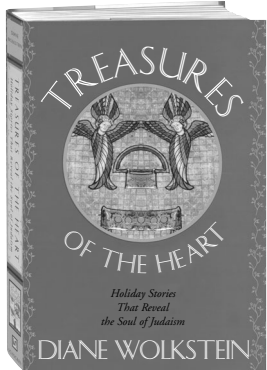



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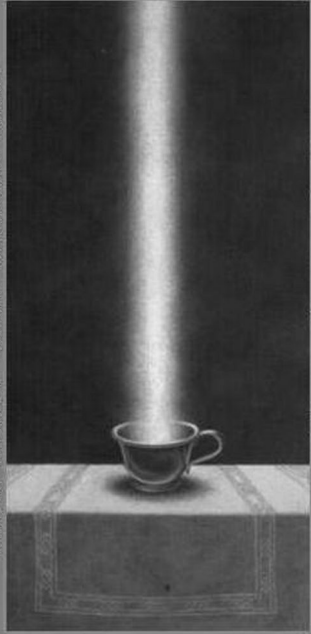
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removed from the texts themselves: it is words about pictures about words. In closing, then, I return to the fascinating and inspirational texts that are the basis of the series. Some of these sacred words are hard to come by, hidden away in large anthologies and arcane sources. Shambhala has done well in making them available in an attractive and affordable format. Even in an over-lavish page, the simplicity, directness, beauty, and wisdom of the texts will call readers back to each volume. As well as an interesting, if flawed, presentation of examples of contemporary calligraphic art, the books in this series would function well as sourcebooks for contemplation.

An art historian and member of the Western Buddhist Order, Manjusura (Ian Tromp) has written essays and reviews for the (London) Times Literary Supplement, Tricycle, Buddhadharma, and The Nation.

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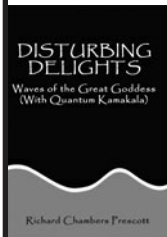
Reality

By Peter Kingsley. Inverness, Calif.: The Golden Sufi Center, 2004. Pp. 600. \$35.95, cloth; \$19.95, paper.

Reviewed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

THE BOOK *Reality* by the British scholar of Greek philosophy, Peter Kingsley, unveils a reality which, if understood and accepted, will transform the understanding of contemporary Western humanity of itself and of the roots of Western civilization. It is for that reason an exceptionally challenging and at the same time salient work. Since the rise of the Renaissance understanding of Greek thought, the rationalism inherent in its humanistic vision has depicted Greek philosophy as almost synonymous with the rise of rationalism and the divorce of logic from the domains of the mysterious, the mystical, and the supra-rational. As the history of philosophy developed in the West within the matrix of the paradigm created by the

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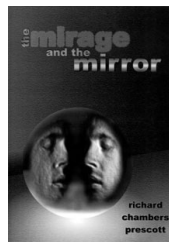
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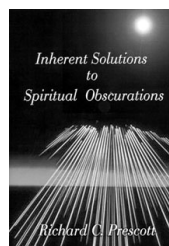
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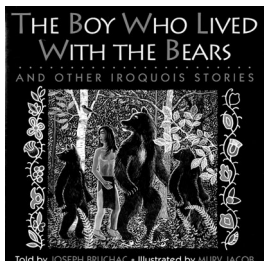
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Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution, the pre-Socratics came to be seen as men groping gradually forward on the road that led in the fourth century B.C.E. to Platonism and Aristotelianism. Among these figures Parmenides was seen as being especially important as the founder of logic and, for many, of philosophy itself. And in more recent times famous philosophers from Nietzsche to Heidegger have turned to the pre-Socratics to provide new interpretations of the foundations of Western thought.

