

## On the essence of μύσται: the case of *American Cosmic*<sup>1</sup>

“The mystery is not in the object.”<sup>2</sup>

Diana Pasulka has undertaken “to document the formation of a new religious form—not to reach ultimate conclusions about the ontological status of its mystery.”<sup>3</sup> Its mystery is ‘the phenomenon’: “the term ‘phenomenon’ is used interchangeably with the term ‘UFO’; it is a more accurate term than ‘UFO’ in that it does not suggest that an object is of extraterrestrial origin.”<sup>4</sup>

What she documents may be categorized as a mystery cult, a form of religious life analyzed by Walter Burkert: “Mysteries were initiation rituals of a voluntary, personal, and secret character that aimed at a change of mind through experience of the sacred.” In the Hellenic world “the mysteries may have been a decisive ‘invention’: cults which were not prescribed or restricted by family, clan, or class, but which could be chosen at will, still promising some personal security through integration into a festival and through corresponding personal closeness to some great divinity.”<sup>5</sup>

The UFO mystery cult (by the term ‘cult’ Burkert intends nothing pejorative and nor do I) certainly has its festivals; the first may have been the annual series organized around Giant Rock in the Mojave Desert beginning in the early 1950s, a sort of proto Burning Man. The custom still flourishes in the Roswell kitsch fair,<sup>6</sup> just one example from an “arena that is a true carnival of hoaxes, consumerism, and misinformation.”<sup>7</sup> The modern wrinkle is the ‘conference’; Pasulka notes her attendance at several of these in the course of her research. Conferences are much more staid affairs of an academic and testimonial mood, though no doubt ‘There will be vendors.’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D. W. Pasulka, *American Cosmic: Religion, Technology, UFOs* (Oxford Univ. Press 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (1987) 97.

<sup>3</sup> *American Cosmic* 112. She quotes the anthropologist Cynthia Nelson with approval: “As phenomenologists we suspend judgment as to whether the apparition [in Nelson’s work, of the Virgin Mary] is *really real* (a question for scientific naturalism) and attempt rather to understand what people do when confronting stress.” *Id.* at 169. One might gloss, ‘when coping with *Unheimlichkeit*.’

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* 259.

<sup>5</sup> *Ancient Mystery Cults* 11.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ufofestivalroswell.com/> . See also <http://marfachamber.org/menu> , <https://ufofest.com/> , etc.

<sup>7</sup> *American Cosmic* 86.

<sup>8</sup> The earliest such conference may have been “a gathering of students at the University of Denver in March 1950;” during which “one Silas M. Newton, self-styled Texas oil millionaire . . . described the experience of a scientist-friend, Dr. Gee, who had been asked by the military to examine three crashed saucers and 16 alien bodies. Journalist Frank Scully heard Newton’s lecture and decided to write a book [*Behind the Flying Saucers* (1950)] based on the revelations of Newton and Gee.” Benson Saler, Charles A. Ziegler, and Charles B. Moore, *UFO Crash at Roswell: The Genesis of a Modern Myth* (1997) 13. Thus establishing the millionaires-and-scientists motif.

The UFO cult is different from the ancient varieties in that ordinarily – if that’s the right word – candidates experience the phenomenon **first**, then in their search to make sense of it they recruit themselves into groups of the likeminded or like-experienced. They have **already had** what Burkert designates “the extraordinary experience” – “a special form of experience, a *pathos* in the soul, or *psyche*, of the candidate.” In this connection Burkert cites Aristotle’s reported antithesis that “at the final stage of mysteries there should be no more ‘learning’ (*mathein*) but ‘experiencing’ (*pathein*), and a change in the state of mind (*diatethenai*).”<sup>9</sup>

Pasulka’s research shows that Experiencers – “people who have sighted or who believe they are in contact with the phenomenon”<sup>10</sup> – first undergo the pathos and afterward seek to learn its meaning; during which search there occurs what she calls ‘The Book Encounter’:

