

# DECODING Hillman

## A Critical Look at the Author of the Soul's Code.

Cliff Bostock

When James Hillman appeared before the Atlanta Jung Society a few years ago, his strongest impression on many of us had little to do with his reading from his best seller of the time, The Force of Character.

Instead, we were most struck by the virtual tantrum he pitched, demanding that a Society member stop snapping pictures of him for the newsletter. I couldn't avoid noticing the multiple layers of irony in Hillman's tantrum. As he acknowledged himself after he cooled down, he was well demonstrating the "heightened irritability" of the elderly cited in his book.

More important and ironic, though, was the way Hillman's angry explosion expressed the full measure *and difficulty* of his archetypal psychology. Like Jung, Hillman believes that image is psyche. "The soul is constituted of images... the soul is primarily an imagining activity," he writes in Archetypal Psychology: A Brief Account. Thus it's no great stretch to say that, from Hillman's perspective, the photographer was playing the anthropologist attempting to capture the soul of a shaman in his camera. "It's my image!" Hillman shouted.

And that claim, while expressing the primacy of the image, also discloses the difficulty of archetypal psychology. For Hillman maintains repeatedly that images have autonomy. They are the spontaneous production of the soul. Indeed, for him, psychotherapy itself is on behalf of the image, not on behalf of the self. So, while one can argue that photography inhibits the essential movement of an image by freezing it, the fact is that Hillman, logician of the soul, attempted vainly (in all senses of the word) to control exhibition of the image that, in his terms, dreams him.

This points in a symptomatic way – if a tantrum can be called a

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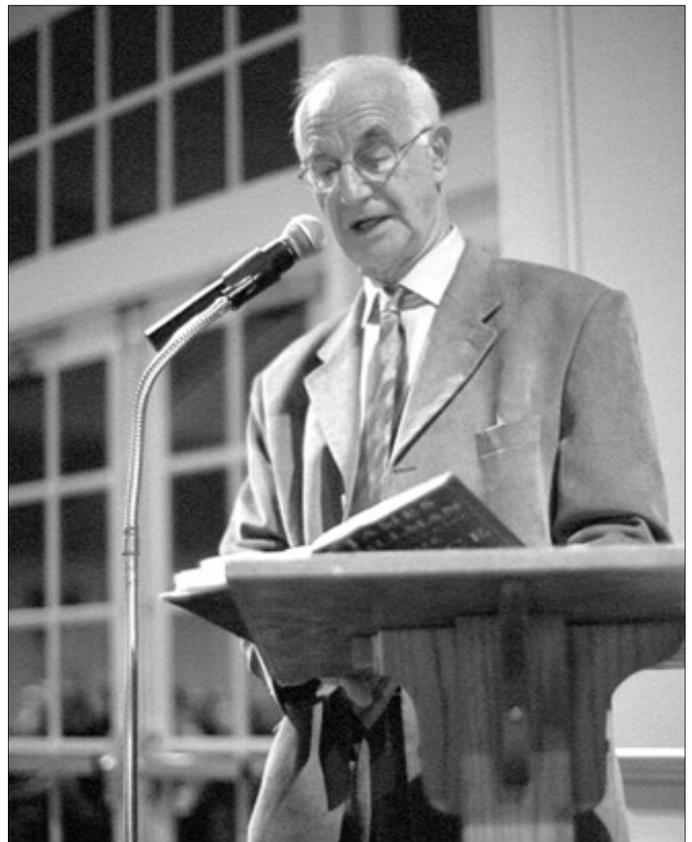
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symptom -- to the underlying problem of archetypal psychology, in my view. By taking its own metaphors too literally -- by "literalizing the process of deliteralizing," to use Catherine Keller's critical phrase -- it often sabotages itself.

Before I explain that more fully, let me first outline in very simplified terms some of the reasons I revere Hillman's thinking, which basically amount to the important ways he departed from Jung. The primary one is his rejection of monotheism. Jung, of course, was heavily influenced by Christianity, and his psychology imagines the human evolving in a Christ-like way to what he calls the individuated Self, a kind of umbrella archetype under which our warring interior drives can be brought into dialogue and resolution. Thus the Jungian holds any pair of opposites in tension for the sake of constellating a third possibility. Jung is always pushing us to wholeness and integration – the "oneness" to which monotheism inevitably aspires.

