



The Philosophers' Secret Fire: A History of the Imagination

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The visionary tradition of spirits, gods, and demons continues to subvert our rational universe, erupting from the shadows in times of intense religious and philosophical transition. In this dazzling history, Patrick Harpur links together fields as far apart as Greek philosophy and depth psychology, Renaissance magic and tribal ritual, Romantic poetry and the ecstasy of the shaman, to trace how societies have used myths to make sense of the world.

The Philosophers' Secret Fire: A History of the Imagination Details

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Author : Patrick Harpur

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From Reader Review The Philosophers' Secret Fire: A History of the Imagination for online ebook

Jennifer says

I actually gave up on it - I only marked it as read because there's no category for "too disconnected." The individual chapters are fine, but absolutely nothing ties this book together. If the author is making a point, I never found it. One could pull out a page or two, read that and find information of interest, but not as a whole.

Oakshaman says

A Hermetic Labyrinth Leading to the Otherworld

This book is a continuation of the ideas explored in the author's previous masterpiece, *_Daemonic Reality_*. It examines the "Otherworld", the Anima Mundi, or soul of the world. This is the larger Reality that was accepted by all traditional cultures, but which is now rejected, suppressed, and ignored by Western man. Yet, just because it is ignored doesn't mean that it doesn't exist- and doesn't make itself felt in our lives.

While *_Daemonic Reality_* emphasized the modern phenomena that seem to represent "break-outs" from the otherworld (UFO's, crypto-zoological species, Marian apparitions, angels, etc.), this volume goes into more historical and philosophical depth. It is a roundabout approach, but then it almost has to be for such a complex and unusual subject. Modern language and mindsets are simply inadequate for the purpose. Indeed, the book appropriately mirrors a hermetic labyrinth in its approach.

Yet debunking the hyper-rational and ultra-materialistic world of modern scientism isn't the foremost objective here. The author is primarily trying to give us some sense of the mind-set of traditional man, of a supernatural world that existed in close communion with the natural world and human society. Our western religious and scientific tradition has driven a wedge between us and both nature and heaven. This is an alien and unbalanced state for a person, or a society. This seems to be why the old immortal daemons periodically break through the veil into our false, shallow, consensus reality. They are trying to awaken us.

Yes, we are truly initiated by what we cannot control....

Cat says

Whilst presented in a somewhat disjointed and nonlinear way, *The Philosophers' Secret Fire* is a treasure trove of fascinating and valuable information and provides countless thought-provoking passages.

Marc says

A psychology professor of mine once said, "Sometimes you just want to curl up by the fire with some

Jungian archetypal comfort food, you know?" This fits that scenario perfectly. A clear elaboration and exploration of the lost daimonic. Brings in some structural anthropology, too. A companionable walk through the "perennial philosophy." Such strolls never get old.

Jesse Whyte says

I really wanted to like this book, but strong writing, interesting content, and the occasional insight cannot overcome the glaring lack of structure or continuity that makes a book into a book. Don't get me wrong -- this is not a Deleuzian rhizomatic masterpiece exploring alchemy in a poststructural way. This book desperately needed an editor that could tie Mr. Harpur's thought into an argumentative piece of scholarship. The re-enchantment project is definitely needed, but Mr. Harpur's effort unfortunately falls short as an academic work and instead is just a paean on the virtue of James Hillman's "soul".

Ivan Kulis says

Future reader beware: this book is difficult to read because of lack of coherence, labyrinthic development and somehow repetitive message. However, it is a very good reminder of how our society has repressed connections with Anima Mundi and how we neglect messages from our soul. Alchemists, shamans and other shape-shifting creatures are so called "daimons", messengers that convey the images from this Jungian archetypal world (or "Otherworld"). Harpur reminds us to listen to their messages, as they catalyse a dynamic and fluid psychic life.

Kirsten Mortensen says

I read both this book and Harpur's "The Secret Tradition of the Soul" over the holidays, and very much appreciated them both. These are holistic books that attempt to bridge contemporary and historical mythologies and frame them in terms of a modern conception of soul. Recommend.

Diane says

This book looks at the history of imagination, mystical experience, and myth. The author draws together seemingly unrelated phenomenon to explain what they tell us about the imagination. The book is well-researched, and included a lot of information with which I was unfamiliar. It was also nice to see a book defending the "non-rational" aspects of life, as authors often tend to ridicule the imaginative side of life. However, I felt the book's structure was somewhat disorganized. The author seemed to jump from one unrelated topic to another with very little transition.

Suellen Rubira says

Eu diria que esse é o verdadeiro guia de iniciantes para a realidade, muito mais do que o livro do Baggot. A história da imaginação do Harpur começa pela relação existente em todas as culturas entre o mundo onde

vivemos e um Outro Mundo, habitado por seres sobrenaturais, eventos fabulosos e como Mundo e Outro Mundo podem ser vistos como antagônicos ou como continuum.

