

# ENTERING FAERIE

## Elves, Ancestors & Imagination

James Warren Maertens, Ph.D.

*Alferian Gwydion MacLir*

THE ORDER OF BARDS OVATES & DRUIDS  
MOUNT HAEMUS LECTURE FOR THE YEAR 2007

## THE MOUNT HAEMUS AWARD

**William Stukeley was an antiquarian much in the mould of John Aubrey. Stukeley too made field trips to Avebury and Stonehenge and made surveys and drawings of both sites. He agreed with Aubrey on the Druidic nature of megalithic monuments. However, public interest in Druidry had waned and Stukeley found it difficult to find publishers for his writings. Instead, he took holy orders and became a clergyman. Once settled into his parish, his ideas regarding Druidry became increasingly eccentric. He had the vicarage garden redesigned in his idea of a Druid grove complete with megalithic folly, he began to expound Druidic principles from the pulpit of his church and he started to sign letters "Chyndonax, Druid of Mount Haemus."**

Philip Shallcrass, *A Little History of Druidry*

Travel and history are the two great teachers of Space and of Time that give our lives context: breadth and depth, substance and roots. History offers us not only the possibility of understanding the causes of present-day situations, but also a gift which at first may seem nebulous, but which is in fact essential for a truly satisfactory experience of being alive in the world: and that is a sense of context. Without context we are lost – doomed to misunderstanding and superficiality.

History understood in its broadest sense, to include an appreciation of the world of culture and the arts, plays a vital part in contemporary Druidry and thanks to the generosity of the Order's patroness, the Order grants each year a substantial award for scholarly research in Druidism. We have called this scholarship the Mount Haemus Award, after the apocryphal Druid grove of Mt Haemus that was said to have been established near Oxford in 1245.

Philip Carr-Gomm

Chosen Chief

The Order of Bards Ovates & Druids

Alban Hefin 2007

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## **Abstract**

Elves and Faerie folk are alive and well in modern culture, especially among the culture of magical folk and those pursuing a nature spirituality, but also most obviously in children's literature. Fictional representations of the Hidden People are drawing more and more on the study of folklore and actual present-day accounts of "meeting the Other Crowd." Rejecting the term "supernatural" and the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity, I consider the reality of the Sidhe as something that is part of Nature and part of the human psyche at the same time. Modern Druids must walk a fine line between the study of old folklore and the creation of new folklore. How do we live in a culture of scientific materialism and yet challenge the dominant knowledge paradigm? Looking at both fiction and non-fiction, I suggest a middle way between credulity and skepticism that posits the power of imagination as central to perception, and perceptions of the Faerie realms as manifest in many ways. However we commune with the Faerie realms, we do well to recognize the importance to our Ancestors of magical beings as integral parts of their world.

## **First, a Few Words**

Before beginning this lecture proper, I must thank OBOD's Chosen Chief, Philip Carr-Gomm for inviting me to write and deliver these thoughts. It is a great honor to be included among the luminaries who have written the previous Mt. Haemus Lectures. This essay into Faerie holds out all the glamour of that hidden world, and so I think it only appropriate that I begin in the dullest way possible by defining some terms. Trained as an English professor and employed in various capacities as a wordsmith, it should come as no surprise that I start with words themselves. Words are the tools we use to craft reality.

### *Faith and Reason*

The world of our Ancestors was a world in which the realm of Faerie was always just around the bend. Faith and Reason were not in conflict for our Ancestors, but in the past few generations, the tensions have increased between cultural notions of what is rational and a faith in personal experiences with Otherworld beings. Faerie highways and hills still are given respect by those in the know, and folklore materials documenting experiences with Fairies have been collected throughout the twentieth century in Britain, Scotland, Ireland and in North America. Yet, folklorists suggest that the Fairy Faith is a dying belief system, based more in traditional storytelling than in actual experiences. The traditional storytellers and their sessions losing in the competition with television and radio, a culture educated into scientific materialism and positivism can only categorize such stories as "fiction." Belief in Fairies is presumed, by the dominant culture led by orthodox academia, to be a thing of childhood or so-called "primitive" societies operating without the benefit of adult reason or methods of empirical validation. Note in this characterization the central rhetorical trope: Science is adult while belief in spirits is childish.

Despite this view, it is interesting to note that within druid and pagan circles the same time period during which such pre-scientific beliefs are supposed to have diminished has seen an upsurge of books about practices involving the folk of Faerie. There is a segment of society, druids among them, who openly embrace belief in the realm of Faerie and often claim to have experienced otherwise inexplicable encounters with this "Otherworld." Such adult believers are neither children nor members of a primitive society. Theirs is belief, but not a naïve belief. At least not always. Instead of credulity, we find active imagination.

Druids in orders such as OBOD work intentionally with the beings of Faerie through meditation and inward journeys. There are branches of Wicca and other neopagan paths devoted to such work as well, using the term "Fairy" or not. Devas, nature spirits, the spirit of Dana or the land itself – all point to the same active imagination of a broader sort of Nature (e.g., Findhorn, McEowan, Stepanich). Few, I suspect, among those who believe in Faerie folk would say they believe in supernaturalism. Science has made "supernatural" a dirty word and the expanding mysteries of Nature revealed by physicists and cosmologists leaves the term rather limp. Nature herself is so "super" that one can imagine almost anything circumscribed within the bounds of her being. The idea is not altogether bad,

however, because as long as science insists on reducing everything to the explained, "natural" carries connotations that are not well-suited to Faerie. It might be better to consider that Faerie is part of a layered nature, in which different layers operate with different expectations of predictability and even different physical rules.

The Church, for many centuries, insisted on a separate category of phenomena that were "supernatural" mainly because Christianity was philosophically based on a separation of God and Nature, Heaven and Earth. Modern pagan and druidic philosophy and beliefs are, by contrast, based on the Hermetic principle of "as above, so below" which at its heart explodes the dichotomy between "above" and "below." Indeed, it explodes the hierarchical view of the cosmos itself and points towards circles, spirals, or what the physicists call a holographic universe in which every part reflects and contains the whole. This is important because it removes the belief that all beings are either subject to God or the Devil and it removes the notion of the Great Chain of Being, leading from God downwards through angels and Men to lower forms of life.

There are still vestiges of this philosophical idea in modern science which continues to feel the need to describe non-human entities in terms of superiority and inferiority, but this bias is clearly breaking down among zoologists as it is among anthropologists. There are vestiges as well in today's paganism in which the upper, middle, and lower worlds are arranged hierarchically on the World-Tree. However, in the Celtic cosmos, and probably the original Norse cosmos, these three worlds were not considered to be in hierarchic relationship in the sense later Christianity imposed. The Celts represented the worlds as concentric circles and the vertical dimension connecting sky, land, and sea, but did not separate them hierarchically or divide them into "nature" and "the supernatural". The Divine is immanent and omnipresent in nature, and wonders are a part of it.

To reject the artificial division of the cosmos into natural and supernatural parts is to move towards common sense and holistic thought. A similar common-sensical turn in today's Faerie lore is reflected in the expression "working with Faerie folk." The phrase may sound odd to some of you, and the term deserves a moment of scrutiny. In the old tales that have come down to us encounters with the Hidden People were seldom characterized by cooperation and never uncomplicated by strange consequences. Even conversation is often missing. *The Secret Commonwealth* of Reverend Kirk is one notable exception in which the contact is sustained and

informative, not surprising and fleeting. Often the human person encountering persons from the Otherworld was startled or frightened by the experience. The encounters often involved marriages or love affairs that lead to ultimately bittersweet results, or abductions of either children or adults. The idea of actively seeking out the Fair Folk and trying to learn from them or cooperate with them in magical actions might seem like folly. Most of the traditional stories lay stress on not interfering with the Shue. This new willingness to actively engage with the Hidden People is the mark of how times have changed and how a culture of new pagans have adopted a very proactive and positive view of the Otherworlds. There is a sense of cooperation that has not perhaps been seen since the time of Cuchullain, and much of this is due, I believe, to the stories published by Professor Tolkien and, after his death, by his son Christopher Tolkien. In these tales, we see the Elves and even the Dwarves as allies with mortal humans in the struggles with the forces of evil and destruction.

Reason and Faith, Nature and Supernature: Such oppositions ultimately need to be deconstructed. Definitions help us to understand what we are talking about, but oppositional definitions are not suitable for our time. The deconstructionist philosophers have pointed critically toward the tendency of Western thought to create polarized concepts rather than to look at what is really there. Jungian psychology has further laid the emphasis on the reconciliation of opposites as the fundamental method of individuation or psychic wholeness. We live in a Holistic age.