“Each of the people I interviewed who said they believed their anomalous experiences were connected to the UFO phenomenon had had a ‘book encounter.’ At some point after their experiences, which sometimes persisted over half a lifetime, they were given, came upon, or in some perceived miraculous way were directed to read a book that put their experiences into perspective and seemed to explain them.”<sup>11</sup>

This *tolle lege* moment triggers a process of further changing the state of mind in that the Experiencer starts “to piece together his obsession” as Pasulka phrases it; the learning, the sense-making, comes after the pathos.<sup>12</sup> Something has happened to the Experiencers and they want to understand what it is, what it means.

The human norm of reaction is capacious enough to allow a broad range of response to any given stimulus and the UFO phenomenon is no exception. Pasulka documents the most intense variety from the range of possible responses to the phenomenon, which she appropriately designates as ‘vocation.’ Experiencers with vocation “feel as if they have a mission and completely rearrange their lives to fulfill it.”<sup>13</sup>

Pasulka designates another moiety of the cult the ‘Meta-Experiencers’: “scientists I encountered during my interviews with experiencers. They were interested in the details of the experiencer’s sightings and often would apply this information to their own work on technologies. I also call them ‘scientist-believers.’”<sup>14</sup> The Metas believe the phenomenon exists; they believe the Experiencers have experienced something anomalous; the Metas struggle to understand what

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<sup>9</sup> *Ancient Mystery Cults* 89.

<sup>10</sup> *American Cosmic* 259.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* 100.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to deny the existence of a large cadre of candidates who have **not** had the experience but are avid to do so. They, too, recruit themselves into groups as devotees of the phenomenon. But as Burkert notes, “The well-known saying that ‘many are the narthex-bearers, but few are *bakchoi*’ seems to indicate just this fact, that ‘to be taken by the god’ is an event that will happen in an unforeseeable way, and probably only to a few special individuals.” *Ancient Mystery Cults* 112.

<sup>13</sup> *American Cosmic* 171.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* 259.

the phenomenon means for science and for the rest of us. That the Metas “often would apply this information to their own work on technologies,” however, is an assertion that Pasulka does not support with independently verifiable facts.<sup>15</sup> More on this issue below.

Some Experiencers and Metas identify an additional *unheimlich* aspect of the phenomenon captured by a saying – cited by Pasulka – of Nietzsche’s: “And when you look long into an abyss the abyss looks into you.”<sup>16</sup> “Witnesses and researchers,” as Pasulka tells it, “often report the strange feeling that once you become aware that there is a phenomenon, it becomes aware of you. . . . The uncanny feeling that the objects are aware, or watching those who are watching them, is common.”<sup>17</sup> She quotes the veteran researcher David Stinnett: “One aspect of the phenomenon, pointed out by [Jacques] Vallée as well as by George Hansen, is that it tricks and deceives. Researchers, when they encounter the real phenomenon, are so amazed by these aspects of it that they go off the deep end in their theories and conclusions. . . . These very real experiences dupe them into believing that the phenomenon is what they think it is. Well, it’s not.”<sup>18</sup>

So there are two schools of thought: “The ‘nuts and bolts’ school of UFO researchers believe that given time, and dependent on their complete disavowal of the psychic, weird, and subjective components of the events, mainstream science will embrace their findings. Yet this may never happen—at least, it will not happen soon. The reasons for this are hinted at in [Vallée’s] book, where he wrote that the subterranean and hidden nature of the UFO phenomenon is part of its logic.”<sup>19</sup> She quotes Vallée: “Contact between human percipients and the UFO phenomenon occurs under conditions controlled by the latter.”<sup>20</sup>

Compare the foregoing with this passage from *Being and Time* in Thomas Sheehan’s translation:

“The fact that such things [in-the-world beings, *innerweltliches Seiendes*, phenomena meaningfully present to us] get dis-covered along with the openedness of our own ex-sistence does not mean that this matter is under our control [*steht nicht im Belieben des Daseins*]. Only *what*, in *which* direction, to *what extent*, and *how* we actually dis-cover and dis-close is a matter of our