Kingsley turns all these interpretations on their head and with careful analyses of the surviving Greek texts as well as archaeological findings is able to present a completely different picture of these figures, especially Parmenides and Empedocles, with whom most of the book is concerned. He demonstrates convincingly that, far from being the father of logic as understood today and a mediocre poet, Parmenides was a priest of Apollo, an *iatromantis* and a prophetlike figure who through the process of incubation and utter stillness was led like a shaman to the other world, while being still alive here on earth, and was taught by the goddess the meaning of true philosophy, which is a means of transformation of one's being rather than mental acrobatics and which cannot be learned unless one dies before dying. For as Plato said, "Philosophy is the practice of death." To quote Kingsley in referring to the current study of much of philosophy, "Now it [philosophy] has just come to mean the love of endless talking and arguing about the love of wisdom—which is a complete waste of time. Philosophy is a travesty of what it once was, no longer a path to wisdom but a defense against it." He demonstrates that the phrase *krinai logōi* ("judge by reason") used by Parmenides does not at all mean defense of rationalism for here, a century before Plato, *logōi* did not mean reason but word or speech from which truth emerges as when the Book of John says, "In the beginning was the Word (*logos*)."

Another term central to Parmenides and

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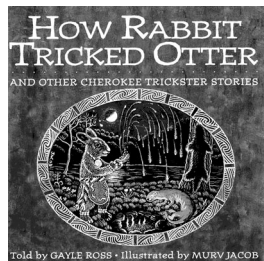
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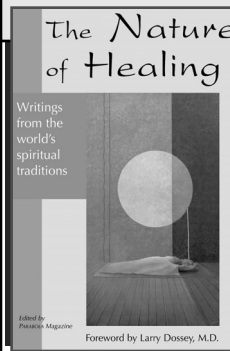


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Socrates is *elenchus*, which does not mean simply the process of reasoning but, to quote Kingsley again, “the process of demonstrating the truth about a matter . . . of getting to what is real at all costs.” He believed in fact that he was ordered to follow this process by divine command as did Socrates. As for the poem of Parmenides, far from being mediocre poetry, it is shown to be not only a vehicle for the exposition of the truth of philosophy, but an operative aid for the realization of that truth, of a philosophy which must be considered as sacred knowledge.

The first five parts of *Reality* deal mostly with Parmenides and to some extent his student Zeno and also Socrates. From Part Six on, the author turns to Empedocles, who is shown to be not only a cosmologist and physicist but also a prophet and sorcerer who combined science with mysticism and considered philosophy to be an esoteric science meant only for the few qualified to understand it as is clearly stated at

the beginning of his poem. As we see in the case of Islamic cosmology, for Empedocles, all his cosmology and science was “to help us learn what we really are and be free.” Kingsley indicates that the teachings of Empedocles, who followed the line of Parmenides, although not well understood in the West, were continued in Egypt and from there reached the Islamic world. It is in fact remarkable how close the interpretation of these figures by Kingsley is to that of certain early Sufis and Islamic authorities such as Suhrawardi, Shahrzuri, Mulla Sadra, and Qutb al-Din Ashkiwari. It would be a groundbreaking work of scholarship to collect such selections from Arabic and Persian, translate them into English, and make a systematic comparison between them and what Kingsley has uncovered in this and his other works. There is certainly no doubt that Islamic philosophers had a line of access to Greek philosophy and understanding of its meaning, especially



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the pre-Socratics but also Plotinus, independent of the philosophical understanding in the modern West based solely on fragments of Greek texts that have reached the West.

Since the 1960s many have spoken of a paradigm shift in the West and there is little doubt that the life of the paradigm created in Europe in the Renaissance and the seventeenth century is now coming to its end. Kingsley's book is a major step in this process for it presents a completely different understanding of the foundations of Western thought from what has been promoted by the majority of classicists and philosophers in the West during the past five centuries. For that very reason the book is bound to meet great resistance from standard bearers of prevalent interpretations of such seminal figures as Parmenides and Empedocles. But also for that very reason it is a book of singular significance, especially for those in search of understanding beyond

the confines of a rationalism and an irrationalism both of which have become stale.

The book is long but it reads like an exciting novel, at least for those in search of a truth that transforms and not simply of information that clutters the mind. The scholarly paraphernalia are kept at the end of the book and the text is written in a vivid prose without scholarly jargon in such a way that it is accessible and should be highly attractive to the concerned educated reader even if he or she does not have a background in philosophy, for it deals with truths which are of the greatest existential importance, truths whose understanding is literally a matter of life and death.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is author of over twenty books and over two hundred articles. His works concern not only aspects of Islamic studies but also comparative philosophy and religion, philosophy of art, and the environmental crisis.