

# Gothic Psychology, The Ecological Unconscious and the Re-Enchantment of Nature

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*This post is part of a continuing examination of themes and ideas that are explored in my recent edited anthology [Greening the Paranormal: Exploring the Ecology of Extraordinary Experience](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Greening-Paranormal-Exploring-Extraordinary-Experience/dp/1786771098) (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Greening-Paranormal-Exploring-Extraordinary-Experience/dp/1786771098>) (2019). This particular post focuses on the relationship between the Gothic Psychology of the psychical researcher F.W.H. Myers (1843-1901) and eco-psychological theories of the ‘ecological unconscious’ and the ‘ecological self.’ It is also concerned with thinking around the idea that a shift in the way we conceive of the nature of the self might have practical applications in tackling the ecological crisis. It is not intended to be a definitive statement but is more a sort of open musing on possible connections and directions for future inquiry. With that in mind then, I would be very happy to hear any further thoughts, ideas or suggestions from interested readers, should there be any...*

## GOTHIC PSYCHOLOGY

The Cambridge classicist F.W.H. Myers is perhaps most famous for being one of the founding members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1882. This organisation was the first in the world to adopt a scientific approach in its investigations of “that large group of debatable phenomena designated by such terms as mesmeric, psychical and Spiritualistic” (West, 2015) – what we would today call the “paranormal.” In addition to co-founding this influential society, Myers also made a unique and pioneering contribution to the burgeoning field of psychology. The psychologist and philosopher William James (1842-1910) referred to Myers’ work as a “Gothic psychology” (Shamdasani, 1994, p. xv), because of its complex and multi-dimensional nature – Myers himself referred to it as “multiplex” (Myers, 1886). In an obituary published in the *Proceedings* of the SPR, James wrote evocatively of Myers’ romanticist approach to the study of the mind. He explains:

*...their work is like going from classic to Gothic architecture, where few outlines are pure and where uncouth forms lurk in the shadows. A mass of mental phenomena are now seen in the shrubbery beyond the parapet. Fantastic, ignoble, hardly human, or frankly nonhuman are some of these new candidates for psychological description...The world of the mind is shown as something infinitely more complex than was suspected; and whatever beauties it may still possess, it has lost at any rate the beauty of academic neatness...But despite the triumph of romanticism, psychologists as a rule have still some lingering prejudice in favour of the nobler simplicities (James, 1901).*

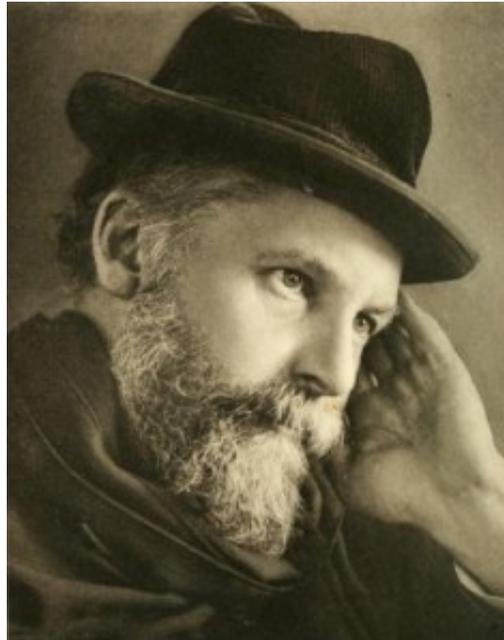
Drawing on his investigations into crisis apparitions (visions of loved ones that appear during moments of danger, or at the time of death), hysteria, automatic writing, hypnotism and spirit mediumship, amongst other varied abnormal psychological states and paranormal phenomena, Myers developed a model of the mind that consists of two separate, though interlinked, streams – the *supra-liminal* and the *sub-liminal* mind:

*The ‘conscious Self’ of each of us, as we call it, – the empiricak, the supraliminal Self....does not comprise the whole of the consciousness... within us. There exists a far more comprehensive consciousness, a profounder faculty, which for the most part remains potential only so far as regards the life of earth, but from which the consciousness and the faculty of earth-life are mere selections... (Myers,1992 , p. 13)*

The supra-liminal mind refers to those elements of our consciousness that we are fully aware of in our day-to-day waking state – our everyday stream of consciousness. The sub-liminal mind, by contrast, bubbles away just below the surface of our awareness, occasionally intruding above the threshold of consciousness in the form of extraordinary experiences of various kinds – from moments of inspiration to dreams, reveries, apparitions and possession experiences. Myers explains his conception of the subliminal as follows:

*I propose to extend the meaning of the term, so as to make it cover all that takes place beneath the ordinary threshold...not only those faint stimulations whose very faintness keeps them submerged, but much else which psychology as yet scarcely recognises; sensations, thoughts, emotions, which may be strong, definite, and independent, but which, by the original constitution of our being, seldom emerge into that supraliminal current of consciousness which we habitually identify with ourselves (Myers, 1992, pp. 13-14).*

Myers’ model of the sub-liminal mind pre-dated the more widely known ‘unconscious’ of Sigmund Freud’s (1856-1939) psychodynamic model, as well as Carl Jung’s (1875-1961) notion of the ‘collective unconscious.’ Indeed, both Freud and Jung were influenced by the earlier writings of Myers and the work of the SPR. It is fair to say, however, that Myers’ notion of the subliminal mind bears a closer resemblance to Jung’s conception of the unconscious than Freud’s. For Freud the unconscious mind was bounded within the individual, while for Jung the unconscious was understood to extend outwards – like a field – beyond the self. He wrote that “a psychological truth is...just as good and respectable a thing as a physical truth [because] no one knows what ‘psyche’ is, and one knows just as little how far into nature ‘psyche’ extends” (Jung, 2007).



F.W.H. Myers (1843-1901)

Myers, and other *fin-de-siecle* psychological thinkers – including William James, Edmund Gurney (1847-1888) and Pierre Janet (1859-1947) – argued that consciousness is divisible – that it consists of many different parts, rather than being a single ‘bounded’ entity – an individual self. Where Myers and James differed from the likes of Janet, however, was in the extent to which they thought this capacity for the self to divide was normal and healthy. Ann Taves explains that for Janet all dissociative states were evidence of pathology (a view that has come to dominate mainstream attitudes towards dissociative states in Western society), while for Myers and James certain dissociative states could be positive in the sense of giving access to gnosis, paranormal abilities and religious reveries (Taves, 2003, pp. 306-311). From the perspective of Myers’ gothic psychology, then, the divisible self is entirely natural and normal. He explains:

*I regard each man as at once profoundly unitary and almost infinitely composite, as inheriting from earthly ancestors a multiplex and ‘colonial’ organism – polyzoic and perhaps polypsychic in an extreme degree; but also as ruling and unifying that organism by a soul or spirit absolutely beyond our present analysis – a soul which has originated in a spiritual or metetherial environment... (Myers, 1992, p. 19).*

## ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The bounded, individualistic, model of the self that has dominated Western cultures for at least the last two hundred years – itself closely related to the rise of scientific rationalism and materialism – has been linked to the ecological crisis we are currently facing (Devall & Sessions, 1999). The bounded perspective on the self sees individuals as discrete islands of consciousness, disconnected from one another and from the rest of the world around us by the barrier of our skin. It is an atomistic way of thinking that – in spite of being scientifically outdated – can be said to have contributed to our growing sense of disconnection from the natural world (Mathews, 2006, p. 3), which in turn has contributed to ecological degradation through our exploitation of natural resources. Perhaps a different model of mind, consciousness and self is required if we hope to reverse some of the damage that has been done.

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1912-2009), founder of the deep ecology movement, developed the concept of the *ecological self*, which – I am suggesting here – could be conceived as another example of the expanded – or dividual – model of the self that emerges from Myers' gothic psychology. Naess suggested that, through the process of what he called “self-realization”, we will ultimately move away from egoic (bounded, individual) conceptions of the self towards an ecological self, the boundaries of which are understood to be porous and to extend outwards into the natural world (which also extends into the self). Naess does not give an explicit definition of the ecological self but does offer a brief sentence: “The ecological self of a person is that with which this person identifies.” He further explains, “This key sentence (rather than a definition) about the self shifts the burden of clarification from the term ‘self’ to that of ‘identification,’ or rather ‘process of identification’” (Naess, 1995, p. 227). Thus, the ecological self emerges when we come to identify the environment with ourselves – i.e. begin to understand the self as constituted from many parts, some of which are beyond the confines of our physical body – to the extent that we realise that conservation of the natural world is simultaneously an act of self-preservation. A similar conclusion is drawn in Freya Mathews' work on *The Ecological Self* (2006).