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<sup>15</sup> “Many UFO-based religions profess the belief that these alien ‘entities’ have left us artifacts; indeed, such ‘artifacts’ inspire Taylor and James [her pseudonymous informants] to create their innovative technologies.” *American Cosmic* 138. “And as I came to see, Tyler’s and James’s research suggested that [the phenomenon’s] strange reality produced revolutionary and very real products.” *Id.* 112. Tyler’s and James’s “technologies were cultural game changers—there was no other way to put it.” *Id.* 23.

<sup>16</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil* Part IV, # 146. *Und wenn du lange in einen Abgrund blickst, blickt der Abgrund auch in dich hinein.*

<sup>17</sup> *American Cosmic* 93.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* 107-108.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* 158.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* 160.

freedom [*ist Sache seiner Freiheit*], although always within the limits of our thrownness [*den Grenzen seiner Geworfenheit*].”<sup>21</sup>

To make sense of this passage Sheehan distinguishes two sorts of *Geworfenheit*. As usual with Heidegger this is a matter of two dimensions, so to speak, the one possibilizing and the other actualizing. In terms from *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, for example, ‘capacity,’ *Fähigkeit*, is a possibilizing dimension; whereas its actualizing dimension is ‘the organ,’ *das Organ*, of that capacity.<sup>22</sup>

As Sheehan notes, “Heidegger establishes this a priori existential projectedness [the possibilizing *Geworfenheit*] in the same way that he does in all his phenomenology: from a well-described *operatio* to its most probable form of *esse*, from actual human acts to what most likely explains how they are possible. We do in fact make sense of things by existentiell acts of projection [the actualizing *Geworfenheit*]. But if we *do* that, we must be *able* to do that.”<sup>23</sup>

“In *Being and Time*,” Sheehan explains, “the verb *entwerfen* has two very distinct meanings, existentiell and existential, although Heidegger does not always make that clear. In the existentiell sense, *entwerfen auf* means ‘to project some thing *in terms of* something else’ . . . more specifically: to take X *as* or *as suitable for* Y. . . . But there is a second meaning of *entwerfen*, a structural-existential one. As we have seen, performing concrete acts of projecting and synthesizing requires the always-already-opened existential ‘space’ for doing so, and for Heidegger, this space is not opened up by one’s own will. Our ex-sistence is structurally projected (*geworfen*; even *als Entworfenes*) ‘before’ we can existentiell project X in terms of Y. . . . our existentiell acts of projection are made possible by our existential projectedness as *thrown possibility*, a structural openedness within which we can understand the things in terms of *their* possibilities.”<sup>24</sup>

One imagines the UFO phenomenon as a possibilizing dimension insofar as it opens existential space, and that opening-up as not under the Experiencer’s control. (That it’s not under one’s control does not entail that it is controlled by another; more on this later.) That is to say experience of the phenomenon ‘goes the full Feuerbach’ in the sense that “Man—this is the mystery of religion—projects his being into objectivity.”<sup>25</sup> To project our being – thrown structural-existential possibility – into the phenomenon means that the encounter is experienced

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<sup>21</sup> *Sein und Zeit* 366, as translated in Thomas Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift* (2015) 206.

<sup>22</sup> *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (tr. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker) 221. Also, “something like color” and “colors” in *Zollikon Seminars*.

<sup>23</sup> *Making Sense of Heidegger* 208.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* 207-208.

<sup>25</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (tr. of 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1848 by George Eliot 1881; Dover reprint 2008) 25. *Der Mensch – diese ist das Geheimnis der Religion – vergegenständlicht sein Wesen und macht dann wieder sich zum Object dieses vergegenständlichten, in ein Subject verwandelten Wesens; er denkt sich, ist sich Object, aber als Object eines Objects, eines andern Wesens.* “Man—this is the mystery of religion—projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject; he thinks of himself as an object to himself, but as the object of an object, of another being than himself.”

as an occasion of *'Es gibt.'* As Burkert says, "the mystery is not in the object." We project the mystery which **we** are into the phenomenon – as Feuerbach showed for Christianity in particular and for religion generally.

