



School of Childhood and Education Sciences

MA in Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred

Theories and Research Methods

The Paranormal as Text

A Methodological Discussion

Answering the question:

What methodological approach do you consider most appropriate for the study of spiritual or religious experience and why?

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Introduction

When discussing methodological approaches to any academic subject, I like to refer to Donna Haraway's thought on methodologies applied to her feminist scholarship. According to her own words 'I think you can actually do interesting work with these tools, but I want to hear them making noise, I want to feel the friction, I do not want to increase the transparency' (2004, p. 336). What this passage means is that human knowledge, and academic knowledge in particular, does not exist in a vacuum. It is informed by all kinds of social and historical mythologies, and these mythologies are also present in our methodologies. As such, we need to remember that a methodology is, above all, a tool that allows us to analyse, think and explore data at the same time that it actively creates these data. This is something that has been relatively clear since the publication of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by Thomas Kuhn (1962). We cannot separate methods from results and this is why Haraway suggests we need to make the methods as explicit as possible.

Arguably, one of the causes for the modern hegemony of scientific thought has to do with a confusion between the method and an idealized construction of what science should be, as argued by Paul Feyerabend in his paper 'How to Defend Society Against Science' (1975). In his most acclaimed book, *Against Method* (2010), he makes the compelling argument that reality is way too complex to be analysed through a set of inviolable, rigid rules and that any scientist should have the capacity to change or morph their method when the problem or subject at hand so requires it. In his own words:

my intention is not to replace one set of general rules by another such set: my intention is, rather, to convince the reader that all methodologies, even the most obvious ones, have their limits. The best way to show this is to demonstrate the limits and even the irrationality of some rules which she, or he, is likely to regard as basic. (Ibid., p. 16)

This is especially important when discussing methodologies related to the study of religious, mystical or paranormal experiences. These areas of study are concerned with some of the most taboo subjects in academia, as Fort said, with the 'data of the damned' (1919, p.11), and these do not always seem to respond to classical scientific research. It is thus particularly

important to develop methodologies that are critical of mainstream science and, at the same time, extremely self aware of their own 'friction' and 'noise'.

Jeffrey Kripal has worked in this direction with his idea of a gnostic knowledge of religion as proposed in *The Serpent's Gift* (2007). In this book Kripal suggests a kind of scholarship deeply appreciative of religion and extremely critical of it at the same time. A methodology that works within the tension between reason and faith, the object of study and the researcher himself, in order to produce a kind of holistic knowledge (gnosis) very different from what is traditionally accepted in a scholarly environment. Kripal's thought is permeated by the desire to integrate polar opposites, namely a certain post-modern constructivism with a more modern structuralism. This is important in the sense that it allows us to use some of the post-modern techniques that bring subjectivity into academia without falling prey to a complete relativist (non-)ontology.

There are, however, some problems with Kripal's proposed 'Gnostic methodology'. Some of these are rightfully brought up by Hanegraaff (2008) in his review of *The Serpent's Gift* 'Leaving the Garden'. The main problem being that what Kripal advances is not, *stricto sensu*, a methodology but a philosophical outlook on what religion is and what its study should be. In Hanegraaff's own words: 'by now it should be clear that Kripal's 'gnostic study of religion' is not so much a methodology for studying religion(s), but rather a religious and normative (meta)discourse about the nature of religion' (2008, p. 269). Unlike Hanegraaff, I believe that this metadiscourse is a rather important step when establishing a methodology, but it is not in itself sufficient to do it.

Another problem identified in the same paper by Hanegraaff is Kripal's dogmatic take on religion. Not only is religion full of 'lies', mystical processes are always regarded as 'interior' or 'psychoanalytic' in nature. Despite this being a perfectly acceptable stance, it might not be an interesting one to have *a priori* in a methodology (or at least in every methodology). How can we move from this general outlook about the nature of the study of religion to the methods of studying it?

This essay has two main objectives: (1) discuss how we can move from an overly rationalistic academy to a more 'gnostic' one (2) propose one possible methodology that might be interesting when studying paranormal phenomena.

For the sake of clarity I decided to use the expression “paranormal” to describe a wide variety of experiences that could be classified as religious, mystical or esoteric. Not every author follows this line so there may be some fluctuation in the text. Essentially the main objective is to study phenomena that usually involve a different state of consciousness or a belief in a paranormal framework, be it either gods or aliens. The reason why I prefer the word paranormal is because it seems to be the word with the largest scope among the terms previously referred and prevents this essay from being sidetracked into terminological discussions that are not its main aim.

