

THE STRAW MAN

DEFENSE:

KEPHAS RESPONDS TO OLD BALLS ON FIRE

What follows is a belated response to the article, “Old Balls on Fire: In Defense of Whitley Strieber,” written in 2008. The article refers to my original, now-redundant version of the Strieber piece, “Through a Fractured Glass, Darkly,” as it first appeared at the forum Rigorous Intuition, under the pseudonym Aeolus Kephas.

Quotes from this original piece (almost entirely taken from “Old Balls of Fire”) will be attributed to “AK.” Since the author of “Old Balls on Fire” chose not to put their name on the work, I will attribute quotes to “OBOF.” For simplicity’s sake I will put all AK quotes in **bold**, OBOF quotes in *italics*, and leave the main commentary of this current article unformatted.

AK: “a picture emerges of Strieber as the John the Baptist of the alien paradigm . . . he is clearly a man with a mission (as he himself freely admits). His mission, as ambassador to otherworldly beings, is to help humanity prepare for contact and communication with them.”

OBOF: “Kephas suggests that Strieber is advancing himself as somehow uniquely positioned and endowed to advance an alien cause, whatever that may be. But this is not borne out by the facts.”

Strieber has, on repeat occasions, described himself in these terms.

OBOF’s counter argument is that: “On his radio broadcast, Strieber routinely interviews or features other abductees. . . . Can Strieber really be advancing himself as the special harbinger bar none of the alien reality while also advancing countless others who are also part of an abduction phenomenon?”

Is a prophet less a prophet for having disciples, or more so?

OBOF: AK “makes the absurd claim that Strieber is misinterpreting his own experiences. This shyster’s trick is profoundly disingenuous. One can after all misinterpret data; but one cannot misinterpret one’s own experience.”

Is this accurate? OBOF cites the example of someone who believes they are in love, saying they can misinterpret the girl’s feelings but not their own. I wonder if he has never looked back on a past infatuation and reinterpreted “love” as “obsession”? If he has not, then he is probably in the minority. We misinterpret our experiences all the time. In fact it’s the rule—as people as diverse as Descartes, Freud, and P.K. Dick have gone to great lengths to argue.

More tellingly, in a mother.strangled podcast from Nov 6th (around the 25-minute mark), Gefunden Trouvé discusses (with the apparent author of OBOF) a theory of Ken Wilbur’s about how mystical and transcendent experiences can easily be misinterpreted. “When you come back from that altered state,”

Gefunden argues, “your interpretation of the state will be governed by the stage you’re at. So if you’re at a pre-rational, egocentric stage of development, your interpretation of that state will be narcissistic, it will be antisocial, it will confirm your fundamentalism rather than shattering it.”

This is as close to AK’s contention about Strieber as makes no difference. Yet while OBOF calls it “a shyster’s trick” in the AK piece, on the mother.strangled podcast, he punctuates Gefunden’s speech with a burst of somber classical music, as if to underline its profound significance.

What’s more, OBOF admits that Strieber’s interpretation shifts and changes, thereby affirming that his interpretation of his experience is anything but definite: *“Instead of a nicely packaged objet d’art dropped in the critics’ lap, Strieber adds new details, **re-interprets the significance of events.**”* (Emphasis added.)

OBOF: *“a piece that attempts to dispose of Strieber himself by suggesting mental illness”*

Here OBOF conveniently ignores a line from the AK piece: **“To dismiss Strieber as insane doesn’t work”**

OBOF: *“. . . then further adduces mental illness on the basis of the fact that Strieber attempts to ‘realistically’ interpret his experiences rather than loosely and indifferently interpret them according to the author’s pet theory of reality.”*

The model which AK puts forward (about Imaginal reality), far from being a “pet theory,” draws freely on the observations and deductions of some of the most esteemed UFO authors, including Jacques Vallee, John Keel, and Strieber himself.

OBOF: *“To separate Strieber from his experiences, Kephias has to support his claim that Strieber has been subtly morphing into someone mentally disturbed or imbalanced.”*

OBOF is referring to this passage from AK: **“In the past few years, however, Strieber has become increasingly preoccupied with what he refers to as ‘the dark side’ of the alien experience. This preoccupation has colored his writings to a disturbing degree, and at times his morbid fascination with the darker undercurrents of spiritual experience seems to border on obsession.”**

OBOF’s main piece of evidence regarding AK’s faulty/dishonest reporting centers around his contention that: a) AK’s thesis is largely founded on the idea of Strieber’s gradual descent into darkness/madness; b) that AK erroneously attributes quotes to a larger time period, giving the illusion of a linear progression in Strieber’s psychology where none in fact exists.

