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Docere, Delectare, Movere

Soul-learning, Reflexivity and the ‘Third Classroom’

ANGELA VOSS

INTRODUCTION

‘It is as if we can study everything about religion, except what makes it fiercely religious’ observes Rice University religious studies professor Jeffrey Kripal. Well, what does make religion fiercely religious? Should this highly-charged, sensual, devotional, or emotive impulse indeed find a place in academic studies?

In this chapter I will direct the theme of re-enchanting the academy towards an exploration of ‘fierce religiousness’, not only in relation to the study of spirituality, but also as an intrinsic part of all experiences which make us aware of a deeper, mysterious, or extraordinary dimension of reality, experiences which we may label paranormal, visionary, erotic or inspirational. Such an intuitive or imaginative apprehension of something other than the consensus

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1 Docere, delectare, movere (to teach, delight and move) were the three aims of the orator as stated by Cicero (Orator, 46 BCE). ‘The Third Classroom’ is a term coined by Jeffrey J. Kripal in The Serpent’s Gift (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007, 23). I would like to thank Jocelyn Lloyd for his detailed review of this chapter.


3 The word ‘religious’ has a dual etymology: religare, to ‘bind back’ (as in Lactantius, Divine Institutes, IV, xxviii) and religere, to ‘recover’ (as in Augustine, City of God xiii). In both cases, it suggests the idea of a return to a former condition, and I am interpreting it here in the sense of an intuitive realisation or experience of awe, longing, piety, or reverence in relation to a numinous ‘other’ or alternative condition of reality, rather than a formal adherence to a specific tradition.
norm can be shocking, even life-changing, and may arise from engaging deeply with texts, images, and music which are explicitly concerned with awakening a mysterious and elusive sense which we could term ‘sacred’.

Narratives such as scripture and poetry, cultural mythologies, or the symbolic writings and images of our esoteric wisdom traditions (for example Kabbalah, astrology, alchemy, or magic) all carry this potential because they speak in figurative language in order to evoke meaning through engaging the imagination. But they also require interpretation through engaging the rational mind, and therefore carry great potential for bringing intuitive apprehension and critical analysis into a harmonious relationship. I want to show that moments of awe, love, desire, or awakening do not have to be left outside the classroom, but can give rise to a learning process which is hermeneutically rich and personally transformative. Indeed, I find connections here with both contemporary explorations of the cultivation of spirituality and wisdom in higher education, and with the transpersonal branch of the transformative

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4 Kripal defines ‘the sacred’ as ‘a particular structure of human consciousness that corresponds to a palpable presence, energy, or power encountered in the environment’. It is a ‘third thing’ beyond faith or piety, which is not to be identified with ‘the faith-claims of the religious traditions’. Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), 9, 254. For an example of this kind of sudden insight in relation to astrological symbolism, see Maggie Hyde, ‘The Judder Effect: Astrology and Alternative Reality’, The Astrological Journal (2001), 43.5, 48–53.

5 ‘Magic’ is a ubiquitous yet difficult term to define, as it covers a variety of activities from the creation of illusions, to spell-making, working with the hidden forces of nature, and ceremonial and spiritual ritual. For a survey of the many types of magic practised in early modern Europe, see Brian P. Copenhaver, Magic in Western Culture, from Antiquity to the Enlightenment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

6 Elizabeth J. Tisdell asserts that ‘spirituality is about how people construct knowledge through largely unconscious and symbolic processes’ and suggests that it is ‘always present (although often unacknowledged) in the learning environment’. See Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Adult and Higher Education (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), xi; Wilma Fraser and Tara Hyland-Russell define wisdom as ‘a stance of openness embracing possibility and multidimensionality…Wisdom is broader in scope than cognitive knowing and includes aspects of the sacred, divine, intuitive and experiential’ in ‘Searching for Sophia: Adult Educators and
learning movement,7 and I would suggest that the principles I will discuss could apply to all human learning contexts, insofar as they might aim to achieve a balanced relationship between the representation of knowledge as information, and its living presence as an internally realised truth.

The power of symbol

Timothy Scott has remarked that ‘symbolic interpretation has become a practice to be studied rather than a mode of study itself’8 due, as we shall see, to the Enlightenment project of stripping away all non-rational or ‘subjective’ elements from what was deemed to constitute positive knowledge.9 However, the metaphorical language of mythic narrative presents multi-levelled possibilities of interpretation. For example, the Jewish and medieval Christian methods of fourfold exegesis provide a framework for the reader to move from literal, to allegorical, to tropological or moral,10 to anagogic or mys-

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7 Transformative learning, arising from the work of Jack Mezirow, can be briefly defined as ‘a process of examining, questioning and revising [our] perceptions of our experiences’ (Edward W. Taylor, Patrician Cran-ton and Associates, eds., The Handbook of Transformative Learning [San Francisco: Jossey Bass 2012], 5). I am referring here to the depth-psychological and transpersonal perspectives on TL as promoted by writers such as John M. Dirkx, Robert D. Boyd, J. Gordon Myers, and Rosemary R. Ruether, as opposed to the social/political strand instigated by Paolo Freire.


9 On the radical epistemological shift that took place during the 17th–18th centuries, see Iain McGilchrist, The Master and his Emissary (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 330–51. Positivism states that reason and logic, as interpreters of empirical evidence, are the only sources of truth.

