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Book Review: Mythic Imagination Today: The Interpretation of Mythology and Science by Terry Marks-Tarlow

Ivana Gligoric¹

Abstract:

Terry Marks-Tarlow interprets mythology and science as endless curiosity about the workings of the Universe, combining with humans' creative urges to transform inner and outer worlds. The author perceives mythology as a universal product of the human imagination in interaction with the physical and social world, driven by the urge to communicate with others symbolically and make meaning out of life experiences. Moreover, Marks-Tarlow studied the origins of a human story within the social brain, mythmakers, and myths from multiple cultures. At the same time, she explored how contemporary sciences of chaos, complexity theories, and fractal geometry unite with ancient wisdom. The origins of the 'psyche' and 'psychology' concepts were unpacked in detail through the ancient Greek myth of Psyche and Eros

Keywords: mythology, history of science, interpersonal neurobiology, fractal geometry, nonlinear sciences

Both mythology and science draw upon the creative imagination. Mythology continuously blends the imaginary with the real. Science systematically separates the two while paradoxically positing purely imaginary concepts, if not counterintuitive.

Marks-Tarlow (p. 10)

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This wide-ranging book explores mythology and science and acts as an illustrated guide that you may well wish to have in your library to continuously plunge into—not necessarily to read from cover to cover.

Marks-Tarlow's powerful exploration of how contemporary sciences of chaos, complexity theories, and fractal geometry unite with ancient wisdom could make this book essential for the readers as an unceasing source of valuable information.

Four chapters provide a delight of information and visuals, in the following order:

- 1 Myths and Mythmaking
- 2 Introducing the New Sciences
- 3 Psyche and Eros Today
- 4 Foundations: Curiosity, Memory, and Metaphor.

From mythmakers and multiple cultures' myths to contemporary sciences of chaos, complexity theories, and fractal geometry, along with ancient stories and timeless wisdom, are endless visuals and stories to enjoy.

Likewise, the origins of the 'psyche' and 'psychology' concepts were unpacked in detail through the ancient Greek myth of *Psyche and Eros* in chapter three, ending with an exploration of curiosity, memory, and metaphor while considering the importance of context.

Marks-Tarlow's nonlinear wisdom and unique lenses, formed by the long-lived experience as a licensed clinical psychologist, bring valuable perspective and inspiration to a reader. Integrating the deep understanding of the endless human hopes for healing and transformation paved the book's path continuously while frequently honoring whole-brained mythic imagination. Additionally, a crucial thesis postulates that,

“The brain's emotionally rich right hemisphere speaks the language of mythology, while the rationally driven left hemisphere speaks the language of science” (p. 4). The feminist perspective was further discussed, stating that,

Right-brain, bottom-up processing based on emotion and intuition aligns with the feminine principle in Nature. In contrast, left-brain, top-down processing based on reason and analysis aligns with the masculine principle” (p. 4).

The author acknowledges that both complement each other while appreciating their mutual necessity. The thesis was later enriched with engaging stories such as McGilchrist's (2009) examination of the history of modern civilization through the lens of the brain's two hemispheres (p. 72). They addressed Western culture's preoccupation from well-balanced operations of the brain's two halves to the 'left-tilt' resulting in disbalance with the emotional and relational.

Likewise, Marks-Tarlow's skillful storytelling reminds us in various ways of our two wings, intellectual and emotional, equally necessary to fly through life in a balanced and powerful way. Whereas many hundreds of years ago, Western culture was more balanced between operations of the brain's two halves, more and more of a "left-tilt" has occurred over recent history. This tilt amounted to the logical left side forgetting the importance, if not existence, of the emotional, feminine intuition, relational right side as its foundation.

The author invites us to comprehend the world through story, visuals, and verbal symbols, which clearly narrates the idea that,

“Mythology derives from the evolutionarily older language of

emotion, while science represents the evolutionarily more recent language of reason. Whereas mythology is an artful attempt to symbolize experience through a story, science is a technical attempt to siphon input from observation and experimentation through more disciplined forms of thought” (p.3).

Adding that, “Modern science circles around and embraces what creation mythology has already addressed” (p. 76). The theme of surprise, frequently found in creation myths, demonstrated the author's creativity. It felt that some sections, as products of her wisdom and imagination, took the life of their own, springing forth unpredictably, taking us in unexpected directions. Yet, as Carl Jung said, we all, regardless of culture or historical era, need a set of guiding myths to live by, and Marks-Tarlow gave us infinite options to choose from.

Moreover, endless mythic stories were compared throughout the book, linking ancient myths with modern times stories. The book demonstrated tremendous research and knowledge, benefiting readers with endless stories relating, besides many, Superman, Spiderman, and Wonder Women with Gilgamesh, Hercules, Samson, Cuchulainn, Beowulf, Greek Goddess, Aphrodite, and creator of the Amazons, to name a few.

