

Re-enchantment in a Materialist World



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O stars,
isn't it from you that the lover's desire for the face
of his beloved arises? Doesn't his secret insight
into her pure features come from the pure constellations?

~ Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Third Duino Elegy".

From *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*,
(transl. Stephen Mitchell).

Boiling frogs

It's said in fable that if you take a frog and plunge it into boiling water, it will experience shock and immediately jump out. But if you place a frog in tepid water and slowly heat it, the frog will not sense the change, will not see the danger, and will be slowly and inexorably boiled to death. More than a fable, this is a metaphor for where we are right now, as individuals, as group members, as a culture, and as a planetary collective – some materialists, illusionists and sceptics might say a slime mould on Earth's surface, a cancerous growth, or a plague. The mystic and philosopher Gurdjieff would say that we are asleep; his student P. D. Ouspensky, that we are automatons.

Squadron of Simpletons

As psychologist Robert Ornstein pointed out, we are not one single, unified "I" but are largely governed by a "squadron of simpletons" or idiots, between which we frequently shape-shift, each running his or her own sub-program, with an outlook that is often myopic and blinkered, and with little effective central command or coordination. Many of these psychic simpletons were acquired in more primitive times when we were daily faced with dangers that demanded a swift reaction – "fight, flight or freeze" – and which are simply not geared-up to noticing or thoughtfully responding to the sort of slow-moving creep of trends such as nuclear proliferation; global warming – which has at long last been recognized by some as a climate crisis, though of course disparaged by denialists, contrarians and conspiracy theorists who dub themselves "climate realists" – biodiversity loss; and sham-materialism – Shammat, which is documented in Doris Lessing's *Canopus in Argos* series of sci-fi novels.

Post-Truth

More recently, we've reached the lowest common denominator, and populism, politics and media have dispensed with old-fashioned values such as truth, honour and chivalry, to the point of arguing, in an Orwellian way, that "up is down", "wrong is right", and "truth is fake news". Proponents, acolytes and followers don't "do" rational argument, and don't sense hypocrisy, irony, and other subtle arts, as intelligent or sentient people might foolishly think; they thumb their noses at the "fact-checking libtard expert elite"; evangelists who blindly or even wilfully worship morally-bankrupt neo-liberalism, wealth and other gilt-edged idols. They turn their backs on the very traditional Christian or spiritual values and virtues that they might reasonably be expected to uphold at all costs, such as the tragic plight of refugees (from wars and disasters that the West has helped create), the poor, the disenfranchised, and the homeless – as the most financially-wealthy 1% look on and rub their hands with ever-increasing lust and glee. Wingnuts who are determined to bring about the prophesy of the End Times, through some horrendously-beautiful Armageddon, to Resurrection, ultimate supposed Rapture, and Blessed and Eternal Life.

Warners and Arks

Of course there are warning voices: Author Margaret Atwood has brought us *The Handmaid's Tale*; and Philip Pullman has much to say about the politico-religious and paramilitary body which he calls the Magisterium, in his *The Dark Materials* and in his *The Book of Dust*, which he has affectionately referred to as “His Darker Materials”. There are, of course, many warners (though as Doris Lessing once lamented “the wind blows away our words”) – but what we desperately need right now are more *arks*: physical, metaphorical or otherwise.

How much more utterly bizarre and crazy do things have to get before we are finally shocked out of our sleep and apathy, and realize that our dreams of fame and fortune, burying our heads in the sand, and thinking sweet and happy-happy thoughts, aren't going to get us out of the fine mess we're in; and realize that we are up the proverbial and stinky creek without a paddle? As Roger Waters of Pink Floyd asks in the song “Comfortably Numb” which I grew-up listening to in the 1970s: “Hello? (Hello, hello, hello) / Is there anybody in there? / Just nod if you can hear me / Is there anyone home?”