Nessa ambiciosa história da imaginação, Harpur não ignora as posturas filosóficas desde Platão até as mais recentes teorias da ciência - da física em especial. Passa por mitos, pela psicanálise, alquimia e como a "literarização" de mitos, de arquétipos levou a um abandono desse Outro Mundo que embora ignorado, não pode ser eliminado da nossa psique. Todos os rituais de iniciação, de aceder a um plano transcendente são tirados de seu significado metafórico/simbólico e por isso são tomados como absurdos e acabam amplamente rechaçados pela ciência que busca a verdadeira realidade do mundo.

Taylor Ellwood says

This book takes the concepts Harpur discussed in Daimonic Reality and extends them further, examining how the other world intersects with everyday reality through myth, imagination, dream, and even popular culture. He also explores the intersection of these themes with identity and how identity is formed for a person. Harpur does a good job with this book, showing how imagination impacts memory and identity, while also exploring Jung's archetypal theory in mythology. what I find interesting is how he shows how the otherworld interacts with people across cultures in a consistent way. It's an intriguing book that'll help you appreciate imagination and its intersection with the otherworld.

Joshua Buhs says

I've been slow about writing this review because, at first, I wasn't sure I had anything to say, and then, once I thought about it more and came up with some topics, I wasn't sure how to put them together.

Partly that's a result of the book's organization--which leads to a first gloss: imagine Richard Tarnas's "Passion of the Western Mind" cut into four page chunks and re-arranged at random (rather than chronologically.) That gives a sense of both the book's content and arrangement.

Another attempt: Harpur is a Jungian structuralists unbothered by post-structuralism and post-modernism--indeed, he's anti-modern, looking to a lineage of thought that predates much of what we call Western civilization but which was reclaimed by romantics first during the Florentine Renaissance then Elizabethan England (alchemy is an important practice; John Dee an important character) and later again by the German and English Romantics. He sees Jung (and himself) as operating in the same tradition.

Beyond "Romantic," what is that tradition? It is the belief that, as Blake put it, imagination--not sense perception--is the key to human understanding of the universe, forcing an engagement with the the sacred.

Which raises the question, what does Harpur think the imagination is? That's where the book gets weird. He believes that the imagination is another world, both spiritual and material, populated by what he calls daimons--these are real beings. They manifest themselves in the world as fairies and monsters and aliens, all of which he thinks are both real and metaphorical (but still: real). They are ambivalent forces, good and evil, manipulable by some. Harpur calls this world world imaginal, in reference to Henry Corbin's work on the Mundus imaginalis.

Poets, shamans, and, of course, psychoanalysts (he especially likes James Hillman) have access to these

creatures; they see the other world not simply as metaphor--not simply as abstract creations of human musing, but as an actual entity. This part of the book reminded me of the end of Roger Penrose's "The Emperor's New Mind," which discussed just such a mental landscape--one that is not just a collective unconscious but a place subject to its own rules, a place where actions feedback into the human world.

Normal people can also access this otherworld, usually through dreams, though possessions, out-of-body experiences, and alien abductions may also be encounters with this daimonic reality. Generally, though, we ignore this place, or make it an intellectual abstraction--the soul of the world, the imagination, or the collective unconscious--but not a real place that is (again) both actual and metaphorical. There's a strong Neo-Platonist strand that runs through the book, and that's another way to think of Harpur: he really seems to believe that the world of Platonic forms exists. Jacob Boehme is, of course, central to the intellectual history Harpur is trying to write--Boehme thought imagination was what held the universe together, imagination understood in this Romantic way.

Harpur blames ignorance of this other world on Christianity, generally, which made demonized the daimonic (as Victoria Nelson has also argued) and Cartesian dualism in particular. The separation of mind and material left no room for understanding this world (it was a Fortean damned fact, so to speak) and unleashed a heroic modern ego that saw itself as completely individual and disconnected, focusing only on the literal meaning of its senses rather than the metaphorical. (He calls this rampant rationalism, as opposed to reason.)

Building on Mary Midgley's (really brilliant) book "Science as Salvation," he argues that science has become a modern myth--the myth of scientism, in which everything can be explained materially, rationally, without recourse to metaphor or myth. Technology aids in focusing the human attention on the literal to the exclusion of the metaphorical, and so turns the mind away from the daimonic realm. The clock divided time and the compass divided space (this is reminiscent of Charles Taylor's argument in "The Secular Age" about the loss of ritual time and ritual space). The telescope literalized the heavens, the printing press literalized knowledge, and television literalizes the imagination, creating a simulation of the other world, but one that does not nourish the human soul.

This focus on the material, he argues, has led to a contemporary ennui and poisoned souls--medicine treats the body, but nothing nourishes the psyche. We need myths to do this (shades of Robert Bly). If we understand how myths work, he claims, then we can understand how imagination works, and therefore the human soul.

So how do myths work? Harpur does not want to offer a single theory--citing anthropologist Rodney Needham, he notes myths do a lot of things: they reflect history, provide social character, embody a metaphysics, respond to nature, express both the timeless and the historical. Any single theory could not account for all this--and more to the point, any single theory of myths would itself become a myth, the way science has become a myth.

