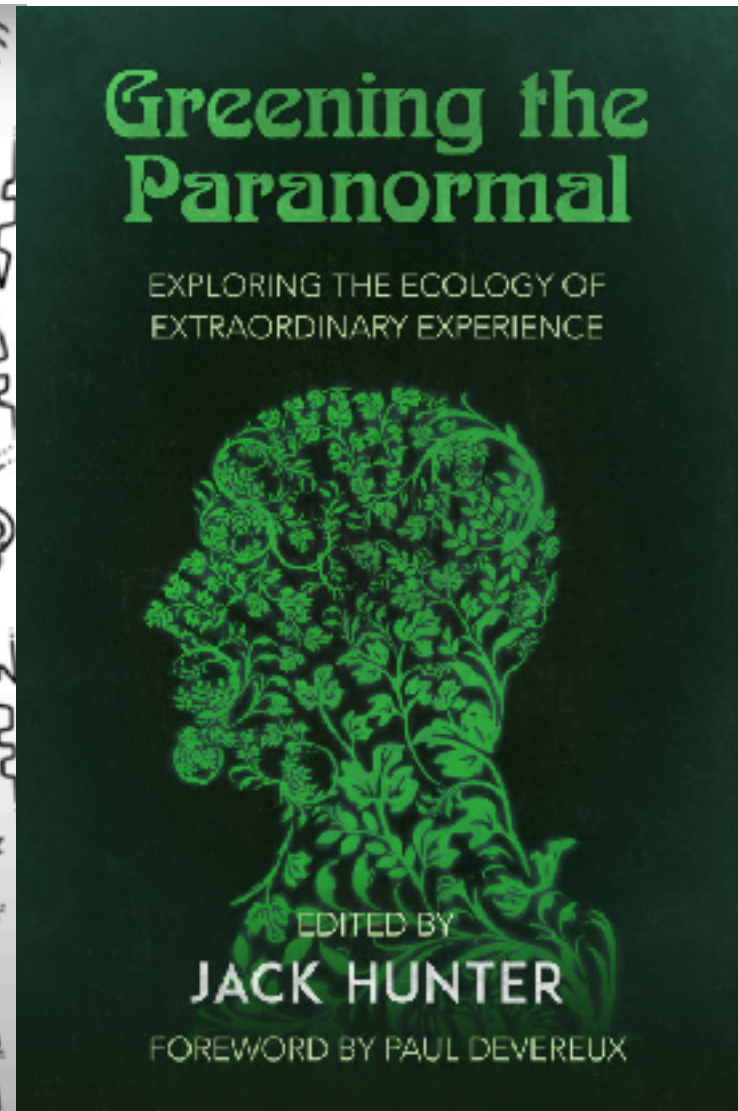
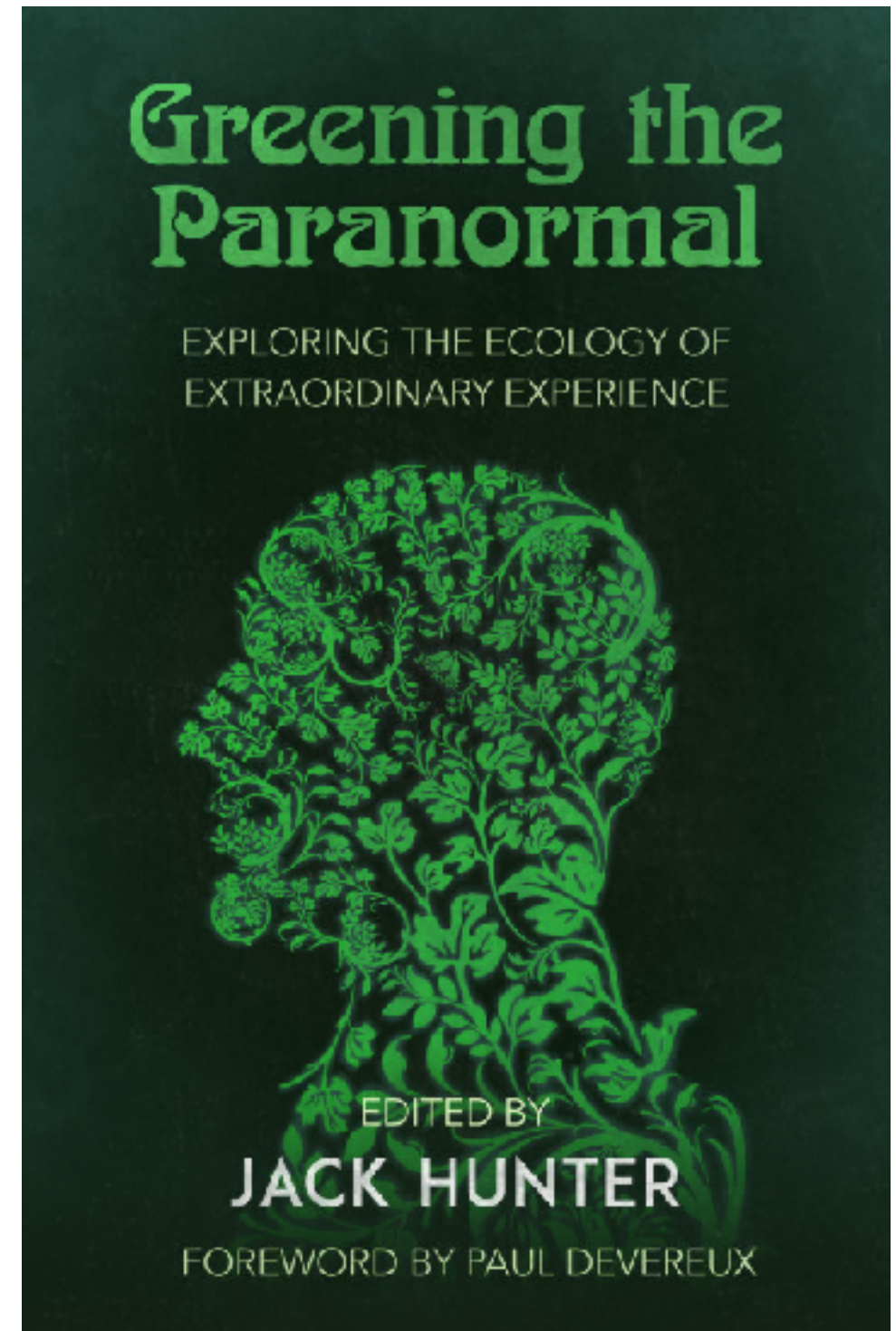


Ecology and Spirituality: Greening the Paranormal



Greening the Paranormal

- Broad exploration of the links between ecology and anomalistics.
- Paul Devereux, Cody Meyocks, Nancy Wisser, Amba J. Sepie, Lance M. Foster, Jacob W. Glazier, Christine Simmonds-Moore, Mark A. Schroll, Viktória Duda, Maya Ward, Simon Wilson, David Luke, Brian Taylor, Silvia Mutterle, Susan Marsh, Timothy Grieve-Carlson, Elorah Fangrad, Rick Fehr, and Christopher Laursen.

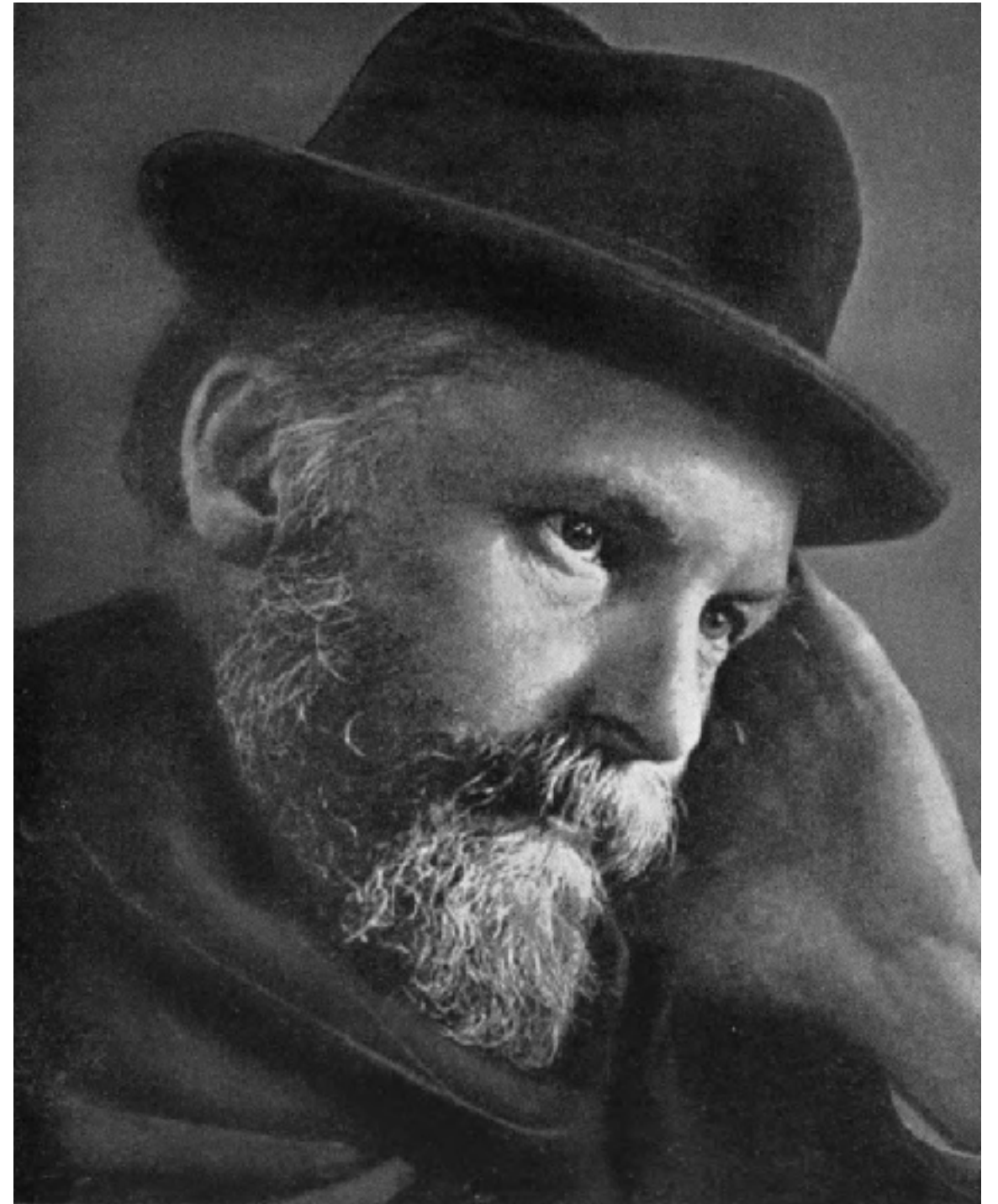


Overview

- What is the Paranormal?
- Putting the Paranormal in Context.
- High Strangeness and the Trickster.
- Fruits of Paranormal Experience.
- Alien abduction and environmental destruction.
- Paranormal Super-Minds.
- Cleve Backster and Primary Perception in Plants.
- Window areas, nature spirits and magical animals.
- Extraordinary feedback loops.