Sufi Mystics

This isn't a new problem, of course, though things are becoming more and more exacerbated in this post-modern era. The writer, thinker and teacher in the Sufi mystical tradition (which preceded and flowered in the classical Islamic era), Idries Shah wrote at length about the commanding self – that “mixture of primitive and conditioned responses, common to everyone, which inhibits and distorts human progress and understanding”. He writes: “The Commanding Self ... can be seen as a sort of parasite, which first complements the personality, then takes over certain parts of it, and masquerades as the personality itself.” Shah states that there is “no intention of destroying or undermining the Commanding Self”. Instead, would-be students are encouraged to “divert vanity from the spiritual arena ... to channel the Commanding Self's activities to any worldly ambition: while continuing to study the Sufi Way in a modest and non-self-promoting manner,” according to Wikipedia.

Shah's approach is only partly direct or didactic, however: the Sufi materials are interleaved or interwoven with what are specially-designed teaching stories (and poetry) which approach issues indirectly, so as to smuggle themselves past our defences and inner censors, and hence not provoke our opposition and defeat the object of what is a more intuitive exercise (ultimately provoking inner-tuition, as it were). One such story illustrates aspects of this approach, and features in Idries Shah's *The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin*:

The Smuggler

Time and again Nasrudin passed from Persia to Greece on donkey-back. Each time he had two panniers of straw, and trudged back without them. Every time the guard searched him for contraband. They never found any.

‘What are you carrying, Nasrudin?’

‘I am a smuggler.’

Years later, more and more prosperous in appearance, Nasrudin moved to Egypt. One of the customs men met him there.

‘Tell me, Mulla, now that you are out of the jurisdiction of Greece and Persia, living here in such luxury – what was it that you were smuggling when we could never catch you?’

‘Donkeys.’

As ever, the wise fool Nasrudin hides his light under a bushel.

In addition to this, the Sufis use a technique termed “scatter”, rather than presenting the materials in a logical and systematic A-Z fashion as one might in a modern Western school, and this is in part so that the picture presented to the student – composed of a constellation of minor impacts – is not brought into



premature but incomplete focus, which might lead to him or her settling for the comfort of a stunted psychic development (the result of premature “paradigm fixation”. Once you’ve seen one coherent image or gestalt, this can make it more difficult to unsee that and see further alternatives or additional dimensions).

Henry Corbin and Tom Cheetham

The philosopher and ishrāqī mystic, Henry Corbin also sees our current predicament as symptomatic of a much earlier onset of dis-ease. Corbin’s work is densely packed and not an easy read, but fortunately the author Tom Cheetham has written several books that are useful in interpreting Corbin’s thoughts.

Much of what Corbin wrote concerned what he termed the *mundus imaginalis* or “Imaginal World”, an intermediate world between that of our own mundane world and that of spirit, and Corbin is at pains to inform us that it (and its angelic inhabitants) is as real, if not more real, than what we call our everyday, supposedly-real world of concrete, glass, consumerism, sex and politics; and it is most certainly not “merely imaginary” or a fantasy. There are three ways into this world: through dream; active imagination (of the type Carl Jung and JRR Tolkien engaged in); and, ultimately, death. Being an ishrāqī mystic, too – that is, of the School of Illumination – the nature and role of Light features much in Corbin’s work.

In the first chapter of *Green Man, Earth Angel*, titled “The Mundus Imaginalis and the Catastrophe of Materialism”, Cheetham writes:

“In language that I’ve learned since, this is the history of what the French call *mentalité*, and this shift in the relation between the subject and the object involves a “withdrawal of participation.” Many people have discussed this phenomenon from a variety of viewpoints. For instance, you can analyze the Neolithic transition in terms of a kind of disjunction between humans and nature: outside the walls of the city lies the Wilderness, within them, the Tame. It has been argued that by a similar process, the immanent, female deities of Earth were severed from the remote and transcendent masculine gods of the Heavens. Another disjunction, another loss of participation, accompanies the transition from oral to literate society. For European history the crucial transition occurs in Greece roughly between Homer and Plato. The techniques of alphabetic writing and reading forever changed the relation of humans to language and to the nonhuman world. Socrates was very concerned about this new technology, and was afraid that it signaled the death of real thinking, and that education would suffer irreparably. In fact the great sweep of Western history as a

whole has been read as a story of withdrawal and the progressive “death of nature,” and the birth of a mechanistic cosmology based on abstract materialism.”

