Brief Notes on Thomas McEvilley

1. The Shape of Ancient Thought and The Arimaspia

*Pan neglected his / leaping and sang / the odes of / Pindar.*

In *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, Thomas McEvilley notes there had been important similarities between the thought of India and Greece in the Ancient world. One reason for this is that both were profoundly affected by the Bronze Age civilizations of the Ancient Near East, especially Mesopotamia. Under the Persian Empire (roughly the sixth century BCE), there was an important transmission of ideas from Northwestern India to Eastern Greece (part of present-day Turkey/Western Anatolia). These ideas included reincarnation, a cyclical view of time, and the idea of monism. Pre-Socratic thought, the central philosophical movement at the heart of Western Civilization, was essentially brought over from India and based on these ideas. Later, during the reign of Alexander (the fourth century BCE), this transmission occurred in reverse. Now Greek thought, carrying with it the advanced ideas of the dialectic, of reason, and logic, began to influence thought in India. The radical view in *The Shape of Ancient Thought* is that this significant exchange of ideas between East and West, which occurred for many centuries and showed that the origins of Greco-Roman culture were non-Western, was repressed in favor of a Western bias.
In McEvilley’s novel, *The Arimaspia*, a Greek scholar is travelling to India in order “to unite East and West in a megaculture that would combine, and yet somehow separately preserve, the best of all its parts.” He discovers the challenges of such a product. On arriving in India, he encounters Megasthenes,\(^1\) who believed that the Indians were “better in deed than in word,” and that their “opinions indicate mental simplicity.” Such ideas resulted in what the narrator sees as part of Megasthenes’s racist projection: “that dark-skinned peoples can’t deal with abstraction, that they are associated with the instincts, and so on.” Our Greek scholar also discovers the influence of Indian thought upon Greek thought:

Even then they speak of nothing so much as of death, for they say that the life here is as it were that of a babe still in the womb, and that death, to those who have devoted themselves to philosophy, is birth into true life, and that they discipline themselves above all to be prepared for death. (This was the Orphic line too. Socrates is said to have remarked that philosophy was “practicing death.”)

While reading an Indian text, he notes the expression of Western ideas mixed with a form that is distinctly Eastern. He describes the text as “unrolling inexorably the ancient story of war and betrayal that reminds me of the Homeric tales except for its narrative form, which seems pluralistic and shapeless. Aristotle would never accept it: no clear beginning, middle, and end.” Furthermore, he feels surrounded by a “big emptiness” that cannot be “surrounded or embraced in a framework which could give it meaning, because such a framework would just become the next boundary of the finite and be in turn surrounded by the big emptiness.” The concept of “zero” or *sunyam* origi-

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\(^1\) Megasthenes (350–c. 290 BCE) was an ancient Greek historian and ethnographer of India during the Hellenistic period. He described his findings in India in a book called *Indika*, which has been lost but partially reconstructed based on the writings of later authors.
nated in ancient India. It was derived from the concept of “void” or śūnyatā propagated by Nāgārjuna in his work *Seventy Verses on Emptiness*. Our Greek scholar comes up against the limits of reason. But his project of “establishing a philosophy school in India and fomenting a synthesis of Greek and Indian thought” is an attempt to establish global harmony.

Such attempts to acknowledge the Eastern influence upon the West were repressed over time as a result of racist ideas during the colonial period, primarily of the British agenda. Instead the West was seen as the home of rational positivism and the East as mystical and irrational, thus inferior and superstitious. When Percy Bysshe Shelley writes, “We are all Greeks,” he specifically means the West, the Greco-Roman culture. Thus, the East and West have always been seen as distinct. In the East, China and Japan were dependent on Indian origins, but in the West, the Greco-Roman civilization has been seen, due to colonial project, as the sole culture responsible for the origin of Civilization, and thus superior to all other cultures. Speaking about *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, McEvilley tells us that in 1786, at the height of the Colonial period, there was a man named Sir William Jones, who gave a lecture in which he stated that Sanskrit was an Indo-European language. This struck at the heart of the British agenda. If Sanskrit was understood to be the oldest of the Indo-European languages, that would topple the supremacy of the Western linguistic bias. But his views were ignored.