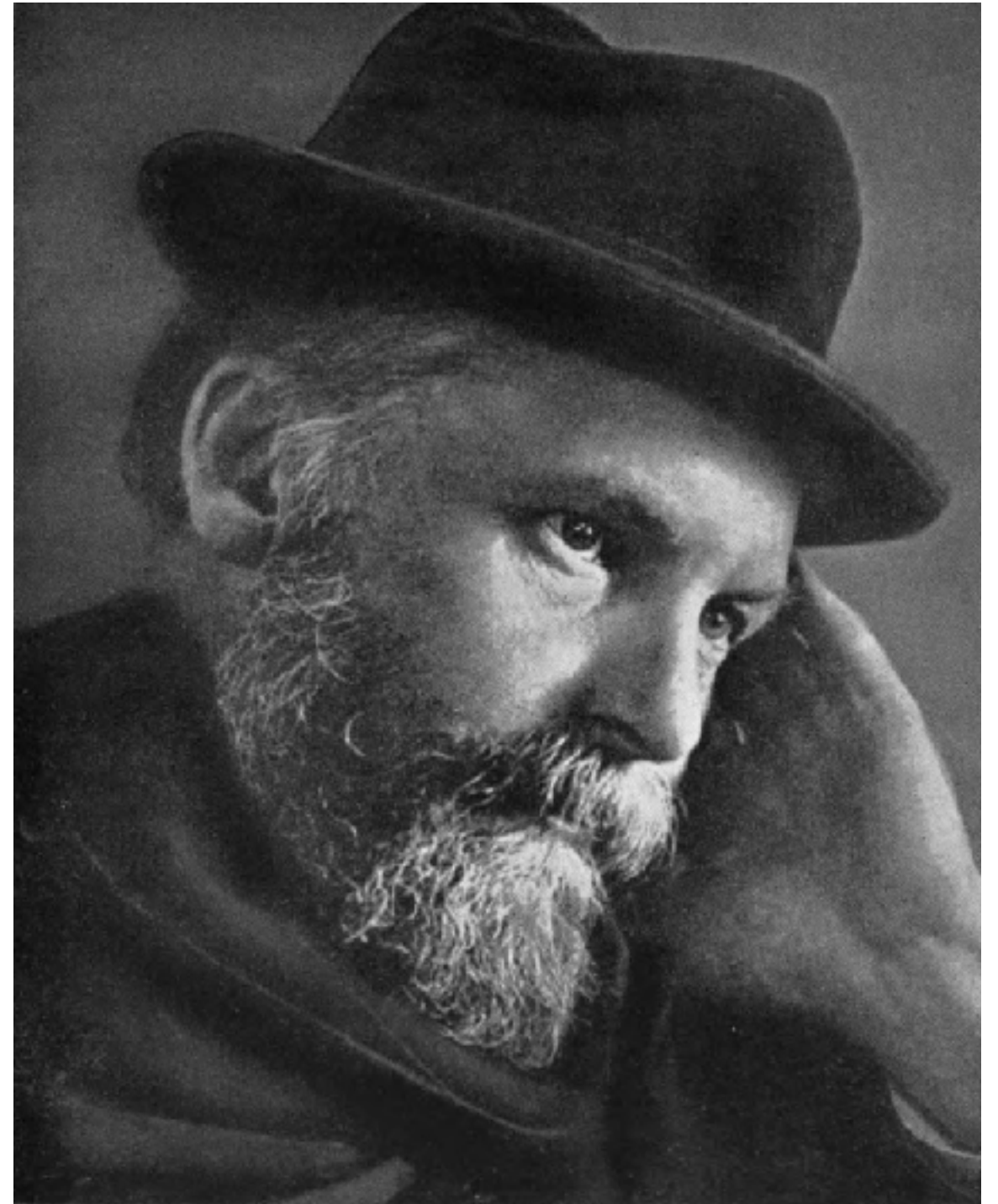
What is the Paranormal?

- F.W.H. Myers coined the term ‘supernormal’ in an effort to move away from the explicitly religious connotations of the ‘supernatural.’
- “Of a faculty or phenomenon which goes beyond the level of ordinary experience, in the direction of evolution, or as pertaining to a transcendent world. The word *supernatural* is open to grave objections; it assumes that there is something outside nature. Now there is no reason to suppose that the psychical phenomena with which we deal are less a part of nature....they are above to norm....rather than outside... nature...” (Myers, cited in Kripal, 2010, p. 67).
- Became ‘Paranormal’ in France, and imported to the USA.
- Psi - telepathy, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, etc.
- Ghosts, spirits, cryptids, UFOs...



Putting the Paranormal in Context

- As we have already seen, parapsychology moved from a field-based research project (in the form of psychical research) toward a laboratory based approach.
- But, these experiences occur in the midst of complex social, cultural, emotional, physiological (and other) processes.
- They can't be properly understood without reference to these dimensions.
- Also a need to deepen this context, because social and cultural phenomena are embedded within ecological systems.
- Because the paranormal is a controversial subject area, we can also legitimise it by contextualising with other strands of academic work - e.g. research on religious experience.



High Strangeness

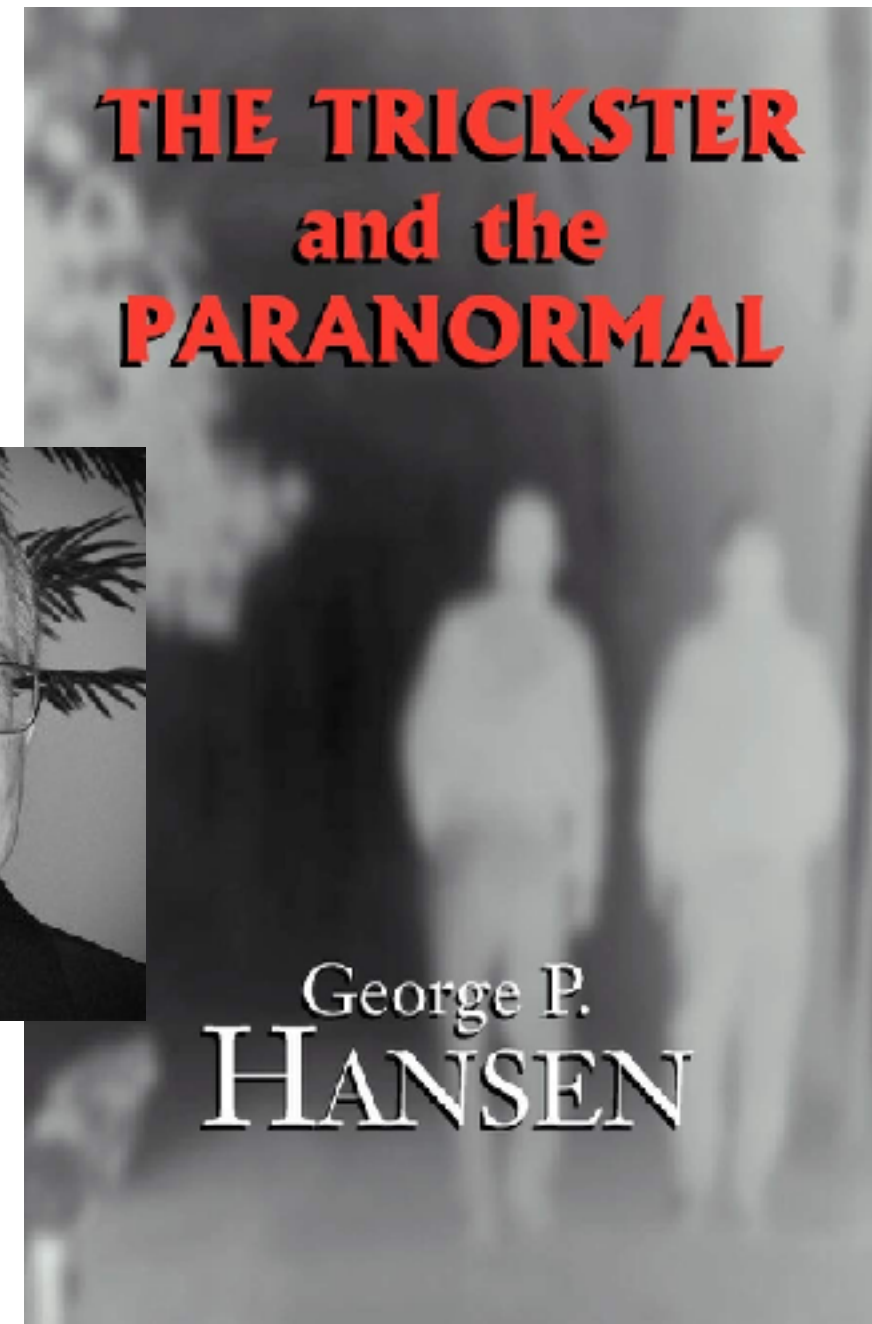
- Pioneering UFO researcher and astronomer Dr. J. Allen Hynek (1910-1986).
- Scientific adviser to the US airforce's UFO projects - Project Sign, Project Grudge and Project Bluebook. Collating and explaining away UFO sightings.
- “A light seen in the night sky the trajectory of which cannot be ascribed to a balloon, aircraft, etc., would nonetheless have a low Strangeness Rating because there is only one strange thing about the report to explain: its motion. A report of a weird craft that descended within 100 feet of a car on a lonely road, caused the car's engine to die, its radio to stop, and its lights to go out, left marks on the nearby ground, and appeared to be under intelligent control receives a high Strangeness Rating because it contains a number of separate very strange items, each of which outrages common sense...” (Hynek, 1974, p. 42).