Whereas "what, in which direction, to what extent, and how we actually dis-cover and dis-close" – take the phenomenon ontically, existentially to be – "is a matter of our freedom, although always within the limits of our thrownness." Just as what we may take ourselves to be – rational animals, children of God, digital simulants in a higher dimension's game, or whatnot – always occurs within the limits of our thrownness.

Which brings us to the third principal theme of *American Cosmic* – that American factual *Geworfenheit* is so far bound up in technology that nearly all 'what, in which direction, to what extent, and how' get channeled by the thrownness of technological existence. Experiencers and Metas both are constrained by their thrownness-in-technology to make sense of the phenomenon as – take it as, *entwerfen auf* – either technological – ranging from spacecraft to balloons – or naturalistic – ball lightning, swamp gas, the Morning Star; for few of them is there the possibility of a *tertium quid*.<sup>26</sup>

As evidenced by his writings and his discussions with Pasulka Jacques Vallée is "committed to the idea that the phenomena appear to be technological."<sup>27</sup> And like Vallée Pasulka's pseudonymous informant 'Tyler D.' "believes the phenomenon is technological."<sup>28</sup> In fact, "Many of the scientist-believers I interviewed think that the phenomenon functions like a technology, and that the human is a receiver and transmitter of information."<sup>29</sup> "In this sense . . . humans are technologies."<sup>30</sup>

That human beings are wielded as instruments or employed as vessels by the divine – as its technology in our term – is an ancient thema. This thema gets expressed as what is recognizably a version of Philip K. Dick's techgnosis<sup>31</sup> by the two scientist-experiencer-believers who are Pasulka's principal but unidentified informants. Unfortunately Pasulka subverts the credibility of these accounts, for their personae come straight out of central casting.

'James Master,' Pasulka tells us, is "one of the world's leading scientists and a professor at a major research university," who "held an endowed chair of molecular biology and headed a laboratory at one of the top universities in the world. He was a successful inventor. He had a global reputation for pushing the boundaries of science and biotechnology." He drives "a high-end roadster, tricked out with a red leather interior" and makes a stylish entrance "probably

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<sup>26</sup> The only group of exceptions documented by Pasulka are Experiencers who were devout before their encounter; they can accommodate the phenomenon as an angelic visitation or something of the sort. They project their faith into the phenomenon; take it in terms of that faith.

<sup>27</sup> *American Cosmic* 170.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* 179.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* 187.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* 179.

<sup>31</sup> *The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick* (ed. Pamela Jackson and Jonathan Lethem 2011).

typical for Silicon Valley millionaires” “at our summer conference in the foothills of Northern California.” He speaks at the conference about the phenomenon and stuns the assembly with the power of his presentation. And even before that appearance he had previously “decided to put himself on the map, to ‘out’ himself publicly as being interested in the phenomenon.” So after someone’s discovery of material claimed to be of alien origin, James offered his time and skill in service of the goal of determining the genuineness of the alleged artifact. This offer was taken up and his analysis showed that it was of terrestrial origin. Although Pasulka gives no citation apparently the results were published in some form because two other scientists sought him out in person to probe him about this finding.<sup>32</sup> Rich, tenured, and still young, James is capable of eviscerating opponents in controversy, taking them “apart limb by limb with the sword of intellect.” But he’s no bully: “The victims were always worthy opponents, such as other top scholars from universities like Princeton.” He’s top gun and quite the *Mensch*: “As much as I was intimidated by James’s intelligence and passion, I saw him as a hero. He had the guts and the ability to take on anyone in the world who dismissed the reality of the phenomenon.”<sup>33</sup> Guts to go under the very jaws of death, even unto but definitely not including disclosure of his identity in Pasulka’s book.<sup>34</sup>

This makes no sense. James is financially, professionally, and reputationally secure; he has already outed himself publicly on at least two occasions; he has the courage to face opposition: “He fought the good fight, for the right reason: because he believes—or as he would say, because he *knows*.”<sup>35</sup> Make that ‘would say pseudonymously.’

