

Book Review

AMERICAN SOUL: A CULTURAL NARRATIVE. (2012). BY RONALD SCHENK. NEW ORLEANS, LA: SPRING JOURNAL BOOKS

Reviewed by Russell Lockhart

Thirty-five years ago in these pages, I reviewed Edward F. Edinger's *Melville's Moby-Dick: A Jungian Commentary; "An American Nekyia"*, praising his effort as providing the "final, conclusive, decisive, and authoritative" commentary on Melville's great American novel—the *definitive* Jungian analysis—"as if nothing more *could* be said."¹

Then, I wrote,

Can a work be criticized for what it has not done? I think so—particularly if there is a promise that something is to be done. There is a promise in Edinger's book that in elaborating the archetypal roots of *Moby-Dick*, the problems Melville explored so deeply and so imaginatively a hundred years ago can be seen as *our* modern problems—particularly the problems of America. Hence, the subtitle of Edinger's commentary: "An American Nekyia." It is a failed promise.

While not quoting Edinger or *Moby-Dick*, Ronald Schenk's cultural narrative on the American soul, may be thought of as a head-on attempt to articulate the story and the myth of America by revealing its "underbelly." Schenk does so through a kind of deliberate *nekyia* in the sense in which this word was used originally, that is, referring to *a ritual intended to call up ghosts in*

*order to learn the future.*² Schenk's ritual is to quote, in their own words, the ghosts he calls up. The ghosts are those many figures of American culture: early settlers, pioneers, revolutionary warriors, founding fathers, presidents, business leaders, politicians—a panoply of figures who stand tall in the popular and public-relations versions of our history, but who are brought to account here in the pages of Schenk's narrative scrutiny.

The author is at his best and has done a masterful job of collecting bits and pieces of actions and quotations that together *do* tell a darker, shadowy, less euphemistic tale, one that tugs the reader to pay attention, because one can *feel* a desire to pull away, to escape this truth-telling. Oddly, when the author uses theory to explain, the narrative loses force. Not that there is anything wrong with theory or Schenk's skill in this regard. Rather, this theoretical distancing subtly serves to escape the dramatic power the narrative has engendered. It is this dramatic power that “gets through,” and is the reason for the special value of this book.

The ghostly quotations were so compelling that I found myself constantly going to the sources quoted. Thanks to Schenk, I rediscovered Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. I took a renewed interest in several books of the Bible. I studied what some of our early settlers actually wrote. I became familiar with what our founding fathers *really* felt they were doing and why. I was stunned by some of the things our various presidents actually said. The list goes on. I could re-quote the author's discoveries here but this feels like spoiling a movie. I will say this: I urge you to read this book both for the joy and horror of what you will find. But don't stop there. Get this book into the hands (and minds) of *any* person of power or influence.

John Gast's famous painting, entitled "American Progress" (1872), shows Indians and buffalo fleeing from Columbia, a diaphanous, half-strapless-gowned female floating westward in the air, with the Star of Empire adorning her head, a book of learning clutched in her right hand, and stringing a telegraph line in the left, and all manner of transport heading west. It is an allegory of America's "manifest destiny" that has been and continues to be the ideological foundation of so much of America's sense of itself as God's special country. Schenk announces his intention by *not* using this image, but another of Gast's paintings, the little known "Angel" (1871). Here is a female angel, gowned in heavy garment, seated, facing east, her chin resting on her hand, looking depressed. In contrast to the vibrant colors of "American Progress," "Angel" seems to be losing color. At auction in 2010, this painting brought a little more than \$4,000—not exactly the heroic sum one might imagine for a picture of America's soul. But this is a soul of America no one wants to see, or to acknowledge. This is the cover of Schenk's book, and it is *apt*.

Commented [PM1]: I suggest a long dash instead of double-hyphens.

Schenk begins his narrative with "9/11" and the fall of the Twin Towers. As iconic emblems of the mighty dominance of America, Schenk wonders whether the piercing of the collective innocence on that day might open the way to a new sense of America, coupled with a true openness to "the other," that is, other countries and cultures of the world. The rest of the book wrestles with these twin questions and covers a broad array of both historical foundations and present-day realities: self-interest, Ronald McDonald, Puritanism, America as the New Jerusalem, empire building, the glorified cowboy, Americanization of the world, Katrina, the fall of Enron, the religious structure of capitalism, America as everyone's hero (or so we think).