The Trickster

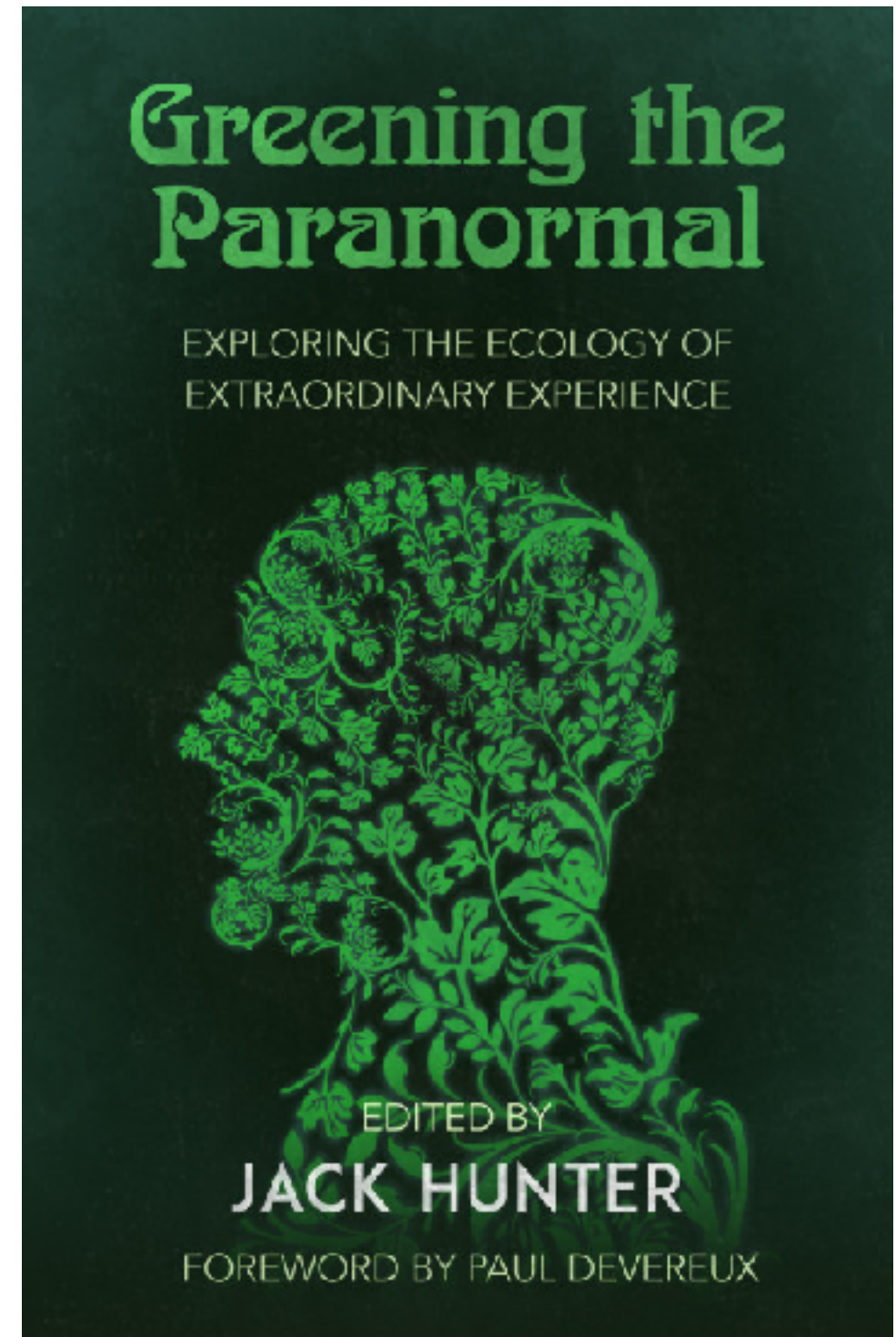
- Parapsychologist George Hansen has suggested that the paranormal possesses a ‘trickster-like’ quality.
- Other paranormal researchers had also noticed this tendency. John Keel, for example:

“We are confronted with a series of manifestations that indicate that the human mind can be programmed and reprogrammed like a computer, that human senses can be made to see anything and hear anything at the whim of the phenomenon, that our reality itself can be distorted by some mysterious force. When you study all of the manifestations, it becomes clear that the force has a childlike intelligence – capricious, often irrational...” (Keel, 2013, p. 11).



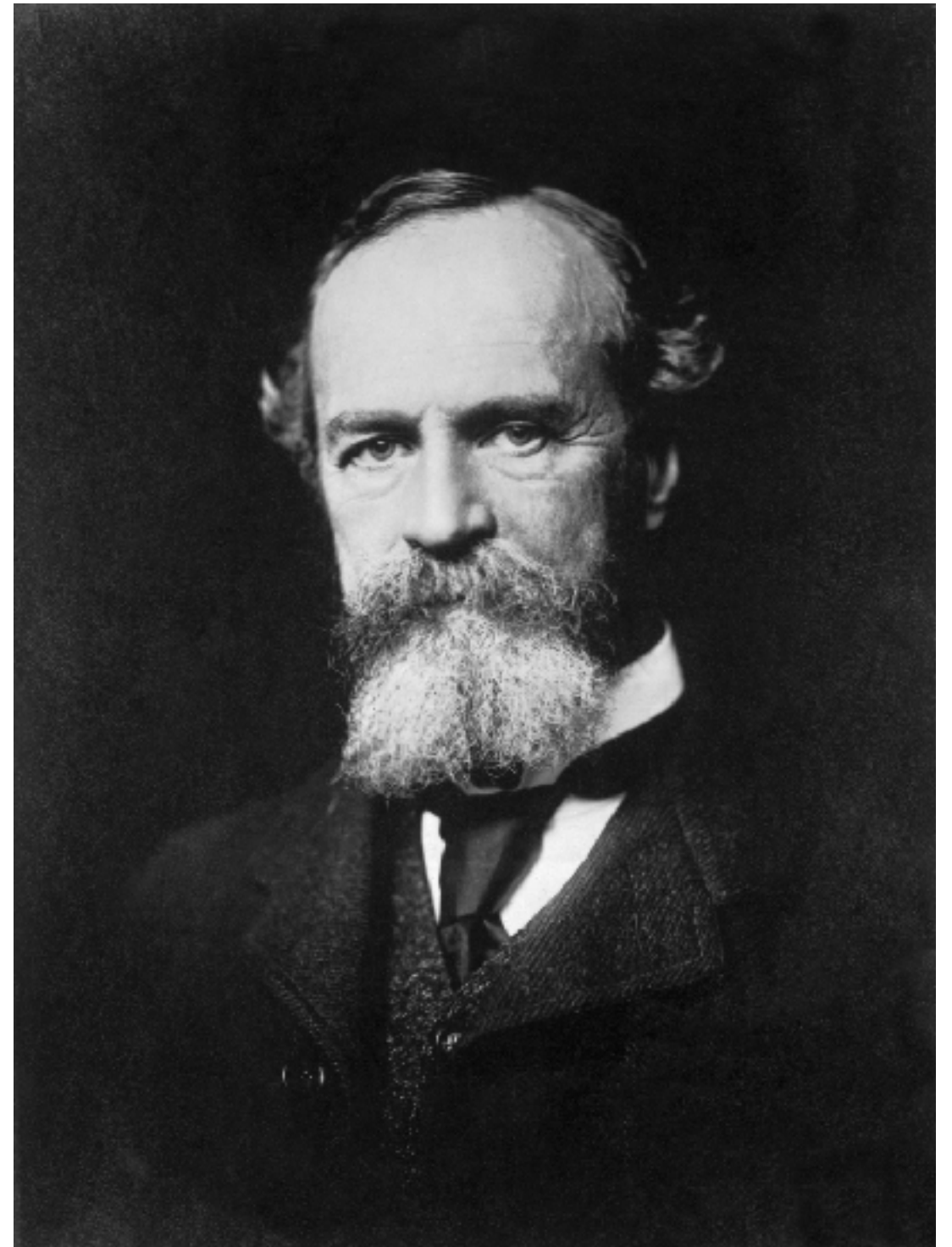
Green Strands in the Paranormal

- Although it might seem at first glance that ecology and the paranormal are unrelated, there are actually a surprising number of green strands that run through the paranormal.
- e.g. the fruits of paranormal experience, the content of paranormal experiences, the implications....



Fruits of Paranormal Experience

- James argued that one of the simplest ways to tell if an experience was a genuine religious experience was to judge it by its 'fruits.'
- The effect of the experience on the individual - did it change their behaviour?
- Ring & Valarino (2006) that Near-Death Experiencers often develop a 'heightened sensitivity to the ecological health of the planet' (p. 125) following their experience.
- Similarly, 'lifetime experience with psychedelics in particular may ... contribute to people's pro-environmental behavior by changing their self-construal in terms of an incorporation of the natural world' (Forstmann & Sagioglou, 2017).



