

The Entity-Shadow Paradigm: Toward a New Psychedelic-Assisted Therapeutic Framework

By Jules Henry Rivers

Abstract

Reports of autonomous “entities” encountered in psychedelic states represent one of the most provocative findings in contemporary consciousness research. Clinical trials and qualitative surveys alike have documented frequent descriptions of beings, presences, or intelligences that patients experience as vividly real. At the same time, Jungian psychology provides a well-established framework for understanding the appearance of seemingly autonomous figures in the psyche through the concept of the shadow: the disowned, repressed, or unintegrated aspects of the self that take on symbolic form. This paper argues that entities and the shadow represent two sides of the same coin, differing primarily in framing but pointing toward a shared reality of imagistic manifestations of unconscious content.

By synthesizing psychedelic phenomenology with depth psychology, we propose an entity-shadow paradigm as a foundation for future therapeutic practice. Unlike abstract concepts such as “trauma,” “disorder,” or “blockage,” the imagistic concreteness of entities allows patients to viscerally grasp and engage their unconscious material. This imagistic-symbolic framing speaks directly to the subconscious’ own language of images and symbols, making it a more powerful therapeutic tool than purely rational-analytic approaches. The discussion emphasizes the therapeutic implications of working with entities as symbolic figures, highlighting both the opportunities for integration and the risks of misinterpretation.

We conclude by outlining a research agenda for an entity-informed psychedelic psychotherapy, one that honors both the experiential realities of patients and the interpretive insights of depth psychology. This integrative framework may provide a bridge between subjective experience, clinical practice, and symbolic imagination.

Introduction

The contemporary resurgence of psychedelic research has generated not only promising clinical results but also profound ontological questions. Psilocybin, DMT, and related substances have been shown to reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD, while enhancing well-being and openness to experience. Yet alongside these measurable

outcomes are recurring reports of extraordinary experiences, many of which fall outside conventional psychiatric language.

Among the most striking of these are encounters with “entities” or “beings.” In a large-scale survey conducted by Griffiths and colleagues (2019), 60% of participants who smoked DMT reported meeting an entity or autonomous presence, often described as a guide, teacher, trickster, or healer. Similar findings emerge in psilocybin studies, where participants sometimes describe presences that feel separate from themselves yet deeply embedded in their therapeutic process. These encounters, often imbued with numinous significance, challenge clinicians and researchers to develop explanatory models that respect phenomenology while remaining therapeutically useful.

Jungian psychology provides one such model. Carl Jung’s concept of the *shadow* refers to the unconscious repository of rejected aspects of the personality, desires, impulses, and traits inconsistent with the ego’s self-image. The shadow often appears in dreams, fantasies, or projections as figures that feel autonomous, threatening, or uncanny. Jung emphasized that confronting and integrating the shadow is essential to psychological wholeness, a process he called individuation.

This paper explores the possibility that psychedelic entities and Jungian shadow figures are functionally equivalent phenomena. Both represent autonomous-seeming imagistic forms arising from the unconscious. Both carry affective charge and symbolic meaning. Both demand engagement if the individual is to move toward integration. By viewing them as two expressions of the same underlying process, we can bridge psychedelic phenomenology with depth psychology and generate new insights for therapeutic practice.

Our thesis is that **the entity-shadow paradigm offers a more visceral, imagistic, and therapeutically potent framework than conventional abstractions such as trauma, disorder, or blockage.** Entities, unlike abstract diagnoses, present themselves as living images, meeting the psyche on its own symbolic ground. This opens the possibility of developing new therapeutic methods that harness the imagistic concreteness of entity encounters while maintaining psychological rigor.

Entities in Psychedelic Literature

Frequency and Phenomenology

Entity encounters are a recurrent and well-documented aspect of psychedelic states. Strassman (2001), in his DMT studies, reported that over half of his participants experienced contact with what they described as intelligent beings. Later surveys expanded this finding: Davis et al. (2020) surveyed more than 2,500 people who reported

DMT-induced entity encounters, the majority describing the beings as benevolent, knowledgeable, and more real than ordinary reality.

Psilocybin research has similarly highlighted entity phenomena. Griffiths et al. (2006, 2016) noted that high-dose psilocybin sessions often involve encounters with guides, ancestors, or divine presences. Though less consistently anthropomorphic than DMT entities, psilocybin entities still carry an unmistakable sense of autonomy and intention.