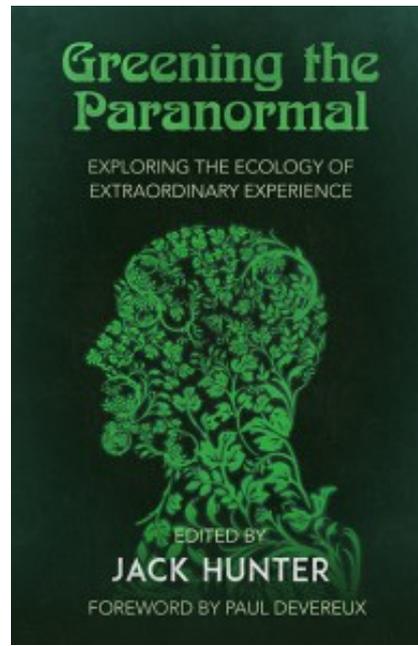
An ecological perspective on consciousness would see consciousness – just like any other element of an ecosystem – as being connected to all other elements of the system through various modes of interaction and relationship. Indeed, the science of ecology specifically highlights the complex connections between phenomena in the natural world, from interactions between species within an ecosystem, to interactions between ecosystems in the wider global system. The ecological perspective is an interconnected one. In essence, then, the recognition of the ecological self is a realisation that there is no solid, impermeable boundary between the self and the ecosystem; the self is deeply embedded within, and part of, the wider ecological system, and is connected to all other aspects of it (Mathews, 2006, pp. 129-133). Indeed, we could even take this further, drawing on Myers' conception of the 'polypsychic' self, and suggest that the self is a sort of ecosystem in itself.

In attempting to delineate precisely what is meant by the term 'ecopsychology,' Theodore Roszak (1933-2011) argued that "[t]he core of the mind is the ecological unconscious." This, he explains, consists of "the living record of cosmic evolution, tracing back to distant initial conditions in the history of time" – an unconscious that connects us to all other life on Earth (Roszak, 1992). Could there be a connection between this conceptualisation of the ecological unconscious and Myers' notion of the subliminal mind and the multiplex self? In a manner similar to that highlighted by Freud, Roszak suggests that it is the repression of the ecological unconscious that has led to both the rise of widespread psychological distress in contemporary society, and to our culture's destructive attitude towards the natural world. The goal of ecopsychology, then, "is to awaken the inherent sense of environmental reciprocity that lies within the ecological unconscious...[and] to heal the more fundamental alienation between the person and the natural environment" (Roszak, 1992).

## SUPER-NATURE

Taking Myers' lead, one approach to re-awakening a sense of 'environmental reciprocity' could be to re-engage with the extraordinary, mystical and paranormal. Just as Myers thought that these extraordinary states could give an

insight into the nature of consciousness, so too might they give an insight into nature itself and our relationship with it. Indeed, there are a number of ecological threads that run through and connect the divergent strands of the paranormal, many of which are explored in the aforementioned *Greening the Paranormal* (2019). For the sake of brevity, and the limited purposes of this post, I will highlight some of the key themes explored in the book.



In my introductory chapter in the book I attempted to put forward the suggestion that the worldview implied by the paranormal – taken as a whole – suggests a cosmology of interconnection, and a cosmos populated by numerous different forms of mind and intelligence – gods, spirits, faeries, cryptids and other supernatural beings – of which human consciousness is just one variety. There are echoes here of James’ assertion that Myers’ gothic psychology also incorporates the ‘nonhuman’ world. There are also resonances in this idea with what we might term an ‘animistic’ worldview. Scholar of Religious Studies Graham Harvey explains that:

*Animists are people who recognise that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others. Animism is lived out in various ways that are all about learning to act respectfully (carefully and constructively) towards and among other persons. Persons are beings, rather than objects, who are animated and social towards others (even if they are not always sociable). Animism...is more accurately understood as being concerned with learning how to be a good person in respectful relationships with other persons (Harvey, 2005, p. xi).*

Theodore Roszak even went so far as to suggest that animism's emphasis on the formation of "right relationships" with other-than-human and non-human persons might have "a proven ecological utility," in that "it disciplines the relationship of humans to their environment, imposing an ethical restraint upon exploitation and abuse" (Roszak, 1993, p. 84).

In addition to the denizens of the paranormal ecosystem, psi phenomena, such as psychokinesis (PK) and telepathy (a term coined by Myers) – if real – also appear to embed consciousness and the self into wider networks of physical and non-physical communication with other elements of the system. The Global Consciousness Project (<http://noosphere.princeton.edu/>), for example, which collects data from random number generators in laboratories around the world, seems to suggest that when human consciousness is collectively focused it exerts an influence on the physical world. For instance, during times of global catastrophe (e.g. following disasters), or periods of intense unity and solidarity (e.g. the recent global climate strikes – and likely also the current coronavirus pandemic), the random number generators stop being random, and move towards pattern and coherence (Nelson & Bancel, 2011). Drawing on such ideas, and the wider evidence and implications of parapsychology, ecopsychologists Kerr & Key have suggested "that the human psyche is woven into nature in the same way that psi is interwoven into a larger emotional and physical context" (Kerr & Key, 2011, p. 52).