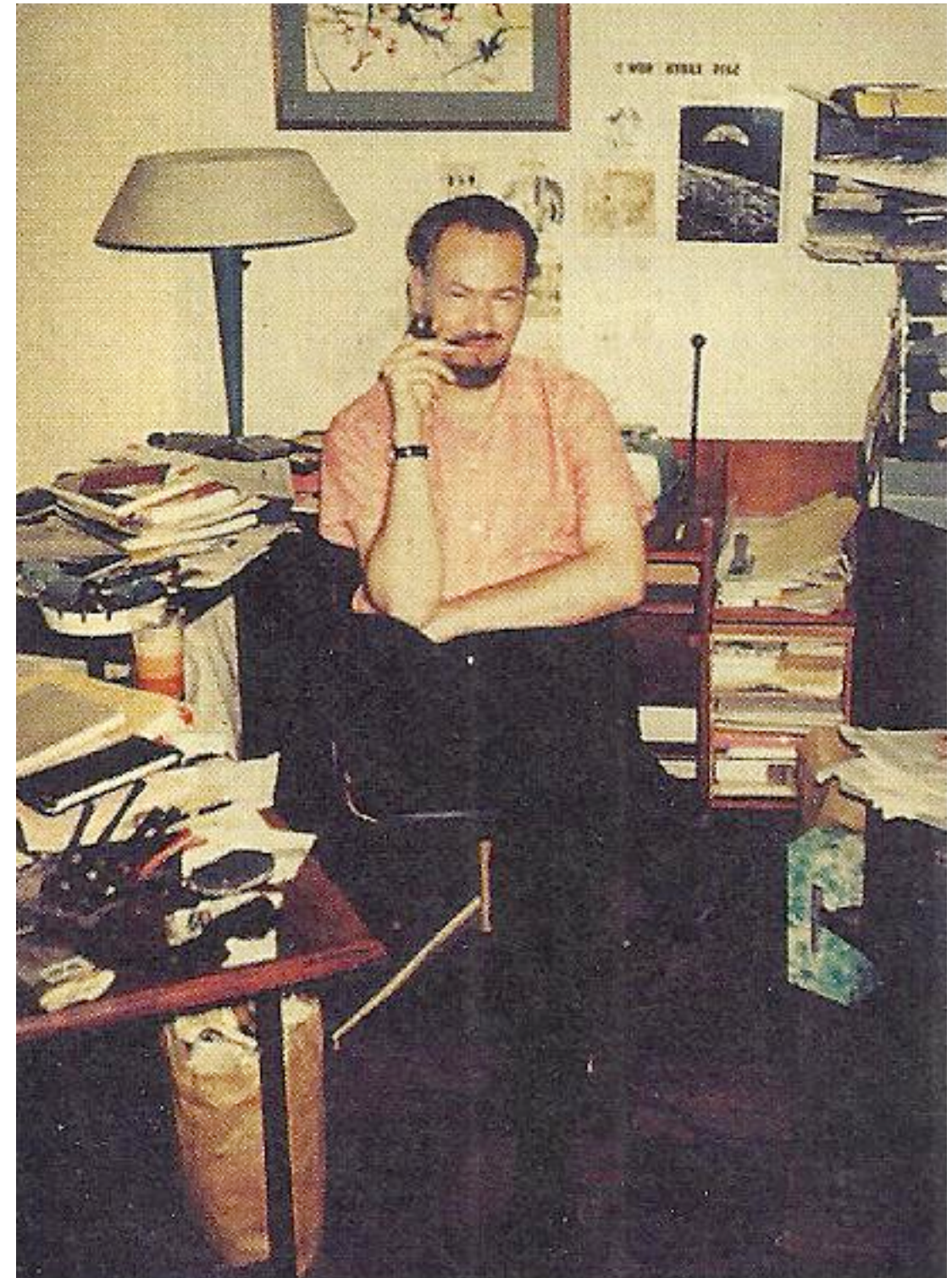
Alien Abduction

- Harvard psychiatrist John Mack (1929-2004) researched Alien abductees in the 1990s.
- “It seems impossible to avoid the observation that the alien abduction phenomenon is occurring in the context of a planetary ecological crisis that is reaching critical proportions and that information about this situation is often powerfully conveyed by the alien beings to the experiencers...” (Mack, 1995, pp. 434-435).



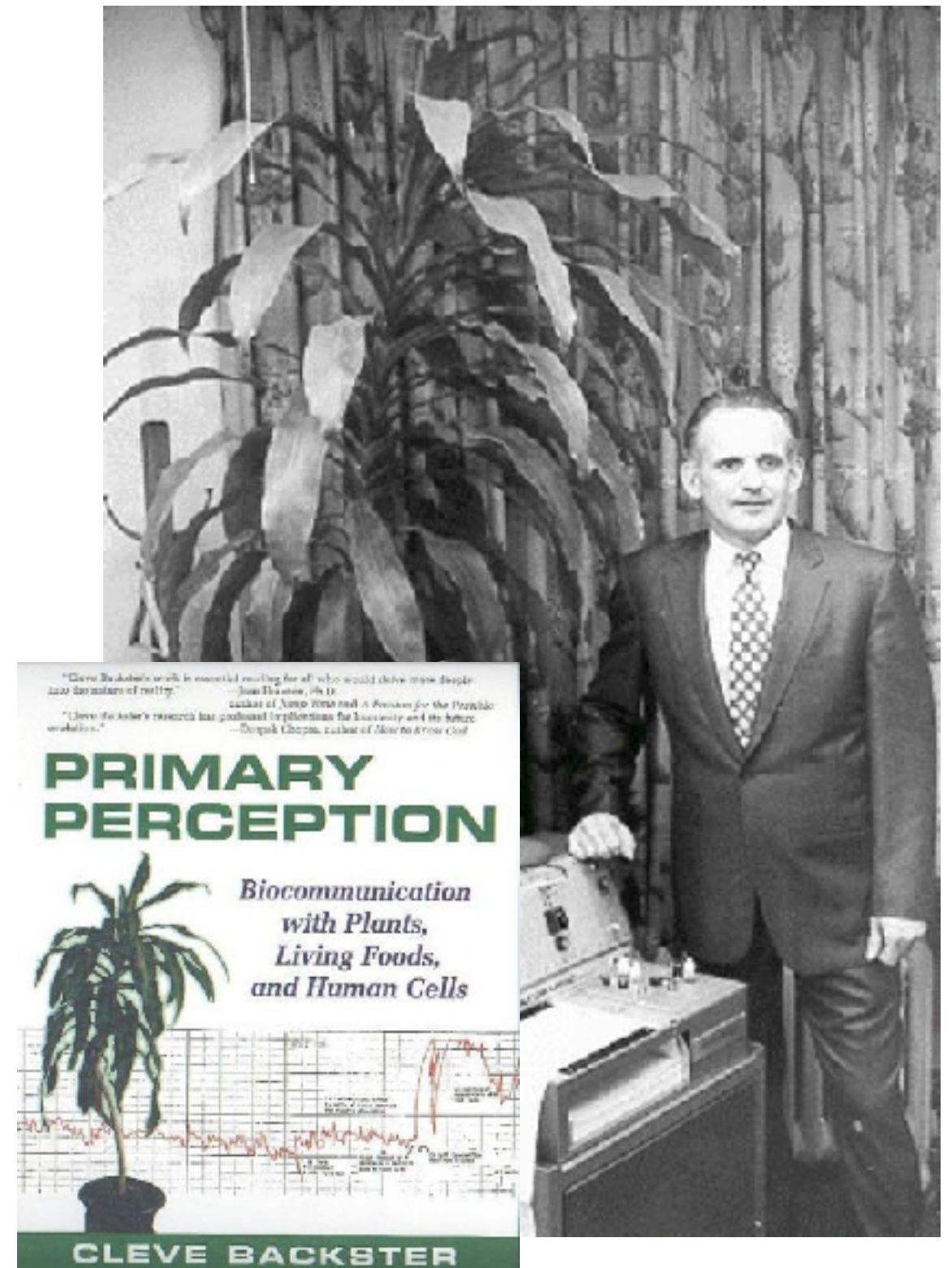
Paranormal Super-Minds

- “It is quite possible – even probable – that the Earth is really a living organism, and that it in turn is a part of an even larger organism, that whole constellations are alive, transmitting and receiving energy to and from other celestial energy sources. Up and down the energy scale the whole macrocosm is functioning on levels of reality that will always be totally beyond our comprehension. We are a part of it all, just as the microbe swimming on the microscope slide is unknowingly a part of our dismal reality, and, like the microbe, we lack the perceptive equipment necessary to view the larger whole. Even if we could view it, we could not understand it...” (Keel, 2013, p. 248).
- Could the insights of paranormal researchers like John Keel be glimpses of the same vast intelligence seemingly revealed by ecology?



