

Book Review

Daniel C. Noel, *The Soul of Shamanism: Western Fantasies, Imaginal Realities* (Continuum Publishing Company, 1998)

S.T. Coleridge described the poet's task as one of "raising the feelings of childhood into the powers of Manhood." In his important new book, *The Soul of Shamanism*, Daniel Noel makes a similar rite of passage. A professor of religious studies, Noel has been a student of Shamanism, and more particularly of contemporary Western neoshamanism, for some thirty years. Like many of his generation, it was the works of Carlos Castaneda which first stirred in him that nostalgia for the spirit which I am here calling "the feelings of childhood." Castaneda's books were inspirational in their depiction of a vital shamanic spirituality to which Westerners might find access. The rub came, however, some years later with the revelation that Castaneda's writings were not the factual field reports which they were purported to be, but fictions. Recognizing that one has been taken in by a hoax is a disillusioning experience. The interesting thing about this book is what Noel subsequently did with his disillusionment. Rather than splitting off what had enchanted him about shamanism and regressively restoring his academic persona, Noel continued to hold on to the allure which shamanism had held for him while at the same time suffering its waning credibility on a conscious level. Like Eros repairing to his mother Aphrodite's house to nurse his scalded wing, Noel's libidinal investment in shamanism passed into an introverted period. During this time of continued study and reflection, Noel was faithful both to his critical training and to the experience of the numinous which had been mediated to him by the sham anthropology that had so excited and inspired him. Accepting these opposites which were constellated in him, he waited on the clarifying third that would truly resolve his conflict.

A turning point in Noel's work with this material came when he learned of contemporary critiques of Mircea Eliade's great book, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Though Eliade has an impeccable reputation as a scholar, recent scholarship has demonstrated that his readings of ethnological reports were biased in the direction of ascension imagery. After linking Eliade's predilection for this imagery with its appearance in a novel which Eliade wrote concurrently with this book on shamanism, Noel asks us to consider whether what Eliade's critics would discard as error might not also be regarded as a datum of religious experience, a revelation of Eliade's own Western unconscious. In this connection, I am reminded of Jung's definition of numinosity as "*a priori* emotional value" and of his adage that the unconscious appears first in projection. In Noel's view our Western fantasies about shamanism are the projection of an *a priori* emotional value upon shamanism. We see ourselves first out there in the way we misperceive the other. Our fanciful and mistaken view of actual indigenous shamanism contains our own authentic shamanic spirit. It is with this projection-reclaiming recognition that Noel survives the disillusionment of what Coleridge calls the "feelings of childhood" and carries them forward into the "powers of manhood."

And what are the "powers of manhood" as Noel conceives them? As for Coleridge, they are the powers of imagination. Elucidating this further, Noel eruditely discusses the importance of Jungian psychology in general, and Post-Jungian "imaginal psychology" in particular, in releasing the authentic dimension of our contemporary interest in shamanism and neoshamanism. The perspectives of Jung and Hillman, he argues, help one to navigate between the Charybdis of an uncritical New Age literalism and the Scylla of cultural appropriation of indigenous shamanism by Western seekers.

The work that the book does--containing opposites, withdrawing projections, imaginatively connecting to Mercurius and Merlin--is classically Jungian. The product of this work, the third that reconciles the tensions contained in its pages, however, is decidedly post-Jungian. Like James Hillman, to whose work this book also provides a lucid introduction, Noel has not abandoned his puer spirituality. Rather, he has stayed with it and allowed the disillusionment that is part of the puer's fate to move him from the naïveté of Western fantasies to the imaginal realities that have underpinned them. An authentic Western shamanism, Noel suggests, may find its proper grounding in the soil of imaginal psychology even as it may find its mythical exemplar in the Western figure of Merlin. Whether one is interested in shamanism or not, this book is important as an exercise in psychological method. Also, as a commentary on neoshamanism as a contemporary religious movement, the book is a model of what I would characterize as empathically informed cultural criticism.

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