Hillman instead draws his inspiration from the Greeks and advocates a polytheistic psychology. He effectively abandons the idea that we have a central Self. Instead, he argues, the psyche is inevitably plural – comprised of different beings, personified as the gods in the ancient pantheon. He doesn't purchase the idea that monotheism (or individuation) represents an evolutionary improvement over polytheism (or psychic plurality).

In destabilizing the Self, Hillman is thoroughly postmodern and of course accused of nihilism. What kind of life can we have without imagining ourselves as whole, evolving beings with access to universal truths if only we devote ourselves to



the task?

For Hillman the answer is in aesthetics. He insists that the soul, as producer of images, wants nothing more than beauty. Hillman's beauty is not "pretty" but that which arrests our attention. This follows because, he says, the fundamental quality of images is their movement. We are in the presence of beauty when our attention is stopped. Beauty is awe.

For Hillman it is enough to continually deepen one's sense of life's beauty. This is soulmaking. We should not confuse the soul with the Self. The soul seeks and expresses difference. It delights in multiplicity. It confers meaning by processing images and, most important, it is not "inside" us. It is an "other." It is with us. It is connected to the soul of the world, but it is most definitely not "us." In Hillman's world, we live as poets, not as Christs-in-training.

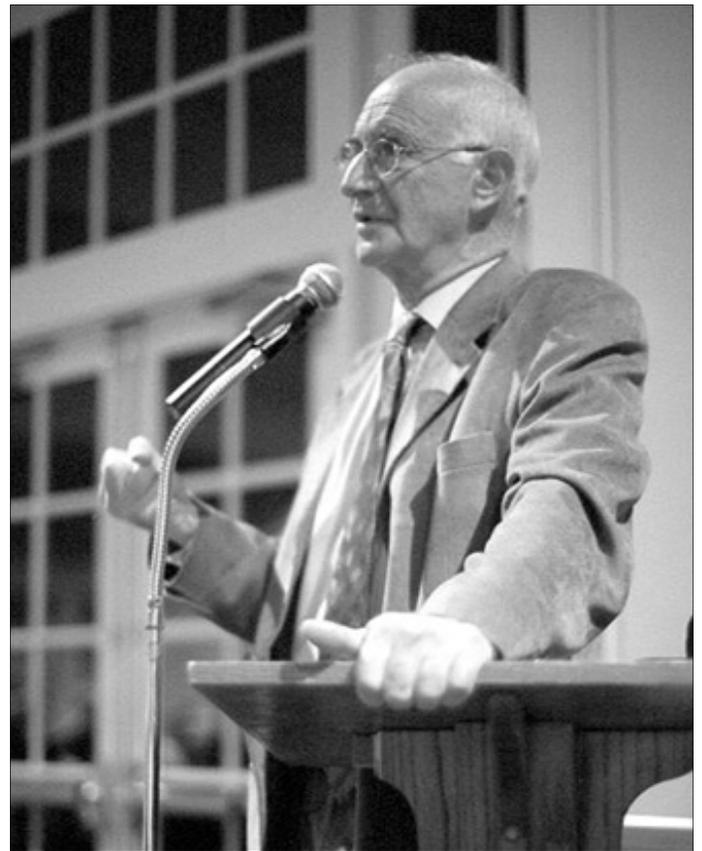
I find this approach to psychology deeply satisfying. Archetypal psychology recognizes the thirst for "wholeness" as legitimate but refuses to valorize it above all others. In archetypal psychology, every unpleasant experience does not become another battle. Every time Aphrodite causes us to throw our brains out the window or Hermes seizes our tongue and makes contrarians of us, we don't have to pathologize ourselves as split-off. We can instead, like Lester in the film [American Beauty](#), look on the spectacle of our naturally fractured lives with awe and compassion. We learn, in Hillman's terms to "see through" but not transcend.

