

**Cosmos And Psyche:
Intimations Of A New World View**

by Richard Tarnas

Viking Penguin 2006, 569 pages

Review by Frederick J. Dennehy

In the *Epilogue* to his masterful (and bestselling) The Passion Of The Western Mind, Richard Tarnas acknowledges the Copernican revolution as a “primordial event,” both “world-destroying and world-constituting,” the basis for both the ontological and epistemological revolutions initiated by Descartes and Kant respectively. These revolutions have sharply defined the human being as free and independent from the natural world, but they also have reinforced the radical uncertainty and estrangement we all experience today as “alienation.”

Tarnas compares this situation to Gregory Bateson’s famous “double bind.” In the post-Copernican world, the human being is at once a peripheral mote of dust in a vast purposeless cosmos and, at the same time, a conscious, purposeful subject conferring meaning upon that same cosmos. His hope is to find in the larger cosmos a wholeness, a meaning and a purpose that may have been eclipsed in the aftermath of the Copernican revolution, as the breathless adventure of a new cosmological discovery congealed into the smug and dogmatic limitations of the Enlightenment.

Tarnas’s new book, Cosmos And Psyche (Penguin Viking 2006) begins where the *Epilogue* of The Passion Of The Western Mind left off. In fact, although it made its appearance fifteen years later, the impulse for Cosmos And Psyche antedates that of The Passion Of The Western Mind, which was originally conceived to constitute the opening chapters of Cosmos And Psyche.

In Cosmos And Psyche, Tarnas is clear that, even more fundamentally than Descartes and Newton, Copernicus is responsible for the present rupture between world and self. Where there was once a “permeable” human self participating in a universal matrix of intelligence and soul, there is now -- centuries after the triumph of the heliocentric hypothesis -- a vast “disenchanted” *cosmos* on the one side, and a radically differentiated human *psyche* on the other. That human self is the sole repository of meaning and purpose; the cosmos is mute. The Enlightenment becomes the guiding spirit of a universe seemingly stripped of meaning, but anchored in truth; Romanticism inspires the self in its effort to *confer* meaning, beauty and goodness into the eternal silence. It is the irony of the scientific revolution that while it has given us freedom from dependency, passivity and superstition, injecting us with a self-directed energy we had never before known, at the same time it has drained the spirit and soul out of everything else. But the resulting division is grotesquely unequal. The human self increasingly appears like an “insignificant speck” in an “atomistic void.” The *objective significance* -- the very *reality* -- of the self’s spiritual aspirations is dangerously in question. It is not an exaggeration to characterize the whole of modern philosophy as an effort to articulate a connection between mind and matter -- *psyche* and *cosmos* -- to find (or deny the existence of) meaning in that connection.

In his exploration of this connection, Tarnas first turns to transpersonal psychology, and to Carl Gustav Jung in particular. In Jung’s long, painstaking investigation of synchronicity, Tarnas sees the shadow of an underlying coherence that may connect otherwise disparate events and inform a larger field of meaning.

For Tarnas, astrology -- in the form of planetary alignments and transits, without reference to zodiacal signs, “houses” or “progressions” -- yields a particularly evidential synchronicity. But we must understand that these planetary positions do not “cause” events. They are more like the indicator on a barometer, a marker of the archetypal climate. We have to move beyond our modern limited notions of cause and effect to Aristotle’s wider formulations. If for Aristotle’s “formal” cause you read *meaning*, and for “final” cause *purpose*, you understand planetary alignments and transits as not only a form of synchronicity, but as archetypes themselves.

In his early years, Jung understood archetypes to be primordial forms *located within the psyche* that structure and give rise to human experience in action. The Platonic view of archetypes was closer to “forms” or “ideas” that give the world its shape and meaning -- timeless universals that transcend subject and object. Tarnas’s understanding of archetypes is broader than both the early Jung and Plato, and more like the Homeric one -- actually *beings* or “gods.” They embody an identifiable living meaning that embraces contradictions and changes shape continually. Consequently, they periodically demand new interpretations and connections.

In Cosmos And Psyche, Tarnas examines the positions of the planets relative to each other at the time of an individual’s birth, as well as with the positions of the planets at any given time *in relation to their positions* when that individual was born (transits). As an historian, Tarnas is interested in the positions of the planets relative to the earth at any given time, because they reflect a collective archetypal dynamic in cultural conditions and the prevailing state of the will. He is particularly concerned with the “big picture” -- planetary

alignments with longer life cycles, and so he focuses on the slower moving outer planets -- Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. He examines thoroughly -- with practiced intuition and in cascading detail -- the alignments, both individual and epochal, of Uranus - Pluto; Saturn - Pluto; Jupiter - Uranus; and Uranus - Neptune.

The substantial majority of the pages of this book is devoted to the significance of the above alignments. It may be that the best way to read this book is to go very slowly, even meditatively, in attempting to understand the archetypal relationships that Tarnas masterfully outlines. Then, before reading further in any given chapter, sketch out lists of acquaintances and well-known figures, specific events in their lives, as well as historical events that you believe resonate with the archetypal relationship. Include yourself at the top of the list. Then compare your list with what the chapter in question will supply. You are likely to be surprised at the results.

Once the planetary archetypes are evoked, the sheer outpouring of instances within a given cultural age, both in terms of representative individuals and events, is overwhelming. But you will come to understand that this is not a predictive exercise or a parlor game. It is rather a way of understanding a real connection between self and universe, between psyche and cosmos, as it is revealed by those planetary alignments. What should emerge from your reading is a deeper understanding of archetypes and a recognition that the meaning and purpose we have arrogated to ourselves exclusively since the Copernican revolution, may be a real part of the universe as well.

Tarnas's deeply radical hypothesis is that the disenchantment of the modern universe is *unreal* -- the result of a "simplistic epistemology" and moral positioning totally inadequate to

the depths, complexity and grandeur of the cosmos. He illustrates this in a parable which he calls the "Two Suitors." He asks you to imagine that you are the universe. Not the mechanistic universe in the dull imaginings of post-modern science wonks, but a mysterious cosmos of beauty and intelligence. He asks you to imagine that you are being approached by two suitors - - two epistemologies -- who want to know you.

Would you open more deeply to the suitor (the way of knowing) who approached you as though you were without intelligence or purpose, as though you had no interior dimension, no spiritual capacity, and whose motivation for knowing you was driven by a desire for mastery and control over you? Or would it be to that suitor saw you as intelligent and noble and worthy -- as endowed with mind, soul, moral aspiration and purpose, spiritual depths and mystery, as he? Whose goal in knowing you is to find a fulfillment intimately linked with imaginative vision, moral transformation, empathetic understanding and aesthetic delight? Whose act of knowledge is an act of love that could produce a co-creative unfolding of new and unimagined realities?

Of course the answer is given in the question, but the contrary assumption -- the approach of the first suitor -- which has governed our inquiry for half a millennium, is beginning to crack. It can no longer measure up to our increasingly vibrant intuition of the *reality* of truth, beauty and goodness. It is time, Tarnas says, to give the second suitor a chance. You will find it very difficult to argue with him.