‘Tyler D.’ strikes me as modelled on ‘Thomas Jerome Newton,’ the character played by David Bowie in the science fiction movie *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976). Perhaps that’s because Pasulka quotes Bowie in an epigram for her book, so the shade of the late rock star is fresh on the reader’s mind as Tyler’s story unfolds.

Pasulka arranges to meet Tyler face-to-face for the first time during a conference of the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta. An Experiencer who knows Tyler tells her that “Tyler was probably an angel, which to [the Experiencer] meant that he was a person who is part human and part extraterrestrial.” “You are just about to meet someone who is not human,” the Experiencer told her. “He is older than both of us, but he looks twenty years younger.” Pasulka recruits her colleague Jeffrey Kripal as sponsoring witness to, but only to, this first meeting in a restaurant near the conference site. “Soon a tall, thin man with thick brown hair appeared at the restaurant window and peered in.” Tyler introduces himself and Pasulka notes how his elegant

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<sup>32</sup> “The media pronouncements on James’s research [on the artifact in question] were so confusing that he decided to work with a few credible, high-profile science publications and newspapers to make a more direct statement on the matter. The publications affirmed that James had debunked the claim that the artifact had an alien origin and emphasized that he had in fact found it to be of human origin.” *American Cosmic* 58-59.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* 18

<sup>34</sup> “They [the scientist-informants] agreed to be included on condition that they remain anonymous. . . . [they] are silent about their research.” *Id.* 6. Evidently not.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* 52-53.

clothing singles him out in the crowd of disheveled academics at the restaurant. “Maybe in his late forties or early fifties” he did “look extremely fit and youthful.” This mysterious, charismatic stranger charms Kripal at once. We learn that as “an aeronautical engineer” and a “biomedical entrepreneur” Tyler owns forty patents – “he wrote patent after patent” – and is, like her other informant James, loaded, “a wealthy rocket scientist.” He got his start in NASA’s space program at age 18 as an intern, working himself up through the engineering ranks, apparently without much formal academic training – at least we are told he does not have a PhD – to a position of authority in the program – friend of the *Challenger* crew, whose deaths he witnessed in 1986. Unveiling his sensitive side, he sends Pasulka a video of himself at the *Challenger* gravesite mourning the loss of his friend Judith Resnik. He left the program from grief but returned later because launching rockets and shuttles “and anything to do with space exploration” is his passion. His body temperature is “naturally very warm” but he craves a lot of sun. He’s lonely – he celebrates the sale of his latest tech company “alone, in his laboratory, with the [alien] artifacts, a cigar, and a snifter of brandy.” (His everyday drink is a tall glass of water.) Tyler and Pasulka arrange travel to Rome to conduct research together at the Vatican observatory and “the Vatican Secret Archives.” Tyler arrives first and presents himself for admittance while Pasulka is still in flight over the Atlantic. Despite the fact that Pasulka is the credentialed scholar who has obtained permission for the research, Tyler is admitted and given an archive badge for six months (the maximum) because “Apparently, Tyler was known to members of the Vatican.” In the course of their work in Rome Tyler has a religious experience and determines to convert to Catholicism, telling Pasulka, “Diana, I have to go back and help people directly. I feel like I’m a complete failure.” But to Pasulka “He was some kind of rock star.”<sup>36</sup>

“The code of conduct for academics,” as Pasulka describes it, “demands transparency. We reveal our sources as a matter of practice and ethics. It is an ethical imperative that guides our work.”<sup>37</sup> So one would have expected her ethnography to recount the true identities of her principal informants along with their academic and professional affiliations and citations to their relevant publications and patents.

