The Impossibility of Ian Watson's *Miracle Visitors*

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Miracle Visitors appeared in 1978, the last in a line of extraordinary visionary sf by Ian Watson – beginning with *The Embedding* in 1973, certainly one of the most intellectually and aesthetically ambitious sf novels ever published, followed by *The Jonah Kit, The Martian Inca,* and *Alien Embassy*. *Miracle Visitors* is, among other things, the UFO novel to end all UFO novels.

Conveying the plot of a Watson novel is never easy. Let's give it a try. I'll quote from Adam Roberts's stab at it. (By the way, Roberts has given some of the best readings of Watson's early fictions on his now-defunct old blog, Punkadiddle, and his new one, Sibilant Fricative.)

> Comely young Michael Peacocke is abducted by a sexy alien in a glowing UFO over the Yorkshire moors as a schoolboy, he recovers his memory of this encounter only later, under hypnosis by John Deacon, a scientist working with a "Consciousness Research Group" at the University of Granton. Deacon becomes convinced that he has developed a new explanation for the larger UFO phenomenon, as a new mode of consciousness rather than as actual alien spaceships from other stars; and investigating further he himself starts to see unidentified objects – a flying monster, a glowing ball of light that visits his house and decapitates his pet dog, a various other things. Deacon, Peacocke, and an ex US Air Force pilot called Shriver, who specializes in hunting UFOs, find themselves following an increasingly complicated extraterrestrial spoor. Peacocke's girlfriend Suzie sees devils, and is harassed by some fairly incompetent Men in Black. Deacon is mysteriously transported to Egypt, where he meets a Sufi holy man. Peacocke himself is approached by bizarre-looking herbivorous aliens from Cassiopeia, who tell him that Deacon's theories are right, UFOs are a kind of materialized collective hallucination from the spiritus mundi, but that they, the Gebrandi, are not manifestations, but are actual extraterrestrial beings, come to warn Earth of the terrible danger they are in, of which the UFOs are a symptom.

Roberts's heroic attempt at summary stops there – and here's probably why. He neglects to tell us that these Gebrandi are tortoise-like beings encased in Michelin Man spacesuits, who have established a base on the dark side of the Moon, to which they abduct certain humans in automobiles that they retrofit to fly in space. Mike Peacocke's is a cherry red Thunderbird. They do this to send them back to Earth to place biosensitive devices on lei-lines to detect perturbations in the Earth's life force – these usually indicate the onset of the UFO Phenomenon. Mike returns to the Earth to do this job; then he takes Deacon and Shriver with him in his gravity-defying T-bird to show them the Moon base. But when they arrive they find the base flattened and destroyed. They themselves are then almost destroyed by a tremendously dense dark shadow entity. They barely manage to escape to Earth, but the darkness follows them. They crash in the Nevada desert; the car is smashed by the entity. Deacon is absorbed by it, he becomes a UFO, realizes that the destructive events were caused by him in the process of self-differentiation occurring according to a timespace continuum different and more comprehensive than the normal prosaic state of consciousness. He comes to an egoless understanding that human history is filled with collective phenomena that remain unexplained, indeed unexplainable by material science because they are essentially and necessarily inexplicable. They are prods to consciousness that draw it toward a full self-realization of Cosmic Being and Awareness – an awareness that itself can never come into being, since conscious being itself is a process of becoming driven by a vortex, a suction of mind to more and more comprehensive and complete understanding – which of course can never be complete because incompleteness is what drives awareness. The end.

This summary gives a bit of the flavor of the book, in that it shows its plot is almost unrelieved in its production of relevant information. It is sort of Wagnerian in its continuous melody. (Watson has said he was listening to Wagner's music at the time we was writing the book.) As a summary it also sounds like a particularly extreme example of psychedelically inflected sf – a sort of dumpster of New Age motifs, oh so Seventies! And on first pass, one does get the feeling of one damn weird thing happening after another, relieved (and believe me I do not really mean relieved) by infodumps about hypnosis, Sufi cosmology, magic, Jung's theories about UFOs, Tibetan tulpas, *und so weiter*. And its epigraph is a quote from Blake's Four Zoas:

> …aghast the Children of men
>
> Stood on the infinite Earth and saw these visions in the air…
>
> But many stood silent, and busied in their families.
>
> And many said, "We see no visions in the darksome air,
>
> "Measure the course of that sulphur orb that lights the darksome air,
>
> Set stations on this breeding Earth and let us by and sell."
>
> Mighty was the draught of voidness to draw existence in.