To briefly summarise, if the world truly is radically more alive than we have tended to give it credit for in the post-modern, post-industrial Western world – and if we are embedded into this system at a subliminal levels – then we are right to call the Earth a “haunted planet” – a term coined by the Fortean writer John Keel in his 1971 book of the same name. Waking up to this expanded view of reality and our place within it – to the gothic complexity that arises from the interaction of the many different forms of consciousness and intelligence that surround us, and with which we are constantly engaging in relationships (whether we are aware of it or not) – may be understood through the lens of ‘re-enchantment’ (for an interesting series of articles on “super-nature” see Timothy Grieve Carlson’s posts on the [Paracultures](https://www.paracultures.com/post/supernature-1) (<https://www.paracultures.com/post/supernature-1>) blog). In recent years there has been a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the dominant materialist paradigms of academia, which leave very little room for the mythic, mystical and imaginal in scholarship. Re-enchantment offers an alternative perspective. In their recent edited book *Re-Enchanting the Academy* (2017), Angela Voss and Simon Wilson write:

*To feel enchanted is to step through a hidden portal into another way of seeing, into a new reality, where the reasonable, the certain, the measurable, and the predictable give way to the awesome, the wonderful, the delightful, the paradoxical, and the uncertain – and perhaps even the longing of the soul for some other kind of life beyond the exigencies of the everyday (Voss & Wilson, 2017, p. 13).*

Myers’ gothic psychology, and his willingness to explore beyond the confines of the dominant models may point us in the direction of a new way of conceiving of ourselves and our relationship with the world around us – and may go some way towards enabling a re-enchantment of the natural world. In the epilogue to his posthumously published *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (1992) Myers gives a hint of what this wider perspective entails, and where it might lead us:

*...I mean no unreal opposition or forced divorcement of sacred and secular, of flesh and spirit...as our link with other spirits strengthens, as the life of the organism pours more fully through the individual cell, we shall feel love more ardent, wider wisdom, higher joy; perceiving that this organic unity of Soul, which forms the inward aspect of the telepathic law, is in itself the Order of the Cosmos, the Summation of Things (Myers, 1992, p. 289)*

At this time of social, psychological and ecological crisis these ideas could represent both interesting and practical angles for further research and exploration as we continue forward into the twenty-first century.

*Note:* If you are interested, you can find more of my work on similar ideas [here](https://www.dailygrail.com/2020/01/natures-spirits-on-religious-experience-and-ecological-participation/) (<https://www.dailygrail.com/2020/01/natures-spirits-on-religious-experience-and-ecological-participation/>).

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## Biography

Dr. Jack Hunter is an anthropologist exploring the borderlands of ecology, religion and the paranormal. He lives in the hills of Mid-Wales with his family. He is an Honorary Research Fellow with the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre, and a Tutor with the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture, both at the University of Wales Trinity



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To find out more about his work visit [www.jack-hunter.webstarts.com](http://www.jack-hunter.webstarts.com) (<http://www.jack-hunter.webstarts.com>).

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Psychology. Science & Technology. Sex & Gender. There is an undeniable neutrality running throughout Nature's easy to imagine Her quietly laughing to Herself as we try to project our own limited narratives of meaning and morality onto Her, or when we try to imagine ourselves as being somehow separate from the natural world. For those who care enough to notice, Mother Nature can show us the secrets of Creation itself. They can be found in the sound of leaves rustling in the breeze, in the delicate architecture of a flower, in the feeling of warm sunshine pressing upon your skin. Hearing the voice of Spirit echoing through the natural world ' Gothic Psychology, The Ecological Unconscious and the Re-Enchantment of Nature' - Gothic Nature Journal Blog, 26th March 2020. 'Nature's Spirits: Religious Experience and Ecological Participation' - Daily Grail, 15th January 2020. 'Lovecraft, the Psychedelic Experience and the Problem of Religious Language' - X-Files of the Humanities, 10th March 2017. 'Mysterium Horrendum: Exploring Otto's Concept of the Numinous in Stoker, Machen and Lovecraft' - X-Files of the Humanities, 23rd October 2016. Just as Myers thought that these extraordinary states could give an insight into the nature of consciousness, so too might they give an insight into nature itself and our relationship with it.