Clinical Significance

Entity encounters can be transformative or destabilizing. Positive encounters often yield profound feelings of acceptance, forgiveness, or insight. Patients report entities removing burdens, offering healing energy, or teaching vital lessons. Conversely, hostile or oppressive entities can induce fear, paranoia, or prolonged distress. In therapeutic contexts, both outcomes are significant: the former as breakthroughs, the latter as opportunities for deep work.

Clinical vignettes illustrate the range of experience. One psilocybin participant described a serpent-like entity that coiled around her body, embodying her lifelong struggle with shame. When she confronted it, the serpent dissolved into light, leaving her with a felt sense of liberation. Another participant reported being attacked by a swarm of insectoid beings, which he later recognized as a symbolic enactment of his childhood abuse trauma. Such examples highlight how entity experiences, whether benevolent or malevolent, often crystallize unconscious dynamics in a vivid, embodied form.

Interpretive Challenges

Mainstream psychiatry struggles to classify such phenomena. Are entities hallucinations, archetypes, projections, or metaphors? Strassman suggested they might represent autonomous realities, while others argue they are symbolic dramatizations of inner states. Regardless of metaphysical stance, what is clear is their *phenomenological reality*: participants experience them as real, autonomous, and significant. For therapeutic purposes, it is precisely this phenomenological reality that matters most.

From both the therapist's and the patient's perspectives, an assurance of whether the perceived entities are actually real is ultimately inconsequential. What is of primary importance is that the experience leads to a robust conviction that a transformative event has taken place, an impression subsequently substantiated by observable behavioral changes, improved social functioning, and enhanced self-esteem.

Jung's Shadow and Archetypal Psychology

Defining the Shadow

Carl Jung's model of the psyche includes key components such as the persona (the social mask we present to the world), the shadow (hidden or repressed aspects of the self), the anima/animus (inner sexual archetypes), and the self (the organizing center striving for wholeness). Together with the ego and the collective unconscious, Jung describe how conscious and unconscious forces shape personality and psychological development.

Regarding the shadow aspect, he described it as the repository of psychic contents incompatible with conscious self-image. Aggression, sexuality, envy, fear, and weakness often find their place here, banished to the unconscious but exerting influence through projections and symptoms. For Jung, the shadow was not simply negative; it also contained vital energy, creativity, and authenticity repressed by socialization.

The shadow often appears in dreams or visions as figures embodying what the ego rejects. A dreamer might confront a dark double, a hostile stranger, or a monstrous figure, images that provoke fear but carry the potential for growth if integrated. Jung insisted that facing the shadow is indispensable for individuation, the process of becoming a whole and authentic self.

Archetypes and Autonomy

Jung's broader theory of archetypes situates the shadow within a collective framework. Archetypes are universal psychic structures that manifest in symbolic images across cultures. Among them, shadow figures represent humanity's confrontation with its own darkness. What is striking is their autonomy: archetypal images feel alive, intentional, even intelligent. Jung himself described dialogues with such figures during his visionary explorations, most notably in *The Red Book*.

James Hillman (1975) extended this perspective by founding *archetypal psychology*, which insists on treating imaginal figures as genuine presences within the psyche rather than as abstract metaphors. He argued that to reduce these images to mere symbols or diagnostic signs is to strip them of their vitality and autonomy: "By seeing the image as a person or god, rather than as a mere sign, we enter into relationship with it," Hillman wrote, emphasizing dialogue over interpretation. For Hillman, imaginal figures carry their own intentions and affective power and engaging them as if they have agency allows for a richer, more dynamic psychological process.

This approach resonates strongly with reports from psychedelic participants who encounter entities during deep journeys. Rather than dismissing these figures as hallucinations or neurological noise, many find that acknowledging them as independent presences fosters meaningful transformation and insight. Just as Hillman suggested that “the soul wants its images to be taken seriously,” psychedelic experiencers often report that the potency of their breakthroughs depends on treating such encounters with respect and curiosity, an attitude that can catalyze lasting behavioral change, emotional healing, and a renewed sense of connection.

Shadow Encounters Across Contexts

Shadow-like figures commonly surface in dreams, shamanic journeys, near-death experiences, and episodes of psychosis, often embodying fear, aggression, or deeply repressed desire. Across cultures, these figures are rarely seen as trivial hallucinations; rather, they are treated as potent messengers or catalysts for transformation. As Jung observed, “One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious”, suggesting that such encounters force the psyche to engage with its own disowned material. Their emotional intensity and symbolic richness often mark turning points in an individual’s psychological or spiritual development.