OBOF: *“What evidence does Kephias now cite for a ‘morbid fascination [...] that borders on obsession’? Two quotes: one from a Journal entry ‘Christmas Joy: Mankind is Awakening’ from Friday December 14th, 2001, and the other ‘Shedding Light on the Dark Side’ from Wednesday December 3rd, 2003.”*

The quotes AK presents are from the period 2001-2005. However, AK also states, **“Strieber presents so many different points of view, at varying times on his website and in his books”** indicating a general “see-sawing” back and forth between points of view. The evidence offered that Strieber is increasingly preoccupied with the dark side of the alien phenomena is not restricted to the two quotes which OBOF singles out, but includes a reading of Strieber’s 2007 novel, *2012*, which AK describes as “perhaps the most chillingly convincing depiction of spiritual evil in the annals of occult literature.” OBOF ignores this

reference entirely. It's true that AK breezes over it, when citing specific passages would have strengthened his argument, but this is no excuse for OBOF ignoring it entirely.

OBOF argues that, in the section "Alien Daze," AK lists a series of quotes from Strieber that show a more balanced view of his experiences. The quotes in this section, OBOF points out, come from late 2002 to the end of 2005. He states that this alone contradicts AK's statement about Strieber's increased preoccupation with the dark side of the alien experience. The quotes which AK cites in the next section, "The Dark Side," meant to show evidence of the shift in Strieber's interpretation, he rightly attributes to roughly the same period.

OBOF: *"Kephas takes quotes that represent the supposed old interpretation and the new unbalanced one from **the same article**. This ought to clearly refute Kephas' thesis of a turn toward an obsessive, pathological interpretation of events by Strieber, as there is no chunk of time in which Kephas can show such a turn taking place."*

In retrospect, it's easy to understand OBOF's confusion, if not consternation. In "Alien Daze," my intent was to give a summation of Strieber's most lucid interpretations of his experiences, in his own words. In "The Dark Side," my aim was to show how an increasingly negative, fearful aspect had crept into his writings *during the same period*. There is no inherent contradiction in citing the same pieces, or the same time periods, to illustrate the two perspectives. Certainly, Strieber's fear of a malignant edge to the visitor experience was present from the very start. AK's premise was that *it had gradually become more and more predominant, culminating in 2012*. I did not ever argue that it had entirely supplanted the more balanced view.

I will say that it has proved extremely trying to lay all this out in such a way as to acknowledge OBOF's arguments, while at the same time, not allowing them to confuse the issue at hand, which is: to what extent are they an accurate reason to discredit the piece as a whole? My conclusion is, very little, if at all. But the reader should judge for themselves. The original article is still posted, here: <http://www.rigorousintuition.ca/board2/viewtopic.php?f=8&t=16642>

Moving on then:

OBOF: *"It is worth noting in passing for those interested in logical thinking that in the same breath in which Kephas refers to what he calls the distortion of the unconscious, he simultaneously refers to a mechanism whereby reality is supposedly constituted by a collective unconscious through individuals."*

Presumably by a reality "supposedly constituted by a collective unconscious through individuals," OBOF is referring to AK's description of the Imaginal realms. In which case, he is redefining one description in order to then show how it is logically inconsistent with another description. Whether there is an inconsistency in OBOF's two definitions is debatable but irrelevant, because he would first need to *correctly define* AK's definition of Imaginal reality, before showing how it is logically inconsistent with the idea of a distortion in the unconscious. This he conspicuously fails to do.

OBOF: *"It's clear that the whole reason behind finding the false paradigm shift in Strieber's writing as he has done, again citing the same journal entries for both the old paradigm and the supposed new one, is that it is necessary in order for Kephas to do his psychological critique of Strieber. In other words, to separate him from his experiences and save them for the objective esoteric pundits."*

This is OBOF's main charge, but is it backed up by the evidence he sites? At the very least, OBOF makes a mountain out of a molehill; at worst, he deliberately exaggerates and distorts the facts in order to justify a full dismissal of AK.

