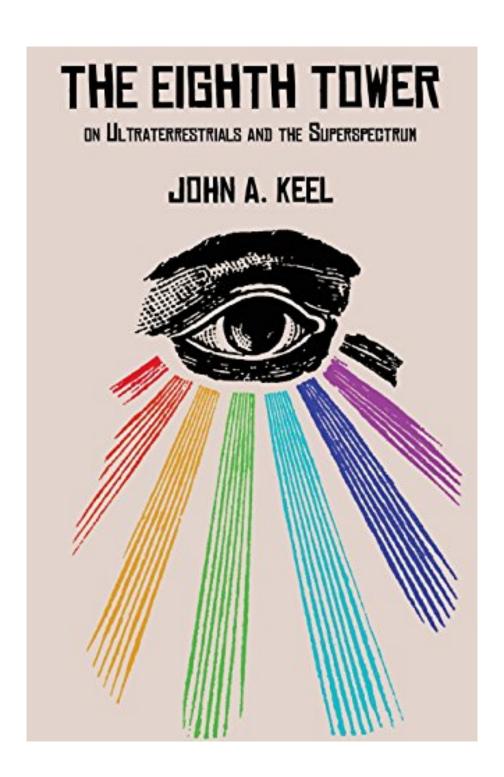


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"Whoever--or Whatever--They Are, They've Got Us Surrounded"

By The Wingchair Critic

In his afterword to the 1991 IllumiNet Press edition of 'The Mothman Prophecies,' author John Keel reported, "fifty percent of the original manuscript was edited out by faceless editors in tiny cubicles," material which Keel then "salvaged" and "reshaped" into 'The Eighth Tower' (originally published in hardcover in 1976 by Saturday Review Press, with a Signet paperback following shortly afterward).

The late John A. Keel (1930-2009) was a highly influential investigator of the 'paranormal' with a special interest in unidentified flying object (UFOs). Keel's stronger books--'Operation Trojan Horse' (1970) and first-hand narrative 'The Mothman Prophecies' (1975)--are actually books of speculative physics and the possibilities inherent in our complex universe.

However, Keel also turned out a fair amount of hackwork, like 1988's 'Disneyland of the Gods,' which ultimately only tarnished his already controversial reputation in the fairly small but broad field of Fortean studies.

The ideas which compose the first two sections of 'The Eighth Tower' are fairly easy to summarize and understand. Keel describes and defines the electromagnetic spectrum and the limitations of the human mind and senses to comprehend, interact with, harness and manipulate it. Keel then posits "a hypothetical superspectrum" in which the electromagnetic spectrum is wholly contained.

This second spectrum, he says, is "composed of energies known to exist but that cannot be accurately be measured with present-day instruments...it is a shadowy world of energies which produce well-observed effects, particularly on biological organisms (namely people). This superspectrum is the source of all paranormal manifestations from extrasensory perception (ESP) to flying saucers, little green men, and tall, hairy monsters. It is hard to pin down scientifically because it is extradimensional, existing outside our own space-time continuum yet influences everything within our reality."

To illustrate the scope of this hypothetical second energy spectrum, Keel uses the same analogy he used in 'Operation Trojan Horse.' When a boy with a microscope "peers at a drop of water on a slide, he is, in a sense, looking into another world quite separate from his own reality. In 30 seconds of his time, he can watch the entire life cycle of a microbe--its birth, its multiplying, and its death. Because of its very small size, if the microbe had a sense of time, those 30 seconds would seem like 30 of our years..the microbe swimming about in his drop of water knows nothing about the universe outside his immediate environment, and the boy exists in a whole other different dimension."

We and our world are the microbe and the drop of water; the superspectrum and its forces are represented by the boy, who exists almost, but not entirely, on another plane of reality altogether. Keel gives the name "ultraterrestrials" to the unknowable agencies or entities he hypothesizes may exist on the vaster planes of the superspectrum.

Thus, the brightly colored blobs of light seen at night, which blink in and out of our skies and are visible one moment but gone the next, and which we call 'UFOs,' may be, Keel says, no more than unknowable 'objects' briefly entering our reality from a much vaster realm of existence, just as the boy in the analogy could prick an amoeba with the tip of a pin and then withdraw it. The amoeba, if it could comprehend and think, would have absolutely no context whatsoever for accurately understanding the object it briefly encountered.

What we call UFOs "are extradimensional, not extraterrestrial" Keel says, and what we perceive as our future "already exists in the superspectrum," just as the entire life cycle of the amoeba, which may seem like the equivalent of 30 years to the microorganism on the slide, may only be several minutes of time to the boy.