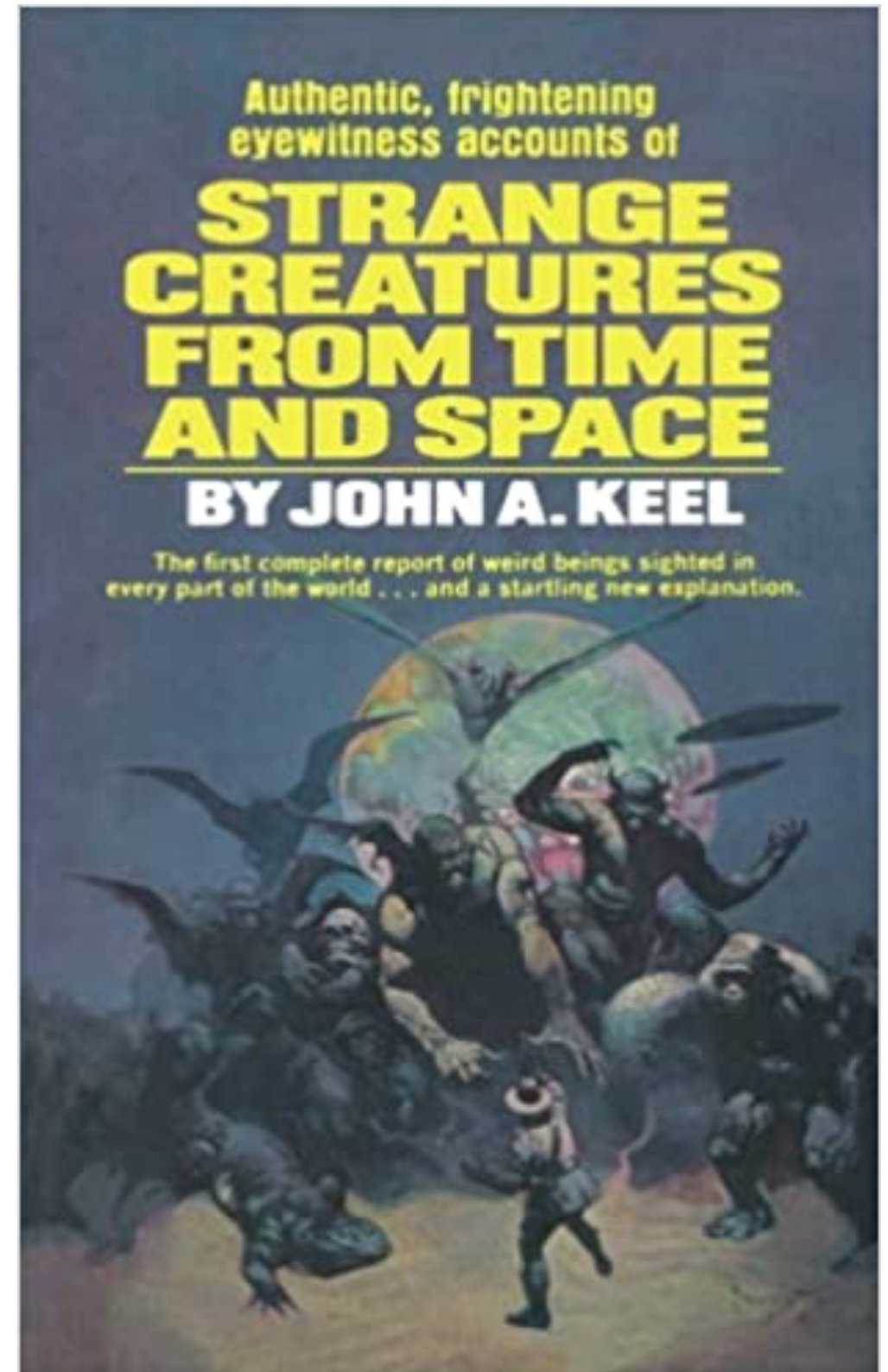
Cleve Backster

- Cleve Backster (1924-2013) and his investigations into plant consciousness. Backster's interest began in 1966 when he recorded polygraph (lie-detector) readings indicative of emotional arousal in house plants after watering a *dracaena massangeana* pot-plant in his office, to which he had attached electrodes and a galvanometer (Tompkins & Bird, 2002, p. 4).
- “The author proposes that there exists a yet undefined primary perception in plant life...and that this perception facility in plants can be shown to function independently of human involvement...this perception facility may be part of a primary sensory system capable of functioning at cell level...” (Backster, 1968, pp. 333-345).
- Backster also claimed that his experiments provided clear evidence of mind-to-mind communication between humans and plants. Backster's plants seemed to react to his thoughts, emotions and intentions even before they had been expressed in the physical world. Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird (2018) provide a thorough overview of the pioneering work of researchers at the borderlands of parapsychology and plant physiology in the 1960s and 70s.



Window Areas

- “We have a theory. It is not very scientific but it is based upon the known facts. These creatures and strange events tend to recur in the same areas year after year, even century after century. This, in itself, indicates that the creatures somehow live in those areas which we call ‘windows’” (Keel, 1970, p. 15).
- e.g. West Virginia - Mothman.
- “...The sudden appearances and disappearances of these wild, unknown creatures all over the world, even in densely populated areas...Mundane explanations do not seem to fit the known facts. We have to stretch our minds a bit and extend our imaginations into the paranormal...”
- “...They speculate that another world exists outside our space-time continuum and that these myriad objects and creatures have found doors from their world to ours in these “window” sectors. Admittedly it is a far-fetched idea, yet much of the data supports it” (Keel, 1970, p. 16).



Nature Spirits?

- “Lama Gelongmo Zangmo, director of the Samye Ling Buddhist Monastery in Dumfries, Scotland explains that ‘Nessie is a naga. We build the relationship with the naga, try to please them and don’t abuse the environment. If Nessie is treated well she will bring prosperity’ (The Scotsman, 2014).
- Joshua Cutchin has suggested that Bigfoot might best be understood as a sort of wilderness poltergeist (*wildnisgeist*), owing to frequent reports of disembodied voices, stone throwing, rapping, orbs of light, and so on in Bigfoot encounters (Cutchin, 2018; Cutchin & Renner, 2020).



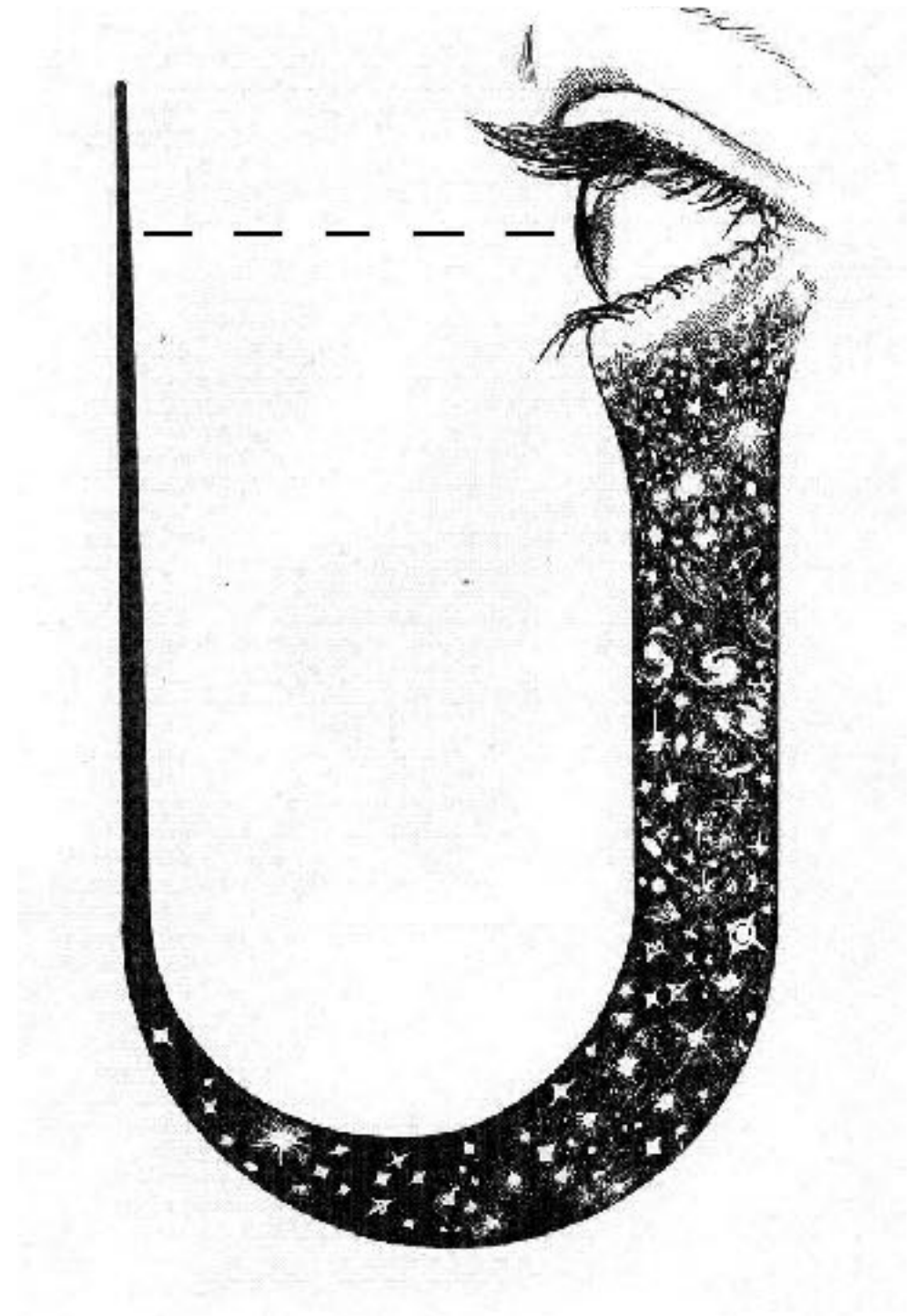
Magical Animals

- Holmes *et al.* argue that the folklore and traditions surround magical animals can have both positive and negative impacts on conservation efforts.
- Both ‘mythical animals not recognized by science and extant animals that are recognised by science but have magical properties.’
- “...magical animals can have positive and negative consequences for conservation, and...the relationship between magical animals, human beliefs and behaviour, and extant biodiversity is complex...we argue that conservation needs to interrogate the interaction of magical animals, extant animals and biodiversity conservation goals...It should see these animals as part of broader systems, be it of cultures, rationalities or belief systems, and acknowledge that beliefs and values around magical animals are dynamic...Ultimately, by understanding human interactions with magical animals, conservation could create successful coexistence between humans and non-humans...” (Holmes, Smith & Ward, 2017, p. 237).



Feedback Loop

- There is a correlation between **interacting** with the natural world (whether through observation of ecosystems, or the practical tending of gardens) and **extraordinary experience** (feelings of connectedness to nature, communication with plants and animals, and so on).
- “Anthropologists have carefully explored the importance of non-scientific ways of knowing, particularly with regard to understanding and engaging people about climate and conservation ... the subtle power of dowsing, I argue, lies in more than mere illusion and bias; rather, its power comes in part from the strength of engaging bodily and pragmatically with one’s surroundings...” (Woolley, 2018, p. 25).