And Cheetham goes on to say: “[In Henry Corbin’s view] all the dualisms of the modern world stem from the loss of the *mundus imaginalis*: matter is cut off from spirit, sensation from intellection, subject from object, inner from outer, myth from history, the individual from the divine.” Those of you who have read Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* or *The Book of Dust* may find a resonance with this aspect of Corbin’s work.

Then, on a related note, there is also the question of whether Eve was framed, and of whether it was wrong to “steal fire from the gods”.

The Real Corbin and the Inner Church

Since Corbin is such a central figure in this, and many would dismiss his contribution as merely intellectual and philosophical (“you can talk the talk, but can you walk the walk?” as the refrain goes), if you’ll forgive the digression, it’s worthwhile clarifying his status in this arena:

According to Wikipedia, Henry Corbin (14 April 1903 – 7 October 1978) was a philosopher, theologian, Iranologist and professor of Islamic Studies at the *École pratique des hautes études* in Paris, France.

According to his widow, Stella Corbin, as reported by Peter Kingsley in his book *Catafalque: Carl Jung and the End of Humanity* (p364), however, Henry Corbin’s “real identity and purpose” was “not as a scholar with some minor mystical leanings but as a mystic, inwardly directed to play the role of academic.” She described to Kingsley how in Iran, “the great spiritual teachers or sheikhs often offered to initiate him as a Sufi on condition that he converted to Islam; and how he always politely refused. ‘Thank you for your invitation but there is no need, because I already have my own inner sheikh inside me.’” (pp364–365)

Corbin (who knew and understood Jung and his work so well; they were colleagues at the conference venue Eranos) spoke of an “inner church”, echoing Jung fifty years previously when Jung explained how “if we belong to the secret church, then we belong, and we need not worry about it, but can go our own way. If we do not belong, no amount of teaching or organization can bring us there.” (p366).

Corbin writes of his years of retreat in Iran with his wife, “I learned the inestimable virtues of silence, of what initiates call ‘the principle of the arcane’ (*ketmân* in Persian). One of the virtues of this silence is that I found myself placed, I alone together with him alone, in the company of my invisible sheikh, Shihâb al-Dîn Yahyâ Suhrawardi,” (p367) and he goes on to say that “when these years of retreat finally came to an end I had become an Ishrâqi.” (p368) Ishrâq means the point of dawn in the East – not, to Corbin, the (horizontal) geographical East, but the mystical Orient and Celestial Pole; (p368) and the Ishrâqi is a “tradition of those who appear with the dawn; who belong to the moment of dawning; who tirelessly and timelessly work at fetching the gifts of the sacred into the light of day.” (p368) The Ishrâqi are the “eternal leaven” (p369). According to Kingsley, Corbin was an Uwaisî (p372), one of those Sufis who happen to be without a physical teacher, and who are guided and sustained by those like the mysterious invisible guide, Khidr (p372).

The Invisible College

There are several other authors whose work, topics of interest, and enthusiasms overlap with that of Corbin, indeed in a sense you might call this an “invisible college”:

As a starting point, Tom Cheetham has written several useful books interpreting Corbin's dense and voluminous work: *The World Turned Inside Out: Henry Corbin and Islamic Mysticism*; *All the World an Icon: Henry Corbin and the Angelic Function of Beings*; *Green Man, Earth Angel: The Prophetic Tradition and the Battle for the Soul of the World*; and *Imaginal Love: The Meanings of Imagination in Henry Corbin and James Hillman*.

James Hillman

James Hillman has written a number of books such as *Re-Visioning Psychology*, and *The Soul's Code*, about which the publisher's blurb reads: "Plato and the Greeks called it 'daimon', the Romans 'genius', the Christians 'Guardian Angel' – and today we use terms such as 'heart', 'spirit' and 'soul'. For James Hillman it is the central and guiding force of his utterly unique and compelling 'acorn theory' which proposes that each life is formed by a particular image, an image that is the essence of that life and calls it to a destiny, just as the mighty oak's destiny is written in the tiny acorn."

