

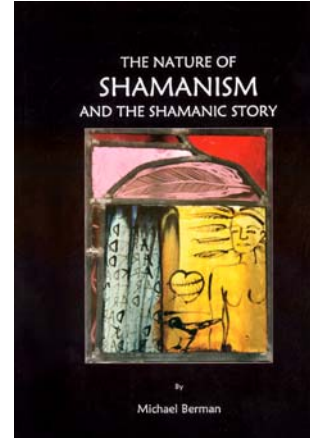
REVIEW OF MICHAEL BERMAN'S *THE NATURE OF SHAMANISM AND THE SHAMANIC STORY*¹

I have tried to write an academic review of Michael Berman's book and found myself reiterating Aado Lintrop's points. Then I tried respond to Lintrop and Berman jointly, and this also did not work. In every instance, my criticism of the Berman book was much harsher than Lintrop's. Indeed, I find Lintrop's review a remarkable demonstration of scholarly generosity and rhetorical temperance.

Berman's book is characterized throughout by an absolutely uncritical use of sources. Consider for starters the third paragraph of the introduction, where alongside classical scholars of religion like Durkheim, Marx (pace!), James, Muller, Radin, Van der Leeuw and, of course, Jung, one finds not only modern and contemporary scholars like Eliade, Hoppal, Hultkrantz and Smart, but also neoshamanist apologists such as Joan Halifax, Sandra Ingermann, Michael Harner, and Roger Walsh. Berman alphabetizes the whole list so that Halifax and Harner appear between Eliade and Hoppal, but such gestures of egalitarianism among academic unequals can be only gestures.

Lintrop has detailed the structure of the book and taken pains to be patient, when on page after page Berman abuses traditions of scholarly discourse by making mistakes for which undergraduates are chastised. Typically, Berman's rhetorical strategy is to assert a point – “In shamanism, rapture can be seen as one method of enhancing life's powerfulness” (p. 2) – and then quote from a scholar who is making a different point in an entirely different social, cultural or historical context. The scholar's quotation is presumed to legitimate Berman's assertion because both the scholar's and Berman's points are imagined as logically participating equally in a higher level of generalization. So Berman follows up his assertion about shamanic “rapture” with a quotation from Van der Leeuw that “the Israelite judges, for example, led their people to victory because the spirit of Jahveh had come upon them. This exaltation, this fullness of God, confers mighty power.” (quoted on p. 3). The quotation can appear to validate Berman's assertion only if one assumes, I emphasize *assume*, that the phenomenon described as the rapture that comes upon a shaman and that described as the “spirit of God come upon the judges” are the same, but how would one know, the Hebrew judges being long dead and we, the uninitiated, not being shamans? Lacking any matrix of comparators, this form of argument is no argument at all but simply a begging of the question from those already inclined to agree.

Yet all is not ecstatic among (neo)shamans. Part of the object of Berman's book, it seems, is to authorize himself by positioning himself as a revisionist of Harner, candidly challenging the founding father of neoshamanism as a commercial enterprise. Contrasting a neoshamanic narrative with that of a classic Eskimo narrative, he cheek-



ily points out that “the kind of apprenticeship neoshamanic trainees undergo bears no resemblance whatsoever to the hardships that indigenous shamanic apprentices had to pass through and indeed, if they did, it is highly unlikely there would be many recruits for such courses and many workshop leaders would soon go out of business.” (p. 54)

A remarkable passage begins on page 17 with a challenge to Harner’s belief that “there is nothing necessarily dangerous in what the shaman does. Such a definition ensures prospective workshop participants are not put off from attending as a result of any risk that might be involved.” (p. 17) He then argues with Harner’s assertion that shamans are distinguished from “magicians and medicine men” by the state of consciousness called ecstasy, an assertion which for Berman “raises the problem of what is ecstasy, as it can refer to a whole range of emotional states from mental dissociation to the transports of joy a poet or artist is said to experience [...] moreover, the words ‘ecstasy’ and ‘trance’ are frequently used synonymously [...] As the word ecstasy can be used to refer to so many different situations, which makes its meaning ambiguous, the word ‘trance’ is preferred for the purposes of this work.” (p. 18) Having deferred from the terminological ambiguities ‘ecstasy’ to the clarity of ‘trance’, Berman quickly becomes anxious to dispel any negative associations surrounding the latter term, preferred for its unambiguousness, asserting that “there is no reason to regard being in a trance state as anything strange. Indeed, all the time we spend sleeping or daydreaming can be regarded as time spent in trance states too.”

If you have been following thus far, like me you also may rightly wonder if any clarity has been gained by trading the term ‘ecstasy’ for the term ‘trance’. Or consider the following argument from (failed) analogy: “Just as psychology could never have constituted itself if people had no psyche and sociology could never have existed as a subject if people had not society, in the same way there could be no religion if people had no religious sentiment.” (p. 38) By this time, perhaps you like me have also begun to develop a genuine appreciation for Lintrop’s patience as a reviewer.

As for the “shamanic story” portion of the book, and the claim to introduce a new genre, this has all been treated generously by Lintrop as well. The “shamanic story” genre, it turns out, is any story based on a journey, real or imagined, during which the protagonist learns something. I cannot say I found reading this book to be such a shamanic journey. But Berman is too modest. He claims to introduce only one new genre, but ignores the implicit assumption that since, quoting Eliade, “All the ecstatic experiences that determine the future shaman’s vocation involve the traditional schema of an initiation ceremony: suffering, death, resurrection”, there are really TWO new genres, one *The Shamanic Initiation* embedded in the other, *The Shamanic Journey*. Of course, these two are together only specifications of the real master narrative, Rank-Campbell’s *Myth of the Hero*. By this point, it is clear enough that not only does this book not add anything new; it confuses that which already exists.

So for whom, then, is this book written? First and foremost, probably for Berman himself, who has some bones to pick with Harner and Ingermann and who, as a self-identified neoshamanic practitioner wishes to clear a space for his own shadow. Second, probably for neoshamanist neophytes for whom any book that has a variant of the word “shaman” in its title not once but twice must thus be doubly appealing. Finally for all those, forgetting Alexander Pope’s admonition about “a little knowledge”, who would

gloss 150 years of social science scholarship in a compendium of appropriate quotations. For the rest of us, on the other hand, the book must stand as a kind of amazement. Reading it brought to mind the judgment of the American historian James Beard, which I can only paraphrase because I do not have the exact quotation in front of me: "Its reasoning proved persuasive for those who found it satisfactory."

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NOTE

- ¹ See the book's first review "A Shamanic Book without Shamanic Stories" by Aado Lintrop in *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, Vol. 38, pp. 157–165 and Michael Berman's response in *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, Vol. 39, p. 129.