10 From tropos, meaning ‘turn’. Tropological thus means a ‘turn of the soul’, a change in viewpoint, understanding or action.
tical readings of scripture, and similarly in the Western esoteric traditions (which in the main derive from Pythagorean and Platonic teachings) the symbol is seen as embodying meanings which allow the understanding to move from the concreteness of the particular instance to more universal or archetypal resonances. Ritual contexts also provide for this transition from the literal, embodied presence or action to the revelation of meaningful insight, and participation in ritual as a methodological approach is certainly more widely recognised in anthropology than in religious studies or history. With a hermeneutic approach to discourse or practice, participants can create meaningful narratives which amplify the literal sense, for as C.G. Jung observed, ‘whether a thing is a symbol or not depends chiefly upon the attitude of the consciousness considering it.’ The meanings can never be ultimate, for readers will locate themselves at different places on the spectrum; for some, literal or historical meanings will dominate, for others, allegorical significances will be seen, and for yet others, the material in hand will instantiate a significance that may impel them to change in some way, through evoking a profound emotional connection between themselves and the nar-


12 See Peter Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Writers at the Limits of their Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). For example, in the Hermetic rituals of statue magic, a statue of a deity was seen in four different ways: as a stone object, as a representation of the deity, as an imitation of the deity, and finally as fully embodying the deity and thus alive. Further on this topic, see Angela Voss, ‘The Secret Life of Statues,’ in *Sky and Psyche*, eds. N. Campion & P. Curry (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2006), 201–27.


enerative that they have never glimpsed before. Perhaps rarely, a state of being may be induced in which they feel at one with a greater reality or presence, however it may be named.

In my career in H.E., I have observed a pervasive tension between sacred and secular domains of knowledge, with ‘the sacred’ assumed to be the concern of theology and religious studies rather than a quality of relating to any beloved activity or subject or study. No doubt for historical and doctrinal reasons, I have also experienced tension between theological perspectives and the field of esoteric philosophy, for the fields of magic, divination, the paranormal, and paganism (in short, New Age philosophy and practice) are often still regarded with suspicion from orthodox monotheistic viewpoints. I hope to show, however, that it is possible (and desirable) to find an intellectual space where all expressions of a religious sense, spiritual agency, or revelatory wisdom can be brought into a comparative focus, and examined through the lens of reflexivity. Creative methodologies, arts practice, and personal journaling may all provide opportunities for a symbolic ‘turn’ to take place as the student not only learns about wisdom traditions (in all their variety) but also from them.

From the perspective of the modern rationalist, the realisation of symbolic truth (such as in divinatory or ritual practice, or in a powerful synchronicity or dream), will remain forever foreign, impossible, curious. Gary Tomlinson, in Music in Renaissance Magic, demonstrates the problem when he claims that the modern scholar simply cannot cross over to the other side where magic ‘works’ but

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15 I have directed two Masters’ programmes in Canterbury, UK: ‘The Cultural Study of Cosmology and Divination’ (University of Kent, 2006–2010) and ‘Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred’ (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2014–present).

16 Geoffrey Cornelius has addressed the problem of divination in relation to both monotheistic and Enlightenment positions in ‘Field of Omens, A study of Inductive Divination’ (PhD diss., University of Kent, 2010), 2–22, 23–49.

17 Synchronicity, as defined by C.G. Jung, is a meaningful coincidence, which carries import for the individual in some way as it evokes archetypal patterns, and aids in the individuation process. See C.G. Jung, Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle (repr. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955).
can only sit uncomfortably on the fence, acknowledging that indeed it did work ‘for the (historical) other’. Similarly Peter Struck and Sarah Iles Johnston expose a common assumption of post-Enlightenment scholars that somehow ‘we know better’ than our forebears regarding the ontology of spiritual intelligence:

Whatever our ancient sources may claim about the greater powers that enabled it to work—gods, demons, the cosmos itself—divination is an utterly human art, behind which one can glimpse not only the rules that participants have developed for its engagement, but also the rules by which participants assume (or hope) that the world works.

Geoffrey Cornelius comments ‘The question of provenance reveals our ultimate concern with respect to divination; there is nothing that goes beyond this question, and how we approach this concern testifies to our own attitude to divination and to the divine. Post-Kant, no modern rationalist conceives that there could be other than one respectable answer’. He points out that there is no ‘finally secure basis’ for such an assertion to be assumed as a self-evident truth, and that it reminds us just how firmly the Enlightenment project cut the telephone wires, as it were, between men and gods.

One cannot help but want to give such scholars a shove, to propel them right over Tomlinson’s fence into a world where the symbols of magical or divinatory ritual, of dreams and visions, do indeed ‘work’, here and now, as perhaps the most effective and powerful tools of all with which to unlock the imaginative powers of mind—indeed one only has to turn to depth and transpersonal psychology to see this in action. The scholars will land, according to Iain McGilchrist, in

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20 Cornelius, ‘Field of Omens’, 190.
21 C.G. Jung and James Hillman being the key sources, their work on myth, symbolism, and ‘active imagination’ developed by writers such as Marie Angelo, Roberto Assagioli, Robert Boznak, Joseph Campbell, James Elkins, Patrick Harpur, and Thomas Moore. I should also mention Henry
the world of the right hemisphere, and it is to his thought-provoking conclusions that I now turn.

**The two eyes of the soul**

McGilchrist, neuroscientist and English literature scholar, provides us with a monumental overview of the fundamental duality of human cognition in his 2009 book, *The Master and His Emissary.*\(^{22}\) He observes that ‘the divided nature of our reality has been a consistent observation since humanity has been sufficiently self-conscious to reflect on it’,\(^{23}\) and beginning with the fact that the human brain is physically divided in two, he explores how this characteristic can be taken as a grand metaphor for the way Western culture over the last 2,000 years has demonstrated two distinct, and often adversarial, ways of knowing. This is not an ungrounded metaphor, for as a neuro-scientist McGilchrist demonstrates empirically how the human brain really does work in two different ways, according to the specific functions of the right and left hemispheres. However, it is important to emphasise that as the book is primarily about the power of this metaphor to reveal what happens when these two modes become unbalanced, it is the meaning of the duality with which McGilchrist is chiefly concerned. As he concludes, ‘if [the divided mind] turns out to be “just” a metaphor, I will be content. I have a high regard for metaphor. It is how we come to understand the world.’\(^{24}\)

The idea that there are two orders of reality (variously termed divine and human, spiritual and material, mental and somatic), reflected in two distinct parts or ‘eyes’ of the soul, is indeed an ancient one, first articulated in the philosophical canon by Plato in his

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\(^{22}\) See fn. 9 for details.