Many spiritual and healing traditions echo into this perspective, though each interprets the phenomenon in its own language. Tibetan Buddhism presents wrathful deities, terrifying yet ultimately compassionate manifestations of enlightened mind. Amazonian shamans describe parasitic spirits or sorcery darts encountered during ayahuasca visions, while Christianity frames similar experiences as demonic temptation testing one’s faith. Despite doctrinal differences, the phenomenological overlap with Jungian psychology and psychedelic accounts is striking: all point to the necessity of confronting these shadowed presences as part of a broader process of initiation, purification, or integration.

Entities and the Shadow: Two Sides of the Same Coin

The parallels between psychedelic entities and shadow figures suggest they are best understood as two sides of the same coin. Both are imagistic, autonomous-seeming manifestations of unconscious material. Both carry symbolic meaning that demands interpretation and integration.

Similarities

1. Autonomy – Distinct Presence

Both entities and shadow figures are experienced as separate from the self, often appearing to act according to their own intentions or agenda. This felt autonomy gives

them a compelling, sometimes unsettling reality, prompting the experiencer to negotiate, dialogue, or confront them as if they were independent agents within the psyche.

2. **Affective Charge** – Evoking Intense Emotions

Both types of figures carry a strong emotional weight, ranging from fear, guilt, or anxiety to awe, reverence, or fascination. Their presence can rapidly shift the emotional tone of an experience, making the encounter both memorable and deeply transformative.

3. **Symbolic Representation** – Manifestation of Inner Contents

Entities and shadow figures serve as imagistic embodiments of psychic material. They make intangible aspects of the unconscious, repressed desires, unresolved trauma, latent potentials, visible and tangible, allowing the individual to engage with them in a concrete, often visually rich way.

4. **Transformative Potential** – Catalysts for Growth

When approached consciously, both entities and shadow figures can stimulate profound self-reflection and psychological integration. The encounter often challenges habitual perceptions, opens new perspectives, and can catalyze the development of new coping strategies or emotional resilience.

Differences in Framing

- **Entities** – Often experienced as discrete, autonomous beings in visionary or altered states of consciousness. They may appear to have intelligence, intentions, or even personalities independent of the dreamer or participant. Therapeutically, entities can function as guides, challengers, or symbolic mirrors, and their interactions frequently involve dialogic, relational engagement presences.
- **Shadow Figures** – Typically understood within depth psychology as projections of unconscious content, embodying aspects of the self that have been repressed, denied, or disowned. While they may provoke intense emotions, they are generally interpreted as symbolic extensions of the individual psyche rather than literally autonomous agents. Therapeutic work with shadow figures often involves recognition, confrontation, and integration, helping the individual reclaim or reconcile disowned traits.

Therapeutic Implications

Limits of Abstract Language

Modern psychology frequently frames human suffering through clinical terms like trauma, disorder, or syndrome. While these categories provide diagnostic clarity and facilitate evidence-based treatment, they are abstract, analytical, and predominantly left-brain constructs. Such terminology can leave patients intellectually informed but emotionally untouched; they may nod in agreement yet unsure how to embody the idea of “resolving a trauma” or “integrating a blockage.” As James Hillman observed, overreliance on technical terminology risks stripping psychic pain of its mythic depth, leaving individuals alienated from the very forces shaping their inner world.

The subconscious, however, communicates through images, symbols, and felt sensations rather than clinical jargon. A powerful image such as a cracked mask, a suffocating darkness, or a hidden child, can activate emotional and physiological processes that words like “disorder” or “syndrome” cannot. Depth psychology, somatic therapies, and psychedelic-assisted methods increasingly recognize that this imagistic immediacy engages the psyche more effectively, mobilizing transformation that is visceral rather than merely conceptual.

Entities, by contrast, are among the most concrete and emotionally charged forms such imagery can take. A patient can easily picture a demon, serpent, or presence; they can imagine bargaining with it, confronting it, or releasing it entirely. This directness bypasses the rational mind’s abstractions and speaks in the unconscious’s native language. Jung himself remarked that “the psyche creates images” and that the unconscious “does not communicate in concepts but in symbols,” underscoring why such figures feel alive and potent. When therapy allows space for these entity experiences without insisting on their literal reality, it meets the psyche where it actually lives, turning abstract struggle into a tangible encounter that can be negotiated, integrated, and ultimately transformed.

