

Geomythology

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Arktos: The Polar Myth in Science, Symbolism and Nazi Survival. By Joscelyn Godwin. *Thames and Hudson/Phanes: 1993. Pp. 260. £10.95, \$16.95 (pbk).*

JONATHAN Swift, the misanthropic Anglo-Irish cleric (1667–1745), once spun a little verse that runs:

So geographers in Afric maps,
With savage pictures fill the gaps;
And o'er uninhabitable downs
Place elephants in place of towns.

Back before the entire Earth had been, if not explored on foot by civilized men, at least flown over and mapped, geographers put things stranger than elephants beyond the boundaries of the known: one-eyed Arimaspians, one-legged Sciapodes, headless men with faces in their chests and fabulous wildlife. These animals were usually composites of known creatures. They included the unicorn of India, the gryphon of Scythia, and dragons everywhere. In 1952, my lamented friend Willy Ley and I attempted a popular survey of leading geomyths in our *Lands Beyond*, which Joscelyn Godwin cites as a source.

Godwin also surveys geomyths, focusing on those associated with the Arctic. He begins with the myth of the Golden Age, before men discovered civilization and fell into its evil ways. The three 'Abrahamic religions' (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) have their own version in the Garden of Eden.

The big, fat Russian adventuress who became the uncrowned Queen of Occultists, the fascinating Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91), founder of theosophy, made up her own Golden Age, located in the North Pole. According to her and her disciples, man evolves through seven Root Races, each with seven subraces. We are the fifth Root Race; the sixth will soon appear.

The first Root Race was a kind of astral jellyfish, living on the Imperishable Sacred Land centred on the North Pole. The animals are unknown as fossils for the obvious reason that jellyfish seldom leave fossils. After the Imperishable Sacred Land disappeared (despite its imperishability), the second Root Race, a little more substantial, dwelt in Hyperborea, roughly Siberia plus Scandinavia and the Canadian Arctic. The

third Root Race comprised the apelike, hermaphroditic, egg-laying Lemurians, inhabiting the large southern continent of Lemuria. Some had four arms; some, eyes in the backs of their heads. Their discovery of sex precipitated their downfall. (Blavatsky took a dim view of sex, at least after she became too old to be interested in it herself.) And so on through the wholly human Atlanteans to us.



Hyperborea, like Atlantis, comes from ancient Greek geographical speculations. The Hyperboreans were supposed to dwell in the far north, perhaps on the north coast of Asia. Never having been there, Greeks imagined the Arctic as a fine, balmy place, where men lived a thousand years.

Godwin's pursuit of northern lore brings in a vast mass of nineteenth-century science, speculation and fakery. Examples are the rise of the Aryan myth, embraced in the twentieth century by the Nazis with genocidal results. It involved the dispute of the 1840s over whether man's original language had been Hebrew, as Biblical literalists assumed, or Sanskrit, as the Aryanists declared.

Another such fragment sucked into

the occult and pseudoscientific vortex was the fictional force 'vril', which appeared in the science-fiction novel *The Coming Race* (1871) by the prolific English writer Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who a few years before had been made first Baron Lytton. In this tale, Lord Lytton takes his hero into an underground cave world. There he finds a race of supermen using vril, which they mentally direct to blast rocks and monsters. Blavatsky and her theosophists adopted vril as an effective means of propulsion and defence for her prehistoric races, like Edgar Rice Burroughs' Eighth Barsoomian Ray. There was even a Vril Society, which included Karl Haushofer, the German founder of 'geopolitics'.

And so on and on, through the Thulean Society, a subgroup of which became the German Workers' National Socialist (Nazi) Party; the Chilean occultist Miguel Serrano, who hailed Hitler as the Tenth Avatar of Vishnu and claimed that Hitler had escaped the fall of Berlin in a German flying saucer; the Polaires or Polar Society, which enlisted the occult help of the ghost of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; jewel-crusted Shambhala, either on the surface of Tibet or Mongolia or beneath it, and ruled by a King of the World; and even the notorious Shaver hoax perpetrated by the late Raymond Palmer in 1945–48, when he edited *Amazing Stories*. Palmer received a number of manuscripts from the semiliterate Richard S. Shaver, asserting as fact that the world's ills were caused by evil telepathic emanations from a race of subterranean fiends, the deros. Palmer asserted that he, too, took these assertions as true. Visitors to *Amazing's* office were amazed to find Palmer cowering behind his typewriter and listening for deros.

Godwin goes on to serious discussion of the form of the Earth, especially of those who thought it was hollow. Eminent among these was John Cleves Symmes, who said that the Earth was not only hollow, with holes at the poles, but also that it was merely the outermost of a whole series of hollow spheres, one inside the other.

One group held not only that the Earth was hollow, but also that we were inside it. This group was headed by Cyrus Teed, who ran his cult on the west coast of Florida from 1894 to his death in 1909. When he failed to resurrect in three days as promised, several followers killed themselves; but stubborn believers lingered on for years.

Having myself read through much of the Higher Nonsense in getting material for my own books, I must admire Godwin's stamina in wading through the vast quantities listed in his bibliography. His attitude towards the prophets of Hidden Wisdom and Secret Masters is admirably fair and nonjudgemental, albeit when considered *en masse* these colourful and riotously contradictory doctrines merely lend proof to Bertrand Russell's statement that most people, if you shout "Two and two make five!" at them long and loudly enough, will come to believe that two and two *do*, after all, make five.