\(^{24}\) Ibid., *The Master*, 462.
‘divided line’ and ‘cave’ allegories. Here, Plato posits two worlds: that of intellect (nous) and reason (episteme), and that of opinion (doxa) and sense perception (aesthetic). Intellect in this sense is not the domain of abstract thought as we might see it today, but a deeply intuitive connection of the soul with a source, or ground of all being termed the One (for which the sun is the supreme symbol). On this intuitive faculty, reason depends, being the capacity for discursive knowledge and ethical understanding. The knowing of the intuitive intellect is called gnosis, which as it has come to be understood through the study of Western esotericism, can be characterised as ‘a kind of intuitive, nondiscursive, salvational knowledge of one’s own true self and of God’.

As such it is primary, beyond words, experiential, and essentially subjective and non-predictable, requiring episteme to articulate and interpret its insights.

These two dimensions of knowing are also characterised by Plato as ‘the same’ and ‘the different’, and they are intrinsic to the universal mind, or soul, which informs both the world and the human being.

We must of course remember that neither Plato nor Aristotle use the term imagination (phantasia) for the gnostic glimpse through the veil, or the vision of the sun outside the cave.

For the elevation of the imaginative faculty to this role we await Philostratus (190–230 CE) and Plotinus (204–270 CE), whose definition of higher imagination as the capacity of the soul to receive images of transcendent truth and convey them through creative genius was to be so celebrated by Renaissance and Romantic artists.

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25 Plato, Republic vii, 509d–511e and 514a–520a.
27 Further on the nature of gnosis, see e.g. Dan Merkur, Gnosis: An Esoteric Tradition of Mystical Visions and Unions (New York: SUNY Press, 1993). Please note that I am not talking here about Gnosticism, a dualist form of early Christian belief which shunned the material world.
28 Plato, Timaeus 34c–35a.
30 See Philostratus, Vita Appollonii 6.19; Plotinus, Enneads iv.31, V.8. On
Tim Addey has shown how Plato uses myth to lead the reader towards *gnosis*, from the understanding that a ‘likely story’, a poetic or metaphoric narrative, presents truths through images which evoke a deep memory of the soul’s original participation in the world soul.\(^{31}\) Indeed Bernardo Kastrup maintains that there is a deep level of reality which ‘cannot be conveyed through any other means—scientific or philosophical—but religious mythology’ as it is simply ‘not amenable to words or equations’.\(^{32}\) We also find this distinction in the Sufi tradition.\(^{33}\) The medieval philosopher/mystic Ibn ‘Arabi speaks of ‘the two eyes of the soul’ as ‘the eye of reason’ and ‘the eye of revelation or imagination’. The former knows through representation, abstraction, and theorisation, whereas the latter knows through similitude, metaphor, and symbol.\(^{34}\) Ibn ‘Arabi also distinguishes between ‘imitation’ and ‘realisation.’ Imitation is second hand or theoretical knowledge, learned through received traditions such as the sciences. Realisation is intellectual knowledge in the Platonic sense, through tasting or knowing for oneself, and involves action; for ‘knowledge without practice is not true knowledge’.\(^{35}\) Thus an ethical dimension is involved in the realisation of the symbol as meaningful in the world, for in the Sufi context, as in the Biblical four sense hermeneutic, the meaning of the sacred text is understood as pointing to a moral imperative to act on behalf of self, others, or community.\(^{36}\)

McGilchrist’s project is to show how these two modes of knowing are characteristic of the two hemispheres, and in a healthy human

\(^{31}\) Tim Addey, ‘Myth, the Final Phase of Platonic education’ (http://www.prometheustrust.co.uk/html/myth_-_philosophy.html).
\(^{34}\) Ibid., 71–72.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., 35.
and society should work together (*episteme* being the ‘emissary’ to the Master’s *nous*). But they have become divided to such an extent that reason is no longer in service to intuition, and has become an autonomous *logos* or *rationality*, ‘a closed system which cannot reach outside itself to whatever it is that exists apart from itself’.\(^{37}\) I cannot possibly do justice here to McGilchrist’s monumental survey, but in short, he argues that human culture and civilisation have flourished when the cognitive functions characterised by the left hemisphere (analysis, abstraction, and scientific empiricism), have been in appropriate relationship to those of the right (imagination, intuition, holistic vision, religious sense). He shows, with exhaustive attention to historical and cultural detail, that since the Enlightenment period, the power of metaphor to lead the mind out of the ‘hall of mirrors’ of the left hemisphere towards ‘meaning rather than fact, ambiguity rather than certainty’ has been relentlessly undermined, if not blocked.\(^{38}\) Metaphor has become mistrusted, rather than understood as a path to knowledge, and consequently the arts have become merely entertainment, and divinatory practitioners generally regarded as indulging in pseudoscience when they are not outright charlatans.

However, McGilchrist points out that metaphor, as a right hemispheric function, ‘is in every sense prior to abstraction and explicitness, and the means by which genuine creativity is stirred.’\(^{39}\) ‘All understanding’, he says ‘*depends on choosing the right metaphor*’ (my italics) because the metaphor we choose governs what we see. I will come back to this important observation, but let us note here that in terms of our great religious mythologies McGilchrist says ‘any mythos that allows us to approach a spiritual Other, and gives us something other than material values to live by is more valuable than one that dismisses the possibility of its existence.’\(^{40}\) Why? Because then it becomes a key to *gnosis*, freeing us from the confines of a life which, in McGilchrist’s view, is only half-lived.