Turns out there is a different code of ethics for scientist-ufologists, who are

“vetted extensively before their employment in the field and, once hired, take oaths to keep their sources secret. The code of confidentiality extends throughout the communities of people associated with the government who work in specific areas of space research and particularly in the field concerned with unidentified aerial objects. The one thing that you are not allowed to discuss, if you are employed in this capacity, is the very thing you study. They maintain their silence for important reasons, one of which is national security.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Tyler’s backstory includes the motif of the ‘angry officer.’ *American Cosmic* 33. Cf. *UFO Crash at Roswell* 23, 26, 28, 46.

<sup>37</sup> *American Cosmic* 24.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Pasulka continues, “I learned that I needed to take my new research partners’ [sc. James and Tyler] ethical codes seriously and respect their silences and their confidentialities. If I didn’t, I could get some people in a lot of trouble.”<sup>39</sup>

James and Tyler, if bound by the strictures of the ethical code described, breached the non-disclosure terms of their employment and imperiled national security simply by revealing themselves to Pasulka as scientists employed in the UFO field. If her descriptions of the two give any indication of their true identities, then she has made their breach of trust public and thus known to their employers.

Waiving that, there remains the matter of the site trip. Tyler gets “special permission” from some unidentified authority to take Pasulka and James to a saucer-crash site – under a no-fly zone – in New Mexico to search for any artifacts that may have been overlooked. “It was the site of one of the crashes that occurred in New Mexico in 1947, but had been largely forgotten over time. It was not the Roswell event.”<sup>40</sup> So the three of them walk the site for a day and find “material [which] looked like crumpled tin foil that was also a type of fabric.” James takes away all the items they find and his “preliminary analyses of the materials, months later, made it hard to believe they were made on earth . . . they defied conventional explanation. They were just . . . anomalous.”<sup>41</sup> You can’t discuss the thing you study and cannot reveal sources but you can take people to a source and let them carry away bits of the thing you study? With special permission, apparently so.

The coyness in these accounts frustrates the reader’s effort to take the book seriously. Pasulka can remedy this problem if she will publish on the book’s website her field notes and audio/video recordings of interviews with these two informants.<sup>42</sup> If they are indeed ‘employed in the field’ and her descriptions of them veridical then with the publication of the book their employers already know that they’re talking about their work on the phenomenon. If the descriptions are not veridical, if instead of versions of Buckaroo Banzai the informants are more nearly specimens of one’s own *gens* – “just a bunch of seedy, squalid bastards like me: little men, drunkards, queers, henpecked husbands, civil servants playing cowboys and aliens to brighten their rotten little lives”<sup>43</sup> – then their claims may appear in a different light.

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<sup>39</sup> *Id.* 25. *studiose lector . . . dicerem si dicere liceret, cognosceres si liceret audire.* Apuleius re the innermost mystery of the Isis cult: ‘Eager reader, I would tell it if it were permitted to tell – but it’s classified.’ *The Golden Ass* 11.23.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* 74. Then it must have been the Plains of San Agustin event. See *UFO Crash at Roswell* 17, 22-25.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* 75. “It was analyzed by research scientists, who concluded that it was so anomalous as to be incomprehensible. According to these scientists, I was told, it could not have been generated or created on Earth. One scientist explained it to me in this way: ‘It could not have been made in this universe.’” *Id.* 240. This is a broadening of the motifeme “For hardness and strength, it’s out of this world” in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and picked up subsequently in the Roswell myth as “lightweight metallic sheets of material much harder than any known terrestrial metal;” *UFO Crash at Roswell* 17, 20, 23, 28.

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.americancosmic.com/>. And while she’s at it how about a picture of the “several metallic artifacts” (p. 48) they found in New Mexico?

<sup>43</sup> *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (dir. Martin Ritt 1965). Quotation slightly altered.