As to whether the leaders of the countless occult and magical cults believe their own claims, who knows? We do not yet have a mind-reading machine, and Godwin does not address the topic. Cyrus Teed probably believed his own line. Contrariwise, Blavatsky seems to have been altogether cynical. Finding that she could make people believe that two and two make five, she exploited this gift to the hilt, as the most effective way open to her to make a living.

In one of her impulsively candid moods, Blavatsky told the Unitarian preacher Conway: "It's all glamour. People think they see what they don't see; that's all there is to it." The Russian journalist Solovyoff (or Solovëv) quoted her thus: "What is one to do when, in order to rule men, you must deceive them, when, in order to catch them and make them pursue whatever it may be, it is necessary to promise and show them toys?" Some purveyors of the Higher Nonsense may have begun their leadership from pure self-interest, but as time passed they came to believe their own pitch. (This may have been the case with the late L. Ron Hubbard of Scientology fame.)

Although Godwin seems not to be taken in by the prophets of Hidden Wisdom and Secret Masters, his attitude towards "materialistic science" is hardly more favourable. He accuses scientists of "brainwashing" the young with their doctrines of boundless "progress". This is confusing the scientific beliefs to which accumulating evidence pushes scientists with their beliefs on nonscientific (social, moral or cultural) matters. There is no hard-and-fast connection between the two sets of convictions. Thus the great ethologist Konrad Lorenz revealed Nazi tendencies. Godwin wants to hang on to the "realities and truths that stand inviolate", such as those attributed to Christianity.

When much younger, I rejoiced in freedom from religious dogma, thinking: wouldn't it be fine if everyone adopted my own hard-nosed, sceptical, materialistic, nonsupernatural, scientific view? Now, having seen the results of trying to run an empire (the Soviet Union) on the

basis of a purely secular, nontheistic philosophy, I am not sure that masses of men can manage their affairs without supernatural beliefs about, for example, rewards and punishments after death, or promotion and downgrading in one's next incarnation. So let Godwin hang on to his Christianity — if he can — even though I might not accept his arguments myself.

The work is a remarkably comprehensive coverage of the pseudoscientific field in recent centuries, well written and knowledgeable. If the author wanders off the boundaries of polar geomorphology, that is inevitable in trying to make sense of such hazy, amorphous concepts. It is like trying to measure a cloud with a surveyor's tape. Nor is the subject trivial. Sixty years ago, many well-informed people dismissed the Aryan-race cult as crackpot nonsense, and we know that use was made of the myth. □

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Out of the bell jar

Hugh Freeman

Touched With Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament. By Kay Redfield Jamison. *Free Press (Macmillan Inc., New York): 1993. Pp. 370. \$24.95.*

"ONE of the oldest and most persistent of cultural notions", says Kay Jamison, is that of a possible link between madness and genius, even though many of the outstandingly creative have always appeared to be healthy and well balanced. In her view, confusion about the meaning of 'madness', together with ignorance particularly of the nature of manic-depressive (or affective) illness, has been responsible for most of the controversy around this theme. It has also tended to fall between two academic stools — psychiatric research, which is mainly biological, having little interest in the experience of writers and artists, and scholars of creativity fruitlessly pursuing a connection with schizophrenia. Jamison, though, was not only the co-author of one of the standard works on affective disorder, but has personally investigated a large British sample of artistically creative people. With these unique qualifications, what has she made of the 'mad genius' notion?

Her declared purpose is "to make a literary, biographical and scientific argument for a compelling association between two temperaments — the artistic and the manic-depressive — and their

relationship to the rhythms of the natural world". At the same time, she warns that labelling anyone who is unusually creative or eccentric with this diagnosis "both diminishes the notion of individuality within the arts and trivialises a very serious illness". Nor are most people who have affective disorder unusually creative. For a start, though, there have to be clear distinctions between affective psychosis (at the extreme end of the spectrum), episodes of major depression (or, more rarely, of mania) and fluctuations of mood. If these disorders are confused, as they often are, it becomes impossible to compare any one set of data about them with another.

Should anyone be disinclined to take manic-depressive illness seriously, Jamison points out that, if untreated, its mortality — now mainly through suicide — is higher than that for many types of heart disease; out of a long list of poets, a staggering 18 per cent had taken their own lives. There may also be disguised cases: Byron's involvement in the Greek War of Independence may in fact have been a way of ensuring his own death. The purpose of knowing this, however, is not just as an exploration of psychopathology, but to understand the man and his work more deeply. Tabulating what is known about 37 British and Irish poets born between 1705 and 1805, Jamison records that no fewer than 30 of them had evidence of significant affective disorder.

While all this information is impressive, it involves what epidemiologists call the 'floating numerator' — a problem which Jamison does not deny. Not only is the denominator of 'poets' very difficult to define, but literary scholarship has resulted in our knowing much more about the famous than about the unknown, which could bias the evidence. An alternative approach, though, comes from affective disorder being "the most genetic of the major psychiatric illnesses", providing what Jamison describes as "the constitutional core of a determining temperament". Although the genetic mechanisms are still largely unknown, studies of separated twins provide strong support for the illness being familial, with many unaffected relatives also showing cyclical swings of mood. What is particularly relevant here is that unusual creativity and other abilities may run prominently through the same families.

So the disorder is "paradoxically advantageous and yet destructive". Its most characteristic feature is a cycle of fluctuations in mood, energy, sleep — and creativity in those who have the gift for it. Quite recently, 'seasonal affective disorder', with depression related to the darkness of winter, has been found to be relatively common, and the incidence of suicide peaks in spring and autumn.