Conclusions

- ‘Paranormal’ is a scientific term that can be reclaimed.
- Paranormal experiences need to be understood in their ecological context - emotional, social, cultural, physiological, biological, etc...
- They are characterised by High Strangeness and Trickster properties.
- There are many green strands within the paranormal, e.g. the fruits of paranormal experiences encourage a greater sense of connection to the cosmos.
- Ideas that emerge from paranormal research, e.g. nature spirits, super-minds, window areas resonate with ideas from ecology, sacred geography, etc.
- Understanding the role of engagement with non-humans, e.g. through magical animals, and place, can help to promote and understand the processes of nature connection.

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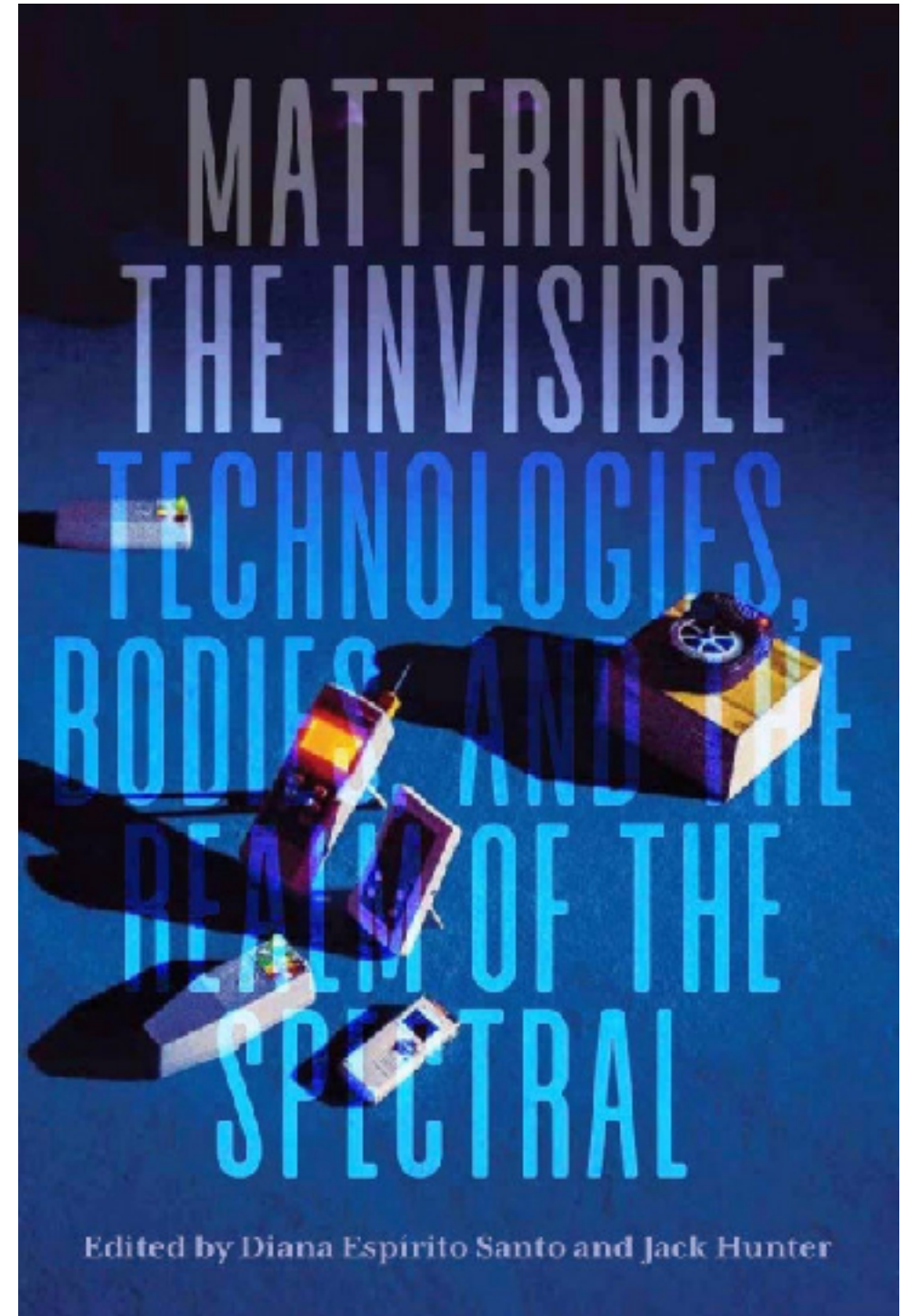
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Ecology and Spirituality: Mattering the Invisible

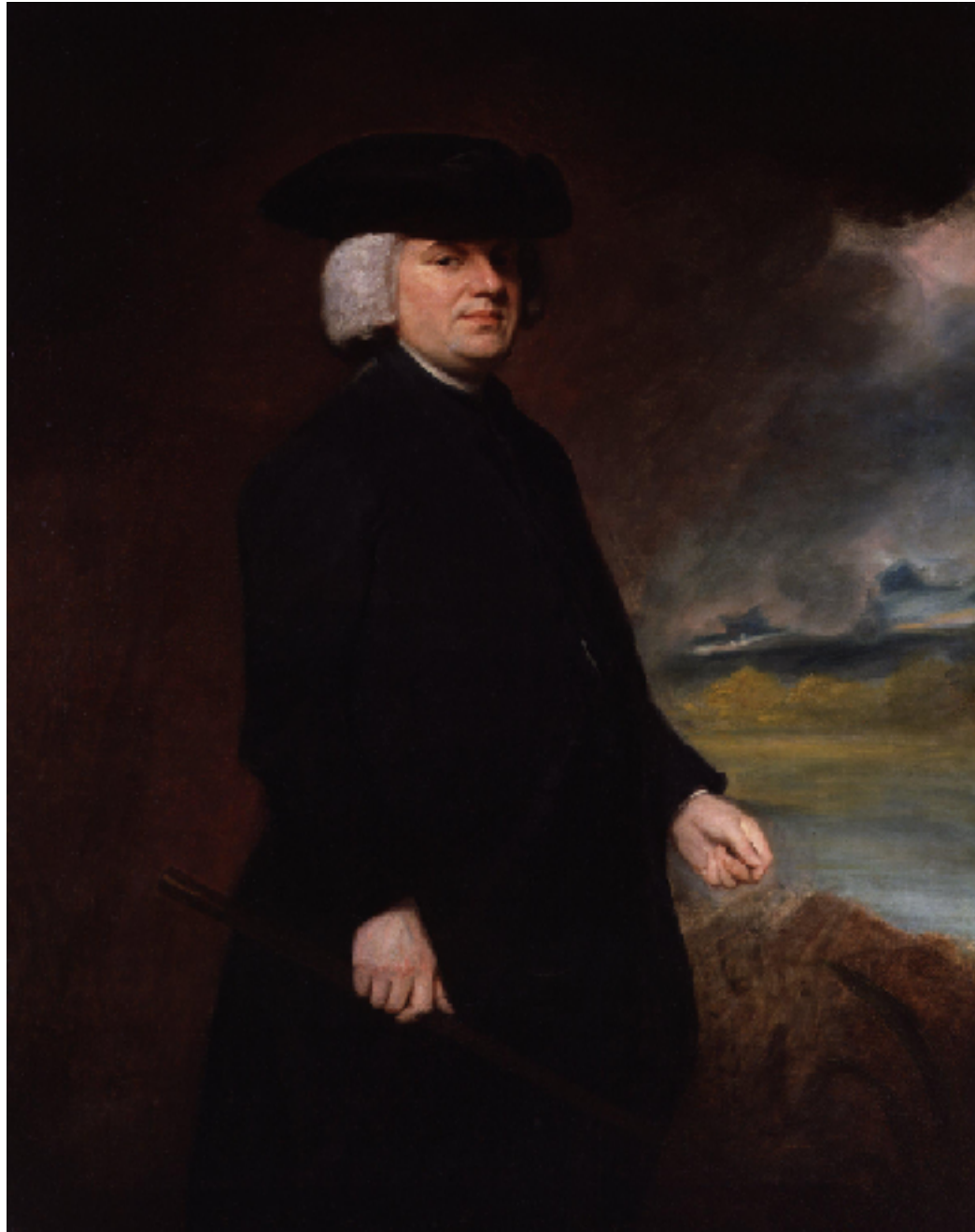


Where Mediums and Mushrooms Meet

- Drawing on ideas from my chapter 'Organicism and Psychical Research: Where Mediums and Mushrooms Meet.'
- Looking at my own fieldwork experiences with spirit mediumship and applying organic models to understanding what was going on.



Palley vs. Hume



William Paley
(1743-1805)



David Hume
(1711-1776)

Is the world a vegetable?