And then there are several authors and poets (the latter such as William Blake, Kathleen Raine and Rainer Maria Rilke) who survey or convey important events and movements in the past, such as the "good times" of the pre-Socratic philosophers, neo-Platonism, the Renaissance, and Romanticism, and the terrible decline from the time of the so-called Enlightenment – which some have more-wisely termed "The Endarkenment", the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of Scientism and other fundamentalisms and extremisms – and seek to rediscover and bring about a new renaissance rooted in largely-lost native Western tradition, rather than Eastern imports and modern kitsch. Regarding the Industrial Revolution, see the last two chapters of JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, beginning with "The Scouring of the Shire" that were lamentably omitted from the otherwise-excellent film adaptation.

Richard Tarnas and the Soulless Vacuum

Richard Tarnas, quoted in Jeremy D. Johnson's *Seeing Through the World: Jean Gebser and Integral Consciousness*, has this to say: "By the late modern period, the cosmos has metamorphosed into a mindless, soulless vacuum, within which the human being is incongruently self-aware. The *Anima Mundi* has dissolved and disappeared, and all psychological and spiritual qualities are now located exclusively in the human mind and psyche."

"The forging of the self and the disenchantment of the world, the differentiation of the human and the appropriation of meaning, are all aspects of the same development. In effect, to sum up a very complex process, the achievement of human autonomy has been paid for by the experience of human alienation."

Gary Lachman and Jean Gebser

Gary Lachman has written two important books, *The Secret Teachers of the Western World* and *Lost Knowledge of the Imagination*.

In *The Secret Teachers of the Western World*, Gary Lachman writes: "The central argument of [philosopher, linguist and poet, Jean Gebser's] *The Ever-Present Origin* is that human consciousness is not static. Throughout its history, it has gone through several changes—what Gebser calls "mutations"—before arriving at our own form of consciousness. These mutations transform consciousness from one "structure" to another. There have been four such structures so far, what Gebser calls "the archaic," "the magical," "the mythic," and the "the mental-rational,"

ranging from our prehistoric ancestors to modern times. Gebser also posits a fifth “structure of consciousness,” what he calls “the integral” [influencing many, such as Ken Wilber], which is an integration of the previous four structures, and he believed that we, in the late modern world, were beginning to experience the effects of the shift from the mental-rational to the integral structure.” Each structure is latent within, like a seed, until actualized.

According to Gebser, we are in the late stages of “the deficient mode of the mental-rational structure”, and the rise of left-brain dominance – up the proverbial creek without a paddle, you might say. Hopefully, we will make it more fully into the “integral”, but such an outcome is far from guaranteed.

Iain McGilchrist, the Master and His Emissary

Psychiatrist and author Iain McGilchrist has much to add to the topic of the hemispheric working of the brain and its influence on the history of Western civilization. The RSA lecture on the Divided Brain provides a useful introduction (there’s a fun RSA animation, too), and *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* is an epic read with more studious footnotes than you can shake a stick at.

McGilchrist echoes words that may or may not have been those of Albert Einstein, that: “The intuitive mind is a sacred gift. The rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant but has forgotten the gift”, and Philip Pullman has expressed similar sentiments about reason and rationality. In a similar vein, Gary Lachman writes in *Lost Knowledge of the Imagination*, there are two main modes of working: “Pascal was admirably equipped to follow mathematical reasoning, but he knew of other reasoning too; as he famously wrote, ‘the heart has its reasons that reason does not know’. It knows them through the spirit of finesse, the intuitive approach, one of the two directions, as Barzun says, that the ‘one human mind can take’, [the other, rigorous approach being the ‘spirit of geometry’].”

As Khalilullah Khalili once wrote (quoted in Idries Shah’s *Learning How to Learn*):

“In every state, the Heart is my support:
In this kingdom of existence it is my sovereign.
When I tire of the treachery of Reason -
God knows I am grateful to my heart.”

In *The Master and His Emissary*, McGilchrist goes on to write: “Our talent for division, for seeing the parts, is of staggering importance – second only to our capacity to transcend it, in order to see the whole. These gifts of the left hemisphere have helped us achieve nothing less than civilisation itself, with all that that means. Even if we could abandon them, which of course we can’t, we would be fools to do so, and would come off infinitely the poorer. There are siren voices that call us to do exactly that, certainly to abandon clarity and precision (which, in any case, importantly depend on both hemispheres), and I want to emphasise that I am passionately opposed to them. We need the ability to make fine discriminations, and to use reason appropriately. But these contributions need to be made in the service of something else, that only the right hemisphere can bring. Alone they are destructive. And right now they may be bringing us close to forfeiting the civilisation they helped to create.”