What mankind has called ghosts, satyrs, vampires, trolls, lake monsters, and hairy wild men throughout history may be little more than inadequate efforts by these higher agencies to communicate with human beings--or to convey, however ineffectively, a specific message to us. Are UFOs, leprechauns, and the dragons of ancient China and Britain little more than failed commercials or telegrams? As Keel stresses in 'Operation Trojan Horse,' paradoxically, the intelligent boy with the microscope cannot communicate with the microbe, despite his vast superiority on all apparent levels. Thus, the 'higher intelligence' has to resort to other, more primitive stratagems. But even then, how can the boy ever be fully assured he has succeeded in communicating with such a basic form of life?

Keel's theory of what might be called a 'macroverse' was not a new one. In the specific area of Ufology,

scholar Meade Layne (1882-1961) theorized as early as 1950 that UFOs were interdimensional ships created and driven by "Etherians," beings remarkably like Keel's ultraterrestrials. Even Dr. Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel, 1904-1991) published a children's book utilizing the broad idea of a 'macroverse' in 'Horton Hears a Who!' (1954).

Ultimately, the question of whether or not Keel's formulation of a 'superspectrum' as such has any hard scientific merit is a question best left to contemporary physicists.

But Keel should have stopped while he was ahead. The book's final section is by far its weakest, as Keel attempts to apply his "superspectrum" theories in specific detail to prehistory and early recorded history, and stumbles so badly that the volume degenerates into, to use a term Keel likes, "jabberwocky."

Here, Keel launches into his clumsy argument regarding "the ancient gods," whom he believes were either the 'authentic' entities from the superspectrum that he calls "ultraterrestials" or their artificially-created, robot-like proxies and messengers.

These "gods," he says, mated with human women and produced a race of demi-gods whose rule over the people of the Earth was, in turn, eventually usurped by their priests, who actually understood the "magical" workings of the superspectrum in a manner the demi-gods did not. Why did Keel attempt to tie his superspectrum theories to Earth's prehistory at all? Was Keel influenced for the worse by the enormous commercial popularity of Erich von Däniken's 'Chariots of the Gods?' in the late 1960s and early 1970s?

Keel then moves on to the actual 'Eighth Tower' of the title, but never properly defines it. The closest he comes to definitions are "a kind of electronic time capsule that continues to function purposelessly millions of years later" which was originally built by "super earthlings," or "Titans,' five million years ago, and "an energy transmitter" created by the same race to "broadcast to their biochemical slaves on biological frequencies" which has somehow survived the annihilation of its creators but is still functioning haphazardly today, so that it is, at present, a "senile machine playing out the end game."

The specific idea of an "eighth tower" as such comes from William Seabrook's 'Adventures in Arabia' (1927), from which Keel quotes: "Stretching across Asia, from Northern Manchuria, through Tibet, west through Persia, and ending in Kurdistan, was a chain of seven towers, on isolated mountaintops, and in each of these towers sat continually a priest of Satan, who, by 'broadcasting' occult vibrations controlled the destinies of the world for evil."

Keel's 'Eighth Tower' may be an actual construct or a metaphor, a "supercomputer" like the black monolith in '2001: A Space Odyssey,' or, in some inexplicable manner, literally the conscious 'mind' of the planet Earth itself (Ivan T. Sanderson's theory, Keel reports). Keel's 'Eighth Tower' theories also sound suspiciously like some of those expressed by Nigel Kneale in his screenplay for both the British television serial and 1967 Hammer film production of 'Quatermass and the Pit' (the latter released as 'Five Million Years to Earth' in the United States, perhaps significantly, since the term "five million years" crops up repeatedly in 'The Eighth Tower').

Keel's vague 'tower' also seems uncomfortably close in concept to the 'Control System' theorized by his acquaintance and correspondent Dr. Jacques Vallee in 'The Invisible College' (1975) and later books. But Vallee, a scientist, was insightful enough to leave his concept as sketchy and as broad as possible, and to present it in less melodramatic terms. It is well known that Vallee and his mentor and associate, the well-respected Dr. J. Allen Hynek, shared ideas with Keel, but which of them had the 'Control System'/'Eighth Tower' idea first?