\(^{38}\) Ibid., 438. He points out that we have inherited an Enlightenment view of metaphor which does not allow it to be a ‘vehicle of thought’, but regards it as a linguistic device which is either ‘indirectly literal’ or ‘purely fanciful’ and either way ‘can have nothing to do with truth’. 332. See also 337.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 179.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 442.
McGilchrist does certainly not underestimate the importance of left hemispheric knowing, in that it ‘is a wonderful servant’; it is just that it is ‘a very poor master’.\textsuperscript{41} The problem is that the left hemisphere works like a very successful propaganda machine which wants to lead us to believe that ‘what it does is more highly evolved that what the right hemisphere does’,\textsuperscript{42} and this has led to its determination to overthrow all that it deems irrational, occult, or superstitious in terms of knowledge. ‘Magic is the way that the left hemisphere sees powers over which it has no control’ acutely observes McGilchrist,\textsuperscript{43} whereas for the right hemisphere these powers are built into the fabric of the world and indeed may move the soul towards right action and self-understanding, as well as inspired artistic achievement.

What has this to do with transformative learning? McGilchrist gives us a model which, in my opinion, can be put to practical use. He emphasises, in interpreting Hegel, that creativity arises from imaginal perception, reflection, and analysis, dependent on the flow and co-operation between the two hemispheric functions:

What is offered by the right hemisphere to the left hemisphere is offered back again and taken up into a synthesis involving both hemispheres. This must be true of the processes of creativity, of the understanding of works of

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 437.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} McGilchrist, The Master, 311. We could perhaps characterise ‘sorcery’ and ‘natural magic’ as the extraordinary powers of mind viewed from the left and right hemispheres respectively. It is interesting to note that in his paper ‘Magic’ (http://www.academia.edu/25678359/Magic) (accessed 20/10/2016), Wouter Hanegraaff ends by warning the scholar against ‘falling under its spell’, falling prey to illusions which may become ‘potent factors in the real world’. In my view, this statement demonstrates McGilchrist’s very point, which is the problem faced by the rational mind when confronted by events or phenomena that are inexplicable from its point of view. Of relevance here also is Bernardo Kastrup’s metaphorical observation that if we locate ourselves ‘outside’ mind we are the mercy of what appear to be ‘impersonal external forces’ whereas if we are in mind, taking a participatory stance, then we participate consciously in these forces and they are no longer a threat (Kastrup, Materialism is Baloney: How True Skeptics Know there is no Death and Fathom Answers to Life, the Universe and Everything [Winchester: Iff Books 2014], 70).
art, of the development of the religious sense. In each there is a progress from an intuitive apprehension of whatever it may be, via a more formal process of enrichment through conscious, detailed analytic understanding, to a new, enhanced intuitive understanding of this whole, now transformed by the process that it has undergone.\(^4^4\)

Philosophy, says McGilchrist (if it is to be true to its name), follows such a trajectory, for

It begins in wonder, intuition, ambiguity, puzzlement and uncertainty; it progresses through being unpacked, inspected from all angles and wrestled into linearity by the left hemisphere; but its endpoint is to see that the very business of language and linearity must themselves be transcended, and once more left behind. The progression is familiar: from right hemisphere, to left hemisphere, to right hemisphere again.\(^4^5\)

Plato tells us that in the state of wonder, \textit{eros} is born, the energy that fires the soul with a passion to pursue its truth.\(^4^6\) Just contemplating the night sky, he says, will incite a desire for learning,\(^4^7\) and this arousal of affective and erotic longing deeply informs the revival of Neoplatonic philosophy in the Renaissance period (which McGilchrist points to as an example of the creative collaboration of the hemispheres).\(^4^8\)

Something crucially important is happening here. In the act of ‘returning’ to the right hemisphere, which McGilchrist affirms is a supreme act of creative imagination,\(^4^9\) a third element is added to the process of applying reason to intuitive understanding, which partakes of, yet transcends, both hemispherical functions. We find

\begin{footnotes}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 206.
\item McGilchrist, \textit{The Master}, 178.
\item See Plato, \textit{Phaedrus}, 246A–254E.
\item McGilchrist, \textit{The Master}, 298–329.
\item Ibid., 199.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotes}
this too in Plato, who provided for it in his creation of the world soul which is comprised of three parts: the same, the different, and a mixture comprising the two. In many traditions, the third eye is used as a metaphor for this enhanced vision,\textsuperscript{50} which points to the inherent possibility of transcending dualism through seeing in a different way, produced by a co-operation of rational and noetic faculties. I would like to suggest that following McGilchrist’s threefold epistemological unfolding is one way of re-enchanting our learning processes, in not identifying with either the right hemisphere’s comfort zone (intuition and belief but no discrimination) or the left hemisphere’s tunnel-vision (rational analysis but no intuitive sense), but pushing through to a deeper synthesis in which a new dimension of consciousness is born. Indeed, I experience McGilchrist’s grand metaphor, in so far as it rests on scientific evidence and confirms what spiritual traditions have taught for millennia, as facilitating the very hermeneutic breakthrough that it advocates.