The Holy Trinity

The methodological debate in the field of religious phenomena can be neatly grasped when looking at Hanegraaff (1995), Segal (1983), and Kripal's introduction to *The Serpent's Gift*. These three authors summarise the Holy Trinity of methodologies to study religion. Segal stands for reductionism, i.e. the idea that the study of religion should look at religious phenomena as the result of specific social, historical and economical constraints; Kripal stands for religionism,¹ a methodology that intends to look at religious phenomena in religious terms, and as a specific (religious) function of the human being; Hanegraaff stands for empiricism, i.e. looking at religious phenomena without any assumptions about their nature since these assumptions require a non-falsifiable metaphysical stance.

All the three authors present amazingly detailed and well-argued cases. It is not the purpose of this essay, however, to discuss their stances. What is interesting for the point I am trying to make is that both Hanegraaff and Segal refer to the 'superiority' of the method they are proposing.

The problem with these claims of superiority is that they seem rather fruitless, perhaps because there is a dimension of incommensurability in the various stances that are taken. Hanegraaff hints at this when he says that 'both parties are operating with mutually exclusive definitions and are not, in fact, talking about the same thing' (1995 p. 106).

Kripal, unlike his colleagues, moves away from the claim of superiority and, while proposing a methodology, declares that he does not believe any of this to be a 'zero sum game' (2007, p. 13). Kripal recognizes the essential problem at hand: scholars are trying to reduce a plethora of methods used by a field of study to a single one. The reason for this might be the wish to equate religious studies with science, which claims to have found a single exceptional method to study reality (Feyerabend, 1975, p. 15). How then can we defend Kripal's position that different methodologies should co-exist?

¹ It is more or less clear from the literature that religionism has a negative connotation so Kripal tends to use the term gnostic. I used religionism for sake of clarity because it seems to me to be a more widespread term.

The quest for an all-regulating method or force is not specific to science. Juvenal's famous line '*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*' (Satire VI, v. 347–348) has been used to describe the problem that arises when a single force has dominion over something, particularly in the case of politics. In his *Consideration on Representative Government*, John Stuart Mill faces this same problem. When questioning how to keep the Parliament in check he suggests that one of the few possible solutions is that '...the head of the executive must be elected by some agency entirely independent from the representative body' (2013, p. 49). This is the very idea upon which most modern western democracies rely and it is a neat solution to the problem presented in Juvenal's quote. Just as in politics, creating upper hierarchical layers to keep our methodologies in check is irrelevant because there will always be a lack control in the higher layer. But if we could make the move Mill makes when discussing politics, it is possible to imagine that the tension between the three approaches we are discussing is actually what keeps each of them in check.

Critics might say that this will divert us from the objective of achieving a sound approximation to truth, but I am convinced otherwise. For example, the challenge presented by a scholar who is radically against metaphysical stances might be the best way to avoid the transformation of Kripal's scholarship in a proto-religious movement. By looking at the problem through these lenses, the methodological discussion has no longer a teleological objective. Instead, the tension that arises from it becomes itself the source of interest in the scholarship about religions. The different approaches give us interesting takes (often radically different hermeneutically) and work as an inhibitor of the excesses of each methodology when taken *ad absurdum*.

In the end, even if we do not find ourselves closer to the truth, as Feyerabend beautifully puts it, 'it is of course not true that we have to follow the truth. Human life is guided by many ideas. Truth is one of them. Freedom and mental independence are others' (1975, p. 4)

Feyerabend and Counterinductive Reasoning

It is a rather strong statement to say that the tension between ideas can result in valid knowledge or have any interest to the academy. In this section I would like to show that this position has already been very well argued by the philosopher Feyerabend, despite the fact that it has not taken roots outside of certain radically post-modern circles.

Feyerabend was a philosopher of science most known by his radical and revolutionary takes on epistemology and the scientific method. According to his work, one of the main impulses of scientific advancement is divergent thought. In his book *Against Method* (2010) he gives several instances in which divergent thought was fundamental to improve or discredit scientific theories. The particular example he explores throughout the book is Galileo's defense of heliocentrism that in fact contradicted most of the available scientific, philosophical and theological evidence at the time.

