

A Story Waiting to Pierce You: Mongolia, Tibet and the Destiny of the Western World

By Peter Kingsley

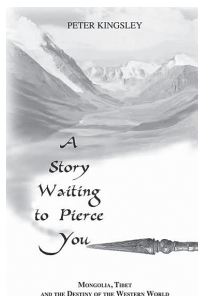
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Reviewed by Nicolas Leon Ruiz

A *Story Waiting to Pierce You: Mongolia, Tibet and the Destiny of the Western World* is the fourth book by classicist and historian of philosophy Peter Kingsley. Kingsley's previous books, including *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (1999) and *Reality* (2003), argue that the so-called "Presocratic philosophers", the founding fathers of Western civilization, have been profoundly misunderstood. As a result, we in the West have misunderstood ourselves.

Modern scholars tend to present the Presocratic philosophers as ingenious but primitive thinkers. They see the Presocratics as essentially like themselves: as secularizing rationalists, or as intellectuals who cared more for theory than for practice. But Kingsley's work offers a completely different picture: Parmenides, Empedocles, Pythagoras and those like them were mystics and prophets, links in an ancient Western esoteric and initiatory tradition. For them, science and philosophy came from the sacred and were meant to lead back to the sacred—a worldview that makes their writings nearly incomprehensible to those who do not share it.

This has obvious implications. One is that any thinker who approaches these sacred texts without an understanding of or appreciation for the sacred is only going to be able to offer the most superficial of interpretations, while the deeper spiritual significance of these writings is bound to remain hidden. But the reality of what the Presocratics did has not been



lost on everyone. Historically, their work became the living source and inspiration for much of Hermetic, alchemical and even Islamic mystical tradition.¹ And in our own time, Kingsley's writings have resurrected a truth as surprising as it is beautiful: Western civilization itself is the product of, and the heir to, a sacred tradition—one as rich and powerful as anything found in the East.

Peter Kingsley's new book, as the title suggests, is not only about the West—nor is it simply about the past. The book takes as its starting point the enigmatic accounts of Pythagoras' encounter with Abaris the Hyperborean. Abaris, an itinerant healer, miracle worker and prophet, arrived in Greece as a mysterious visitor from the East and ended up playing an absolutely crucial role in the life of Pythagoras—and so in the creation of Western science, philosophy, and culture. Kingsley picks up the glossed, ignored and abandoned threads that these stories offer and weaves together a narrative of remarkable power and scope. At the heart of his "story" is a startling revelation: that the indigenous wisdom of the West was intimately connected with Mongolian and Tibetan shamanic tradition. As the book shows, what follows from this has the most serious and far-reaching implications for our understanding of Western, Mongolian, Tibetan and even Native American sacred tradition.

A Story Waiting to Pierce You contains some surprising conclusions, but they are backed by substantial scholarly research: the book's end-notes are almost as long as the main text. These notes take the reader far beyond European and American classical studies. They span multiple disciplines, engaging the work of (among others) anthropologists, archeologists, and specialists in Asian history. They provide a well-reasoned case for Kingsley's immediate conclusions, but they also shed light on much wider issues as well. For example, one note (which runs around sixteen pages and reads more like a tremendously concise essay than a reference) provides new insight into the pre-Buddhist shamanic traditions of Tibet—and the shockingly brutal suppression of these traditions at the hands of the early Tibetan Buddhists (128-143). His explanations often have the force of elegance as well—pulling together the pieces of a previously intractable puzzle into a seamless whole, leaving the

¹ Kingsley's first book, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) explores these connections in great detail.

reader to wonder how no one ever saw the solution before. In all of this, attention to detail is paramount. Kingsley's singular talent is to take those details that at first "might sound like nothing" and apply his guiding methodological principle that "what sounds like nothing can be a clue to making sense of the whole if we only take the time to learn its language" (21).



A Story Waiting to Pierce You shows how sacred traditions from the East played a crucial role in the creation of Western civilization. This book may be the final nail in the coffin of an old fantasy: that of the early West as a completely closed-off, bizarrely self-invented culture. This will doubtless cause great consternation among popular historians of the Western triumphalist sort and among a number—though a mercifully declining number—of hidebound academic classicists. But Traditionalists will find an extremely elegant and down-to-earth confirmation of their worldview in Kingsley's demonstration of the common spiritual heritage that unites East and West both on the level of concrete history and on the level of esoteric essence as well.