Subconscious Readiness for Extraction

When patients conceptualize their suffering as an entity, they naturally orient toward an eventual release or transformation. The very image of an entity implies that it can depart, be transformed, or be integrated. This symbolic logic primes the psyche for resolution in a way that abstract terms like “conflict” do not. As a result, therapeutic techniques that engage entity imagery; dialogue, ritualized extraction, symbolic transformation; often feel more compelling and effective than abstract analysis.

Case Examples

In retreats applying the entity–shadow approach, we’ve repeatedly observed participants describe encounters with entities that significantly aided their healing journeys. A patient saw her grief as a black bird perched on her chest. By visualizing its departure, she felt a literal unburdening. Another saw his craving as a trickster figure whispering in his ear. By externalizing it, he could resist its seduction with newfound clarity. A veteran encountered insectoid beings gnawing on his body. With guidance, he recognized them as embodiments of his combat trauma. Symbolic expulsion allowed him to reclaim his sense of integrity.

The following examples, drawn from published academic studies, further illustrate this phenomenon:

- *“As I accepted my death and dissolution into God's love, the insectoids began feeding on my heart, devouring the feelings of love and surrender. They were interested in emotion. As I was holding on to my last thought - that God is love - they asked, "Even here? Even here?" [1]*
- *“They were like a figure, one on top of the other... they turned into a totem pole, the totem was a mask, with like, aggressive faces... like sneering demons sticking out their tongues, long tongues. They were in front of me, they came for me and grabbed at me... it was like... fuck! Where the hell has this come from? It's so real!... This actually exists in some place, and I'm in that place... ” [2]*
- *“I will, but I'm concerned that this human mind would distort [the entity]” ... he witnessed it as being “a bit octopus-like ...” [3]*

Therapeutic Advantages

1. **Accessibility** – Concrete, Intuitive Understanding

Patients often grasp an entity or image far more readily than an abstract clinical term like “maladaptive schema” or “dysregulated affect.” Seeing grief as a dark bird on the chest or addiction as a whispering trickster gives immediate, visceral form to what might otherwise remain a vague diagnostic label. This concreteness lowers cognitive barriers and invites emotional connection.

2. **Engagement** – Active Participation Through Imagery

Working with a vivid figure or being transforms therapy from a purely verbal exercise into a dynamic, imagistic dialogue. Instead of passively analyzing symptoms, patients negotiate, befriend, confront, or even transform these figures. Such active participation can ignite curiosity, creativity, and sustained therapeutic investment.

3. **Somatic Resonance** – Anchoring the Experience in the Body

Encounters with entities frequently coincide with physical sensations—tightness in the chest, warmth in the belly, or tingling along the spine. This somatic resonance roots the symbolic experience in the body’s felt reality, bridging mind and physiology. It not only deepens emotional processing but can also make insights feel more “real” and embodied.

4. **Resolution Potential** – Pathways to Closure and Integration

Entities are not static images; they can evolve. Patients may choose to release a figure, integrate it as an ally, or transform it into a more benevolent form. These symbolic actions can deliver a powerful sense of completion and empowerment, offering psychological closure that abstract discussion alone might never achieve.

The entity-shadow paradigm invites a rethinking of psychedelic-assisted therapy. Rather than viewing entity encounters as anomalous or pathological, we can recognize them as legitimate expressions of unconscious material in symbolic form. This reframing opens several avenues:

1. **Entity-Informed Psychotherapy** – Training clinicians to recognize, validate, and work with entity experiences as imagistic manifestations of shadow.
2. **Research** – Systematic studies of entity phenomenology, clinical outcomes, and integration methods.
3. **Integration Practices** – Developing protocols that help patients reflect on, dialogue with, or ritually release entities.
4. **Cross-Cultural Learning** – Drawing insights from traditions that have long worked with spirits, demons, or presences as part of healing.

Risks must also be acknowledged. Over-literalization of entities could reinforce delusion; dismissing them as hallucinations could invalidate patients. The challenge is to maintain a balance: honoring phenomenology while providing interpretive containment.

Ultimately, the entity-shadow paradigm restores the imaginal dimension to therapy. By taking images seriously, we engage the psyche on its own terms. This is not occultism but psychology in its deepest sense: *logos of the psyche*.

Empirical Testing and Future Directions

Preliminary empirical observations from numerous participants in psychedelic-assisted retreats employing the entity-shadow paradigm; applied during preparation, within the

journey itself, and throughout integration indicate striking therapeutic outcomes. These initial reports point to significant healing benefits that warrant further systematic investigation.