### *Fairies*

Two other terms which must inevitably be defined in discussions such as this are the word "Fairies" (spelled variously) and the term "Otherworlds." When addressing an audience of druids, one might take the risk of assuming that everyone understands these terms, but they are, in the broader culture, full of varying connotations. "Fairies" for example (spelled with an "ai" in the middle) has given way to "Faeries" (spelled with an "ae") for much the same reason as magick is often spelled with a "k" at the end. The more archaic spelling is used to indicate that one means serious beings from another world parallel to our own, rather than the tiny winged creatures depicted by Cecily Mary Barker or J. M. Barrie.

According to Carole Silver in her study *Strange & Secret Peoples*, a major transformation of Faerie lore occurred during the Victorian and Edwardian eras. Our great-grandparents saw the emergence of the Golden Age of Children's Literature, in

which "fairies" underwent a process of diminution and marginalization – separated from adult life and relegated to the nursery. Says Silver:

“As the elfin peoples became staples of children's literature, the perception grew that they themselves were childish and that interest and belief in them befitted children only. Some of the tales ... made the fairies tiny and harmless ... fairies were conflated with angels or further miniaturized into toys. In addition, fairies and witches were increasingly polarized: fairies grew purely good and sprouted wings, losing their demonic energy and power.” (187)

J. M. Barrie, in *Peter Pan*, drew a close association between fairies and children, suggesting that fairies were actually created by the laughter of babies. (Silver 188). Walt Disney solidified these associations and diminutive images in the collective consciousness of the West. Silver notes several dynamics in this historical process. First, the proliferation of fairy-tales for children swamped the genuine, non-literary tales of the Shue and the Hidden Folk. The fairies couldn't stand under all the attention. Second, the firm association of fairies with childhood made it increasingly difficult for adults to admit to themselves or others that they had experienced contact with the Faerie world. Finally, the process of shrinking the beings of Faeries and giving them wings was part of a growing literalization of them. If they were so elusive, they must be tiny. If they could fly, they must have wings. As odd as it may sound, these modifications of the Faery traditions were an attempt to make them more believable to scientifically influenced minds. The new generation of children educated to accept the scientific view of the world had to have some plausible literal explanation for how fairies could fly or how they could go unseen.

The scientific mentality introduced two other tendencies operating seemingly in opposite directions. One was the tendency to call all manner of beings "fairies" homogenizing them into a single race. The other was the tendency to classify and name them, as if they were literal, actual creatures subject to the sort of binomial nomenclature Carlus Linnaeus applied to organize and subdue the natural world. "Fairies" became a sort of generalized term, a Genus, of which there were many species. However valid such classifications are to the student of folk lore, Silver is right to say that attempts to deal with the Hidden peoples scientifically in the early twentieth century went awry. Central to this historical moment was the well-known episode of the Cottingley fairy photographs and their defence by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, whom the public associated with his fictional character, the super-rational

Sherlock Holmes. As Silver puts it: "the tendency to render the elfin peoples material and/or scientific inadvertently diminished their importance" (185). The shift we see is simultaneously a shift from the world of adults to that of children, and a shift from the world of legend and myth to a world ruled by science and its premises.

The denizens of Faerie (and here I am using the word spelled with an "ae" to indicate their realm) -- these denizens are indeed multiform, but they are also protean and defy classification. One has only to open Katherine Briggs' *Dictionary of Fairies* or any number of other such encyclopedic guides to see that there are many different kinds of beings who are all rather lumped together with the term "Fairies." Recent children's books such as the *Spiderwyck Chronicles* and the Harry Potter books have attempted to create "field guides" to the "magical beasts" and the fairy folk.

It is worth noting that the word "fairy" itself is derogatory and traditionally no one with any sense would address a person from the Otherworld as a "Fairy" spelled in any way. It is a somewhat dismissive abbreviation for Fair Folk, one of the polite euphemisms for people from the Otherworlds who are not one's dead ancestors. That is to say, those beings of Faerie who are not human. It is much as if in more modern English we were to refer to emissaries from a noble court as "Blondies."

For this reason, I prefer to avoid the term "fairy" however convenient, and instead use the more general and respectful, if not as short, "denizens of Faerie" or the Germanic term, the Hidden Folk (*Hulderfolk* in Swedish). My own experiences are principally connected to various kinds of Elves and Dwarves and while the latter name (Dwarves) is, again, potentially derogatory, it is at least descriptive of relative size, in the same way that "Giants" is. The term "Elves" too carries the unfortunate risk of conjuring images of Santa's little helpers in their toy factories at the North Pole, but perhaps less risk since Professor Tolkien's work has become so well known. I hope that the Good People will not be offended by my generalizing about them with such human terms as a convenience.

Recent authors, not least among them John Matthews, have resorted to the Irish word "Sidhe" but that too is a euphemism and abbreviation of "Shee-folk," meaning the people of the hollow hills, which is the literal meaning of the Irish word "sidhe." It seems to me that what we really need to do is talk to our otherworldly friends and learn a bit of their languages, rather than resort to these traditional vague or derogatory names. That's a tall order, of course, but it is, after all, how we would approach getting to know any foreign people in another land.

### *Otherworlds*

With that thought, let me turn to the term "Otherworlds." I often use the plural form, though even when used in the singular it is quite clear from old legends and bardic voyage tales – the *immrama* – that there are many "worlds" or "lands" included in that realm. Its primary characteristic is that it is described as what we would call today a "parallel universe." It seems to occupy the same space as our universe, or "world," yet is invisible and inaccessible to people in the ordinary way of things. The concept of a parallel universe is quite new and has proved useful to people interested in understanding the phenomenal reality of the Otherworlds. It is another way to distance our discourse from the separation of "natural" and "supernatural" worlds.

David Abram, in his book *Spell of the Sensuous*, argues that the Otherworld and non-human beings are intimately connected to this world, to the land, trees, plants, and animals around us. Not, he notes, in a vague, general or abstract way, but in a very particular relationship between the storyteller and his or her land. Abram explores the idea that the adoption of literacy, the abstraction of the land into written words printed with an alphabet, marks a shift in perception which disconnects human consciousness from the land, and so from the Otherworld. I find Abram's thesis particularly suggestive when one considers that the ancient druids seem to have deliberately avoided alphabetic writing in favor of an oral culture. Could this be the reason?

Patrick Harpur has explored the concept of "Daimonic Reality" in his study of the same title. He uses the term "daimonic" to refer to a world that exists between our ordinary idea of reality and the Mind of God. The daimons, which is the general term he chooses for the denizens of this liminal space, may appear as "fairies" as angels, or as aliens or UFOs. In all cases, Harpur argues, such beings partake of the world that bridges inner and outer. The Otherworld is at once "in our psyche" and "out there." The categorical distinction between these zones of reality is dissolved. I wonder if this dissolving of categories is what is meant when people speak of "the thinning of the veils" between worlds. It is not strictly an "outer" phenomenon, nor simply "inner" – say the result of the Sight -- rather it is the dissolving of the *mental categories* that separate our ideas of normal reality and the broader reality of the *Anima Mundi*, the World-Soul.

Quite a number of individuals have, over many centuries of human storytelling, claimed to cross over a kind of boundary from our world of normal reality to another world in which wonders occur. Among the wonders are encounters with strange cultures of apparently immortal beings, encounters with dead relatives or neighbors, banquets of uncanny sumptuousness, music and dancing with an uncanny quality, and, perhaps most notably, the passage of time in some inexplicable way so that people who enter Faerie and re-emerge into our ordinary world find that time has passed much more quickly here than there. Some, like Oisín, return and step back into the world they left, only to be reduced to old age and death. John Matthews in his firsthand account, *The Sidhe*, records extensive interviews with one of the denizens of Faerie and comments upon the irregular quality of Time in that realm and the fluidity of inner and outer realities.

Whatever else is going on in this daimonic reality, it seems quite clear that journeys in the Faerie Realm call into question our modern Western notion of Time as a thing in itself that is regular. We have, since the dawn of science and its love of mechanisms, formed our ideas of Time around clocks. It seems to me that this commonly held notion that time "flows" at a steady rate, or "flows" at all is a mistake. Like "outer world" and "inner reality," "Time" is an invented concept. Although the concept has become reified into a "thing" that scientists talk about all the time, it is one of the first of the "mind-forged manacles" that we have to cast off if we are to understand and participate in the Otherworlds and recover the consciousness of our ancient Ancestors.