AK's: **"these writers have not been recounting their own personal experiences but simply interpreting data provided by others; hence they have had the luxury of distance."**

OBOF: *"This of course has absurd implications; namely, that in order to be a 'researcher' one must have no first-hand experience of the event."*

While apparently taking AK's line to its "logical conclusion," OBOF exaggerates and distorts what is actually being said in order to contest it. He does not contest AK's actual statement, but, once again, only his own *personal interpretation of it*. This is a good example of the "straw man argument" which OBOF accuses AK of throughout, i.e., a logical fallacy in which you misrepresent the opponent's position then attack the straw man rather than the man. Straw man arguing creates the illusion of having refuted the proposition by replacing it with a superficially similar yet unequivocal proposition. (Loosely quoting Wikipedia)

AK: **"such uncertainty only confirms that whatever he has undergone is beyond his ability—maybe anybody's—to categorize."**

OBOF does not address this idea at all, which is odd, since it's clearly central to the other AK arguments, which OBOF so violently opposes.

AK: **"More disturbingly, in *The Key*, Strieber refers to the beings who visited him in 1985 as 'demons.'"**

OBOF: *"Strieber asks his interlocutor: 'Was I in the company of demons or aliens on that night in 1985?' (p. 55). The answer given seems to go far in the direction opposite of demons. That is the only mention of the word 'demons' in the book."*

Here OBOF is correct. It was stating it too strongly for AK to say that Strieber refers to them as demons; it would be more accurate to say that he questions whether they are demons.

OBOF: *"Kephas' final discovery is Strieber's statements about his political conservatism What Strieber's political conservatism has to do with his credibility on the issue of his own abduction experiences is difficult to say. . . . Strieber's credibility is the issue, and having decided at the outset that Strieber is not credible, Kephas is simply making his case using anything at hand."*

Again this appears to be a deliberate misreading of AK's argument.

AK: **"While on the one hand, [Strieber] appears to be blessed with a rare ability to see past the façade of consensus reality and into the abyss beyond, on the other, he continues to 'vote Republican'? To me this suggests that a great deal of Strieber's knowledge, insight, and apparent wisdom is largely theoretical, and that, for all his eloquent explorations into Imaginal realms, he is still (at times at least) shackled to a distressingly mundane perspective. . . . Having profound insights into the hidden nature of existence doesn't alter the fundamentals of the personality, nor does it automatically erase decades of social conditioning. But in Strieber's case, the gulf in his psyche seems to be unusually wide."**

While comparing the two articles, Keith Zavatski noted that OBOF “completely ignores [the “2012 and the Need for Secrecy”] section in your piece. Why? In one sense he probably dismisses it as just fiction. But it only makes sense WS would be incorporating ideas from his experiences and his impressions of those experiences. This is a perfect example of the scientist drawing the clear line that the artist sees as inherently blurred. But the question remains what interest would WS have in painting the visitors in such a negative light even fictionally?”

This is a valid point and worth addressing. Strieber has repeatedly stated that what he cannot write about as fact, he puts into his works of fiction (i.e., that he embeds more groundbreaking ideas into his fiction). At the same time— as Strieber’s “Open Doors” and *2012*, the AK article, and the mother-strangled podcasts *all* address in their respective ways—Strieber appears to believe that the “visitors” depend on human belief to establish their reality in our world. It seems logical to infer from this that *what* we believe about them—whether we see them as good or evil, or both or neither—would also play a part in determining their reality. So again, “what interest would [Strieber] have in painting the visitors in such a negative light even fictionally?”

If this does not indicate to OBOF a degree of unacknowledged mental confusion in Strieber’s opus, I don’t know what would.

OBOF: *“Having thus inadvertently demonstrated that he was something less than a Jesus Christ or Buddha, Kephias judges that because Strieber lacks ‘the personal development to deal with attacks like Pinchbeck’s’, now, the mind control question is a fair and honest one which ‘throws into question everything Strieber has had to say until now’.*

“The absurdity and connivance of this assertion is visible a mile off, and smacks of the kind of journalistic malpractice lampooned on The Daily Show every night. It goes something like: ask a baseless question, base it on something else that is irrelevant; now that the question has been raised, voila! there must be some truth to it.”