I will now take McGilchrist’s model further by looking at the work of Jeffrey Kripal, whose vision of the ‘third classroom’ provides firm guidelines for how to create such a breakthrough in pedagogic context.\textsuperscript{51}

\textbf{The gnostic classroom}

‘The Human as Two is not just an ancient mystical doctrine. It is a universal neuroanatomical fact’ states Kripal in an affirmation of McGilchrist’s thesis, in his 2010 book \textit{Authors of the Impossible}.\textsuperscript{52} In his calling for a new pedagogy of the ‘impossible’, Kripal pushes methodological boundaries in the academic study of religion; that is, he refuses to be limited by either the faith approaches of theology or the explanatory models of rational critique and promotes a new kind of scholar who finds a third perspective, echoing McGilchrist’s threefold relationship of hemispheres:

\textsuperscript{50} For example, Hinduism and Buddhism.
\textsuperscript{51} Kripal acknowledges his indebtedness to McGilchrist in \textit{Comparing Religions}, 390.
\textsuperscript{52} Kripal, \textit{Authors of the Impossible}, 265–66.
An author of the impossible is someone who has gone beyond all of the dualisms of right and left, mystical and rational, faith and reason, self and other, mind and matter, consciousness and energy, and so on. An author of the impossible is someone who knows that the Human is Two and One.\footnote{Ibid., 270.}

Furthermore, such writers, he says possess unusual powers of imagination, receptivity, discipline, and experience that allow them to enter religious worlds in a different way. For these scholars, academic method and personal experience cannot be so easily separated [...] They do not so much process religious data as unite with sacred realities, whether in the imagination, the hidden depths of the soul, or the very fabric of their psychophysical selves. In their subjective poles, these understandings become personally transformative, in their objective poles, they produce genuine insights into the nature of the phenomena under study. These are types of understanding that are at once passionate and critical, personal and objective, religious and academic. Such forms of knowledge are not simply academic, although they are that as well, and rigorously so. But they are also transformative, and sometimes soteriological. In a word, the knowledge of such a scholar approaches a kind of gnosis.\footnote{Kripal, \textit{Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom} (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), 5.}

What would a classroom which promoted such integrative scholarship look like? In \textit{The Serpent’s Gift} (2007), Kripal makes the distinction between what he calls the classrooms of ‘faith’ and ‘reason,’ or ‘sympathy’ and ‘doubt,’ in relation to his own discipline of religious studies.\footnote{Kripal, \textit{The Serpent’s Gift}, 22–24.} The parallels here with the hemispheres are obvious, for the classroom of faith ‘takes religious claims seriously and sympathetically’ whilst that of reason ‘proceeds on the assumption that all
religious claims are not what they claim to be’ and therefore require explanation or analysis according to various critical theories.\(^56\) However, ‘Let us never forget’, he says, ‘that many gifted individuals are quite capable of deriving reason from faith, and of fusing faith and reason into a deeper gnosis that appears to be much more radical and potentially transformative than any social-scientific or purely rational method’.\(^57\) This deeper gnosis, he suggests, finds its place in a ‘third classroom’, a ‘luminous space’, a classroom of ‘gnostic epiphany’ which is set apart from the ‘real world’ by its freedom of speech and intellectual daring.\(^58\) He likens it to a ‘meditative ritual space’\(^59\) in which teachers and learners can embark on an intellectual adventure which seeks to place both faith and reason within a larger structural whole, as ‘two poles of a deeper unity’.\(^60\) Kripal lays out a radical methodological basis for his argument. He imagines the snake in the Garden of Eden as a heterodox ‘wisdom figure’ which could infuse scholarship with this gnostic impulse, an ‘erotic, humanistic, comparative, and esoteric’ wisdom which we can recognise within ourselves and act upon, in defiance of orthodox academic agendas.\(^61\)

Kripal also clearly aligns himself with McGilchrist’s plea for a return to metaphor as the language of the third classroom, and indeed in *Authors of the Impossible*, he upholds the mythic or metaphoric narrative as more conducive to our understanding of extraordinary human experience than theoretical models, because ‘theological, mystical, and literary metaphors deliver far more imaginative impact. They are closer to the lived experience of things’.

*The Serpent’s Gift* prepares the ground for Kripal’s latest book, *Comparing Religions* (2015) which offers a working syllabus for the journey through the classrooms of faith and reason to the gnostic emporium of what he terms *reflexivity*. Here we find the Platonic injunction to ‘know thyself’ reiterated in a bold new vision of transformative learning for the student of human culture. It is worth mentioning at this point that intuitive, autobiographical, and

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 23.
\(^{57}\) Ibid.
\(^{58}\) Ibid.
\(^{59}\) Ibid., 24.
\(^{60}\) Ibid., 13.
\(^{61}\) Ibid., 1.
\(^{62}\) Ibid., 258.
heuristic research methods, practice-based research, and the appeal to spirituality and mythopoeisis in learning are all gaining hold in the transdisciplinary transformative learning movement situated in education and the social sciences, and these are all very healthy indications that the kind of hemispheric collaboration McGilchrist advocates is alive and well. But Kripal is doing something different here, and it has to do with his suggestion that access to the third classroom is not democratic. This allies his project to the underlying rationale of the esoteric traditions, which situate ‘gnostic’ insight on a vertical trajectory of initiatory merit. Kripal clearly states that his curriculum is underpinned by a ‘modal initiatory structure’, stressing that ‘the textual initiation, like any initiation, is not for everyone and so requires an initial taking of responsibility and a moral assent on the part of the student or reader’ (my italics). He points to the ‘existential risks’ involved in having one’s worldview deconstructed and challenged, and suggests that in general academic disciplines ‘erase the sacred’ through producing a whole series of signs which are ‘much too certain of themselves’ and hide or suppress their constructed nature. The preservation of the ‘sacred sense’ which imbues his writing, here as elsewhere, is what distinguishes it from the average textbook, as does his appeal to the erotic as an attractive force which draws us towards knowledge, towards what he terms ‘the school of the more’, and in this he is faithful to Plato.

When the student reaches the third classroom, then, they are able to adopt a method ‘which combines faithful and rationalist re-readings even as it moves beyond both’. Seeing our many spiritual traditions and philosophies as beautiful, intricate stained glass windows, the student is led to perceive something else or more that is shining through, without taking one particular window as ‘the truth’ or analysing its components as opaque structures of the hu-

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64 Kripal, *Comparing Religions*, xii.