Patrick Harpur and the Soul of the World

Another author who writes along the same lines as Gary Lachman is Patrick Harpur, such as *The Philosopher's Secret Fire: A History of the Imagination*, and *A Complete Guide to the Soul* (UK) or *The Secret Tradition of the Soul* (US).

In *A Complete Guide to the Soul*, Harpur writes: “What you knew in your childhood is true; the Otherworld of magic and enchantment is real, sometimes terribly real – and certainly more real than the factual reality which our culture has built up, brick by brick, to shut out colour and light and prevent us from flying.”

In *The Philosopher's Secret Fire*, he lays it all down: “According to the Neoplatonic tradition, psyche or soul is the underlying principle – the very stuff – of reality. It is, as we have just seen, ambiguous. It is imagined both as a macrocosm, ‘great world’, and as a microcosm, ‘little world’. It is both a collective world-soul, containing all daimons, images, souls, including the human soul; and an individual soul containing a profound collective level, in which we are connected to each other and, indeed, to all living things. Depending on our perspective, then, we can see ourselves as either embracing the Soul of the World [*anima mundi*] or as being embraced by it, although both are the case. Or we might say that soul manifests itself both impersonally, as world-soul, and personally as individual souls. At any rate, we can begin to see that the ancient laws of sympathy and correspondence which modern science has discredited are not primitive scientific laws at all, but profound psychic principles which express the way each microcosm – each of us – potentially reflects and participates in the entire cosmos.

“In Plato’s *Timaeus*, where the Soul of the World is first described, it is infused throughout the cosmos by the Demiurge, Plato’s creator-god, who thus makes a living ensouled universe. (The Soul of the World remains the root metaphor for all conceptions of the world as organism, including modern ecological ideas.) In other words, as well as being transcendent, one level above our world, the Soul of the World is also immanent, just as traditional cultures imagine it. Not that they always have a concept for the world-soul – they do not abstract from the world but rather see it in the first instance as animate, instinct with soul. ‘All things’, according to the ancients, from Thales to Plutarch, ‘are full of gods.’

“The very people who have emptied Nature of soul and reduced it to dead matter obeying mechanical laws, pejoratively call the traditional world-view animism – a term which effectively writes off what it claims to describe. To ‘animistic’ cultures there is no such thing as animism. There is only Nature presenting itself in all its immediacy as daimon-ridden. Every sacred object or place had its genius or jinn, numen or naiad, yes, even its boggart and hob, as the case may be.

“The Romantics imagined Nature in this way. Imagination was coextensive with Creation, just like the Soul of the World. They were identical. Every natural object was both spiritual and physical, as if dryad and tree were the inside and outside of the same thing. Thus every rock and tree was ambivalent: a daimon, a soul, an image. ‘To the eyes of a man of Imagination’, wrote William Blake, ‘Nature is Imagination itself.’”

Follow the Breadcrumbs ...

Well, I’ve set up the stall and laid out some perhaps unusual borrowed wares, and invited you to enjoy a sample of what alternatives are on offer to us, to get an intuitive “feel” for them. I’ve tried to paint a picture with some broad brush strokes, if you like. I leave it to you to pick and choose what appeals to you, and to follow the tempting breadcrumbs that others have left, in their turn, for our benefit – who knows where they may lead? – in the hope of bringing a little blessed – if at times

heretical – re-enchantment into these wondrous and wuthering Shadowlands in which we currently find ourselves exiled, marooned; forgetful, and largely out-of-touch with the Source.

Thankfully, we are not alone. Bahaudin Naqshband reminds us:

You may have forgotten the Way:
But those who came before
Did not forget you.

I'll leave the second-to-last word to Iain McGilchrist, as expressed in his *The Divided Brain and the Search for Meaning*, and as a cautionary note to myself: "Meaning emerges from engagement with the world, not from abstract contemplation of it." Or, as someone once cogently remarked to me: "Don't just stand there and nod. The mind observes and cogitates, the heart engages, and I would encourage you to engage with the process."

May you find your Shangri-La. May we all find our Sangrael!

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Image

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