In our time, this colonial agenda is disguised as a progressive movement for the people, one that leads to the demonization of Islamic culture and immigrants in general, nationalism, and white supremacy. But, despite this, and as a result of technology and the changing face of our culture and the world, the spread of nationalism is challenged. In such a political environment, translation becomes increasingly important. Today educated children are fluent in at least two if not more languages. Many translations from Farsi, Arabic, Turkish, and other non-Western

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2 Little is known of his life. He was born Hindu, which, during his time (c. 150–c. 250 CE), meant a religious allegiance to the Vedas.
languages are being published. The primacy of English is called into question.

2. Translations

My first encounter with McEvilley’s work was through his translations from the Greek. During the time, I was also working in the same territory, producing translations of Catullus, Lucretius, Ovid, Martial, and others, in an attempt to show how foreign the value system of the Ancient world is to our own, and to reveal certain cultural forces at work in our time. At the center of the project was a reconsideration of sexuality in the pre-Judeo-Christian world. Here is McEvilley’s transcreation of the Epicurean Philodemus’s (c. 110–35 BCE) poem, “Philodemus Reforms”:

I want no more garlands of white violets, no more lyre-playing
No more wine with cocaine in it, no more Syrian incense burning on the nighttable,
No more all night parties that end with a thirsty whore in my bed —
No more! I hate these things; they are all driving me mad!

But — give me garlands of narcissus flowers, and let me play the flute,
Perfume me with saffron, give me wine with amphetamines and hashish,
And mate me, yes mate me, with a virrrgin.

It is an interesting poem in several respects. Epicurus believed that what he called “pleasure” was the greatest good, but that the way to attain such pleasure was to live modestly, to gain knowledge of the workings of the world, and to limit one’s desires. This would lead one to attain a state of tranquility and freedom from fear as well as an absence of bodily pain. Of course, this is
by no means a hedonistic philosophy, though it speaks of “pleasure” as the ultimate good. The similarity of this thought with certain Buddhist doctrines on sexuality and restraint is striking: “This is called the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of enlightenment. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should be pursued, that it should be developed, that it should be cultivated, that it should not be feared.”

Philodemus is exchanging one kind of pleasure for another by renouncing the “lyre-playing” for the flute, choosing wine with hashish and amphetamines instead of cocaine, renouncing the “Syrian incense” to be perfumed with saffron. Perhaps the “flute” suggests the syrinx of Pan. Many modern scholars consider Pan to be derived from a proto-Indo-European god, whom they believe to have been an important pastoral deity. The Rigvedic god, Pushan, is believed to be an earlier form of the Greek god, Pan. Amphetamines and cocaine are both stimulants whose effects are similar. But hashish, a word that comes from Arabic, meaning “grass,” suggests the East. As trade between India and the Greco-Roman world increased spices became the main import along the spice routes from India to the Western world, rivaling silk and other commodities. Ancient Greeks and Romans valued saffron as a perfume or deodorizer that they scattered in public spaces such as the courts and amphitheaters. Wealthy Romans took daily saffron baths. In this poem, there is a mixture of Eastern and Western influences.

In the last line of the poem, Philodemus makes it clear that he wants a “virrrgin” and not a whore for a wife: “And mate me, yes mate me, with a virrrgin [my emphasis].” McEvilley’s poetic license with the spelling of the word “virgin” is significant since it expresses excitement while also pointing to the fact of his “reformation.” It is generally accepted that Hellenistic culture in general, and Hellenistic philosophy in particular, have influenced early Christian thought. And the writings of Philodemus, as well as the Epicurean philosophers, have played a significant

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3 Ven Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translation of the Buddha’s words in The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, 557.
4 The Rigveda is an ancient Indian collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns.
role. For this reason, I read a tension between the “virrrgin” of the poem and the “virgin” of Christianity which will eventually be resolved in a crystallizing moment when the West asserts its power and taking the form of the Christian religion casts away the East as though it were exorcising a demon. With Christianity’s subsequent dominance over the West, the project of neglect and repression of Eastern thought was virtually complete.