This approach certainly isn't for everyone. It disrespects bliss and it is haunted by structural contradictions that can't be dismissed as interesting paradoxes. The most obvious is that while Hillman abandons metanarratives of wholeness, he seems to fully purchase others, like the world soul. Still, in the way he calls himself a bricoleur, I am happy to align myself with Hillman's notion of the soul as a process by which life gains beauty in difference rather than with the more traditional Jungian notion of the Self as an integrative process of wholeness.

But Hillman does break down in some significant ways. I began to realize this when my doctoral dissertation led me to questions of gender and sexual orientation – two discourses that have not been well examined by Jungian or post-Jungian thinkers. (An exception is Andrew Samuels.) In fact, Hillman has repeatedly refused to discuss gender for precisely the same reasons the postmodern discourses have felt it necessary.

"I follow old Alfred Adler in considering all oppositional thinking to be a neurotic mental activity," he writes in the *Utne Reader*. "The male-female opposition was for him the most basic of the polar pairs, and hence the most neurotic. Gender is a class concept, dividing the populace of the world into some three billion folks amassed on either side of a barbed conceptual fence."

This is superficially an agreeable position from my perspective. (For one thing it points to another departure from Jung,



since it ultimately disputes the necessarily contrasexual nature of the anima.) However, even Derrida, whose deconstructionist position is identical to Hillman's in this context, recognizes the necessity of engaging opposites in not merely a dialogue, as Jung would, but in a discursive reversal of value, so that, in this case, female would be privileged above male. Interestingly, early in his career, Hillman did exactly that, often writing that psychology needs to "recover" from masculinity and install the feminine.

In a sense that's what Hillman did by placing "anima mundi," soul of the world, as a feminine principle at the center of his psychology. However, and here I get to the point with which I opened this essay, this principle becomes a densely concrete metaphor of feminine consciousness that borders on the New Age. In an essay in [Post-Jungians Today](#), David Tacey compares Hillman's situation to Jung's description (in [Symbols of Transformation](#)) of a particular mother complex dominated by the "virgin anima...turned toward the inner sun."

The interesting result of this is most evident in Hillman's own life. While disputing the need to even discuss gender and installing his own mother complex at the center of his psychology, he became deeply involved with Robert Bly's "men's movement" during the last decade. That movement, guided by images of "Iron John," explicitly enjoins men to reclaim what it has supposedly lost to women – to feminism and the cult of the mother. I don't need to explain what underlies the bizarre reification of stereotyped genders by the same man who says gender is irrelevant. We have Hillman's own words in [The Myth of Analysis](#), cited by Tacey: "Assertive masculinity is

suspicious. Somewhere we know that it must be reactive to feminine attachment.”

This habit of concretizing, literalizing his own metaphors, like “soul of the world,” sabotages much of Hillman’s work. In the same way he concretizes his personal image and ends up in a tantrum of possessiveness, he literalizes the soul of the world as a nostalgic virgin mother and, overcome by his own attachment, he concretizes the male as a tantrum-throwing Iron John. The same thing occurs in his reading of the Persephone myth, where he utterly refuses to see the abduction of Demeter’s daughter as in part a comment on women’s condition in a patriarchal society. Instead, he literalizes it as his own metaphor of soulmaking, at the cost of acknowledging women’s real-world suffering. In other words, he identifies with Hades and perpetuates the very masculine domination of psychology he recanted earlier.

Where does this leave an admirer of Hillman’s psychology? The temptation is to say that his radical, self-contradictory split is exactly the result of not holding the opposites with more conscious intention. Thus one could, like Tacey, prescribe a return to Jung. But I’m not so sure. Jung, as every Jungian knows, suffered similarly.

But how to adopt polytheism and turn from the notion of the organizing, monotheistic Self without becoming overwhelmed by the voices within? I think archetypal psychology needs to attempt a more conscious rapprochement with feminist and other postmodern discourses. In my own work, I insist that whatever is present be reversed, in a kind of therapeutics based on Derrida’s notion of play. This subtraction and exchange of value is not unlike some varieties of Buddhism, whose object is “nothingness,” which is not nihilistic but sublime. In this way, we might say that Hermes or Dionysos consciousness becomes our guide, rather than the Self. I believe, really, this is what Hillman intends but, for all manner of reasons, including his attachment to Platonic thinking, he can’t quite bear to maintain. That is left for the next generation of archetypal psychologists ■