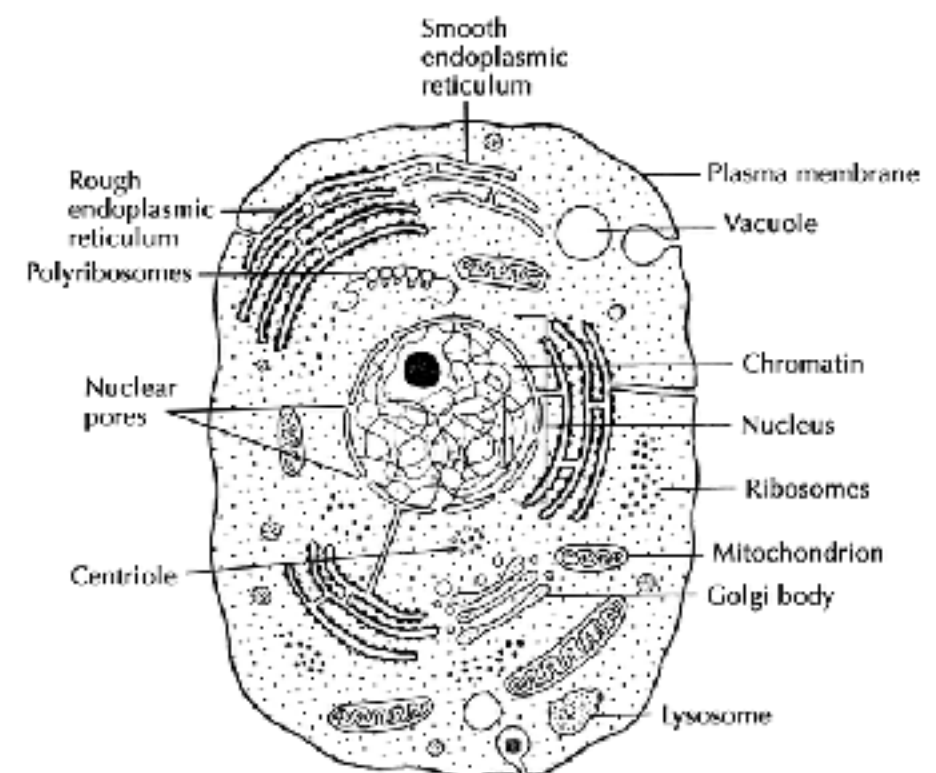
- “The world plainly resembles more an animal or a vegetable than it does a watch or a knitting-loom. Its cause, therefore, it is more probable, resembles the cause of the former. The cause of the former is generation or vegetation. The cause, therefore, of the world, we may infer to be something analogous to generation or vegetation” (David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part VII).



Mechanism and Organicism

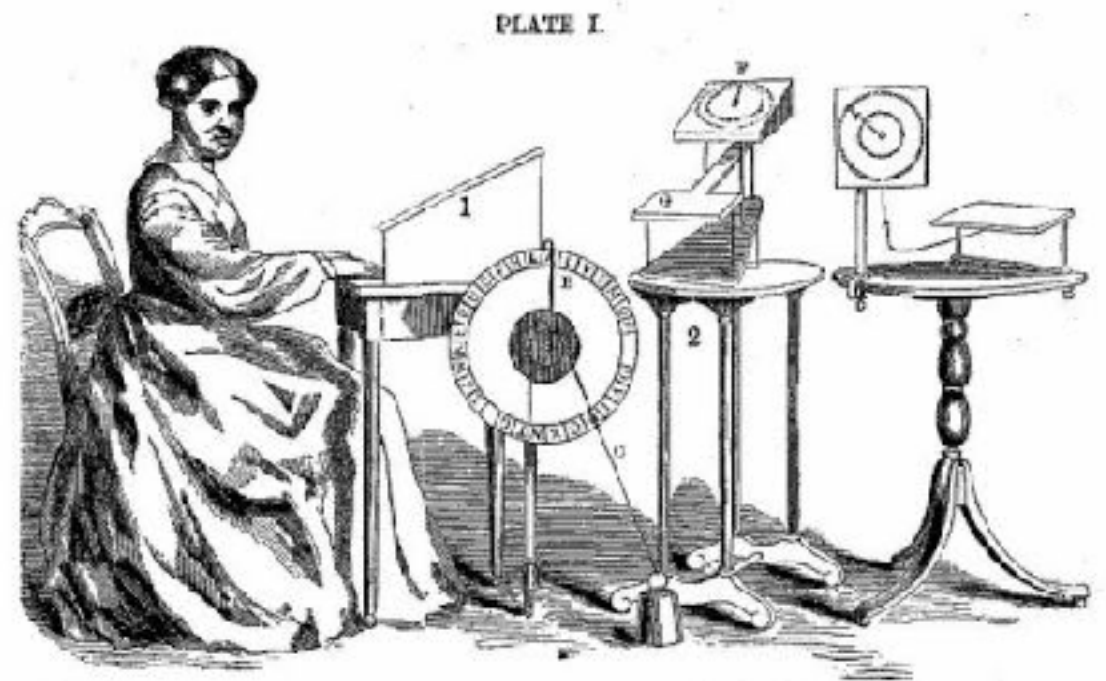
- Mechanistic view is epitomised by materialism and reductionism.
- Organicism:

“This philosophy denies that everything in the universe can be explained from the bottom up, as it were, in terms of the properties of subatomic particles, or atoms, or even molecules. Rather, it recognises the existence of hierarchically organised systems which, at each level of complexity, possess properties that cannot be fully understood in terms of the properties exhibited by their parts in isolation from each other; at each level the whole is more than the sum of its parts” (Sheldrake, 2009, p. 26).



Mechanism in Psychical Research

- Spiritualists, psychical researchers and parapsychologists have employed technological metaphors to understand paranormal phenomena—such as the notion of the ‘spiritual telegraph,’ for example, or the brain as a ‘receiver’ of consciousness and spirits (especially amongst researchers of psychics and mediums)
- They have borrowed models from the queen of the ‘hard sciences’—physics (forces, fields, waves and rays, for example, cf. Natale 2011).
- Other researchers have taken their inspiration from organismic and biological models in their efforts to ‘matter the paranormal’ through the language and concepts of science.



Organicism in Psychical Research

- Charles Richet (1859-1935) - received the Nobel prize for his work in physiology. Introduces terms from biology into psychical research - ectoplasm, pseudopods, etc.
- Hans Driesch (1867-1941) - German vitalist biologist, research on embryology. Saw paranormal abilities as 'super-extended' physiological processes, e.g.

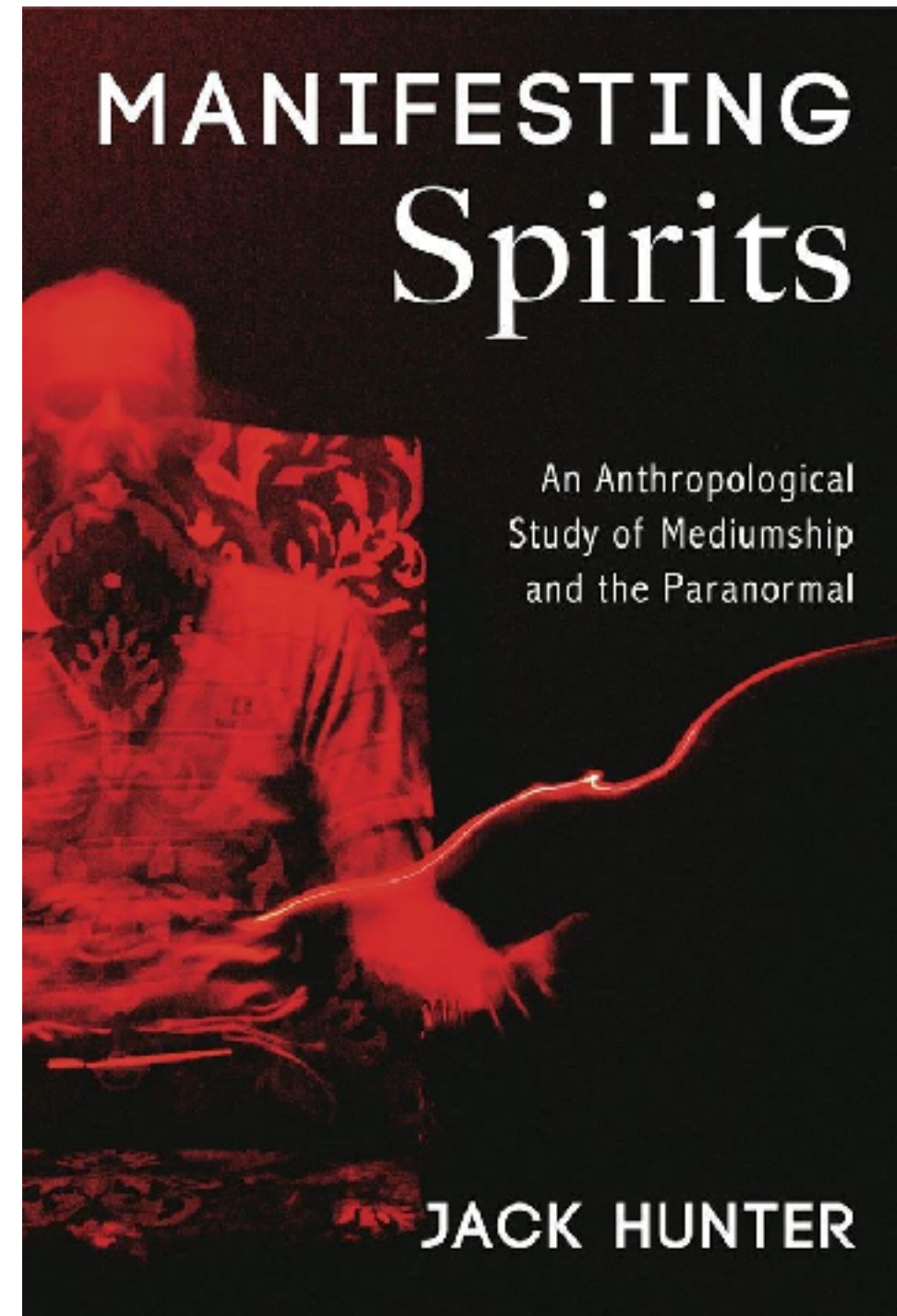
““In fact, normal organisatory and constructive assimilation, as it appears, for instance, in regeneration, would have to be amplified only in regard to its effects ('small' and 'big' are always relative notions). Materialisation would at the same time be a supernormal embryology” (Driesch, 1933, p. 119).

- Rupert Sheldrake - Cambridge biologist, work on morphogenetic fields to help understand the process of morphic development (amongst other things).



