

## Book Reviews

*The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light: Mythology, Sexuality, and the Origins of Culture*, by William Irwin Thompson, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1981, 280 pp, Lindisfarne Series Book, \$14.95, ISBN 0-312-80512-8.

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In this book, published nearly thirty years ago, the author William Irwin Thompson explores the nature of myth and human consciousness, a life time project he continues to develop. He emphasizes the persuasive power of myth to create and inform culture, and weaves the human ability to create life with and communicate through symbols based on male and female forms of power.

The concerns raised in the present volume began with Thompson's second book, *At the Edge of History* - an erudite plea for a mythological view of the contemporary world. In order to carry forward his vision, Thompson became the founder director of the Lindisfarne Association, "a contemplative education community devoted to the study and realisation of a new planetary culture." He has written numerous articles, as well as four other books.

His works, especially the present one in review does not hide his agenda of wanting to take to task the social scientists - or, more precisely, the specialists who try to make a science of the humanities, and the materialists who see "myth as superstitious gibberish from the old days before we had science and technology." "The materialist wants to dominate nature with his culture, and to dominate feeling with reason, for he is interested in control." However, Thompson asserts that with his blinkered vision, he cannot see the point of history.

The point of history, is drawn by Thompson from the four-stage scheme conceived by the 18th century Italian philosopher GiambattistaVico, outlined in the Prologue, in which human history is shown as working its way through cycles consisting of an age of gods, an age of heroes, an age of men, and an age of chaos. His goal seems to highlight the necessity of retrieving the ancient visions: "we moderns are now living in the age of chaos," when our "understanding of myth is quite degenerate;" but as the cycle goes on, "the revelations of the new age of gods" wherein history once again "becomes the performance of myth," "have already begun"; and, as it does so, "our appreciation of myth is deepening."

In order to prepare ourselves for this return to the age of gods, we need only "re-vision" the past history of humankind through its available mythological material. While it is a credible and much to be valued project Thompson also seems to argue, that after all reductionist branches of science such as sociobiology are no less mythological than, say, midrashic commentary on the Bible. This "re-visioning" of the past is what Thompson undertakes in *The Time Falling Bodies Take To Light*.

If reading can give pure pleasure through the insights and expansion of vision a studied and painstakingly researched writing contains then the book being reviewed is one dazzling performance. It is an erudite, rarely obscure, brilliantly illuminating and breathtakingly eloquent, explanation of how human history became "eroticized" by the shift away from estrus in early hominid history, and explication of Thompson's main thesis, namely that "for hundreds of thousands of years the culture of women and women's mysteries" was "the dominant ideology of humanity."

It is as if Thompson takes us on a caravan ride through the origins of culture, sex, agriculture and patriarchy as we read the chapters, hominization, symbolisation and agriculturalization. He does not solely rely on abstract conceptualisations, but has got the picturisation and archaeological image base to substantiate his argumentation. In other words, he is into mythopoeic thinking, which gets down to deeper levels of existence. One of the most beautiful wisdom sentences in the book is "Myth is the history of the soul." The wide historical sweep he takes across millennia over his subject matter comes alive constantly because of the many challenging ideas he brings up to confront the reader.

In this work the author is concerned with edges - the origin of consciousness, the beginning of language, the source of symbol and the reason why sexual reproduction supplanted simple cell division. Such edges are necessarily the limits of our intellectual understanding, beyond which we can only see by relying on myth. Thompson's scholarship is broad, deep and infused with keen insight. He ably demonstrates that science may be clever at dissecting what is, but fails when it attempts to demonstrate how things came to be. Further, shows through his interpretative analysis of ancient myths that at the edges, all modes of thinking take a flying leap, and the maps provided by the old stories, suffused with poetry and rich symbols, are to be discarded only at our peril. Cecil Bothwell concurs that a science cut off from ancient wisdom can easily lose sight of the reason we needed knowledge in the first place, and full of itself can lead us toward catastrophe to prevent which we need scholars like Thompson.

A reviewer like Christopher Lehmann-Haupt has taken Thompson to task for claiming that "our appreciation of myth is deepening" just on the basis of the fiction of Doris Lessing, Jorge Luis Borges, and Stanislaw Lem, the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen, and such films as Nicholas Roeg's "The Man Who Fell to Earth" and Werner Herzog's "Kaspar Hauser." While these may indeed have been insufficient, way back in early 80s, to show that we have arrived at the edge of Viconian history

between the age of chaos and the renewed age of gods, the developments since and appreciation for alternative modes of spirituality seem to prove Thompson right in hindsight.

While the dreams, aspirations and attempts at an escape into the vast outer space may be a continuation of the mythological history of the soul, the connectedness to the earth and its preservation as a prehistory cannot be forgotten yet. In keeping alive that memory the indigenous visions that most appropriately preserve the ancient wisdom still needs to have a place in academia and beyond.