65 Ibid., 367.

66 Ibid.
man mind.67 This ‘genuinely new way of interpreting religion’68 entails a double vision, which focuses on both ‘culture and cognition’ and ‘the sun outside the cave’.69 It is indeed this metaphorical sun outside which Kripal sees the purely ‘rational re-readers’ as denying, and which the ‘reflexive re-reader’ begins to see as the projective consciousness in which they themselves are participating. These gnostic researchers can easily move, amphibian-like, from outsider to insider, where ‘looking at the looker’70 in a reflexive flip allows for interpretation and criticality to emerge from a broader field of reference, one which embraces mystery, paradox, ambiguity, and wonder.

Kripal knows he is an academic heretic, and is proud of it. He is daring to leap over Tomlinson’s fence, daring to open up to the right hemisphere in a world dominated for the past four hundred years by the agendas of the left. ‘I no longer want to study mystical literature’, he announces, ‘I now want to write it’.71 In setting up this deepening, or liberation, of consciousness as an academic method, Kripal has inevitably provoked criticism from a more objectivist perspective, and it is worth digressing for a moment to see how this critique might inform us about the challenges of his project.

Kripal’s Dutch colleague Wouter Hanegraaff72 has offered a penetrating critique of The Serpent’s Gift73 and whilst I cannot examine this in detail now, I want to draw attention to some key points. Hanegraaff is a brilliant and keenly perceptive scholar who subscribes to a ‘methodological agnosticism’ in his historical scholarship of western esotericism.74 He is a true scholar of the European scientific enlightenment, who in a new found spirit of freedom from religious authority, privileges what Geoffrey Cornelius has called an ‘objectivist

67 Kripal, Comparing Religions, 391–92.
68 Ibid., 367.
69 Ibid., 391.
70 Ibid., 392.
71 Kripal, The Serpent’s Gift, 15.
72 Hanegraaff is Professor of the History of Hermetic Philosophy and related currents at the University of Amsterdam.
74 Ibid., 262 fn 5; Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 357.
mode that is at once empirical and analytic.\textsuperscript{75} Cornelius has pointed out that ‘one of [this mode’s] primary tasks is to complete the overthrow of the authority and meaningfulness of symbolism’ as a method in its own right. From this perspective, Kripal is described as a ‘religionist’, a term which is explained in Hanegraaff’s book \textit{Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture}.\textsuperscript{76} Here Hanegraaff postulates a clear distinction between what he calls ‘historiography’ and ‘religionism’, and says ‘we are dealing with two types of reasoning that are internally consistent but mutually exclusive’, insisting that there is no common term between them.\textsuperscript{77} His ‘methodological agnosticism’ upholds empirical and historical verification as an ideal, surveying texts, trends, and influences in a dispassionate and distanced gaze which is never self-referencing, avoids all value judgements and intuitive hunches, and is impeccably thorough. This approach, in service to what Hanegraaff calls ‘the truth of history’,\textsuperscript{78} is primarily that of the modern academy. Religionists on the other hand pursue the ‘impossible dream’ of ‘the history of truth’, in basing their studies on theological, metaphysical or psychological premises and searching for ‘eternal and universal’ truth in historical sources.\textsuperscript{79} I would observe that Hanegraaff’s religionists (for example, C.G. Jung, Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, or Henry Corbin) acknowledge and participate in a worldview revealed by the texts they study, respond in a reflexive, imaginative, and intuitive way and understand that something is in fact at stake here for themselves, and indeed all human beings.

Interestingly, Corbin, whom Hanegraaff singles out as an ex-

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{75} Cornelius, \textit{Field of Omens}, 24.
\textsuperscript{76} A brief definition of (western) esotericism would be a path of spiritual development towards a higher consciousness which sees nature and cosmos as metaphor or symbol, and therefore as keys to unlocking a deep wisdom inaccessible to the rational mind. These traditions are rooted in the Gnostic, Hermetic, Neoplatonic, and Hellenistic world of the first centuries CE. Such paths do not require ‘exoteric’ religious forms, and have been traditionally repressed, hidden, or the preserve of heterodox spiritual movements. See Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, \textit{The Western Esoteric Traditions} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
\textsuperscript{77} Hanegraaff, \textit{Esotericism}, 301.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 257–367.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 296. For a full discussion of ‘the history of truth’ see 5–76.
\end{footnotesize}
treme ‘religionist,’ also claims the impossibility of reconciling two distinct epistemological domains when he laments ‘angelology and sociology must remain forever foreign to one another,’ that is, that there is a fundamental disjunct between human and divine sciences. We could frame the former as a horizontal trajectory that follows the progress of history, and the latter as a vertical one which seeks to lead the reader both to deeper knowledge of themselves and to the subjects at hand. But such a move, Hanegraaff suggests, cannot and should not announce itself as a method of studying religion as it is rather ‘a religious and normative (meta)discourse about the nature of religion.’ In his opinion, scholars ‘are in no position to make statements about ontology,’ and he considers Kripal’s gnostic study of religion to be ‘based upon personal beliefs or preferences and not on “knowledge” in any scholarly sense’.