In order to include divergent thought in science he suggests the terms 'counterinduction' or 'counterinductive reasoning' (2010, ch.2). These terms relate with his own conception of an 'anarchist methodology' that privileges the appearance of strange or unlikely takes on reality that can offer a stark contrast to established scientific truths in order to shake them out the realm of dogma. As you can probably imagine, it is very interesting to cross the concept of counterinductive reasoning with the Fortean takes on methodology and science present in *The Book of the Damned* (1919). Feyerabend famously discusses the need for a fluid methodology in the following passage:

It is clear, then, that the idea of a fixed method, or of a fixed theory or rationality, rests on too naive a view of man and his social surroundings. To those who look at the rich material provided by history, and who are not intent on impoverishing it in order to please their lower instincts, their craving for intellectual security in the form of clarity, precision, 'objectivity', 'truth', it will become clear that there is only one principle that can be defended under all circumstances and in all stages of human development. It is the principle: anything goes. (Ibid, p. 13-12)

It is important to say that Feyerabend is not against the scientific method *itself* but believes that the path to knowledge lies in a plurality of methodologies that challenge each other and that the modern academy simply does not allow to flourish. Thus, he is not himself a radical relativist and he has even written against the proportion to which relativism has grown within a certain strain of the post-modern humanities academy (2010 p. 283-287 and references therein), much like Kripal's warnings on his Introduction to *The Serpent's Gift* (2007, p. 10).

The point I wish to make here is that the tension between the three most accepted stances in the study of religion I was suggesting earlier is actually a very organic instance of the kind of academy Feyerabend advances in his work. It is not overly relativistic, there is a direct confrontation between more rational views and views that are not totally within the scope of rationality and it even allows partnership between opposite poles.² As such I suggest that this tension between different approaches is not only natural but desirable and it should be cherished as our way to achieve a nuanced and complex knowledge of what it means to be religious and how those experiences emerge in societies.

Keeping in mind that there are no ultimate methods I would now like to suggest the move that I think will allow scholars interested in religious experience to work the data in a way that is both enlightening and challenging to post-enlightenment mainstream academic forms of knowledge.

² Thanks to Angela Voss for calling to my attention the symbology in the fact that the book Kripal and Hanegraaff wrote together is called *Hidden Intercourse* mirroring the symbiotic nature of their relationship despite their public disagreements.

Voss and Plato - Restoring Divine Revelation

It is widely accepted that the revolutionary contribution of the Enlightenment was creating a 'conception [that] emphasised the centrality of reason and sensory experience as sources of knowledge' (Garrard, 2006, p. 6) and leaving behind divine revelation and religious authority as legitimate forms of knowing. However, it is worth noting that today's academy has some approaches that are highly critical of scientific enlightenment thinking, more importantly post-modernism. Radically relativist post-modernism is especially present in certain areas of academia like gender studies or critical theory as epitomised in the thought of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Paul Preciado, etc.

What I intend to suggest in this section is that the revolutionary proposal of the Enlightenment is not as revolutionary as we are made to believe and that post-modernism is not an effective way to oppose the excesses of reason and it is, in fact, the result thereof. After this I will suggest a change in perspective, already advanced by Angela Voss (2013), that should inform our academic thought, and a possible methodology for the analysis of religious, mystical or paranormal phenomena.

In her article, Voss (2009) refers to the conceptual difference Platonic philosophers made between discursive knowledge and revelatory insight, and how revelatory insight was considered the highest form of knowledge, reason working in its service. When reading classical texts it is possible to see that what the Enlightenment philosophers did was not so much the proposal of a radical new form of thought, but the inversion of a classical hierarchy of different forms of thought. Revelatory knowledge is no longer the most important source of knowledge, reason is, and revelation has been put alongside opinions, as the lowest, less informed way of knowing.³ This is even visible in pagan communities where there is a raging debate whether UPG (unverified personal gnosis) should be taken seriously.⁴

³ Milne makes a similar point when discussing what he calls 'ontological inversion' (2002, p. 5)

⁴ I have no academic reference for this since there are not many neo-pagan theology academic works, but a quick search through neo-pagan websites like www.patheos.com will show any interested person the debate is alive.

However, already in the 3rd century Iamblichus had warned Prophyry of the danger in reversing the role of reason and 'intellect'⁵ when discussing the gods (2003, book I, §3). The author of *Picatrix*, an 11th century islamic grimoire, also warns that magic is 'too deep and strong for the intellect' (2011, p. 27).⁶ These two examples, among many more that could be named, show that the Enlightenment philosophers did not introduce a concept that had never been thought of. The conflation of Iamblichean intellect with mere opinion and the absolute rule of reason was something to fear, not something beyond conceptualization.

And yet this ideological approach is the most present in academia with any belief in the paranormal often labelled as 'reasoning abnormalities' (Lawrence & Peters, 2004) or 'epistemically suspect' (Penycook et al., 2015) and a measure of low intelligence or lack of skepticism (Ibid; Blanco et al., 2015) even if a poll shows that 73% of Americans hold at least one non-religious paranormal belief (Moore, 2005). This view is quite well illustrated by Penycook et al.'s remarks: 'although epistemically suspect claims may or may not themselves qualify as bullshit, the lack of skepticism that underlies the acceptance of epistemically suspect claims should also promote positive bullshit receptivity' (2015, p. 552).⁷

However, this is not even what the literature shows. Not only 200 years of Enlightenment were not able to get rid of 'reasoning abnormalities' but one study has even found that one in five Americans is a science denier (e.g., a creationist) who has an above average scientific literacy (O'Brien & Noy, 2015).