In a late chapter entitled, “What Ishmael Saw: An Overview of American Involvement in the Middle-East,” Schenk details the long muddled history of our incomprehension of the realities of “the other” as America took on the mantle of “the great nation” promised by God to Abraham’s son, Ishmael.³ It is as if we can understand only through the lens of our claimed religious “rightness” which, of course, forces “the other” into varying degrees of “wrongness.” Schenk does not come right out and say our failure to comprehend those opposed to us is due to our failure to understand the *religious* basis of this opposition, but his narrative leads in that direction. But to fully accept “the other” in this deep sense requires the genuine sacrifice of our grand schemes still tied to our ship of manifest destiny, our modern-day *Pequod*. Let’s remember the other Ishmael, the Ishmael who survived Ahab’s madness, but only by accident, and lived to tell the tale, through Melville’s imagination, of *Moby-Dick*.

In the thirteenth⁴ and penultimate chapter, entitled, “The Soul of Terror/The Terror of Soul,” Schenk draws the shocking picture of Jesus as terrorist. This is Schenk’s most valuable insight and leads to seeing terrorism as emerging “...from an underlying layer of the psyche common to *all* of humanity.” Can you imagine the leap of political imagination or set of actions it would take to see our country as terrorist? Yet, the evidence is in plain sight for all to view. Schenk’s penetrating analysis of three major religions and their history up to the present time (Hebrew, Christian, Islam) leads him to conclude that “...the sacred is inherently violent.” What we fail to understand as a culture is that terrorism is warfare not in any usual sense, but a battle for souls, a propaganda campaign more than a military campaign. In this light, Schenk reads Rudolf Otto’s phrase *mysterium tremendum* as embodying “a tremendous mystery that acts like a terrorist.” Schenk notes that Tocqueville’s grandfather was beheaded during the French Reign of Terror,

perhaps preparing the grandson for his being able to see into the future of American democracy as a "...terror which depresses and enervates the heart." Surely we are where he foresaw us.

Until our culture sees deeply enough into this complexity we will continue on a path of turning ourselves into what we seek to destroy. In seeking to destroy terrorism, we seek to destroy the soul. This is the fundamental insight of Schenk's brilliant work and the full realization of this is the necessary starting point for seeking "something else." If we seek to destroy the soul, as Ahab tries to destroy the whale, we too will go down like all great empires before us. Our ship of state, our great and glorious Pequod, is surely listing. Ahab's doubloon suckers us all into the great enterprise and for the most part we are unknowing and seemingly unconcerned about our fate as we are entertained into a miasma of collective stupor.

Who will live to tell the tale?

ENDNOTES

¹Lockhart, Russell A. (1979). What whale does America pursue? *Psychological Perspectives*, 10(1), 83-87.

²Jung used *nekyia* interchangeably with other words and expressions such as "night sea journey," "katabasis," "descensus ad inferos," or, most generally, "descent." This is true as well in the Jungian literature. In *The Dream and the Underworld* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), James Hillman began a significant differentiation of these terms (p. 168), but this task remains incomplete. The relevance here is that in *nekyia*, there is no return, while in the "night sea journey," there is. Thus, *Moby-Dick* is a *nekyia* for Ahab (and for anything we characterize as "Ahabian"), but is a "night sea journey," for Ishmael. What it was for *Moby-Dick* remains to be explored.

³Ishnael was born to the slave Hagar, not Abraham's wife Sarah. Ironically, Ishmael is considered the progenitor of the Arabic people and is sacred to Islam. We seem utterly blind to this. While we readily take on "the great nation" image, we are unaware or forget God's other prophecy concerning Ishmael: "This man will be like a wild donkey. His hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand will be against him; he will live at odds with all his brothers." (*Genesis 16:12; Holman Christian Standard Bible*)

⁴My mind immediately connected the thirteen chapters with the thirteen colonies. This was followed by the realization that the author did not mention the common spiritual connection between many of the founding fathers: the Masonic tradition and its alchemical structures. A further absence is the crucial difference between the Puritans and the Pilgrims. Our history is the history of the victory of the Puritans. But the Pilgrims remain a latent possibility. This is elaborated by Lewis Hyde in his book, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*. (1979). New York: Vintage Books.