Physicists have long relied on the idea of Time and it certainly has its uses. But clocks set up an arbitrary, regular measurement of change. *Change* exists in reality; *Time* is simply a concept empiricists employ to measure change. And, as we all know today, the physicists of the last century have been increasingly puzzled by the fact that change does not conform to the notion of clock time. The Elves could have told them that long ago, had they bothered to ask.

Now, having said that, I feel I must interrupt myself to say that you are at perfect liberty to regard my own Elvish sources of information with skepticism. I do so myself, but I cannot disregard them altogether. I call my daimons Elves and they take that form, not in a conventional or archetypal way alone, but in considerable personal detail. Harpur tends to emphasize the "impersonal" quality of daimons, by which he means that they are not simply figments of the imagination of an individual

person. They partake of some power of collective imagination for their appearances. This is how Harpur argues that UFO aliens are essentially the old fairies and angels of an earlier age in modern dress.<sup>1</sup> My own Elvish friends have shared much of their history and language, their customs and even their biology, so they are not easy for me to reduce to the category of archetypes or even "spirits."<sup>2</sup> Though they have told me they inhabit different planets and stars, and travel among them, they do not employ flying saucers or rockets and their technology is beyond understanding in our current terms. I am encouraged to be this open about my own connections after reading John Matthews' book laying out his experiences. I found myself nodding my head when reading *The Sidhe* when the author's unnamed contact described his own existence in much the same terms as our own, but removed in a way that permitted communication only through visionary presence, not the ordinary five senses. This accords with my own experience and what Mr. Matthews' contact told him rings true with many of the things I have learned from the Elves.

My Elfin sources have explained to me that the Otherworlds alluded to in story and legend are not always a hidden dimension of our own world. The dimension that is hidden can exist in the same landscape but as an alternative reality, often untouched by changes which have occurred in our world. It is hard to translate what this means exactly, but the sense I have is that for every place on Earth normally visible to us, there are, across the doorways of perception, the same lands in different form. For example, the place where I live is an urban neighborhood now, filled with a grid pattern of streets and houses. In another dimension that I have been shown on occasion, there live Elves in this land in a state closer to nature, or at any rate without the large population of houses and apartment buildings that spoil the view of the hills and lakes. That world is essentially the same landscape as my own with different inhabitants and preserved by those inhabitants in a way quite alien to our civilization. It is notable, however, that in the Elvish place and time Native American men and

<sup>1</sup> On the similarities between fairies and UFO's see also Rojcewicz. "Between One Eye Blink and the Next."

<sup>2</sup> The term "spirits" needs another whole lecture for its definition. There is hardly a more troublesome word in the field of esoteric studies. "Spirits" is so overcharged with religious connotations and the now quite fuzzy layers of classical and medieval philosophy that I hardly dare bring up the subject. Suffice to say that I do not consider the denizens of Faerie to be "spirits" in the sense of disembodied beings or beings with bodies made of air. Perhaps it would be simplest to say that I consider them to be "spirits" in the same way we are.

women still live in their traditional ways too, undisturbed by the invasion of Europeans that lies 200 years in the past of my own world. Is this merely "imagination" and wishful thinking? The real question is whether the dichotomizing categories suggested by those terms adequately explain the facts. I would ask you to entertain the idea that imagination and wishful thinking are forms of reality and vision into Otherworld dimensions. Not always, perhaps, but I suspect more often than not.

Alternatively, some of the Otherworlds that are accessible through an awakened perception, are indeed entirely different planets. I have myself been told as much and seen the differences in the stars at night and the different qualities of light, air, gravity, and other astrophysical features of these places. Are they "really" glimpses of actual other planets? Obviously, I have no way of verifying the claim. Such Otherworlds may exist in much the same way in relation to other material planets as they do to ours; which is to say, they are "hidden" by being in a particular other dimension relative to ours, but I believe that the hidden aspect of these Otherworlds is due to their occupying different temporal coordinates, as it were, in relation to an observer, not in their being less material. One of my OBOD tutors, Vivienne Manouge, has published her own firsthand accounts of "fairies" who came from the Moon, that is, our own Luna. If the theory of alternative dimensions to material bodies is accepted this could reconcile the apparent contradiction between the airless, desolate Moon of science and the populated, living, Moon of Faerie. In other words, a wasteland may still be, in the Faerie dimension, a pastoral garden or lush wilderness. What the eye of science perceives as a mere rock in space, may have an atmosphere and life of its own in Faerie, where the laws of physics are regularly disregarded. Next time we send a druid to the Moon we can test that hypothesis.

### ***Space Enough and Time***

Which brings me back to the problem of Time and Space and multiple dimensions. Physicists have been trying to explain these aspects of the cosmos through materialist theories but what the Elves make clear is that we also need to explain Cosmos in terms of *Consciousness*. What is the relationship between the Mind and those realities we describe as Time and Space? It seems clear from human experience of Otherworlds that the Mind exists between the categories of Time and Space, as it were, so that the Mind and imagination afford a doorway into those many

worlds. It is also quite clear that we lack the words and concepts with which to accurately express these dimensions and the communication among them.

Carl Jung, the eminent Swiss psychologist, suggested the term "psychic" or *psychoid* reality as a way of expressing that the psyche is not confined within the boundaries of our material bodies.<sup>3</sup> A psychoid reality appears to be external to us, but is somehow connected to our inner world as well, because its manifestations are not completely objective. Harpur takes Jung a step further suggesting that the phrase *Anima Mundi* be used to identify this world that is both "inside" and "outside." We are in fact inside the Anima Mundi and all our realities, whether objective, subjective, or psychoid are part of that larger structure. The Anima Mundi is also inside us. Harpur cautions against taking the daimonic reality literally, by which he means that we err if we literally *believe* and also if we literally *disbelieve*. Ufologists who insist that UFO's are either literally as real as Oxford University, or else must be debunked as illusions or hallucinations of some sort, are falling into this either-or logical trap. The daimonic Otherworld is a world of both-and. In the end, it is This World.

### ***Elves and the Elfin***

Let me end my string of definitions by saying a bit more about how I use the term Elf. The particular denizens of the Otherworlds whom I regularly consult, and who regularly interfere in my life, are Elves. The word "elf" comes to us from Old English *aelf* and Old Norse *alfr*, which, I have on good authority, is actually a word that the Elves use to describe themselves – or very close to it. The word they use is *Alf*, the plural of which is *Alfer*, with an "e" but the question is somewhat academic as the Elves do not, of course, use the Roman alphabet and there are many dialectical variants in vowels. What does "Alfer" mean? Like most names by which peoples call themselves, it simply means "the folk" or perhaps even more simply, "Us." However, it is interesting the linguists have linked *aelf* and *alfr* to the Indo-European root *albho-* from which also springs *albus* and *albino*, meaning "white." It seems logical to me

<sup>3</sup> I confess my German is almost nonexistent so I have not attempted to read Jung in the original, which, I suspect, would illuminate some of these problems of terminology.

that the Fair Folk might refer to themselves this way, or that the word might have evolved from their pale and luminous appearance.<sup>4</sup>

Professor Tolkien, in his tantalizing writings about Elvish languages, tells us that they called themselves by many names. The most general is *Eldar*, signifying "people of the stars." The Elves of my acquaintance call themselves many names too, among which the most general is *Sarithin*, which may be literally translated "star-children." The significance of this name is given in terms of a very different legendary history than the one presented by Professor Tolkien for the Eldar. In his collection of legends, *The Silmarillion*, the Eldar are said to awaken in a dark world without sun or moon, only stars, and it is the light of the stars that they first see beside lake Cuivienen.

The name *Sarith* has been explained to me in terms of a history of travel through the stars on ships, a history of voyages between worlds. What we call "outer space" is called by the Sarithin *Morn-i-Sarion*, the Sea of Stars. They are fundamentally Airy people in many ways and they are in a sense more attached to the stars – the distant lights of other worlds – than they are to the earth and soil of a particular single planet, as we understand planets. They perceive planets rather differently than we do because their spiritual and temporal senses are keener. Where we see singularity and isolation in the void of space, they see interconnection and relationships - not separate organs, but systems.

Elves are not immaterial spirits. They are like us, spirits with material bodies, but they are immortal, meaning that the spirit emanates a body quite different from ours and exerts a great deal more control over its matter than human beings typically do. I will not go into more detail here, but my understanding is that the Sarithin change their form as part of their natural biological life-cycle and as they grow older instead of their physical bodies deteriorating as ours do, they become ever more able to transform their shape and take different forms.