Academic resistance to this unmeasured rationalism usually appears in the form of post-modernism, a set of philosophical approaches that tend to border on radical relativism (Kripal, 2007, p.10). But the complete turn towards subjectivity and away from any conception of 'truth' is not so much an attack against the supremacy of reason, but that supremacy taken *ad absurdum*. It is very possible that absolute relativism stems from two factors: (1) the painful realisation that nothing can be ultimately proven through reason and (2) an extreme difficulty in untangling Iamblichus' intellect from mere opinion. The basic drive behind post-modern thought

⁵ In the translation of Iamblichus I have used, intellect clearly stands for the human cognitive ability that allows divine revelation and communication with the subtle worlds.

⁶ In this translation intellect is not used as in Iamblichus work. It is used as a synonym for reason.

⁷ See references therein for studies that attempt to correlate reflective abilities with the rejection of the paranormal.

is very interesting: We have lost something with the hegemony of reason. However, putting opinion, reason and intellect at the same level seems to result in little more than a complex way of justifying any pet belief.

If we want to create an interesting resistance to the over rationalistic pole in academia we have to resort to (neo)platonistic thought and be able to disentangle opinion from intellect. This is what Kripal is already doing when he talks about the 'third classroom' (2007, p. 23). In her 2013 paper, Voss proposes that the introduction of divine revelation is a fundamental step to study the paranormal academically, and that these phenomena are not understandable if viewed through a purely rationalist lens. But how can we actually look at a paranormal phenomenon in a way that enables revelatory processes? How could we describe one possible method that brings this approach to life?

The Paranormal as Text

One possible technique I would like to propose is attempting to look at paranormal experiences like texts, and try to approach them like literary works that reveal something deep about human experience. In this way, a research of the paranormal could look at reports of dreams, close encounters or religious revelation from a symbolic way and interpret them intra and intertextually. Cornelius' application of the hermeneutical fourfold method to astrology is a big step in this direction (2003, ch. 14-15).

I will try to give a small example of a possible interpretation of a famous close encounter, but I do not intend to analyze it extensively. Although Cornelius' application of the fourfold method to astrology was an important inspiration, I will not use the four stages of interpretation for questions of length. I will merely divide the event into a literal and symbolic.⁸

The episode I will be looking at is commonly known as the *Hopkinsville Encounter*. This encounter has been discussed by several academics and enthusiasts of UFO phenomena. Jacques Vallee described it in *Passport to Magonia* (1993, p. 251 case 372): In the evening of the 21st of August 1955 eleven people, both children and adults, report that a group of 'little green men' (similar to goblins) attacked their house shortly after a light crashed into the ground close by. The family fought the little creatures for hours, claiming the bullets had little to no effect except for a creature that was killed.⁹ The family went to the police to report the attack. The next morning they had left their house in fear, claiming the creatures had come back.

Several academics dismiss the events claiming the family was not sober¹⁰ and that the creatures were actually 'great horned owls' (Schamltz & Lilienfeld, 2014 and references therein). Although it seems rather strange that a family that owns a farm would not be able to easily recognize local fauna, Simon Wilson has correctly called to my attention that the creatures could be owls as seen from a different state, a kind of phenomenon evocative of theurgic work involving statues, for example (Uzdavinys 2009 is an essay that nicely discusses this)

⁸ The reader who wishes to learn more about the four stages of interpretation may look at the seminal work *The Moment of Astrology* (Coernelius, 2003) particularly chapters 14 and 15.

⁹ Vallee does not say what happened to the body.

¹⁰ Conveniently ignoring that there were children among the witnesses.

After extensively analyzing the event from a literalist perspective, our textual interpretative abilities may play a very interesting role. Even admitting the literalist claim that the creatures were owls, what is the relevance that they were perceived as violent invaders? What does this experience mean in symbolic terms and what meaning can we create from it when we depart from the literal level?