Did you know that Spider power has a universal appeal to the mythic imagination, not only appearing within American superhero tales but also in Native American myths?

Besides, fractals, as qualities of wholeness, were studied, acknowledging them in timeless fairytales and contemporary children’s literature. Even Dr. Seuss’s drawings and the joyful *The Cat in the Hat* and *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* found their place in this book

as an example of fractal applications, and the archetype was acknowledged, as noted by Combs & Holland (1990), saying, “The Cat in the Hat is a modern-day Trickster figure who loves to stir up chaos in the service of a new order” (p. 53).

Fractals, the geometry of Nature, indeed appears to be an essential bridge for integrating new models and metaphors in our understanding of self, world, and other, which the author showcased, directly and indirectly, continuously.

The story of *Psyche and Eros* is unpacked in chapter three, and its tale of love, separation, and re-connection is eloquently described while recognizing its tremendous complexity. The timeless wisdom of this story reminds us of the significance of our faith in the organic flow of life, saying

“Given open fractal boundaries allowing interconnection to all things, this myth teaches us ultimately to have faith in self-organizing forces as they unfold naturally, according to the underlying order of the whole” (p. 102).

Interestingly, by offering various and thoughtful interpretations of the *Psyche and Eros* myth, Marks-Tarlow does not stereotype according to gender. In its place, she acknowledges that every person should be regarded as possessing both feminine and masculine aspects, again addressing the importance of balance and healthy emotional range.

The author's deep understanding of the significance and value of images, which are more primary and closer to ongoing sensory experience than the written word, is demonstrated in numerous visuals spread across the book, many of which are her original creations.

As a passionate artist, Marks-Tarlow is perpetually spreading and debating images within the publication, making a more profound and lasting impact on readers from a neurobiological point by hardwiring them into our brains. Further recognizing that, “One reason the mythic imagination is so powerful is that it supplies images within a set of embodied metaphors to live by” (p. 116).

Here, the section “Myth and Metaphor (p. 117)” contains a brief re-working of material from two chapters: “Complexity at the Edge of Chaos” and “New Metaphors Arising.”

Overall, science and mythology were recognized as projective constructions of the human mind while being grounded in faculties of perception and imagination. Throughout the book, the author acknowledges and discusses how science is more heavily anchored in perception and measurement, while mythology is primarily grounded in imagination, potentially implying imagination’s feminine quality.

Moreover, Marks-Tarlow argues that both storytelling and science arise from related human origins and impulses—curiosity, combined with uncertainty—while demonstrating how ancient myths unite with truths revealed by contemporary forms of nonlinear science.

It is worth mentioning the author's reflection on perception and discussing the differences between perception and imagination, saying that they differ on the surface. In contrast, perception immerses us in outer worlds; imagination submerges us in inner ones. However, she shares somewhat surprising findings from contemporary neuroscience, indicating that they share identical neural wiring. range.

Besides, Marks-Tarlow discusses unconscious processes of projection and its invisibility and automated qualities beneath the level of conscious awareness, reminding us how our unconscious minds operate like Tricksters on conscious experience. Partially by concealing underlying mechanisms and machinations, and partially by leading us to believe and act as if our sensations of brightness, shape, color, taste, and sound reflect the world outside us, while they are projected products of our own perceptual and neural organs.

In her powerful chapter on “Foundations: Curiosity, Memory and Metaphor,” Marks-Tarlow writes:

“We, humans, operate in sync with one another partly because we live in groups that require social brains. But the story extends much further, for all societies and each of us individually are open systems. Even if we attain functional independence, we remain structurally coupled to our social and physical environments throughout life. In the case of our bodies, openness means that oxygen, water, nutrients, and waste must pass in and out of semi-permeable borders. In the case of our psyches, no matter how independent we appear, we remain emotionally and intellectually embedded in our social and cultural matrix necessary to sustain complex functioning” (p. 127).

Independent or not, we all felt moments when, “Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth” (Camus as cited in Marks-Tarlow 2020, p. 35)—melting together not just our social and cultural backgrounds but also truth and ancient myths with modern times stories.

Finally, this impressive publication would be beneficial to students of all disciplines interested in a comprehensive exploration of

mythology and science as endless curiosity about the workings of the Universe.

Since Marks-Tarlow addresses contemporary mythic cognition from the perspective of the nonlinear sciences while strongly emphasizing dynamical systems thinking, chaos theory, complexity theory, and fractal geometry—she attempts to cover much ground in this publication. Therefore, several readers might

feel flabbergasted, which certainly does not diminish the book's overall value.

Conclusively, Marks-Tarlow's extensive and timeless wisdom would be a valuable addition to a university or departmental library, providing a comprehensive overview of mythology as a universal product of the human imagination, driven by the urge to communicate with others symbolically and make meaning out of life experiences.