## **Folklore and Belief**

<sup>4</sup> Compare, for example, the term "Shining Ones" employed in reference to the Irish Tuatha Dé Danann.

So, let us set definitions aside and look at folklore, myth, and legend. The traditional legends of the Norse and Celtic peoples preserve stories of beings called Alfar, Tuatha Dé Danann, Shining Ones, Hulder Folk - all of which designate a particular type of being who are to a degree "hidden." Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, the Scandinavian "Hulder Folk" literally means Hidden People. The name suggests one of the common characteristics of these beings, their ability to appear and disappear to normal human sight. Some traditions suggest that it is only humans with "the Sight" - a particular faculty of seeing the Otherworld dimension - who can see Elves and other denizens of Faerie. However, if this is true, it is evident that some people possess "the Sight" either temporarily or without being particularly aware of it, as encounters with these "invisible" persons or creatures are relatively rare. Thus two characteristics of the denizens of Faerie are (1) that they can appear and disappear in a way that is uncanny to human senses, and (2) their contacts with mortal humans are rare enough to make good stories around the fire.

We have stories from ancestors old and new and from our contemporaries, who have given us accounts of their communication and sightings of the Hidden People. In addition to older legends and romances, scholars have written down many oral accounts over the past two hundred years. Some of these are given as first-person accounts, some secondhand, and some as literary accounts that take the form of mythic or legendary narratives, or as fantasy literature. It is important to note that I do not consider any of these categories to be more true than others. One does not have to label one story true and another false, even if they contradict each other in many points. Nor do I privilege firsthand oral tales over literary creations. They are all stories created through the human imagination and only the authors of those stories can tell to what extent they believe themselves to have been inspired by communication with the denizens of Faerie. I suspect that many who write literary tales of the Otherworlds are in fact inspired by true visions of those worlds, whether they know it or not. The process of *Imbas* or inspiration is mysterious.

In general, there are at least two kinds of truth – demonstrable truth and imaginal truth. Harpur might call the latter daimonic truth, the truth of contrariness where the world is seen through a strange looking glass. Both kinds of truth are related to belief, which in turn is founded on cognitive frames.

Students of folklore have noted that there is often a kind of layered belief for those who are interviewed and who relate encounters with the denizens of Faerie. Some contemporary storytellers relate encounters and beliefs of a previous generation, and so distance themselves. The belief in little people who can appear and disappear and who can interact with human lives has been stigmatized, first by the demonization of such beings by Christian priests, and later by modern educational systems. Thus informants who recall the old stories and trust the veracity of others who told the stories, nevertheless are sometimes embarrassed to admit that such accounts have truth-value in the stark light of modern cosmology. (See for example: Butler and Bennett).

Academics who study Faerie lore treat it as an artifact of culture: The folklore narrative is accepted as a legitimate object of inquiry only when acknowledged to be not literally true. Put another way, stories of the Hidden Folk are legitimated among scholars, but the folk of Faerie themselves are not accepted as an object of study in themselves because they are presumed to be fictitious. The folk tale or account of strange events is treated only as an artifact that can give us insight into the way people think, not the way the cosmos is constructed. This treatment would be in contrast to the treatment of an eye-witness account of events that fell into the realm of normal experience. In such a case, corroboration would be necessary to label the utterance "true." In the case of Faerie encounters, just as in the case of UFO encounters and other "unexplained" phenomena, corroboration is not enough to cause most academics to deviate from the orthodox view of reality – one that does not include Elves or daimons, and which finds it difficult to give credence to the idea of extraterrestrial visitors. In our culture, led by the attitudes of Academia, there remains a deep-seated bias that scholarship must not be tainted by childishness or by "flights of fancy." It must bear the marks of masculine adulthood – tough, skeptical, hard-headed, rigorous, and penetrating.

Imagination and fancy may be objects of study – especially in a field such as literary study – but they may not intrude on the cool reasoning and argumentation of one's scholarship. If academics do engage in flights of fancy, they keep them private and separate from their scholarly work, or else publish them as works of fiction, as Professor Tolkien did with his Hobbits and Elves. I would venture to state that it is impossible, at present, to receive credence in Western academic circles while claiming to believe in the actual existence of Elves and Faerie races. It is difficult

enough to reconcile a belief in God with academic truth. Elves, sylphs, and dragons are right out. The very essence of modern scholarship requires that one must renounce one's faith in such childish things, along with belief in Santa Claus.

Now, the reasons for this attitude are understandable. To accept revelation as evidence of real events opens a whole Pandora's box of problems. Academia is only a scant few generations away from a time when religious doctrines of revealed truth *were* included in scholarly thought and caused no end of trouble. I do not mean to suggest that revelation be accorded the *same* value as empirical evidence, only that it be accorded its own truth value as myth. Which is to say, as a different kind of truth, not literal, not empirical or objective, but nevertheless real in its own way.

The problem with the stance of adult, educated thought, is that it asks us to disbelieve in myths and legends as well as individual accounts of unusual experiences that conflict with the dominant cosmology. Logically it asks us to believe that truth cannot be arrived at through fiction, including the fictions of religion and popular culture, which must be reduced to mere objects of study. Indeed, we cannot believe even in the soul, but must make it an object of study for the discipline of psychology. That is to say, the soul must be robbed of its immortal and non-material qualities, reduced instead to something materialism can handle, the mysterious chemistry of the nervous system. Too easily this attitude devolves into mere debunkery and a sterile game of skepticism. Mythos, which in Greek means "story" has been cast aside and equated with falsehood and lies. There is no logic in such a stance – it is mere ideology, a bias that satisfies an emotional need to dominate and secure the moorings of one's reality. Skepticism can be creative, but more often it seems to mask fear of mysteries and a compulsion to keep truth within narrow bounds.

How does a modern druid reconcile experience of the Faerie realms with the prevalent bias against the possibility of such beings or places existing? Of course it is not necessary to talk to Elves to be a druid today. But most druids, one way or another, do talk to non-human beings, which is to say that they engage the daimonic reality whether it be to talk to the Shee, to old Celtic divinities, or to trees. Is there a way to avoid the cognitive dissonance other religions face? We can, at any rate, be glad that belief in the denizens of Faerie does not require one to ignore Darwin's theory of natural selection, or the facts of paleontology. But fairy-faith is so inimical to modern academic-scientific thinking that it remains a problem.

The simplest course is to just discard the dominant ideology as wrong. Let science and academia and school masters go their own way, and head off in the other direction for the Forest Sauvage. Let them call us crackpots and laugh right back. If one's life permits one to embrace Deep Ecology or Paganism and ignore professors and the intelligentsia, that is certainly one way to go. This is, however, essentially to embrace religion at the expense of science and does not resolve the dilemma. For many modern druids such a course is difficult if one has children who attend secular schools where science, mathematics, and rational materialism are privileged not only over "fairy tales" and folklore but over the arts and humanities generally. We must then live a double life, much as the "magical folk" in the Harry Potter novels do.

I myself do not think that magical folk can simply withdraw and lie low, or reject the logic of our culture's scientific mode of thinking. Nor can we, once we are adults and parents very easily straddle the cultural dichotomy between adult belief and child belief. Religious beliefs have, for the past century or so, been bracketed. They are given a separate compartment in the adult consciousness, isolated from the model of reality that governs acceptable adult behavior in most matters. This strange kind of Orwellian Doublethink, where two mutually exclusive beliefs are held simultaneously in different compartments of the mind, is putting a strain on modern Western people. The strain is most notable in religious and political leaders in America, who seem to confuse the truth-claims of myth with the truth-claims of science. Mythic truth is based both on individual experiences and on the deep desire for mystery and magic as the source of being which persists in the human heart.

Even such terms as "paranormal" which have gained some ground, implicitly reinforce the idea that materialist reality is "normal." Perhaps it is, but clearly that is a matter of opinion and agreement among social groups. Any definition of what is "normal" is a cultural definition. Science just happens to be the discourse which the dominant sections of Western culture have used for the past few centuries to attempt to define the norm. Can druids today challenge the norm? Must they withdraw into yet another faith-based sect, a subculture that rejects secular notions of truth in favor of revelation? Or can druids act as a lever to stretch the imagination of our culture?

