

A Post-modern Perspective on Elemental Spirits
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"I believe in fairies. Call them what you will, I believe that the spirits of natural things, and some things which would seem at first as not natural, exist whether or not we choose to believe in them. These elemental spirits are very much a part of our world which we cannot afford to ignore or dismiss if we are to understand our own magical nature, or that which draws us into the world of magic."
- Jaq D Hawkins¹

Most contemporary magicians and those of pagan paths have worked with elemental spirits of some kind, be they the classical elementals of Earth, Air, Fire and Water, or spirits from some other system of elemental classification. This may have been simply calling them as quarter guardians, as is common in many paths of paganism and ritual magic, or it may have involved a full blown evocation or even invocation of the spirit concerned. Or it may not have involved formal ritual at all, and indeed some of the most startling awareness of the elemental spirits of nature can arise outside of any ritual or magical intent.

Elemental spirits are very real and can be very potent in magic, and yet there exists among certain groups of contemporary magicians a distaste with using them, especially those magical traditions that exhibit a scientific approach. At the same time many pagan groups continue to call the elementals by the names of 'Gnome', 'Undine', 'Sylph' and 'Salamander' as if this is their only true names or true forms. This despite the fact these names for the spirits were popularised by Paracelsus² (1493-1541) less than five hundred years ago. Along with these names, the actual conception and theory of what these spirits are still seems to date back to that highly monotheistic era.

This might explain the tendency of many magicians to ignore elemental spirits, but it doesn't really explain why nobody (to my knowledge) has fully attempted to explain them from the post-modernist viewpoint. Peter J Carroll has attempted to rename the four elements to correspond with modern Physical theories³, renaming Earth as Mass, Water as Time, Air as Space and Fire as Energy. Matter, which is only ever witnessed in one of these four states, Carroll equates with the Quintessence or Æther. Although this theory may introduce some interesting philosophical speculation, it does not prove as useful as the old elements in providing a framework for dealing with natural spirits. I prefer to think of Carroll's elements as signifying a 'lower order' of the element's manifestation. By 'lower' I mean a smaller scale of existence.

Two concepts do allow for a more earthy approach to the problem. The first proposes that spirits are in fact sub-components of our own minds and subconscious as explained by Nathaniel O Xanthe⁴. The second theory comes from Ramsey Dukes and his writings concerning "Johnstone's Paradox"⁵. Johnstone's paradox proposes that if technology will one day advance to a level capable of modelling a believable 'reality' inside a computer, peopled with artificial intelligence, how would we know that we ourselves aren't also artificial intelligence in a detailed 'computer modelled' reality? We don't actually have to believe this is the case in order to conceive of our universe as being 'described' by some kind of 'information', and indeed many of the latest scientific theories are suggesting that this may in fact be the case. Things such as rivers, oceans, winds, mountains, trees, earthquakes, fires, planets, asteroids and stars all need to be described by this information.

The information describing a river, be it in a computer reality or our own, contains millions upon millions of calculations every micro-second, causing the river to exhibit a strange attractor⁶ behaviour with a complexity comparable to, if not greater than, the human mind. In this sense the river can be considered a strange and powerful intelligence, an elemental spirit, albeit one very much alien to our own. The spirits of a lake, a small pond or an ocean, whilst all made from water all exhibit very different behaviours. This is partly the result of the unique pattern formed by the body of water's strange attractor and partly a result of their unique surroundings.

In the same way we may see the movements of air and fires as exhibiting their own strange attractor properties. Even the interactions of particles in the earth resolve themselves by millions of 'computations', which although mostly very slow, interact with each other (and the other elements) to form the shapes of pebbles, stones, tors, hills, mountains and whole continents.

This 'computational' model of spirits is all very well, but how can we relate to and communicate with such a strange and alien being, so different from ourselves? A possible answer comes from Xanthe's ideas concerning the cooperating, competing and co-existing personalities, emotions, functions and processes of our minds.

On a number of occasions, I have sat by a medium sized river close to my home, and at various times it has provoked a variety of feelings in me. Usually the first response is a calming and soothing of my mind, putting me in a spontaneous trance state as my mind mimics the regular movements of the water. Then as my entranced mind begins to model and therefore reproduce the movements (i.e. my subconscious mind will make calculations that approximate the behaviour of the river) of the water I begin to notice a vision of myself immersed in the water. This will often manifest in fear and foreboding and a sense that the water is 'calling' to me, inviting me to drown in its depths. On occasions I have entered the trance by accident, and on such occasions the drowning feeling would shock me back to normal waking consciousness. Trance would normally return naturally within a minute or two. Deeper states of consciousness can be obtained with good relaxation and deliberate intent.