One thing you learn reading a lot of Watson is not to think you are smarter than he is, or that he is just churning out copy – even dazzling copy – like an Oxford-educated Philip Dick. Watson has a far more ambitious intellectual and artistic project. Watson's silly dumpster turns out not to be a dumpster at all. The discipline is serious and enormous, it gives you brain ache, but after some time you get it; it's like flying to the Moon is a cherry-red T-Bird with alien tortoises as a mystic prod – the cartoon as the appropriate vehicle of higher knowledge for our time.

Watson's early work – especially *Miracle Visitors* – is very Seventies in its use of countercultural and quasi-mystical motifs – an sf-continuum that begins with Zelazny's *Lord of Light* in the late 60s, though Dick's middle period, Le Guin's *Lathe of Heaven* (about which Watson has written perceptively), on to Doris Lessing's *Shikasta*, in which, like *Miracle Visitors,* Sufi cosmology and UFOs play central roles. The prominence of non-hard scientific motifs in *Miracle Visitors* isn't as surprising as the centrality of UFOs.

It is well known in the sf community that UFOs are not much loved as themes. It may surprise most casual readers that that unlike sf film there are very few works of sf literature in which UFOs play an important role, except for satire. There is a lot of debate about why this should be the case. It probably has to do with the volume of pseudo-scientific nonsense used to explain UFO experiences, so different from sf's reverence for speculative extrapolation from known scientific knowledge. But another reason may be that UFOs have been observed by so many people in so many places, with so many experiences – from pilots' radar data to abduction experiences -- yet no truly exhaustive, trustworthy scientific explanations have ever been proffered. The pseudo-scientific explanations may sound like nonsense, but so do the scientific ones.

I'd like to digress for a moment and tell you about some experience I've had with this subject. They aren't abductions or sightings of UFOs. But I think it's justified because once a Watson story clicks with you, it is a kind of Rorschach test. If Dick can make you feel deranged when he really gets going, Watson can make you feel like you are having a vision. I have not witnessed anything like UFOs, but I know the literature and have the videos. For several years I taught a freshman composition course, and at our university these courses are supposed to prepare students for research and writing in the various disciplines they will encounter in the liberal arts curriculum. It is a challenging task – making them familiar with literary interpretation, scientific reports, and sociological analysis. Truth to tell, most of my colleagues will focus on one or another mode of discourse. Who wants to teach MLA protocols, Chicago style, and APA formats all in the same course? Well, I do. So to find a subject in which writing would come to the foreground rather than truth claims, I chose the theme of UFOs. Students watched powerful documentary accounts by abductees, read John Mack's careful explanations (which meshed quite well with Watson's earlier ones), a dozen scientific articles in a special issue of *Psychological Inquiry* devoted to the question, and Jung's famous little book on the subject. To the frustration of my students, who always wanted to know what I *really* believed, I would not say more than "something is going on, and I don't know what it is." The students themselves, few of whom had ever seen a UFO but some of whom were sure their roommates were aliens, underwent volatile changes of mind. Some of the most skeptical at the outset of the course were converted to belief. Some of the believers became skeptics. The point of the course was ultimately to show the methods of analysis and persuasion in different discourses, so these outcomes I considered salutary.

By far the most interesting, and decisive, of the texts – for me as a teacher and a person – were the psychological papers. Written in the dry, footnote encrusted language of academic psychology, their authors – always multiple authors – argued that abductees were suffering from night terrors and sleep paralysis, or fantasy-proneness, deeply embedded sadomasochism, the subliminal influence of media, and other debilities I can't recall. There were one or two literally countercultural accounts by Mack and his students, arguing that whatever the abductees were experiencing, it could probably never be explained with positive science. Abductees' experiences had to be treated as real for therapeutic purposes (this was Mack's audacious and brave stance as a distinguished professor of psychiatry at Harvard), but as an experience of another reality. These Mack-associated writers would connect to transcultural observations of Native American vision quests, Tibetan Buddhist meditation, and other visionary experiences.

My point in using these articles – which I divided among students and assigned as debating positions – was to show how scientific writing works when scientists do not know exactly what they are writing about. I had no intention of critiquing the scientific enterprise – far from it --, I just felt that if you can learn how to write scientifically about UFO phenomena, you have learned how scientific rhetoric works. The experience proved decisive. Students went into a buzzing tailspin. For the scientifically minded, the arbitrariness and dismissiveness of the academic psychologists was dispiriting. For the passionate believers who had never heard a rational explanation offered, the scientific rhetoric was calming. For me, the evidence became clear: UFOs are something rationalists just don't get.