## The Fairy-Faith and Literature

Elves and elfin folk having been relegated to children's literature in the nineteenth century, they have typically held out there and prospered. The evolution of Faerie folk in literature over the last half of the twentieth century is remarkable, for the Faeries are no longer confined to the nursery, and children's literature itself is rapidly becoming interesting to adults as "fairy-tales" have grown up into a whole new genre of teen fiction. Indeed, I recently encountered a pair of novels that included magic in a world otherwise scarcely altered from "real history" and it was classified as "teen fiction" for apparently no other reason. Its characters were all young adults - college students and teachers in fact.<sup>5</sup> The Harry Potter novels of J. K. Rowling are the most publicized tip of this iceberg and are notable for defying the adult-child split.

The Harry Potter books bridge the adult-child gap, first of all, in readership. Many adults enjoy reading the books as much as children do, but enjoy them not merely as "escapism" into childhood – they enjoy them as adults for the adult characters. Second, within the fictional world of the Harry Potter novels, readers will encounter adults who believe in magic. Indeed, it is hardly a matter of "belief" or of "faith"; it is simply a matter of experience, and there is no doubt about it. In Harry Potter's world we can see the lure and the dangers of prophets and prophecy. Lord Voldemort, the "Dark Lord" who just won't die, is the shadow-side of all charismatic religious prophets who found their own religious sect. He is cast as so completely evil and destructive that his role as an essentially religious figure might easily be missed. But his followers clearly worship him and consider him infallible, they will do anything in the name of their "Lord." Voldemort doesn't claim to speak for God. In Rowling's world God has been removed from the culture of the Muggles as well as from that of the Wizards and Witches. Yet we can readily see both empty piety and religious fanaticism at work in each of these cultures in Harry's world.

Literary scholars writing about Rowling's books have noted that they appeal on a deep level to the human desire for magic, which is rooted in the longing to come

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Stevermer. *A College of Magics* and *A Scholar of Magics*.

face-to-face with the source of all mystery and existence.<sup>6</sup> Yet that longing is presented as one that cannot be fulfilled in our current materialist reality. This materialist world is caricatured by the horrid Dursleys – "The worst kind of muggles," as Professor McGonagal says. The Muggle world is almost devoid of moral force of any kind, while the world of magical folk is plagued with it – both the forces of good and the forces of cruelty. It is a fictional view of magical society, but it points tellingly at modern paganism. To the academic pagans may be people who "believe" in magic and revelation, but to pagans themselves they are simply magical folk. There is no question of belief because there is no question of doubt, and one reason the Potter novels appeal so strongly to their mixed audience is that they offer a view of a society that gives adults permission to call themselves witches and wizards without a doubt. The skeptics in Rowling's world are simply wrong.

In an article about the Harry Potter books and their literary cousins, Pat Pinsent, a senior research fellow at Surrey University, points to another aspect of the age dichotomy and the dichotomizing of worlds. She notes that magical fiction aimed at younger children usually includes some sort of transitional episode that provides the reader a way to move from our ordinary world into the fantasy world of magicians. "Interplay with 'our' world seems to mediate the entry of the younger reader into the secondary world and also allows for occasional interaction with the primary world..." (Pinsent 32). In C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, for example, we move from the world of London during the Blitz through the wardrobe into Narnia, the Otherworld, in which the magical action takes place. In J. K. Rowling's Potter books, the end of summer vacation and the beginning of a new school year with the trip on the Hogwarts Express provides a similar transition, though one that leaves the separation between worlds more permeable because it is not the only way in.

Pinsent points out that "High Fantasy" as a genre is usually aimed at an older reader, college students, for example, and treats the fantasy world as an entirely separate place. In this genre, Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea* books and J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy are the best among a host of subsequent imitators. Such stories, we might say, actually take place *in* the Otherworld. But in either kind of fantasy story, the "secondary" world is treated as a realm removed from the adult's

<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth DeVos, "It's All About God"

world of modern science and technology. Indeed, in many High Fantasy romances, technology is treated as inimical to magic or vice versa. So, we get the ubiquitous quasi-medieval setting of fantasy stories. Even in Rowling, where magical trains and flying cars coexist with owl post and quill pens, the magic of Hogwarts School makes it impossible for modern electronics to work within its grounds. Caroline Stevermer, in her novels, *A College of Magics* and its sequel, *A Scholar of Magics*, achieves a similar effect by setting her stories in the early 20th century before the age of electronics, yet she plays with the possibilities of a world that merges technology and magic without discomfort.

What all of these fictional creations reflect is the essential difficulty in fitting magic into the worldview and cosmology of our scientific age. These authors must find a way to get around science and its technology because the dominant myth of science itself insists that magic is not real. Reality is defined as consisting of only those things which can be explained in materialist terms and verified through repeatable experiments. This is the reason why children's fiction, and even "high fantasy" for adults is labeled dismissively as "escapist." The assumption is that people read this sort of story to escape from "reality." I believe it was Tolkien himself who defended against the charge of "escapism" noting that the modern world was a good place to escape from, given its horrors.

The charge of "escapism" - like that of "romanticism," "idealism," and "utopianism" - is a charge that parallels and feeds off the charge of "childishness.". The rhetorical equation of materialism with adult thinking is even, oddly, applied to Academia itself where students are said to graduate "into the real world" as if Academia were itself a fantasy land. It is a peculiar attitude but one that can be understood if we remember that Academia is a social institution used to indoctrinate children into the world of adulthood. Academia (for the students) is a liminal passage between the fantasy land of childhood into the world of muggle common sense and industrial activity. One is expected to focus on material realities, once one has made the passage through school. Schools thus become something like the magic wardrobe of Narnia, only in reverse, and operating only in one direction.

It has long troubled me that our culture has chosen to relegate imagination to the world of childhood. Wordsworth and Blake both observed this cultural shift in the early 19th Century when they wrote of the babe who comes into the world "trailing clouds of glory" and subsequently feels the "shadows of the prison house" descend as

our culturally constructed "mind-forged manacles" become the badges of adulthood. The Romantic poets, and after them Dickens in his novel *Hard Times*, all suggested that our Utilitarian notions of education were designed to beat our children into submission and break them of "Fancies." The poet Coleridge wrote of our "willing suspension of disbelief" when reading fiction, and this, it seems to me, could be a guide for modern druids.

Druidry does not embrace the fairy-faith literally. Some druids do, but not Druidry as a whole for it covers such a wide spectrum. There is no support for literalism when there are no holy scriptures. But belief in the Otherworlds and the folk of Faerie are approached with a willing suspension of disbelief which can lead to experience, and through experience to understanding. Druidry is not about belief, but about trusting one's own senses and inspirations. Individuals experience revelations and theophanies, but do not become elevated to the role of "prophet" in the Biblical sense. In a sense, prophecy has been democratized. Every druid is free to pursue conversations with the Divine, however he or she experiences it and personal revelations are respected – not taken on faith as objectively true, but accepted as mythically true. True for the psyche.

Such a decentralized and democratized sort of religious experience is set against a powerful and organized educational system. One can see this portrayed in satirical lines in Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, when Harry's aunt and uncle, the Dursleys try to beat the magic out of him through emotional abuse that would be criminal outside of a fairy tale. Uncle Vernon, derides Hogwarts (which is nothing if not permissive, despite all its rules) and praises "Smeltings" his alma mater, where the boys spend a good deal of time beating each other with sticks.

The truth of modern education may be much more subtle and complex, but the effect is much the same. Even though our culture has been highly secularized and liberalized over the past century, the basic structures of coercion are still in place: structures that use education to force children to stop believing in fairies, ghosts, dragons, Santa Claus, or imaginary friends, and instead devote their energies to correct spelling and learning mathematics. If a child grows up with "imaginary" companions and sees Faerie folk or has other psychic talents, she is thus forced to stop having faith in herself and instead place her faith in adult authorities. Rowling's books appeal to us so powerfully, in part, because she shows us this coercion and also

shows children and adults who escape it and end up waging war against it in its most archetypal form in the person of Lord Voldemort.

## **Listen to the Bards**

So, we druids are placed on the horns of a dilemma: as adults do we reject the claims of materialist science to comprehensively explain everything that is real, or do we reject Faërie as the product of pre-scientific thinking that is as far distant from modern ways as headhunting or the wicker man? Given our education and conditioning, the complete rejection of science's explanatory power is nearly impossible, and would, it seems to me, be foolish. The Druidic approach to a two-horned dilemma is to find the way between the horns. The way requires us not so much to redefine science as to redefine adulthood. To do so we do well to look to our ancient ancestors.