Kingsley shows how Hyperborea, homeland of Abaris, can be identified with the areas of Asia now known to us as Mongolia and Tibet. Abaris himself, as many scholars have recognized, "has the makings and markings of a shaman—of one of those strange, uncontrollable healers and mystics found across the world but especially familiar in the areas around Siberia and Central Asia" (4). Kingsley draws out, elaborates and explains these "makings and markings" through an ingenious re-reading of the Greek source material on Abaris. Most striking are the perfect parallels he finds between this material and well-documented shamanic and Tibetan Buddhist practices. His scholarship is surprisingly straightforward. He simply looks where most modern classicists wouldn't think of looking—to the concrete worlds of anthropology and ethnography; to the archaeology and religious history of Asia.

Abaris' meeting with Pythagoras, often dismissed by scholars who know no better as nothing but a literary fiction, is in fact one of history's greatest recognition scenes. And as Kingsley is able to show, it was tremendously important for both men. This intimate connection

between Pythagoras and an ecstatic purifier, wonderworker and prophet, a shaman from Central Asia, sheds light on the many aspects of Pythagorean tradition that, as a few scholars have noticed for a long time, are clearly shamanic.² It is difficult to overstate the importance of Pythagoras for Western civilization. Even among the other Presocratics, founding heroes of our Western world, he was a figure apart. He is justly regarded as “a culture-creator, a shaper of civilization, as originator of the word ‘philosophy’” (47). Pythagoras and the mystical tradition that he helped to inspire stand at the roots of the West. But as Kingsley writes:

[S]uch a great gesture of generating a new culture for a sacred purpose, such a divinely compassionate initiative for the sake of a human race that has lost its way, can never be performed by a single person alone. Someone else was needed, somebody from outside, to help along the process by activating and confirming him in his role. (47)

This subtle but powerful influence, this sacred transmission from East to West, is part of “the mysterious dance in which germs of new cultures are scattered and sown” (48). Centuries later, as Pythagorean tradition made its way to Egypt and the Near East, and eventually into the heart of Persian Sufism, this organic process of seeding would continue. The reality behind this perennial movement is that “civilizations are brought into existence out of a place of creation and destruction that no civilization by itself is ever able to understand” (75).

But the revelations about this “thread...joining the East to the West”, a thread “so fine it has nearly gone unseen” (30), do not end with Pythagoras and Abaris. For Hyperborea was not just the home of Abaris: it was also the home of Apollo. And Abaris, Kingsley reminds us, was not the first Hyperborean to visit Greece for a sacred purpose. We still have “those infinitely enigmatic accounts left behind by early western historians about how the most sacred Greek shrines had been founded by the same strange visitors from Hyperborea who, accompanied by Apollo himself, once brought the Greeks their most precious and primordial traditions” (57).³ Centuries later, when Pythagoras famously (and scandalously) claimed to be “Hyperborean Apollo” and Abaris the Hyperborean was reported as carrying the god Apollo inside him as

² Two classic works that hint at the shamanic background of Pythagoras—and Greece generally—are E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951) and W. Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

³ For one example, see Herodotus, *Histories* 4.32-36.

he walked around Greece in an ecstasy, this was only the continuation of something much, much older. The connections between Abaris and Pythagoras and Apollo, Apollo and Hyperborea and Greece, point us back almost disturbingly far into the pre-history of the West—into our own Dreamtime. If all of this is shocking to us, perhaps it is because “we know as little about the original nature of western culture as we do about Apollo” (42), a god whose light “is a brightness we have no experience of any more” (43). Rather than give away any more of this story, I will leave Kingsley’s readers to rediscover that dark light for themselves.

A Story Waiting to Pierce You also performs another, extremely important service for students of Tradition. It highlights the absolutely crucial role played by the shamanic traditions of Central Asia and Siberia in the flowering of sacred wisdom. It is commonplace to define our shared sacred heritage as human beings in terms of the “great cultures”: Egypt, India, Persia, China, Greece and so forth. Indigenous and nomadic cultures oftentimes do not receive the credit they deserve for their contributions. Worse still, the most extreme commentators even treat them as in some way inferior to the better-known, settled cultures. As Kingsley comments, this is

...the grand fantasy invented by the so-called “higher” cultures to preserve their sense of superiority and self-importance. In reality all of this is just a dream, alongside our other dreams about how indigenous shamanic cultures are not as ethical as us or not able to share our special access to a transcendent reality behind the world of the senses. (63-64, with notes on 143-147 and 160-170)

One of the great strengths of *A Story Waiting to Pierce You* is that it shows, in remarkable detail, the ways in which the sacred traditions of the Mongolians—as well as the ancient Siberians and Native Americans—fit into the great story of Tradition. And in particular, Kingsley’s book points out what they were able to offer that no one else could. Through the millennia, these cultures have not only played “a role” in the unfolding of life, wisdom and civilization—they have played an irreplaceable role, one that no one else was able to perform.