The more this is done, the more the river model in the mind begins to become a permanent feature of the subconscious. It is also possible that the model in the mind exhibits a psychic link to the actual river spirit, causing a magical link from the river direct to the magician's subconscious. In this way the river can 'talk' to us, and since part of the water spirit in this case is our own mind, it can take on characteristics of a human, thus explaining why we often 'see' water spirits (or any kind of spirit) in an anthropomorphised form. This water spirit is likely to be as curious of us as we are of it, and will try to invite you into the water. The river will not understand that this would hurt you, so remember that just because it may seem that it wants to drown you, its intentions are usually merely contact. A water spirit does not usually understand the concept of 'death', which is a peculiarly animal awareness. This lack of understanding of death is one of the things that can make all elemental spirits quite dangerous. With this dire warning in mind, one should be aware that some bodies of water are quite safe to enter, although a trance may not be the best state of mind for water safety.

It occurs to me that in a deeper level of the mind is probably a very innate awareness of what a body of water could do to us. Most non-swimming animals instinctively avoid large bodies of water, suggesting the reaction is hard wired into the brain. Similarly we react to the heat of a fire, the smell of unpleasant fumes, or attractive ones. The solidity or otherwise of the ground can be detected with the eyes in addition to the feet. Some of these things are learned, and some of it is genetically part of our reptile and mammal minds. All these things may combine to form the elemental spirits we contact through our magic.

To really understand elemental spirits it is best to invoke them completely in a trance state. This can be done most effectively near a source of the element you want to contact, such as a camp-fire, a rock, a pond or a column of incense smoke. Jan Fries describes techniques for contacting various totem animal spirits⁷ and 'becoming' them, and these can be usefully applied to elemental spirits also. Should one 'become' a fire elemental one is likely to dance wildly on the spot (assuming you are contacting a safe and contained spirit that isn't spreading), and make loud and crackling type sounds. Become air and you are likely to dance more gracefully and more freely, whispering, giggling, and changing pace. You may even spin around or even feel like you are flying. Become water and you may feel more sleepy or trance-like. Your movements will be more gentle swaying and your voice soft, lisping, hissing, deep whispers, or may be more violent if

you're contacting a waterfall or a stormy ocean. Earth is likely to be very still and/or slow, and will talk with very deep sounds, moans, groans and rumbles. Movement may be very heavy and deliberate. This may explain why dwarves and gnomes are often depicted as grumpy bearded old men.

Once you have gained first-hand experience of the worlds of the elements, there will exist within your subconscious connections to these elements and you will begin to notice them everywhere. It doesn't matter if you are in the wild or in a very urban environment. A city at first glance will seem to be constructed mostly of earth, but streets with high buildings can become a haven for dancing and swirling air elementals. Gutters, drains, sewers, fresh water pipes, reservoirs and our taps, baths, showers and toilets all provide a complex system for water to travel in. A network of electricity can be considered a highly refined state of fire energy, and most of us have to heat our homes at some point, and have a source of heat to cook our food. Fossil fuels are still burned to provide a large part of our electricity needs and nuclear reactors are essentially just big furnaces with a very dangerous fuel.

It is not my intention in this essay to make magic seem more scientific, which could only serve to reduce the magic in our lives, but rather to give us the ability to more freely enjoy magical ideas without having to sacrifice our intellectual reasoning capabilities. So next time you see a draft opening and closing a door somewhere, you need not dismiss this as being 'just the wind'. Instead you may exclaim that it is 'just an air elemental' and feel secure that you are not suffering wishful thinking but have knowledge that the air movements are a product of calculations every bit as complex, if not more so, than your own mind.

References and Notes:

[1] *Spirits of the Elements* series comprising *Spirits of the Earth* (1997), *Spirits of the Water* (2000), *Spirits of the Air* (1998), and *Spirits of the Fire* (1999), - **Jaq D Hawkins**, Capall Bann.

[2] *A History of Alchemy* - **Serge Hutin**, Tower Publications (1962) translated from the French *L'Alchimie*, Presses Universitaires de France (1951)

[3] *Liber Kaos* - **Peter J Carroll**, Samuel Weiser (1992)

[4] *Psychodenizens* - **Nathaniel O Xanthe**, self-published booklet (1994)

[5] *Words made Flesh* - **Ramsey Dukes**, The Mouse That Spins (1988)

[6] A Strange Attractor is a dynamic and chaotic equilibrium that never exactly repeats itself but remains within calculable bounds. For example, we know the river Thames can't flood Liverpool, although we can't be so sure of the Mersey. See *Chaos - Making a New Science* - **James Gleick**, Abacus (1993)

[7] *Visual Magick* - **Jan Fries**, Mandrake of Oxford (1992)