OBOF makes quite a leap of faith here and seems to expect his readers to follow along without questioning his (rather rushed) reasoning. By stating that “the absurdity and connivance of this assertion is visible a mile off,” he dares the reader not to spot it. By saying that it “smacks of the kind of journalistic malpractice lampooned on The Daily Show every night,” he lets the reader know they’d have to be a brain-dead moron to miss something this obvious. But what is it they are supposed to see, exactly? As the one accused, I am still not sure.

OBOF’s charge of “journalistic malpractice” is followed by the section entitled “Kephias as a Victim of Mental Retardation?” which includes this passage:

OBOF: *“Is Kephias mentally retarded? Is esoteric punditry for Kephias the only thing that is staving off mental retardation—a disappearance into the fragmentary void of muttered half-phrases, bodily drives, and adult diapers?”*

Perhaps this is meant as jousting humor, but it is a surprisingly vitriolic and *personal* attack that seems wildly out of proportion with the seeming “provocation.” Is OBOF not content merely to disagree and outline his reasons why? Apparently not. OBOF’s prevailing method appears to be to bully his way to the truth.

OBOF argues that AK's suggestion that Strieber's personality has a direct bearing on his credibility is an absurd connivance. This links up with his earlier charge, that AK was objecting to Strieber on purely personal grounds.

OBOF: *"What it is for has already been stated: Strieber's complicated personality does not resonate with the likes of Kephias and Tonnies. Therefore it must be struck off. And his work rescued for esoteric punditry."*

Since the subtitle to OBOF is "In Defense of Whitley Strieber," the rescue mission cited would seem to belong to OBOF more than AK. However, I think this is one of and even perhaps *the* most interesting argument in OBOF, namely, the idea that I reject Strieber on personal grounds, because he doesn't fit my idea of what an avatar of alien intelligence ought to be, and act like. Yet OBOF simplifies AK's argument and makes it somehow vulgar—Strieber is too "complicated"—when in fact, AK cites the complexity and contradictions around Strieber as evidence for his authenticity, not against it. What AK suggests throws into question Strieber's integrity, honesty, and/or accuracy in reporting his experiences is not his complexity but his personal shortcomings, foremost among which is his apparent emotional instability. Granted, the discernment to judge such a thing as "emotional instability" can be questioned, and should be. But since the author of OBOF elsewhere refers to Strieber's "histrionics" and cites his emotional overreactions, it seems as though he's in agreement with AK on this point at least.

AK's argument, simplified, is roughly as follows: if such transcendental, interdimensional or inter-species experiences have not afforded Strieber an increased degree of equanimity, self-awareness, patience, tolerance, humor, and lightness in his own behavior, then (allowing that they are real at all) it can only be because he has failed to integrate them and transform them into a personal, embodied wisdom. This means (since there is generally no middle-ground) that the experiences have probably had the opposite effect, and unbalanced him. This then throws into question, both Strieber's ability to interpret and report his experiences, and the beneficial nature of those experiences themselves.

This is a very different argument than the one OBOF attributes to AK, which is simply that I find Strieber distasteful as a person and want to take him down a peg or two in order to steal his experiences for my own aggrandizement (if I read his veiled logic rightly).

OBOF: *"He has dragged Strieber through the mud, but in a dashing act of magnanimity, concludes that Strieber's pathology is 'shared by us all.'"*

Keith Zavatski: "He thinks this is an afterthought when in fact it was the essence of the piece. Has this guy ever read mythology and attempted to glean how it applies to his own psyche, ever?"

I think this is both an accurate statement and a reasonable question to ask. The AK piece used Strieber as a living example of the ways in which myth and reality intersect, on both individual and collective levels. Its analysis of Strieber was always meant to extend beyond the local question of Strieber himself, and his writing, into the collective confusion which the Strieber opus not merely addresses but *also reflects*.

OBOF: *"Were they [i.e. AK and Mac Tonnies] successful in being able to humanely intuit a complicated and opaque personality they would be spared the desire to strike out at the unwieldy part to the oeuvre—Strieber himself—so as to be better able to consume at a distance Strieber's output in the manner of all pundits and critics."*

Yet the aim of AK was the exact inverse: to incorporate Strieber *the human being* into the works and thereby provide them with a greater depth of meaning. AK rejects the notion that a work can be separated from its author, explicitly stating it thus (ironically, this passage is quoted by OBOF, with a very different intent):

“Strieber may literally be divided, making his writings a painfully honest, alternatively inspirational and infuriating description of his attempt to come to grips with the broken shards of his psyche, as he struggles to put ‘humpty’ back together again. As accounts of the slow and agonizing process of individuation by which Strieber seeks to arrive at the totality of himself, his writings may be some of the most profoundly significant we have, albeit not quite in the way they at first appear (or were intended by Strieber).”