In the *Arimaspia*, McEvilley appropriates many texts from the Ancient world, and one that is used extensively is Philostratus’s *Imagines*. I imagine this text was important to him since it is in a way a kind of Ancient art criticism, and McEvilley himself was a well know art critic. In the *Imagines*, Philostratus describes to a young boy a series of paintings. I have translated these texts and reading McEvilley’s *The Shape of Ancient Thought* has made me aware of certain important cultural aspects and forces at work. The following text concerns a painting of Themistocles and is of particular interest here. Themistocles (c. 524–459 BCE) was an Athenian politician and general. Plutarch describes him as “the man most instrumental in achieving the salvation of Greece” from the Persian threat. Here is my translation:

### 31. THEMISTOCLES

Here is a Greek, and we can tell by his rough cloak that he is an Athenian, and he is among these barbarians, these men who are degenerates and whose lives are ruined, and I imagine he addresses them with some wise words, in an attempt to have them see the error of their ways and to urge them to give up their luxuries and their decadent way of life. We are in the center of Babylon and these are Medes; notice their royal standard which is a golden eagle upon a shield, and here is a king on his throne, elaborately adorned in many vibrant colors, shimmering like a peacock. Now the painter’s fine depiction of a tiara and a tasseled cloak or a jacket with sleeves or even the grotesque forms of animals that these barbarians decorate their clothes with, fine as these representations are, more deserving of our praise is the painter’s
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use of these golden threads woven into the cloth and how he has preserved the specific design of the garment which contains them, and also, by Zeus, the way in which he painted the faces of these eunuchs. Of course, the palace is also made of gold, indeed, the accuracy with which the painter depicts his subject makes the painting seem unlike a painting at all; the palace seems like an actual building and you can smell the fragrance of frankincense and myrrh, for it is the habit of these barbarians to pollute the clean air and thus clog the passage of the wind. Now let us imagine a man, carrying a spear, who is talking to another man about this Greek, while looking at him with wonder, having heard in part about his great achievements. Now I think that Themistocles, son of Neocles, arrived in Babylon from Athens, after the immortal triumph at Salamis, because he did not know the best place in Greece to be safe; imagine him talking with the king about how he aided Xerxes while he was in command of the Greek army. These Median people surrounding him do not disturb his peace of mind at all, instead, he is as courageous and as bold as he would be if he was standing on a podium about to give a speech; the language he speaks is unfamiliar to us, but Themistocles is fluent in this Median tongue which he learned with great difficulty in that land. If you doubt his proficiency in this language just look at how closely these barbarians listen to him, how their eyes acknowledge the words he is using and indicate that they do understand him without effort, and look at Themistocles, how he holds his head up high like an orator addressing the people; notice also that he is somewhat hesitant when he speaks, though his eyes express his contemplative nature, and this is because the language is new to him and he learned it only recently.

Notice the repeated use of the word barbarian (βάρβαρος) to describe the Medes, who were an ancient Iranian people living in an area known as Media (northwestern Iran) and who spoke the ancient Median language. They are described as “degenerates … whose lives are ruined.” And Philostratus imagines Themisto-
cles addressing them “with some wise words, in an attempt to have them see the error of their ways and to urge them to give up their luxuries and their decadent way of life.” It is a mission to civilize and dominate the “barbarian.” Furthermore, he writes, “you can smell the fragrance of frankincense and myrrh, for it is the habit of these barbarians to pollute the clean air and thus clog the passage of the wind.” Philostratus continues, “Now let us imagine a man, carrying a spear, who is talking to another man about this Greek, while looking at him with wonder, having heard in part about his great achievements.” Themistocles is fluent in the language of the Medians and uses his authority, as an educated Greek, to dominate them and assert his superiority over them. My own examination of certain Ancient texts shows the subtle ways that Western culture dominated those cultures which were foreign to it, bending what they encountered or saw to emphasize their superiority over the East.

3. Conclusion

Thomas McEvilley’s monumental study *The Shape of Ancient Thought* and his novel *The Arimaspia* have much to tell us about a world where the free exchange of ideas was valued and fruitful. In our present world, as democracy faces challenges unheard of in previous generations, his work can provide a kind of map of a possible alternative way of being in the world, one where difference is accepted, not merely tolerated, and where there is conversation and the open exchange of ideas, rather than the present polarization which creates walls and breeds hatred of foreigners. Even in our present world of globalization it is illuminating to read in *The Arimaspia* that though “the idea of global harmony can be a transparent excuse for imperialism … it once had a great ring that is not yet gone altogether.” Translation is of vital importance in our time and is one way of bringing over ideas that are non-Western, so as to examine cultures outside the one you were born in, and thus create a dialogue. Such a dialogue is crucial and the essence of our democracy. We ignore McEvilley’s work at our own peril.
Works Cited