If I had been more honest with my students I would have admitted that I kinda, sorta buy Jung's notion that UFOs are projections from a collective unconscious, that they are mandala-like quasi-materialized symbols that appear to masses of people at times of collective crisis, and they have done so throughout history. They are not strictly material, so they can't be studied empirically. But they are not just hallucinations (whatever those are – we don't know that, either). They are insistent, materialized questions.

I have practiced meditation a long while – on my knees, spinning, jumping, and on my rear end. Meditation can produce visions. I haven't seen a UFO in those visions, but I have had extremely vivid and colorful dreams of them. I've taken psychedelic trips and returned from them with knowledge that has served me well in practical life. What can I say? I believe in higher dimensions of being, if not the stories told about them. I am a trained, guild-certified hypnotherapist, though I no longer practice. One of the things we learn early in training is that there are there kinds of cases we should avoid: repressed childhood sexual abuse, Satanic ritual abuse, and UFO abductions. The reason given is that once one reaches the putatively repressed memories, one is at a level where actual physical experience and hypnotic imagination cannot be distinguished.

Most hypnotic training familiarizes the student with six so-called levels of trance. In training, one has to experience and induce those six, in the deepest of which the subject sees phenomena that aren't real, but are suggested by the hypnotist. But Watson notes in *Miracle Visitors* that some researchers believe there may be anywhere from 30 to 130 distinct levels of trance-awareness – the problem being that it is very difficult to control them from our level of normal consciousness, or for the experiencer to bring verbal knowledge back from them. Anyone returning from a psychedelic trip or even a vivid dream knows the feeling of re-entering normal consciousness is like re-entering Earth atmosphere, shedding clothes or heat shields, gaining control but losing knowledge. That is common in deep hypnosis. Many teachers – and I was fortunate to have one of these – believe that self-hypnosis is a good aid to the expansion of consciousness and deeper feeling. But the problem always remains: how to articulate and communicate the point at which this becomes moot?

Miracle Visitors takes these things as givens. More, in Adam Roberts's words, it takes the uncertainty of the UFO experience not only as experientially radical, but ontologically radical as well. The uncertainty is not just an intracranial spur to expand an individual's sense of awareness, it's part of the way things work – really. Here's where the Blake quote comes in. Blake's Swedenborgian vision involves the ever more expansive and comprehensive awareness of a voidness, through a vortex created from the Void, sucking the imagination up to higher levels, always imagining and creating at higher and higher levels of self-awareness – but in a perpetually incomplete state that is itself delight and irritation, the principle – if such a superego word is applicable -- of divine creation. In such an uncompleteable, indeterminate world, every actual thing is a metaphor, itself incomplete, two terminals producing an arc of energy that marks a dangerous, vitalizing gap, always to be bridged, never to be bridged.

This vortex is made from perpetual self-division seeking its reintegration. The amazing, dare I say sublime, design of *Miracle Visitors* is that Watson uses these ideas as his aesthetic pattern. The story itself is a vortex of divisions producing constant plot-surprises – sometimes called "miracles," after Sufi teachings – that the story, the reader, and the writer are compelled to complete or explain. As David Wittenberg has noted a propos time travel narratives, we strive to conserve the right story – but here the right story is not the consolidated, expected status quo of consensus reality – it's a never-ceasing quest to understand mysterious phenomena that Creation throws at us to make itself understand itself better through us.

This is not the only novel in which Watson uses an ostensibly abstract, unmanageably big metaphor – if that's the right word – as a general design principle that organizes almost everything in it. For my money, *The Embedding*, in my opinion Watson's best book, does it even better than MV. It is not easy to write a novel based on the Vortex – it's no wonder that Blake is so important for Watson. But in *The Embedding* Watson depicts a richly varied world – with sacred-fungus ingesting Amazonian Indians, aliens searching for a vanished civilization of teachers by collecting brains of monolingual speakers throughout the galaxy, linguistic experimenters raising children to learn radically different kinds of language, guerilla wars of Brazilian insurgents against US-client, IMF-directed governments – in which the theme of embeddedness is performed in so many ways, on so many levels of the text, that it seems impossible to see as a whole.

So, how is this sf? Watson loves traditional sf motifs and devices: aliens, spaceships, intelligent viruses, time machines -- which he treats as natural adjuncts to the esoteric and visionary: astral travel, Tantra, Sufi vision, the Gaia hypothesis, and so on. Most relevant here is a concept that Watson borrows from Sufism that pervades his work. The mind has many levels and domains, and each one has its logic, though that logic may not be transferrable to other levels. If each has its logic, each should have its science – the appropriate methods for understanding the reality, seeing the component and contingent natures, and spurring the need to understand from a higher perspective. In this sense MV – and indeed all of Watson's early novels – are experiments in writing sf based on those other sciences.