Instead, Harpur looks at how myths work. He is a (mostly) unapologetic follower of French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in arguing that myths are structured analogies (moon:sun::woman:man, for example). The content of myths do matter--the heroic myths are used to prop up the idea of individuality, for example--but structure is preeminent. Nor are the values always the same: they change and can be reversed; they are only known by considering a whole collection of myths, and deciphering the structure. Myths, then, are not just good to think, as Levi-Strauss had it, but good to imagine as well.

Understanding the imagination in this way requires what Harpur calls double-vision: seeing both the metaphorical and the literal at the same time, with the ability to switch back and forth. The mad (he's a Romantic, after all!) are good examples of this ability--often, he suggests, citing Odysseus, they are playing (or acting As If, in Michael Saler's terms). Rites of passage are also important to seeing the world this way (shades of Bly, again), and Harpur condemns modern society for downplaying them. He notes that the

English Romantics were great walkers, and so had chances to have experiences with the Other World on their peregrinations.

He also insists that science is a place where the imaginal world can be seen to operate, and offers two examples (by my count), one of which is interesting, the other just odd. The odd one is an extended consideration of Darwin's theory of evolution, which he says--but does not really argue--literalizes nature and hides its metaphorical side. I got the feeling that this was mostly trotted out so that Harpur would not be seen as to enthralled by science. That was necessary because of his other example: quantum mechanics and modern physics, which replaced Newtonian mechanics and is currently accepted, he says is an example of the daimonic realm. Subatomic particles are daimons, unpredictable, unseeable, affecting the nature of reality. Harpur's approach, then, is not so different than Erik Davis's "Techgnosis" in seeing mystical metaphors structuring the world, although it is not clear to me that Davis actually believes in Gnosticism.

This view also solves some of the problems presented by Cartesian dualism--well, not solves so much as dissolves. There is no difference between subject and object, he notes--they are connected, and so epistemology isn't really needed (although there is an inherent epistemology in this system; he just doesn't acknowledge it). Memory, he notes as well, is not a literal remembrance of things past, but a recreation--in this he parallels Alison Winter's recent work--and so is both something literal and metaphorical.

Given that the current system is, in Harpur's view, unstable, what should we expect of the future? He rejects Tarnas's conclusion that the masculine intellect will merge with the feminine instinct. Implicitly, he also rejects Victoria Nelson's suggestion that these mystical themes are working themselves out--indeed, evolving--in popular culture to nourish the soul and give access to the other world, the daimonic. Rather, sees a collapse brought on by a kind of dialectic. Science will be brought down by those who try to literalize the paranormal, maybe, and materialism be lost when people accept angels and demons as purely literal creatures.

So, after all this, what do I think? A hint is given in my continual attempt to connect Harpur to more legitimate thinkers. I want him to be right. I like Penrose's ideas and loved Tarnas, who I encountered about the same time that I first read Midgley. There's something to all of this that I think is right: the imagination is bigger than we think, not just flights of fancy. Science is a myth, and sometimes a pernicious one, a myth that will have to be accepted but ultimately transcended. I'm a Romantic at heart, I guess.

And then there's the discovery that "fort" meant, at one time, a fairy hill--or part of this other world. This is to perfect: Charles Fort's very name suggesting that his ideas were a passage to the imaginal world. Harpur's ideas have to be right!

But I am reluctant to follow Harpur too far. Maybe I'm just scared: I don't want to be thought crazy for believing in real demons (even if they are also metaphorical). But that's not the whole reason. I'm enough of a postmodernist to be skeptical of these grand narratives attempting to explain the entirety of human beings. A few Greek myths don't convince me that all people are guided by similar structures. Harpur is right to be skeptical of theories of myths that attempt to explain everything--but he is writing just such a myth himself. And if there's anything I learned reading this book, it is to question such myths.

Michael Klein says

Harpur along with Kripal is one of my favorite current authors. I recommend Harpur's "Daimonic Reality" before reading this one.

Ben says

I found this a frustrating read. I liked his attempt to challenge perceptions of reality, in the same way that Robert Anton Wilson does in his best work. I liked the way he untangles a thread that runs from the Neoplatonic World Of Forms to the Archetypes of Jung, but ultimately , like many reviewers here, I found the lack of coherent narrative frustrating, and feel that he needed an editor to bring this book to life.

Jack Oughton says

I want whatever this man is smoking.

Eibrajam says

Patrick Harpur propone el entendimiento del Otro Mundo como ese objeto elusivo que siempre se trata de aprehender así sea a través de las artes, los mitos o las ciencias. En ningún momento, a esto innombrable, le coloca una etiqueta inamovible que lo defina, sino que abstrae ciertas características que encontrará en común entre elementos tan disímiles como lo pueden parecer la materia oscura, los hados, el inconsciente y la alquimia medieval. Un libro lleno de datos que rompen fronteras y, como el subtítulo del libro lo especifica, con el desarrollo de una historia de la imaginación que va más allá de lo temporal.