With their bards and poets, so beloved and revered, our ancient ancestors did not exclude imagination from adult consciousness. This way of thinking was not "childish" but simply a different definition of what it means to be adult. In this ancient way, an adult may have to deal with responsibilities and knowledge the child does not possess, but doing so does not mean giving up poetic imagination and the power of myth. Nor does it mean confusing poetry and myth with skeptical questioning of facts. Adulthood means understanding that there are different kinds of truth and that neither the poetical nor the empirical should always occupy a privileged position. Moreover, I would like to think that our druid ancestors understood clearly that religious thought is poetical thought.

An adult may indeed need to be more cautious and skeptical than a child. As Blake understood, this is a by-product of age and experience. Certainly adults should not be simply credulous, but that doesn't mean losing all their innocence either. From what I have observed, not very many children are wholly credulous or wholly innocent, for that matter. They may have undeveloped powers of discrimination between truth and lies, but then so do most adults in our current society. We might put it more positively and say that children often have a higher capacity for faith and trust. Children usually know who can be trusted too, but they also like to play. One of the reasons for adult credulity today is that we are taught so little about the imagination and how it works. For the most part, ignorant of the imagination, and

untrained in how to use it actively, adults are as easily manipulated by propaganda and advertising as children are, conditioned to respond with neither imagination nor scientific reason. Taught to think of myths and fantasies as the stuff of childhood, today's adults are easily caught in the net of myths created to keep vested interests in power.

Many of the myths that go unexamined today come from the Bible and the teachings of the Christian churches. The reason for this state of affairs is that when imagination and myths were thrown out with the bathwater, Christianity saved itself as the dominant religion by insisting that its myths were no such thing, but were accurate accounts of historical events. The claim has worn pretty thin by this time, but it has served well to maintain such corrosive myths as the privilege of patriarchy, the divine right of kings, and a whole host of petty tyrants or prophets claiming to be the mouthpiece of God. The threat of being abducted by Faeries was abolished in the Early Modern period, but the threat of Hellfire and damnation has been passed on to the present day among considerable numbers of believers.

Scientists, ever since the Enlightenment, have argued that what is needed to counteract the myths of religion and the fanaticism that goes with it is more science and more reason. Indeed, this argument has been advanced since the ancient Greek philosophers. I wish to propose that we can understand the world of Faerie, as well as expose the folly of religious fanaticism, not by trying to stamp out imagination but rather by improving our knowledge of how it works. To do so requires the modern druid to learn that scientific discourses are just that - discourses. Myths are discourses too – that is, a certain way of describing our world. Science is not the same as myth (as is sometimes suggested), nor are myths reducible to science, but each can be understood as a kind of language. Scientific discourses have their own poetics and vocabulary, their own metaphors. Both the Logos of science and the Mythos of poetry are equally valuable for the insights they give into the universe and the human soul and their value can only be fully comprehended when it is realized that neither can be reduced to the other and that both discourses only point to truths that are beyond all language and signs.

I love a good story. The Bardic ideal can teach us to love our myths and legends, our visions, and revelations. It can also teach us not to confuse legend with history as too many of our religions do. Religious experience cannot be securely built upon the false notion that someone else's revelation is literal history, or that myths and

legends are a substitute for understanding our true history. While history is the bailiwick of adults, and literature is more accessible to every age group, I should not wish to make the mistake of equating a historical view of the world with adulthood and a literary or mythic view with childhood. If Druidry is to have an influence on our ideas of education, let it be to teach children and adults more myths, and more history, and to understand their particular kinds of truth.

## **The Mythic Imagination**

We learn much about imagination and the Otherworld from depth psychology, particularly in the ideas of Carl Jung. The Otherworld, the Sea of Stories, is our own Unconscious soul. But Jung himself arrived at his understanding of psyche by turning to literature. Follow me now into that realm. Suspend your disbelief and consider some works of our modern bards.

*The Lord of the Rings* and the other mythological works of Professor Tolkien have given all of us a doorway into the world of Faerie that is perhaps not fully appreciated even by his fans. Tolkien considered that what he was writing was a "Faerie tale" in the most serious sense of the term. Not a children's nursery story, but a serious engagement with what centuries of our ancestors have taken for granted - a parallel world to our own accessible through forms of altered perception. Professor Tolkien restored Elves, those creatures of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic myth to the place of dignity and awe which they once occupied in the minds of mortals. His Elven races are very like the Irish Tuatha Dé Danann. There are glimpses of their ethereal power in key moments in *The Lord of the Rings*. When the Elvish prince Glorfindel confronts the Nazgûl to rescue Frodo, the hero sees the Elf revealed in his inner spiritual being - a being of light and power on a plane hidden within the material world of ordinary appearances. Even in a less altered state of consciousness, Frodo and Sam see the Elves in the Woody End of the Shire, shining with a faint luminescence. Their meeting with Galadriel in Lothlorien is sublime.

The Elves are indeed the Shining Ones, and Tolkien in the *Silmarillion* explores the ways that this immortal race is related to the Valar, the pantheon of creative spirits who shape the world. To a student of Celtic myths, it is quite apparent that Professor Tolkien was familiar with the cosmology of ancient Irish and Welsh culture. The Valar and the Elves are able to come and go from the Undying Lands in

the Uttermost West, beyond Numenorian Atlantis. Dying in Tolkien's middle Earth, as in the old tales of the Welsh Bards, involves traveling across the Western sea into the setting sun. Yet it is not an unalterable ending to existence, but rather a transition, a new life in a place where nothing grows old, as in the realm of Annwn encountered in the story of Pwyll. Everyone in that world is young and unaging, untroubled by disease, though not entirely by evil schemes. Some of these folk of the Otherworld wish eventually to return to a mortal life, even some beings of fairly high rank, such as Rhiannon, for example in the Welsh Mabinogi. In *The Silmarillion* we have the example of the Maia Melian who marries Thingol Greycloak, an Elf-prince, and the Maia known to Men as Gandalf and to the Elves as Mithrandir.

The similarities between Tolkien's body of inspired legend and the older inspirations of the medieval and ancient Bards are many. The whole genre of fantasy has flowered into a stout branch of literature over the past half century, arguably the dominant evolving literary form. This fantasy movement has given us a renaissance of Faerie tales and is historically contingent with the renaissance of Druidry. These stories are, as Tolkien intended his to be, our myths in an age that seems to have forgotten the point of myths. These literary productions have further given birth to films and video games with their computer generated graphics, a cultural phenomenon which again seeks to fill the vacuum of myth. The masters of CGI are among the modern bards, weaving images, archetypes, daimons, and myths for the imagination.

We've mapped the world and television has brought it into our living rooms. Far-off lands have been drained of their fabulous quality, reduced to "cultures" that can be quantified by political and social sciences, by geography and anthropology. Even the Moon and the planets have become dull facts through the lenses of science so that the whole concept of immediately accessible Otherworlds seems impossible to reconcile with our scientific cosmology and view of Earth. When searching for that place where the soul goes after the death of the body, or from which the soul comes at birth, science gives us precious few places to look anymore, except to the distant stars and galaxies.

When our paleolithic and neolithic ancestors thought of the Otherworld as under ground, this was reasonable. Burying the remains of the dead would naturally suggest that their souls too lived on under the surface of the earth and the discovery of marvelous systems of caverns gave credence to the idea that there might be secret

entrances to this world inside the Earth. Alas, modern speleologists and geologists have rather put the fun out of that theory, although it still could capture the imagination of fantasy fans as recently as in the Pellucidar novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs. This is because the idea of an Underworld has profound symbolic value. That inner world of the Hollow Earth is our own daimonic unconscious, that place within ourselves from which goblins emerge along with frightening visions, images, and urgings. Similarly, the Celtic legends of the undersea Otherworld represents that place of alternative reality beneath the normal surfaces of life. The Earth, the Sea, the Sky, the human Face – all are apparent surfaces behind which lies a hidden reality.

I am always delighted to encounter an author who seems to understand the nature of the Otherworld. The 2005 debut novel of Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norell*, is a superb example, all the more perhaps because she doesn't reproduce the Otherworld of Celtic myth but creates something quite new and different in her alternative England of the Napoleonic period. Clarke's vision of Faerie and "the King's Highways" that can lead into it from every mirror if you know the right spells, resonates perfectly with the Otherworld of Celtic myths. You don't really have to travel to get there – it is always just through the forest, or into a doorway in some hillside. Like Alice's Wonderland, you can get there through the Looking Glass, and like C.S. Lewis's Narnia, you can stumble into it by passing through an old wardrobe in a strange old house. It is a feature of the modern world that antique pieces of furniture begin to assume the role of the Otherworld doorway. Yet Carroll and Lewis do some damage to Faerie by trivializing it this way and relegating it to children, excluding adult participation for the most part.