Across diverse cases, patients consistently report profound and enduring relief from long-standing emotional pain, trauma-related symptoms, and self-destructive patterns. A recurring theme is the conviction that their suffering was bound to a distinct “entity,” and that its felt removal during the psychedelic process marked the turning point for their healing. These firsthand accounts suggest that, when the psyche experiences a concrete and definitive release of such a presence, dramatic and potentially permanent transformation can occur.

If validated, this phenomenon could represent a groundbreaking advancement in psychotherapeutic practice, offering the possibility of compressing what might otherwise require months or years of conventional therapy into a single catalytic event. To rigorously test this claim, we propose systematic research using controlled psychedelic-assisted interventions: (1) longitudinal tracking of patients’ psychological and behavioral changes following entity-release experiences; (2) standardized psychometric assessments of symptom reduction, social functioning, and self-esteem; and (3) qualitative analyses of patient narratives to map common phenomenological features.

Such research would not only evaluate the therapeutic efficacy of this approach but could also illuminate new dimensions of the psyche’s imaginal processes, bridging depth psychology, neuroscience, and clinical practice.

Conclusion

Entity encounters in psychedelic states present both challenge and opportunity. They destabilize conventional psychiatric categories but resonate deeply with Jungian depth psychology. By recognizing entities and shadow figures as complementary expressions of unconscious content, we can build a new therapeutic framework that is both phenomenologically faithful and psychologically rigorous.

Unlike abstract constructs such as trauma or disorder, entities provide imagistic clarity that the subconscious immediately grasps. This makes them powerful therapeutic targets, enabling patients to engage, confront, and integrate disowned aspects of self in ways that rational language cannot. Empirical observations already suggest that when individuals experience the felt removal or transformation of these entities, the resulting shifts in behavior, relationships, and self-esteem can be both dramatic and enduring, sometimes compressing years of therapeutic work into a single, transformative process.

The entity–shadow paradigm thus represents a promising foundation for the next generation of psychedelic-assisted therapy, one that honors images, symbols, and the living imagination as central to healing. Future work should refine methods for engaging entity material, train clinicians in imaginal practice, and evaluate outcomes in controlled studies.

By bridging depth psychology with psychedelic phenomenology, we take a step toward a more holistic, symbolically attuned therapeutic practice, one that not only relieves suffering but also rekindles a sense of wonder and possibility. If these methods continue to show the profound healing glimpsed in early observations, they could signal a turning point: a future in which humanity approaches its own shadows with courage and creativity, transforming collective pain into wisdom and renewal. In recovering what Jung called the “living spirit” of the psyche, we may also recover a vision of humankind capable of deeper connection, compassion, and conscious evolution.

References

- Davis, A. K., Clifton, J. M., Weaver, E. G., Hurwitz, E. S., Johnson, M. W., & Griffiths, R. R. (2020). Survey of entity encounter experiences occasioned by inhaled N,N-dimethyltryptamine: Phenomenology, interpretation, and enduring effects. *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, 34(9), 1008–1020.
- Griffiths, R. R., Richards, W. A., McCann, U., & Jesse, R. (2006). Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance. *Psychopharmacology*, 187(3), 268–283.
- Griffiths, R. R., Johnson, M. W., Carducci, M. A., Umbricht, A., Richards, W. A., Richards, B. D., ... & Klinedinst, M. A. (2016). Psilocybin produces substantial and sustained decreases in depression and anxiety in patients with life-threatening cancer. *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, 30(12), 1181–1197.
- Griffiths, R. R., et al. (2019). Survey of entity encounter experiences occasioned by DMT. *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, 33(12), 1521–1537.
- Hillman, J. (1975). *Re-Visioning Psychology*. Harper & Row.
- Jung, C. G. (1968). *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton University Press.
- Jung, C. G. (2009). *The Red Book*. W. W. Norton.
- Levine, P. (1997). *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*. North Atlantic Books.

- Strassman, R. (2001). *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*. Park Street Press.
- Turner, V. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine Publishing.

Case Examples

1. Strassman, R., Wojtowicz, S., Luna, L. E., & Frecska, E. (2008). *Inner paths to outer space: Journeys to alien worlds through psychedelics & other spiritual technologies*. Rochester, VT: Park Street Press.
2. Frontiers.org. (2022). *Restorative retelling for processing psychedelic experiences: Qualitative outcomes*. Frontiers in Psychology.
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.832879/full>
3. Michael, P., Luke, D., & Robinson, O. C. (2023). *An encounter with the self: A thematic and content analysis of the DMT experience from a naturalistic field study*.