Owls have been interpreted as bad omens and bringers of death in Western culture for centuries. For example, Virgil uses an owl as an omen of Dido's death in the *Aeneid* (book IV, v. 672-74) and John Keats refers the "gloom-bird's hated screech" among a list of bad omens in *Hyperion* (1818, p. 4 v.171). Even in other cultures, as the Yoruba culture in Africa, owls are associated with the *Yami*, spirits of female witch ancestors that are bringers of chaos.¹¹

If we conjecture that these symbolic traits stem from the fact that the owl is a nocturnal predator, we will see how a literal trait is reinterpreted as a symbolic one. This movement is not very different from the possibility that symbolic traits might have been revealed through literal owls in Hopkinsville. We see symbol pouring into the literal in this encounter.

But we can take the analysis a step further. It is interesting to see that the basic narrative of this event is one of protecting your boundaries and your land. This might be read as a role reversal of the frontier myth, perhaps the most central myth of (white) American culture (Turner, 1893). At least since the 19th century the expansion of the American frontiers and the frontier between the civilized world and the 'barbarian' indigenous world is a fundamental concept in the white American psyche. This is the space opportunity for the colonialist. A place of redemption and the possibility of achieving your fullest potential. We can find instances of this in literature with *The Adventures of Buffalo Bill*, in cinema with western movies and even in popular culture with rodeos and western themed fairs.

This encounter, that happened during the night and with the invasion of birds associated with chaos, shows an unholy reversion of the frontier myth making it even more dramatic. This time it is the barbaric that comes to conquer the civilized. The dominated land rises up to disrupt the peaceful life of the colonialists' heirs. A life's hard labour is taken away by the invasion of

¹¹ I cannot provide a source for this because most of Yoruba's culture is orally transmitted and this has been told to me as a practitioner of an African derived tradition.

the unknown, the chaotic, the unspeakable. Even worse than that is the possibility that the conqueror has become the subject of conquest, the civilised has become the barbaric. Through these lenses, the Hopkinsville encounter becomes a literal-symbolic realisation of the deepest fears of American psyche, i.e. losing the conquered land to an unknown, savage entity that will taint the (white) American exceptionalism. This might be particularly relevant in the political context of the time: the Cold War.

We should not forget however the other well known symbolism of the owl in Western culture: Wisdom. Arguably this symbolism has its origin in the consecration of the owl to Athena and Minerva, Greek and Roman Goddesses of wisdom (Eade, 2008, p. 71). It is fair to ask if the symbolism of death and wisdom, both present on the Roman world, could be reconciled and if so, how could this relate to the analysis so far presented of the Hopkinsville encounter.¹²

The question of the conflicting symbolism of owls is addressed by Ovid in book II of the *Metamorphoses*:

(...) Nictimene
committed the most wicked crimes, for which
Minerva changed her to the bird of night—
and ever since has claimed her as her own
instead of me; and this despite the deed
for which she shuns the glorious light of day,
and conscious of her crime conceals her shame
in the dark night—Minerva's Owl now called. (1922, book II, v. 531-632)

In this enlightening passage, the owl is not presented as a symbol of wisdom despite being a symbol of doom, it is presented as a symbol of wisdom precisely because it is a symbol of doom. In this way, wisdom is symbolically presented as a process that shares similarities with death and bad omens. The meanings become not only reconcilable but interdependent. The issue becomes even more mysterious when we look at another work of art, Goya's "Sleep of Reason" that presents owl-like creatures tormenting a sleeping incarnation of reason. Are these monsters shadow of a "primitive mentality" that menaces us everytime reason takes a nap? Or are they symbolic of a kind of wisdom that emerges when reason sleeps, a night time consciousness that brings both death and wisdom? Could the owls represent an initiatory process that implies that

¹² Many thanks to Simon Wilson for bringing this to my attention and providing the framework for the following discussion.

for wisdom to flourish something has to die to give it space, even if it is a temporary death of reason?

There are no clear answers to give here, because through Goya we are entering a space where a completely different kind of consciousness reigns, but it is still worth it to ask what kind of wisdom may have come from the Hopkinsville encounter? I dare say that this short essay may be a step in fulfilling the double symbolism of the Hopkinsville encounter, an attempt to grow wisdom from a traumatic experience with chthonic forces.

Conclusion

There are certainly many more things to say about this encounter but I believe this brief analysis is sufficient to show the kind of work I believe can be interesting to develop in the academic study of paranormal experience. One of the advantages of this approach is that the truth of the event becomes rather irrelevant, the same way the truth of the events in a literary work is also not of central relevance. After departing from the discussion whether the event really happened or not, we have room to explore its symbolic significance in social, psychological and even mystical terms.

In this way, and drawing interpretative tools from hermeneutics and the theory of literature, we can start looking at the paranormal in an academic (and probably revelatory) way that can offer a true counterbalance to more empirical and reductionistic approaches, creating a more counterinductive and free academy.

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