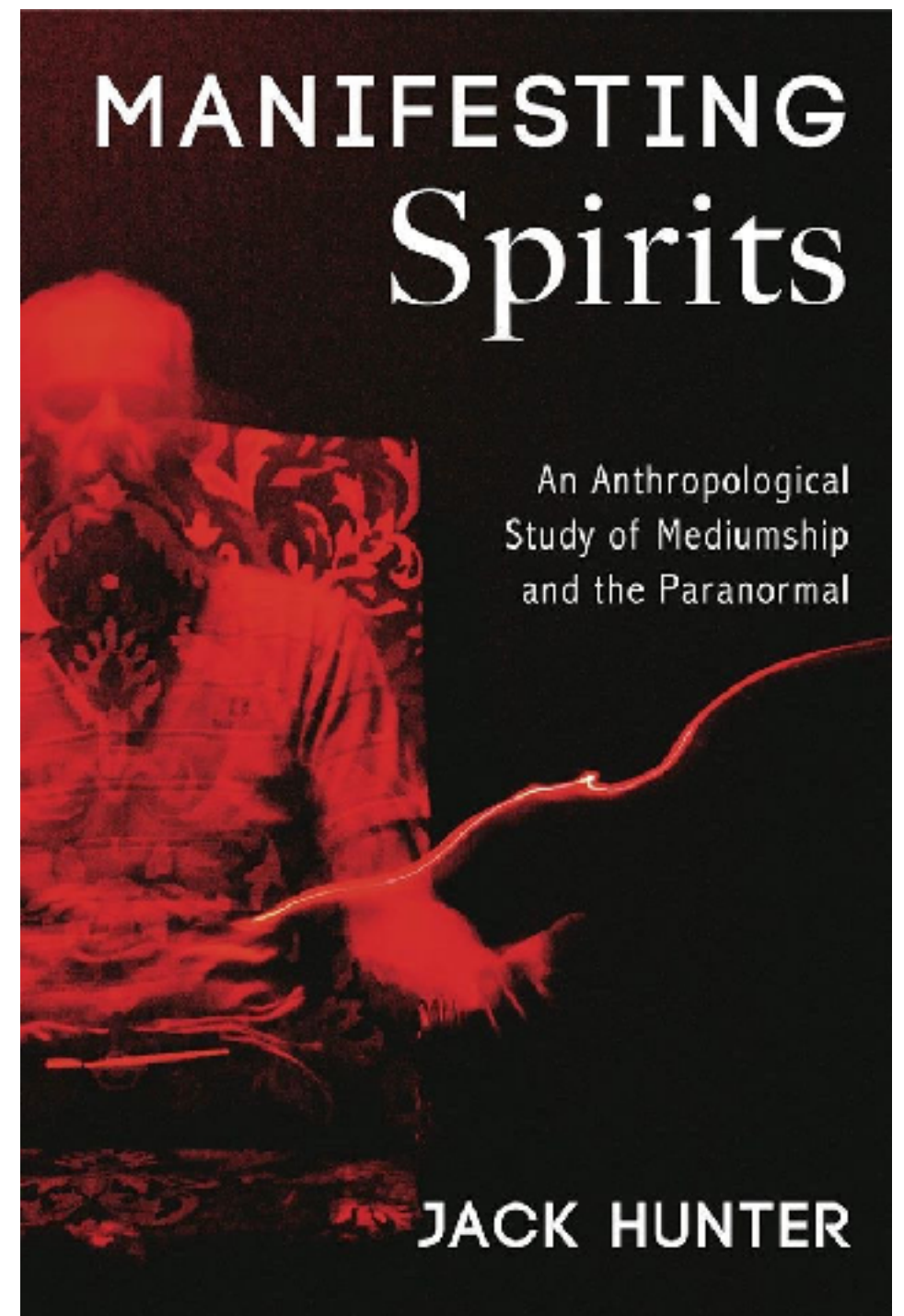
Applying Organic Principles

- My experience of mediumship did not match with the reductive mechanistic idea of the medium as a receiver.
- It was not as if the medium tuned in to a distinct entity, but much more like a gradual process of nurturing and development.
- Similar to Bird-David's account of the Nayaka (Bird-David, 1999, p. 76).
- "I will confess that perhaps my main interest in ecology is the conviction that this science of inter-relationships of animals and their environment will eventually have a reaction for the benefit of [humankind]...I believe that one of the great contributions of biology this century will be the working out of ecological principles that can be applied to human affairs: the establishment of an ecological outlook" (Hardy, 1966, p. 24).



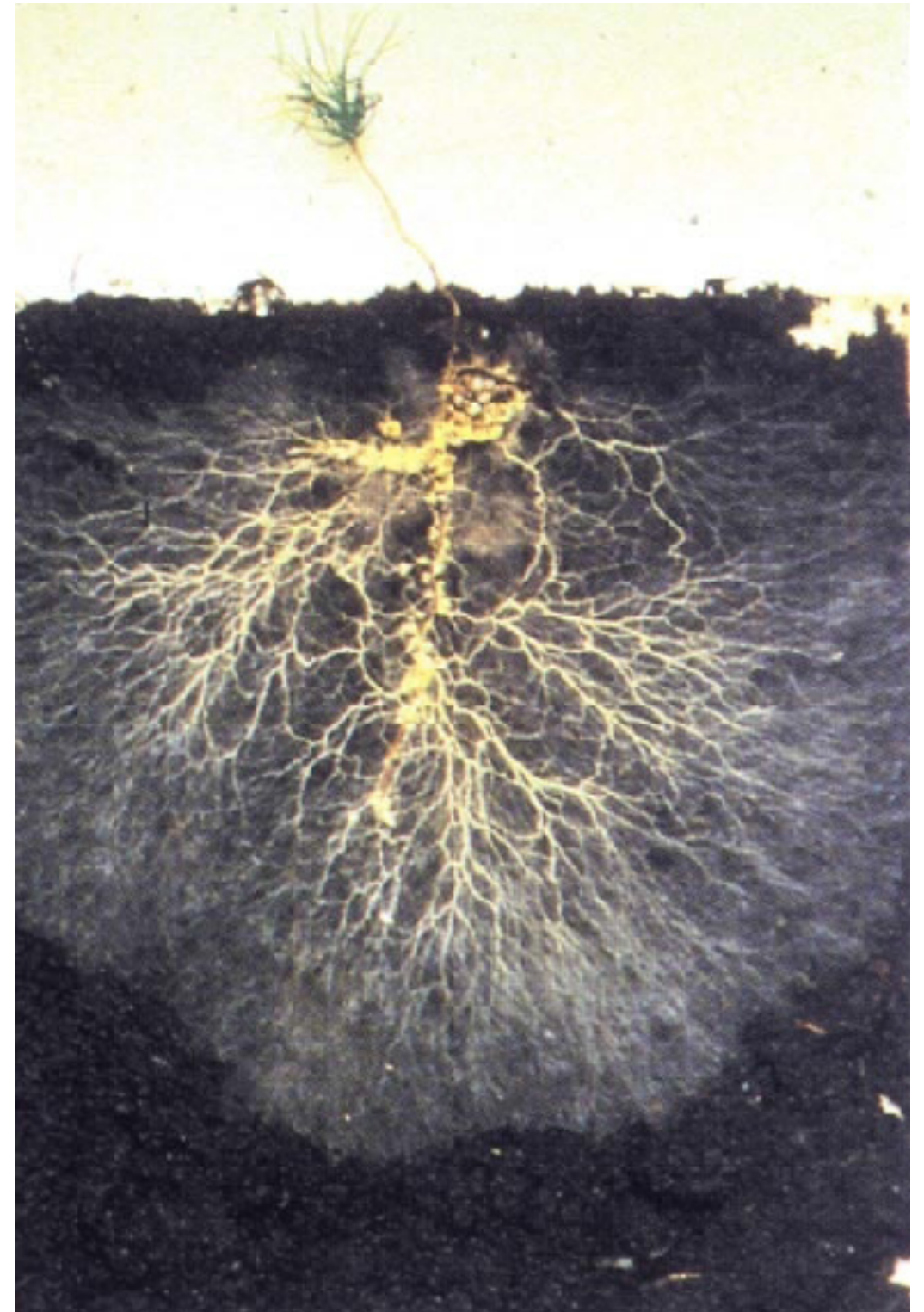
Process

- Growth, development and process are features of all living things - from the micro to the macro.
- Rather than adopt a technological model of mediumship, why not think in terms of organic processes, such as growth.
- Edith Turner makes interesting use of the idea of 'calving' or 'birth' in her discussion of the *Ihamba* ritual, during which she experienced the extraction of a malignant spirit from an afflicted patient.
- "And just then, through my tears, the central figure swayed deeply: all leaned forward, this was indeed going to be it. I realised along with them that something was now going to be born. Then a certain palpable social integument broke and something calved along with me. I felt the spiritual motion, a tangible feeling of breakthrough going through the whole group" (Turner, 1998, p. 149).



Symbiosis

- Lynn Margulis (1938-2011) - co-creator of the Gaia Hypothesis with James Lovelock - suggested that symbiosis and collaboration of fundamental organic principles.
- Mycorrhizal fungi are a great example - symbiotic relationship between plants and fungi.
- The mycorrhizal network is a liminal entity - between fungus and root system.
- What if we apply these ideas to classically problematic issues such as the mind/body relationship?
- What about in the context of mediumship practices, etc?



Systems and Complexity

- Systems are one of the key concepts to emerge from ecological science - the ecosystem.
- Consist of the relationships between living organisms, and between organisms and the non-living environment.
- Ecosystems tend towards increased complexity through succession.
- Ecosystems are more than the sum of their parts.
- The mediumship demonstration is more than the sum of its parts - a complex system.
- Mediumship experiences and phenomena occur within a matrix of different processes - physiological, psychological, social, cultural, transpersonal, psi, etc.
- It cannot be satisfactorily reduced to any of its constituent parts.



Conclusions

- Research on parapsychological phenomena and experiences has tended towards reductive and mechanistic models and explanations.
- Organicist models may provide holistic alternatives that can shed new light on old problems.
- Thinking of mediumship (for example), in terms of process, symbiosis and systems opens up new avenues for investigation.

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