But the worth of *American Cosmic* is not in documenting some Invisible College hard at work on UFOs nor in apprising us of technology allegedly derived from encounters with the phenomenon. All that business is a sideshow to the main event of *American Cosmic* – *Geheimnis*, the mystery at the heart of faith, and as such the concomitant errancy of the book is a phenomenon of the very phenomenon it studies.

Tyler “explained that he was now connected to a source that he believed was part of an off-planet intelligence;” “his connection to off-planet intelligence helps him create biotechnologies.”<sup>44</sup> His faith is in the mystery of revelation. Accordingly “In this book,” Pasulka writes, “the issue of technology and technological discovery is revisited through the lens of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and my own ethnographic research involving biotechnologies. . . . The biotechnologists reveal Heidegger’s philosophy of technology and the process of ‘thinking’ in that technology is ‘revealed,’ and thus functions as a form of revelation for these specific communities.”<sup>45</sup>

Any phenomenology of *Geheimnis* is affected by the field of *Geheimnis* itself. I quote at length William J. Richardson’s videotaped remarks on *Irre* because they are directly relevant to this *Geheimnis*-effect. He is talking about Heidegger’s “On the Essence of Truth”:

“In any case by 1930 [Heidegger] had gotten to a point of raising the possibility ‘suppose it is not we who are projecting, disclosing the ‘Is’ that’s truth.’ What if it were ‘Is’ now as a process of concealment and revealment revealing itself to us? What then? What if that happens? And that’s a big move, obviously.”<sup>46</sup>

It’s the biggest move. For it hypothesizes an ‘other-than-us’ at the heart of truth, at the core of the process of concealment and revealment. He resumes a bit later:

“So it’s at that point where [Heidegger] begins to explain or to explore the positive aspect of revealment. But he said that there’s also a negative component and that negative component of *alētheia* includes on the one hand what he calls a hiding of beings behind one another that he calls *Geheimnis*, which we translate as ‘mystery.’ So that this experience of mystery is something that has ontological

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<sup>44</sup> *Id.* 34, 35. The only concrete instance cited is this: “One of the applications of [Tyler’s] inspiration is a material that has been etched at the molecular level with information. The etching codes the material with information that human bone ‘reads’ as itself. It is then incorporated into diseased human tissue and bone, which helps the body recuperate from cancer and other illnesses. Tyler showed me a picture of one of the patients who was healed through this treatment. Jane is a radiant young mother of twins.” *Id.* 35. Something like this?—“In the skin, collagen fibres form triple helices, but [Ron] Raines’ synthetic form is subtly different. He ‘decorates’ single collagen strands with bumps along their surfaces (the details of how these bumps are engineered are still under wraps). ‘It’s all about steric effects,’ says Raines. These strands won’t form triple helices with one another, but they will with the collagen in the wound. ‘In fact, the damaged collagen seems to love them - it forms very strong bonds and triple helices. We take advantage of the fact that in a wound, collagen is trashed - there are lots of binding sites where it’s been damaged and our strands preferentially bind at those sites.’” <https://www.chemistryworld.com/features/molecular-healing/3004695.article> .

<sup>45</sup> *American Cosmic* 260. Except for a brief reference in the Introduction that’s all we hear of Heidegger.

<sup>46</sup> <https://philinstall.uoregon.edu/video/532/> 29:52 and following. My transcription.

roots, if that's the right word, or at least philosophical roots in the hiddenness or the *lēthic* or the negative component of *alētheia*. And secondly there's another form of that negativity which in effect is mysterious to him because there's a certain character about that negativity that occludes the revelation of being, sabotages it so to speak, or perverts it somehow; and so much so that the effect of our endeavor to try and discover what this 'Is' means is in effect an experience of a lot of frustration and a lot of failure; of wandering about, of wandering about the question and at the same time having the wandering betrayed, if you will, as I said sabotaged, by this negative component that confounds even the experience of mystery. And that's what he calls *die Irre*. And the essential thing about it I think is the notion of wandering about, in confusion, twice confounded. And that confusion twice confounded as a movement becomes *irren*, the verb, describing this wandering about in a confusion that is inevitable, despite best efforts, that is destructive – well, destructive but not completely so – sabotaging is the best word, I think. In any case, that's what he means by errancy or *irren*; it's a secondary component of the negativity ingredient to truth understood as *alētheia*.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand Thomas Sheehan wards us off any interpretation of *alētheia* which posits "some weird kind of agency":

