume that the events which they describe are “real”, that they are not simply the result of disordered minds or psycho-social stress or manifestations of social structure. Yet

Not quite of this world

NIGEL BARLEY

Patrick Harpur

DAIMONIC REALITY

A field guide to the otherworld

330pp. Viking. £18.

0 670 85569 3

John E. Mack

ABDUCTION

Human encounters with aliens

432pp. Simon and Schuster. £16.99.

0 671 71181 4

both state that what they mean by “real” is not really “real”. For Harpur, the phenomena he describes are daimonic, part of a neglected aspect of the world and of ourselves. “Real”, he thinks, does not imply “literal”. Daimonic reality is like Jung’s “collective unconscious” or Plato’s “world soul”, but all analogies are ultimately flawed and so one arrives at a series of Zen-like oppositions – inside/outside, material/spiritual, individual/collective, objective/subjective – none of which is very helpful when it comes to understanding “strange encounters”. UFO-logists are mistakenly literal, psychiatrists and anthropologists excessively subjective or sociological. According to Harpur, the Otherworld is not simply “there”, but here as well. In a sense Harpur’s daimonic reality recalls nothing so much as those unlocatable collective representations that have been the staple of social science for generations.

As far as Harpur is concerned, the epistemology becomes the method. So, fairies are pretty similar to extraterrestrials who overlap with Big-foot, who has aspects of the daimon, and so on. An extraordinarily impoverished reading of Lévi-Strauss is invoked to “transform” almost everything into almost everything else:

Aliens : UFOs :: personified : impersonal; but, aliens : humans :: impersonal : persons. Or, aliens : fairies :: extraterrestrial : terrestrial; but, aliens : UFOs :: terrestrial : aerial.

Anthropology is invoked in the case of witches – but anthropology as conceived by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*, for all “primitives” are held to adhere to the same basic script, the best version of which is the Greek classics. Harpur presumes that the notion of the Person, beyond the Cartesian West, is generally composed of three ingredients mediating the categories of body and soul (which would seem pretty meagre to the Samo of Burkina Faso who believe they contain over twenty components). The proof of the daimonic nature of much of Harpur’s material is that hard evidence – like fairy shoes, yeti footprints and UFO sightings – does not help our attempts to understand it. In our blinkered Cartesian world, it only makes things less clear.

Just about everything can seem to be daimonic, a conclusion that Harpur himself might cheerfully embrace. But of course all this is deeply unconvincing. If you try to establish which food is good for you, or who shot Kennedy, your inevitable failure is perhaps not the work of daimons. Maybe we simply live in a world where there is too much evidence of ambivalent status and contradictory implication.

Mack, unusually for a psychologist, seems to agree with Harpur. He abandons the usual thera-

peutic stance: “I cannot help you. Your problems are real.” The aliens who prod, abuse and molest his patients and then load them with eco-friendly clichés are, Mack believes, not just from another place but from another plane of being.

Mack’s catalogue of the sufferings of his abductees creates a cosily self-confirming circle of belief. Possible abductees approach him because he appears on television as an expert on the phenomenon. Through hypnotism they often provide a clear account of events which they have heard described, which is then firmed up in support sessions with fellow sufferers. Encounters with aliens, it seems, are sometimes the source of puzzling behaviour that a therapist would more usually explain as the result of childhood abuse. Since Mack’s techniques are the same as those used to “recall” the abuse which seems to have become such a dominant feature of American family life, one is left wondering whether US prisons are not full of innocent men.

Both Mack and Harpur end with a guide to the expansion of consciousness. Mack offers the Messianic hope that “the earth would become the jewel in the crown of our being, the place where we experience once again our connection with a cosmic Source from which we have become too separate”. Harpur is more succinct. “Travel light. Don’t believe everything you have been told for good or ill.” Quite so.