Keel also compares his 'Eighth Tower' to renowned psychiatrist C. G. Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, but if Keel intended his concept to be something akin to Jung's, then Keel has done a very poor job of describing it indeed. Keel calls both Jung's collective unconscious and his own 'Eighth Tower' each writer's "personal devil theory," but in what sense is the very loose 'Eighth Tower" hypothesis a "devil theory?" In what sense was Jung's collective unconscious a "devil theory"? What exactly does Keel mean by a "devil theory" and "personal devil theory"?

Jung's oceanic collective unconscious was a vital, dynamic and 'positive' concept which he was rightly proud of and made the basis of all his later work, including his extensive study of alchemy. Plainly stated, in addition to the "personal unconscious" in each individual, Jung described the collective unconscious as "a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents." Though the collective unconscious was also the repository of the archetypes, those primordial 'motivators' of the psyche which Jung believed were semiautonomous and partially controlling when constellated, both the collective unconscious and the archetypes were 'beyond good and evil' as such. It is critical to keep in mind that both of these theories, each essential to Jungian psychology as a whole, were grounded directly in the biological life of man.

So why does Keel blithely demonize Jung's collective unconscious and construe it as a force of darkness? Had Keel actually read Jung's admittedly difficult work, or merely skimmed it?

"You and I are biochemical robots controlled by the powerful Eighth Tower. Our brains are programmed like computers, and many of us are suddenly and completely reprogrammed at some point in our adult lives," he writes. Our "free will," he says, is an illusion, and we are really nothing more than "slaves."

As others have noted, Keel often seems mentally agitated as well as paranoid in the book's final pages. A temporary fit of paranoia following a seeming 'paranormal' or other highly unusual experience is understandable, but perversely formulating an entire cosmology with this kind of claustrophobic paranoia at its center is another, especially when that cosmology is rooted in a series of radically speculative and rather hokey details about the state of life on Earth five million years ago (and Keel happily jumps from one megaannum to another as if he were discussing months, years or decades instead of million-year periods). In his excellent 'Daimonic Reality' (1994), author Patrick Harpur, a Keel enthusiast who wisely ignores those parts of Keel's oeuvre which deal with ancient history, calls Keel "close to madness" during those specific periods of his life when he was aggressively investigating the UFO mystery.

Instead of providing theoretical answers, the last section leaves the reader with almost nothing but questions which Keel himself has raised and failed to answer or further address: if Keel's "super earthlings" of five million years ago were capable of creating an apparatus of mass control like the Eighth Tower, why was it necessary for ultraterrestrial "gods" from the superspectrum to materialize on Earth a million years later at all? Are Keel's "super earthlings," who "flashed overhead in wonderful flying machines" and his later ultraterrestrial "gods" one and the same type of entity? If so, why doesn't Keel simply say so? Who and what were the "nonhuman culture of giants" that "once populated the Earth"? Who were "the Watchers" Keel suddenly refers to, who "the Guardians"? Are Keel's "Guardians" the same entities discussed in Meade Layne's 'Coming of the Guardians' of 1954?

As it nears its end, the book begins to read like sketchy notes for a pulp science fiction novel not unlike Edgar Rice Burroughs' 'A Princess of Mars' (1917) or an extended fantasy like J. R. R. Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings' (1954-1955). Readers familiar with H.P. Lovecraft's shadowy 'Great Old Ones' may also perceive

them lurking awkwardly behind Keel's "ultraterrestrials."

Keel briefly mentions Richard Shaver and Shaver's hollow earth/'detrimental robot' pseudo-mythology, and at points sounds as preposterous and wholly implausible as Shaver did even at his best. Sentences concerning "super earthlings" who "flashed overhead in wonderful flying machines" could have come straight from one of Shaver's early 1940s stories about 'Mutant Mion' in Amazing Stories.

Here, as in other of his weaker books, once Keel begins discussing the "ancient" world and the "ancient gods," "demi-gods" and "priest-kings" he thought ruled over it, his ideas become muddled, his sense of the vastness of time collapses, and his writing, if intended as nonfiction, becomes so strained and incoherent that it is impossible to follow or respect.

Due to its contradictory and taxing last section, taken as a whole, 'The Eighth Tower' is a poorly argued mishmash of ideas and thus stands closer to Keel's amateurish hackwork than it does to the very best of his writing. Had Keel retained only the first and second sections edited out of 'The Mothman Prophecies,' and abandoned or heavily condensed the third, a far stronger work would have resulted, though the former option would have necessitated giving the book a different title altogether.

It is also worth noting that almost every good idea explored here was already presented half a decade earlier in better form in 'Operation Trojan Horse,' where Keel wisely left his conclusions open-ended and tentative.

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This book should be reissued!

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