In seeking to redeem ‘gnostic’ knowing in the academy (which traditionally has high stakes, as it facilitates liberation or salvation of the soul), Kripal is clearly going against the grain of such enlightened liberal scholarship, but in my view there is a deeper question to be raised. In polarising ‘methodological agnosticism’ and ‘religionism’, Hanegraaff is creating a distinction which simply would not be made in the third classroom, as from the ‘reflexive’ position, it is impossible to abstract oneself from the ‘ontological underpinnings’ of one’s own research orientation which are subjected to scrutiny. Kripal is contrasting the kind of religious ‘truth claims’ which result, (at best) in a lack of comparative awareness, and (at worst) in fundamentalism, blind faith, and violence, with an intellectual sensibility which arises from understanding the value of religious metaphors to point beyond their individual contexts towards some unknown source of consciousness. If, as Kripal suggests, our minds are like filters, then it behoves us to move between the analysis of

80 Ibid., 301–02.
82 Hanegraaff, ‘Leaving the Garden’, 269.
83 Ibid., 270, fn. 19.
84 Ibid., 271.
86 Ibid., 69.
these filters and what is coming through.\textsuperscript{87}

As we have seen, for Kripal this reflexive move is the key to the door of the third classroom. I do not think, as Hanegraaff claims, that he is suggesting that the gnostic scholar is superior, although ironically Hanegraaff himself could certainly seem to be claiming such for his own agnostic position \textit{vis-à-vis} the study of religion.\textsuperscript{88} Rather, Kripal is trying to articulate the \textit{change of register} that occurs with the shift to a right-hemisphere approach, not to ‘convince us of some “new worldview”’.\textsuperscript{89} Conviction and argument only happen in the classroom of reason, where ‘the transcendent’ or ‘divine’ become concepts alienated from both imagination and experience. Kripal urges scholars to break free from such a narrow vision by locating themselves beyond a conceptual way of thinking. Of course he cannot provide a ‘precise ontological status or psychological structure’ for the ‘larger complexly conscious field’ that starts manifesting in the altered states of consciousness studied, or even entered into, in the third classroom.\textsuperscript{90} This is not the kind of language recognised by the right hemisphere. But the images of such a complex field can be contemplated, and interpreted from a variety of perspectives.

It is undoubtedly tricky, for from within the watertight world of the left hemisphere those who attempt to integrate emotional, intuitive or imaginative insights into their teaching or research often seem to be sacrificing rigour and accuracy, and indeed may lose their voices altogether, appearing dumb, stumbling, incoherent or woolly in the laser-sharp precision of the other’s critical gaze.\textsuperscript{91} It is to Kripal’s great credit that he is never guilty of this, and indeed he enchants his readers through a quite brilliant gift of rhetorical elegance and humour. But perhaps the trickiest obstacle of all to negotiate in the modern academy is that of ‘initiatory’ knowing, a kind of knowing that is simply not a ‘given’ for all students. Kripal’s gnostic researcher has an intuitive understanding of the difference between literal and symbolic, rational and imaginal modes of exploring religious experience which enables him or her to recognise the unique moment of resonance of metaphoric meaning as \textit{qualitatively differ-}

\textsuperscript{87} Kripal, \textit{Comparing Religions}, 391–92.

\textsuperscript{88} Hanegraaff, ‘Leaving the Garden’, 271.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 273, fn. 26.

\textsuperscript{90} Hanegraaff, ‘Leaving the Garden’, 274; Kripal, \textit{The Serpent’s Gift}, 164.

\textsuperscript{91} McGilchrist, \textit{The Master}, 184–89.
ent from theoretical understanding. This can only be glimpsed to the extent to which there is a desire to engage in the first place. From the agnostic point of view of course, such a knowing can only ever be a ‘claim’ to knowledge, despite the fact that the gnostic does not claim anything, nor reach out to appropriate some assumed truth which can never be proved in left hemisphere terms. On the contrary, he or she lets go of all claims, all judgements of good, bad, true or false, right or wrong, in an openness of spirit to something unnameable, unclaimable, undefinable yet possibly life-changing.⁹²

The truth of religious myth

My final author is philosopher and scientist Bernardo Kastrup, who is an extraordinarily lucid and penetrating thinker. Clearly indebted to (and endorsed by) Kripal,⁹³ he deconstructs materialist world-views in a cogent and intelligent argument in favour of the primacy of consciousness, or ‘mind at large’. Identifying with ‘essentialism’⁹⁴ as his metaphysical position, Kastrup may at times appear a little too dismissive of other speculations on the—possibly ultimately unknowable—nature of reality. However, in More Than Allegory he addresses directly the question of mythic or metaphoric knowing, and wrestles with the nature of the ‘truth’ that arises from that elusive ‘aha!’ moment of insight or realisation with a clarity and creativity that I have not found elsewhere.

Chittick quotes the Sufi tenet that ‘verified and realised knowledge carries with it the self-evidence of certainty’,⁹⁵ and the question of this ‘truth’ arising in what is popularly called the ‘power of now’ is a central theme of More Than Allegory. Like Kripal, Kastrup calls for a deeper awareness of the nature of consciousness itself as not being limited to the human brain, but as filtered through human imaginations to produce the images and stories that make up our great religious and symbolic mythologies and religious philosophies.⁹⁶

⁹² See Kripal, The Serpent’s Gift, 23–24; Comparing Religions, xii–xiii.
⁹⁴ Essentialism, for Kastrup, is the assumption that consciousness is nondu- al, primary, and the ultimate source of all that is.
⁹⁵ Chittick, Imaginal Worlds, 35.
⁹⁶ Kastrup, More Than Allegory, 51.
True religious myths, says Kastrup, remind us of a dimension of ourselves that is transcendent but often estranged, projected outwards as superhuman ‘others’. Like Plato he speaks of the soul as a symbol of a timeless reality, and ‘faith’ as being open to this reality as a prerequisite for transformation. ‘Faith is the sincere emotional openness to transcendent truths connoted by a story, beyond the superficial literal appearances of the story’s denotations’ he says. How interesting that Kastrup’s description of sacred myths as ‘the only pointers we have to a form of salvation’ echoes Socrates’ injunction about the soteriological function of myth if it is believed in. The implication in both cases being that ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ are far from subjective opinions but involve an inner commitment to a myth as true, that is, of direct relevance and import for the individual.