"while the clearing (ἀλήθεια-1) [structural-existential *entwerfen*] enables the meaningful presence of things (ἀλήθεια -2) [existential 'taking X as Y,' *entwerfen etwas auf etwas*] it itself remains intrinsically undisclosed or 'hidden'—unknowable in its why and wherefore. There is nothing mystical about this, and one is not talking about being 'concealing *itself*' as if it possessed some weird kind of agency. We should avoid the hypostasization and quasi-personalization of the clearing that insinuates itself into Heideggerian discourse via the *faux* reflexive: 'The clearing hides *itself*.'"<sup>48</sup>

On Sheehan's interpretation whenever Heidegger claims "It is not we who . . ." he's not implying "It is that weird thing over there which . . ." Instead Heidegger is referring to the *Dasein im Mensch*, the existential-structural openness in people, a structural component we may experience, if we do, as something 'other.' "We do not come to thoughts, they come to us," as he writes in a poem.<sup>49</sup>

As a practicing psychoanalyst Richardson was a student of the thought of both Freud and Lacan. In their view the unconscious – 'the Freudian thing' – creating and sabotaging in ways similar to what Richardson describes in the words quoted above – does indeed possess "some weird kind of agency." In Lacan's slogan, "it dreams, it fails, and it laughs." The Other, says Lacan, "is to be defined as the site of speech. This is not where speech is uttered, but where it takes on the value

<sup>47</sup> *Id.* at 31:55 and following. Richardson was 90 when he reeled that off *ex tempore*.

<sup>48</sup> *Making Sense of Heidegger* 225.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Dewey: "Intelligence becomes ours in the degree in which we use it and accept responsibility for consequences. It is not ours originally or by production. 'It thinks' is a truer psychological statement than 'I think.'" John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1922) 314.

of speech, or in other words where it inaugurates the dimension of truth.” He goes on a bit and then says, “desire full stop is always the desire of the Other. Which basically means that we are always asking the Other what he desires.” After a cartwheel around ‘the neurotic’ he goes on, “The religious is not neurotic at all. He is religious. But he looks like a neurotic, because he too combines things around what really is the desire of the Other. The only difference is that, because this is an Other that does not exist [apart from language], because it is God, we need proof. So we pretend the Other is [understand it as] asking for something. Victims, for example.”<sup>50</sup>

Or, in the case of the UFO phenomenon, that it wants to grant something, to transmit something, to connect with us. Thus Experiencers and scientist-believers feel themselves to be, understand themselves as, the object of an object, of another being than themselves.

Burkert writes that “Mysteries were too fragile to survive as ‘religions’ on their own. They were options within the multiplicity of pagan polytheism, and they disappeared with it.” Pasulka’s achievement is in establishing a counter-example. At least one mystery cult survives in the modern world by deploying the concept of technology as its *operatio*. The cult of the phenomenon, again in Burkert’s words, means yet again what it did for the ancients:

“It was enough to know there were doors to a secret that might open up for those who earnestly sought it. This meant that there was a chance to break out of the enclosed and barren ways of predictable existence. Such hopes were attempts to create a context of sense in a banal, depressing, and often absurd world, providing the experience of a great rhythm in which the resonances of the individual psyche could be integrated through an amazing event of *sympatheia*.”<sup>51</sup>

DCW 8/14/2019

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<sup>50</sup> Jacques Lacan, *My Teaching* (tr. David Macey 2008) 37-39.

<sup>51</sup> *Ancient Mystery Cults* 114.