The world of wizards and witches created by J.K. Rowling has much in common with the children's literature genre too, and continues the tendency to "modernize" it. One charm of the Harry Potter novels is that Rowling presents us with a Faerie realm inhabited by other mortals and just hidden down the alley behind an obscure pub in London, or in a house that no one ever notices. Hogwarts school, the setting for most of the action in these books is somewhere in the Scottish Highlands (near Glencoe, as I've been told on good authority). If you don't see it, well that's because it's bewitched and you aren't meant to see it. Rowling represents in this invisibility something that druids, witches, and wizards have long understood – that seeing the Otherworld requires that we look for it, that we cultivate awareness and actually *see*.

Rowling's world of muggles and magical folk contrasts those who can enter Faerie and those who can't see it. Or perhaps one should say, those who refuse to see it. The Hidden Folk are hidden but noticed more often than muggles would care to admit. In some of the old Irish tales one does feel that the Tuatha Dé Danann and their descendants have hidden their kingdoms and the entrances to them. Rowling's wizarding world is a notably updated Faerie realm. Though its fashions are still a bit medieval, it is no longer the unruly place governed only by the whims of kings and queens. Nowadays, Faerie has a Ministry of Magic that not only attempts to impose restrictions on the worst behavior of its denizens, but also acts as a liaison to the officialdom of the muggles which functions only by virtue of not believing in magic. The Ministry also spends a great deal of time keeping the Faerie world of the wizards secret, forever casting memory spells on the poor muggles who accidentally see something they shouldn't. Rowling cleverly creates her Ministry of Magic as an explanation for why so few people seem to run into Elves and Leprechauns these days, and indeed why just a century or two ago the general populace stopped believing in magic.

Notice, in Harry Potter's world, however, what sad creatures the Elves are. Reduced to obsessive-compulsive slaves to the wizard folk, and seemingly without any culture of their own, the House Elves are all we see of that noble race. Goblins have been domesticated too, into accountants and bankers. It is that sort of tongue-in-cheek inversion and parody that lends so much humor to the Harry Potter books, but I find it disappointing too. One appreciates the allusions to real Faerie lore but misses its flavor and complexity. House Elves are a made-up classification that conflates Scottish Brownies and English Elves.

Brownies are like the Tomten of Scandinavian legend, with whom we are more intimately acquainted in Minnesota. They seem to derive great pleasure from helping people tend their farms and houses. They aren't servants but are helpful creatures with such a charitable nature that we selfish and grumbling humans can hardly understand it as informed by free will.

Such beings are what we call "helping spirits." These sorts of Faerie folk are a far cry from either the proud Eldar of Tolkien's Middle Earth or the Tuatha Dé Danann of Irish lore. In the Irish Faerie lore, one feels that the descendants of the original Tuatha Dé Danann, like most descendants of great founders, were diminished and became a bit down-at-heel. They are the yeoman and craftsman class of Elvish

folk, as often as they are the "Gentry" - more humble, despite their magical powers, but always tricky. Leprechauns, for example, however powerful by our standards, are, after all, shoemakers. Of course it wasn't above Gwydion and Lleu and Mannawyddan to make a living as shoemakers. Craft and the creative arts are the very essence of magical power and even lords and ladies of Faerie understand this. Certainly the Dwarves do.

Elves do work for a living, but have what seems to us an aristocratic culture, much as we believe the ancient Celts to have had such a culture. Artisans, farmers, and workers support the warriors, poets, judges, wise men and women, healers, and lords – what we would call the professional class. Critics of literature may call this representation romantic or even reactionary. One of the criticisms one can make of Tolkien's storied world is that he never shows us much about Elvish classes. They all seem to be warriors or poets as the mood strikes them, but none of them seem to be growing the food, making the beds, or doing the washing up. Hobbits have their gentlemen of independent means, living off inheritance or dragon gold, but there are plenty of farmers, millers, and publicans doing the work of the community. Dwarves do practically nothing but work, taking a break from their crafts only to have the occasional war. Perhaps Rowling was thinking of the traditional view of "the Gentry" when she relegated the washing up and cooking to the House Elves. It is a joke, yet creates a dynamic that is interesting too, in that the wizards (who are mortal) are the masters over Elves, rather than their respectful pupils.

Hints of Elves and Otherworlds appear again and again in modern fantasy. I will mention the works of just a few more authors. Neil Gaiman and Philip Pullman each weave the theme of the Otherworld into a more modern setting, not the medieval romantic setting of so much fantasy. Gods and Goddesses, Elves and the rest interweave in alternate Oxfords or Americas and planets with doorways between them. The Divine is portrayed with gritty and sensual realism, rather than as a world filled with gold and silver cups and plates. In his novel *Neverwhere*, Neil Gaiman represents Faerie as alive and well underneath London and other big cities. In *American Gods*, he presents a dark comedy of the old gods living among us. The comic fantasist, Terry Pratchett has written a number of brilliant novels that both parody and faithfully represent the strangeness of the Otherworlds. Of particular interest is *Wee Free Men*, in which the Otherworld of Faerie is explored quite seriously but with Pratchett's characteristic comedy. Here the traditional Scottish

Brownies and Cornish Pixies are combined in the "Pictsies" who are the wee men painted in blue tattoos and devoted to thieving and brawling. The Nac Mac Feegle, as they are called, also turn out to be helping "spirits" of a sort for the hags and witches of Discworld.

## **Engaging with Faerie**

R. J. Stewart is among the many authors who have, over the past three decades, articulated a direct engagement with Otherworld beings. For Stewart the process seems to require deliberate work, the "underworld initiation." In most of these books, a distinction is made between literary imagination and active imagination. The writing of literature is active imagination for the writer, but it may only be passive consumption for the reader unless a form of deeper engagement accompanies reading. Reading about Faerie encounters is not the same as having them, obviously, and authors such as Stewart, Stepanich, and Hawkins have contributed to a growing literature of instruction in the techniques of imagination to contact Faerie folk.

For Patrick Harpur, by contrast, such daimonic encounters are abundant and spontaneous rather than the offspring of "shamanism" or special techniques. Harpur notes the hazard inherent in attempting to subject daimons to logic. One can really only speak from one's own experience. I myself did not engage in any shamanic workshops or have the guidance of mentors along this path apart from work with OBOD. I was talking to Elves long before I became a druid. Indeed, that is one of the things that led me to OBOD. For many years Elves have accompanied me in life and intruded on my quiet moments. I seldom see them or hear them when I am occupied with other people, but then that's the very nature of the Otherworld. One doesn't find the open door until one has been separated from one's hunting companions.

The result of this fact of the Otherworld encounter is that it is very hard to substantiate the experiences with witnesses. McManus offers some stories in which two or more people witnessed Faeries together at the same time. Unfortunately, that doesn't do us much good from the standpoint of empirical evidence. One can talk about other people's experiences, but in the end, even if we get together and share these experiences, we must mostly rely on our own point of view. As Harpur

suggests, Daimonic Reality is not objective, but a shifting vision that adapts to our own imagination.

Thus, the Otherworld and people's entry into it is highly subjective. The old tales represent the doorways to Faerie as objective things, but you will notice that it is usually only the hero of the story who sees the way in or sees his Faerie bride emerge from the lake. Sometimes a whole warrior band or a pair of knights might pass through the gateways together, but this is pretty rare. More typical is the moment when mist falls and the warrior band falls asleep, leaving Pwyll alone to confront Annwn. The reason for this literary motif is that, as McEowan suggests, the doorway to Faerie is the human mind. We do not actually pass through an objective physical doorway as they tend to suggest in fiction and films; rather, our state of consciousness and perception alters to give us a look, to extend our senses into another layer of the cosmos that we don't ordinarily see. The Otherworld is not "invisible" as is so often said, but is a kind of additional dimension that requires more than two eyes. We do not "enter" the Otherworld. We are always already there.