Abaris is one example of this, from the dawn of Western civilization. And writing about another group of Central Asians from a later epoch, Kingsley says

[A]s long as the Mongols kept faithful to their nomadic traditions they were able to perform the strangest alchemy. Living apart from the great civilizations, treading their

own different path, they managed to cross-fertilize civilizations and sow the seeds of new cultures in ways no individual culture could even dream of. Genghis Khan brought with him an all-embracing openness, a religious tolerance based on shamanic principles, that was almost as much of a threat to his enemies as anything else. (75)

This book makes an eloquent case for the Other, for the “barbarians”, showing how much they have given humanity—quietly, humbly, and often without recognition. But there is a profound truth here waiting to be acknowledged. Sufis, whose own Islamic world bore the brunt of the Mongol invasions, were

acutely conscious of the paradoxical complexities they were facing—of a reality unfolding in front of their eyes compared to which all their civilized achievements faded into nothing, of a force grinding down the old fossilized forms of illusion to create the space for something new. Sufis had visions of Genghis Khan’s army being protected and led along its warpath by the most powerful of saints or even by the Pole, the supreme spiritual authority around whom the whole world revolves; or by the prophet Khidr, the Green Man, the mysterious guide of all guides who always acts from behind the scenes in ways that defy any human understanding. (74)

As a number of Sufis realized, “there is no escaping the barbarians, because they are the life behind what we think of as life” (76).



As I said at the outset, *A Story Waiting to Pierce You* is not simply a book about the past. In fact, it is very much a book for our time. We find ourselves in a modern world on the brink of collapse—and we wonder what to do. The stakes are high: our very survival hangs on what we do next. The modern age, with its technocracy, reductionism, and abandonment of the sacred, offers no real solutions because it is part of the problem. Meanwhile, those of us who advocate a return to Tradition worry about how to reconnect to the essence of the past without merely recreating its outward forms.

A Story Waiting to Pierce You reframes all of these issues. Kingsley’s answer to our current impossible, life-or-death situation is Abaris’ answer, and Pythagoras’ answer. It is the answer of Tradition:

At any given point in time there will only ever be one single way to put a real step forward—which is in a state of ecstasy that takes us out of ourselves. This is how it always has been and will be for each of us; and this also is how it is for the whole. We have the strange idea in the West that civilizations just happen: that they come into

existence as a hit or miss affair and then we bumble along, creating and inventing and making it better. But this is not how things are done at all. Civilizations never just happen. They are brought into existence quite consciously, with unbelievable compassion and determination, from another world. (80)

We have forgotten what our ancestors knew—the sacred ecstasy that allowed them to face their own desperate times, allowed them to do the impossible. This book comes as an urgent reminder of first things: of where worlds and civilizations really come from, and how, and why. Too often we think of a sacred tradition as something that just barely survives inside of a civilization; of ecstasy as otherworldly and impractical. Kingsley shows us that the opposite is true. Sacred traditions create civilizations. Tradition is the living soil from which all our cultures spring. People like Pythagoras and Abaris learned how to step outside of themselves and allow the sacred to come. Their ecstasy sowed worlds.

A Story Waiting to Pierce You conveys this power and urgency through its remarkable style. It reads at times like a prose poem, an incantation, a song of ecstasy. And ecstasy is uncompromising. It has nothing to offer the New Age seeker, nothing to teach the secular intellectual. In ecstasy we lose ourselves—along with all our ideas of the way things were going to be. Yet we are offered something much richer in return: the chance to “live in service not to our flimsy expectations but to the power of life itself” (35). In a world that has almost forgotten these things, and nearly killed itself in the process, Peter Kingsley’s *A Story Waiting to Pierce You* is a reminder, and a call to life.