Now, and lastly, to address the larger charge of OBOF, that the AK piece *“advances a skewed picture of Strieber’s output in order to be done with Strieber himself.”*

Does the evidence bear this out? I have returned to Strieber again and again since that first piece. I have attempted (and only partially succeeded) to get him to go on record. My original intention with this piece was to direct the attention of skeptics to what I felt has merit in Strieber’s work. This is a little known or acknowledged fact, and it was why I posted it at Rigorous Intuition, where the general consensus has been to see Strieber as either a charlatan, a disinformation agent (or both), or at best an unwitting puppet of black-op agendas. It was at least partially frustration that many of the more intelligent, discerning researchers disregarded or dismissed Strieber’s work that prompted me to write the piece. This is a very far cry from someone who is trying to “be done with Strieber.”

OBOF: *“It suggests that the new generation of esoteric punditry is no less happy violating the standards of basic scholarship when it comes to dealing with something it doesn’t like — in this case, Strieber’s personality.”*

In fact, I thoroughly enjoy Strieber’s personality. I have enjoyed listening to his podcasts over the years and find his overwrought, fumbling emotionality strangely relaxing. My personal feelings about Strieber are the inverse of what OBOF suggests. As to “violating the standards of basic scholarship,” that’s a loaded phrase which suggests that such standards are fixed and invariable. It posits, or draws, a line that can be violated, rather than allowing that “basic scholarship” is a sliding scale and that there is no final determinant of good vs. evil scholarship. Of course, there are misreported facts, slanted evidence, etc., which is what OBOF claims to find in the form of a couple of quotes allegedly framed by AK in such a way as to suggest they were spaced out over time rather than sourced in the same time period. Even if this is true, it is the matter of a simple oversight. OBOF suggests that AK is deliberately misreporting facts in order to pursue an agenda and create a “hit piece.”

Even allowing that AK’s standards of scholarship leave something to be desired, the assumptions which OBOF makes are ungrounded, premature, and presumptuous, not to say slanderous. Ironically, they betray a bias and agenda on the part of OBOF that is itself characteristic of “a hit piece.”

Perhaps this is what comes out of an overly defended perspective. OBOF sees AK as attacking Strieber, and feels moved to come to Strieber’s defense. Since the best defense is an offense, OBOF launches an attack on AK, in the hope of discrediting the piece so thoroughly that none of the “charges” leveled at Strieber will stick. Whether OBOF was effective in this clearly stated purpose (whether Strieber felt

adequately defended), is difficult to say. What we can say is that, since I saw OBOF as an attack and not as helpful or constructive criticism, I saw no reason to respond to it. In retrospect, that may have been a mistake.

Now, five years later, due to a more recent podcast by the author of OBOF, I revisited the piece with a more neutral eye, allowing that it might have something of merit to offer. A closer look has definitely helped me to formulate more clearly my thoughts on Strieber. But it has left me with more or less the same feeling about the OBOF piece itself. Superficially, the article appears to present a case, though not an especially strong one, against AK. On closer inspection, however, I found the majority of arguments to be either grossly exaggerated or made of straw, i.e., based on a *misinterpretation* of my arguments (whether deliberate or not) which allows OBOF to expose their “erroneousness”—as it were projecting internal error onto (and around the neck of) the “accused”—or building a straw man for the sacrifice.

Since the piece is written intelligently and passionately, it carries a certain weight to it, above all the weight of a fierce conviction. OBOF’s main objection, however, appears to be less with myself than with the larger community of Ufology (and by extension the field of alternate science and philosophy). OBOF sees Ufology as overrun with pundits, poseurs, and pretend scholars, and he appears to have a lifetime’s frustration, disappointment, and contempt to vent about this. I can’t say he’s wrong in his estimation. Only that he cannot convincingly lay the blame at the feet of a single author or a single article, hard as he might try.