Another difficulty with the Otherworld is its illusive quality, its inherent ability to disguise itself. I was recently re-reading Kenneth Grahame's delightful *Wind in the Willows*, the adventures of Mole, Rat, Badger, and Toad in a natural world that is brilliant with beauty and poetry. Grahame might be accused of anthropomorphizing Nature, even sentimentalizing it, but *The Wind in the Willows* has a particularly sublime moment in the central chapter titled "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn." In that chapter, Rat and Mole are afforded a vision of the god Pan, who is referred to as "the Helper." What is particularly interesting about this passage in the book is not only the accurate way the author describes the sudden onrushing emotion of the numinous, but also that afterwards the God gives Rat and Mole the gift of forgetfulness. The experience of the Divine is so beautiful and overwhelming, Grahame asserts, that were we to retain the full memory of it, we would spend the rest of life grieving and in a state of loss.

There is deep wisdom disguised as a children's book. For it speaks to the child who is father of the man, the inner child who is the Mabon, the bearer of wisdom and the key to the mysteries. That blessing of forgetfulness is something that every one of us experiences every morning when we wake from our dreams and find that even the most powerful often fade away leaving nothing but the vague sense that there was something powerful there. In our sleep we experience deep and powerful

emotions, passions. The same is true in spontaneous experiences of Faerie. If we retain the experience fully, we run the risk of falling into an endless longing like that of Keats's noble knight in his poem "Le Belle Dame sans Merci." To hear the piper's music and to see his face is potentially overwhelming to the psyche. It has the potential to utterly disrupt our ordinary lives. The sojourn in the Otherworld has to end and fade in our memories, partly or completely, for us to go on with our difficult duties in mortal life. The difficulty is that we cannot know when we have had these experiences and forgotten them; when the Deities have blessed us with forgetfulness. That is a dimension of mystical experience, and particularly Faerie experience that, understandably, is seldom reported, for there is little to report other than a vague feeling that something big happened, and the aftertaste of loss.

Dreams, visions, and the spirit-quests of shamans are each doorways into the Otherworld and ones that can sometimes give entry in a very vivid way so that it seems that the body has gone along with us, and for all we know it has. Astral traveling is another such method, as is the "rising on the planes" and "pathworking" of the Hermetic tradition. In each of these methods, however, it is the imagination that is the vehicle and instrument. It is both the doorway and the key. Kabbalistic Serphiroth, Tarot cards, animal totems, may all aid our imagination to open and unlock the doors of perception, as William Blake put it. But these are not primary; they are secondary vehicles and guides. We must train ourselves to remember our experiences in the Otherworlds and we must train ourselves to cope with the potential grief at having to return to our mundane avocations. It is when we fail to face the return to our mortal lives that we risk becoming prophets or religious fanatics. Overwhelmed by the flow of Awen, we imagine that we are unique mouthpieces for God. To the extent that paganism embraces polytheism, this problem might be reduced. There is no single God one can claim to represent. However, polytheism could also exacerbate the problem if people are willing to flock to the mouthpiece of any god or goddess. If pagans start taking revelations too literally, there is even greater potential for factionalizing and in-fighting.

While finishing this paper, I watched a television documentary about the Mormons and their prophet Joseph Smith. Mormonism is a very young religion, only about 150 years old at present. The emergence of a new prophet in the wilderness of America in the nineteenth century and the production of a compelling legend and book galvanized and magnetized thousands of converts. It remains to be seen whether

Druidry and its many authors can create that sort of religious devotion. I rather hope not. Druidry is, for the most part, devoted to democracy and individual conscience, not to patriarchal authority and prophesy. When it comes to Faerie communication, I would hope it is obvious that one would be foolish to suppose every person encountered in Faerie is either reliable or trustworthy. Just as when speaking with ordinary strangers, one needs to be skeptical and back off if the other person starts telling us to do things that are immoral, illegal, or unethical. Similarly, if anyone sets himself or herself up as spokesperson for Elves or nature spirits, we ought to greet them with caution as they can only be speaking for a particular segment of the Faerie folk. There is no way to measure or judge the authority of such seers, or to what extent their visions or messages are colored by the lenses of their own wishes and desires.

Although I will, cautiously, admit to speaking to Elves, I would be very hesitant to suggest that what they have communicated has any sort of authority or objective value. I greet it with skepticism myself. Susan Greenwood, in her anthropological work *The Nature of Magic*, identifies magical consciousness as a particular state of being, a state of Mind, certainly, but also I should say, a state of Soul.

It seems to me that, as druids, we do well to listen to people who talk to Faerie beings, and to those who think they were Fay in a past existence, even winged flower fairies at the bottom of their gardens. We should not be too quick to dismiss them as "fluffy bunny" pagans. After all, Harvey turned out to be a Pooka. When we react to such claims as if they are childish excesses of imagination, or indeed as if they are a confusion of religion and fantasy role-playing games, we are rejecting the very texture of imagination that characterized the ancient Bards we supposedly revere. Moreover, our connection to Faerie or Spirit ultimately rests on our recognition that we ourselves are among the spirits that animate the cosmos.

## **Cautious Conclusions**

To conclude, let me attempt to tie up some of the threads of thought I have presented herein. Perhaps foremost in my thesis has been to urge a middle ground between credulity and skepticism, a middle way that adjusts our thinking away from the dominant either-or paradigm of Western philosophy and science. This rationalist

mentality insists that statements are either true or false. Such thinking, fostered by Academia, needs to be abandoned. The middle way of Druidry allows us to embrace the Bardic imagination, not as a source of empirical facts to set in opposition to science, but as a process of active imagination, imaginal truth, and myth.

Additionally, the word myth needs to be reclaimed along with the word magic and Faerie. We need to take it seriously and clarify that we are not talking about categories of truth and falsehood. Myth occupies a middle land between such polarities, not as a rival claim of authority, but as useful and positive source of truth when not taken literally. At the same time we are reclaiming the term "myth," we also do well to expose the abuse of literalism. One way to do so is to positively embrace literature and story as examples of a non-literal way to understanding ourselves and the world. When approaching literature, we can especially attend to fantasy as a modern form a myth, bearing in mind at the same time that the business of books has commodified and commercialized storytelling. We do well when we seek out the Awen in written stories as well as those told orally beside the hearth.

Lastly, I think again of the fate suffered by the Mormons and even the Freemasons in America. In that fertile new ground, the mysticism and secret societies of our European ancestors flourished, and despite modernity and industrialism, the land still inspires its own wild magic. Yet groups that have publicly promoted their private revelations, such as the Mormons, have been met with brutal violence and persecution in American culture. Times have changed, to be sure, but there are still dangers. Those following private revelations are considered a threat – not least because all parties take their revelations and myths literally. The Abrahamic religions take their own revelations literally, as absolutely true, and have trouble tolerating those who refuse to believe literally. Moreover, their adherents are usually experiencing their revelations vicariously, through books and stories rather than through their own active imagination. A true understanding of imagination and revelation must lead to tolerance of the beliefs of others. It will surely love books, but it will not idolize and fetishize them.

Ridicule, intolerance, and disapproval are not the only dangers for magical folk, however. So is allowing ourselves to slip into lazy credulity. The denizens of Faerie have been long regarded as inherently untrustworthy, often dangerously misleading. There is no question that entering Faerie is perilous. These days one is likely to get the impression they are all beneficent beings helping us to evolve into a

New Age, a new evolutionary stage. Faerie is not safe, anymore than this world is safe, and its peoples should not be trusted without due examination. It is a realm where the rules we hold so dear are easily and often turned on their heads and madness is only a step away, particularly if we take what we see and hear literally. Yet every religion that has ever existed had its roots there – in the revelation of things normally unseen and the appearance of the shining ones in one form or another, whether gods, angels, animals, trees, burning bushes, or mists upon a lake. Druidry, I would suggest, is a spirituality of childhood and childlikeness. I mean this in an entirely positive sense. May we walk lightly, tell stories, enjoy the sensation of wonder in nature, and never forget to embrace our own child-nature by remembering to laugh at ourselves and play.

### **About the Author**

James W. Maertens, Ph.D. (Alferian Gwydion MacLir) holds a doctorate in English language and literature from the University of Minnesota in the United States. He is an independent scholar and Chancellor of the Avalon Center for Druidic Studies, a non-profit institution of higher learning inspired by Druidry, the love of imagination, and nature spirituality ([www.avaloncollege.org](http://www.avaloncollege.org)). Dr. Maertens enjoys studying the history of Druidry and the Celts, medieval history, Elf-lore, tree-lore, magic, and fantasy literature. He teaches at the Avalon Center and is presently working on a book on the art of wandmaking.

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**PO Box 1333, Lewes, East Sussex, BN7 1DX England**

**Tel/Fax 01273 470888 Email [office@druidry.org](mailto:office@druidry.org)**

**[www.druidry.org](http://www.druidry.org)**