Kastrup maintains that fables, religions, folklore, philosophical, and even scientific narratives are all stories by which we make sense of the world, but they are never universally applicable truths even though they may become the dominant narratives for whole societies. His point is that the living truth of these stories only emerges when they resonate with the reader’s deepest intuitions, it simply cannot be imposed from without in any meaningful way. Plato describes such a moment as a ‘spark of understanding and intelligence’ flashing out at the point when sympathy arises between the soul and the text. The key to accessing this kind of insight, which I would

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97 Ibid., 127.
98 Ibid., 49.
99 Ibid., 46.
100 Plato, Republic x, 614c; Phaedo, 114d.
101 Kastrup, More Than Allegory, 46–47. See also C.G. Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 337: ‘Myth […] can conjure up other images [than a dark pit of nothingness] […] helpful and enriching pictures of life in the land of the dead. If he believes in them, or greets them with some measure of credence, he is being just as right or wrong as someone who does not believe in them. But while the man who despairs marches towards nothingness, the one who has placed his faith in the archetype follows the tracks of life and lives right into his death. Both, to be sure, remain in uncertainty, but the one lives against his instincts, the other with them.’
102 Kastrup, More Than Allegory, 46–50.
103 Plato, Seventh Letter, 344. As a personal anecdote, I will mention here that this happened to me on first reading Plato’s Allegory of the Cave at
associate with the tropological sense, is to fully and passionately enter one's chosen myth as if it were true, in an ultimate sense, whilst also knowing on an intellectual level that its truth points to something beyond and is therefore not to be taken literally, or at least not only literally. It is as though one's intellect gives the heart permission to have faith, whilst at the same time standing outside and observing oneself giving assent to its metaphorical status. This is, I believe, what Kripal means by the 'reflexive researcher', and Kastrup illustrates this point with a trenchant comment:

When the Christian myth is honoured by being emotionally taken as if it were the literal truth, Christians live lives of meaning and transcendent significance, escaping the madness of a materialist society and coming closer to truth. When it is intellectually taken to be the literal truth, countless innocent people die burning at the stake or at the point of the crusader's sword.

When entered into in this way, its truth will lie in its mirroring of ourselves and our own inner worlds but also in pointing us towards the deeper meanings of these worlds, so that we may transcend the limited opinions and illusions that fill our everyday 'consensus reality'. Thus, in Kastrup's analysis, religious myths can bring a powerful glimpse of a transcendent order into everyday life, and allow us to know ourselves more fully. More Than Allegory ends with a contemporary myth which Kastrup has conceived in order to illustrate the potential of human beings to expand their current level of conscious awareness. Like Kripal, he posits three stages in this process of awakening. Firstly, the state of delusion, in which humans do not even realise that they are creating their own worlds within a vast field of imagination. Secondly, the sense of deception, where critical reasoning skills are used to 'see through the tricks' of the first stage (but which only serve to 'buy in' to the equally deceptive tricks of scientism or other explanatory worldviews). Thirdly, all these de-

university. This metaphor had the effect of shifting my worldview from one of radical atheism to an openness to other ways of knowing beyond the rational mind.

104 Kastrup, More Than Allegory, 52.
105 Ibid., 53.
ceptions are realised, and one sees oneself as a magician pulling the strings, consciously and deliberately entering into the intricate web of life on earth but knowing that one is simply an actor in a play.\textsuperscript{106} This, I would add, is reflexivity.

**Conclusion**

In Kastrup’s distinction between ‘explanatory truth’ and ‘perceptual truth’\textsuperscript{107} we find, it seems to me, an analogy with Hanegraaff’s distinction between historiography and religionism, or Ibn ‘Arabi’s imitation and realisation, or McGilchrist’s ‘representation’ and ‘presencing’.\textsuperscript{108} To quote Kripal, the student in the ‘gnostic classroom’ or ‘school of the more’ ‘wants it both ways’ precisely ‘because the human being really is both ways’ (his italics).\textsuperscript{109} Honouring this relationship within the academy means, I believe, not marginalising transcendent, intuitive, unitive, or sacred experiences as somehow apart from secular discourse, or as only the domain of religion. It means starting with one’s own sense, memory or image of ‘gnostic’ insight, furthering the critical analysis and interpretation of such events within historical, cultural, and social contexts, and subjecting them to reflexive scrutiny. Finally, it means being able to situate the symbolic, ritual, or practice-based contexts (including reading) in which such ‘fierce’ insights occur within a wider framework of human being and consciousness, referring to interdisciplinary source material and a wide range of theoretical positions, but also recognising that, in the end, metaphor leads further than fact.

I’ll end with McGilchrist, who points to the dangers of reducing or subjecting encounters of passion, of enthusiasm, of insight, which he attributes to the right hemisphere, to the dumbing analysis of the left. ‘Our passions, sense of humour, all metaphoric and symbolic understanding, all religious sense’ he says, are too easily ‘denatured’ by becoming objects of focused attention.\textsuperscript{110} However, he continues, ‘it is the faculty of imagination, which comes into being between

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 104–05.
\textsuperscript{109} Kripal, *Comparing Religions*, 392.
\textsuperscript{110} McGilchrist, *The Master*, 209.
these two hemispheres, which enables us to take things back from
the world of the left hemisphere and make them live again in the
right. It is in this way, not by meretricious novelty, that things are
made truly new again.\textsuperscript{11}"

I believe that such an integrative methodology, as a path of both
re-enchantment and knowledge in academic study, can provide a
space for a deep healing to take place whose ripples will spread far
beyond the classroom. It can allow students to be both fiercely reli-
gious, and discerningly critical, and may even lead them to radically
change their lives and the lives of others in service to the raising of
consciousness in our conflict-ridden world.

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\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 199.


