



**Dwelling Imaginally in Soulless Times,  
An Appreciation of the Work of James Hillman**

**Sylvester Wojtkowski, PhD**

“...put it my way, what we are *really*, and the reality we live, is our psychic reality, which is *nothing but*...the poetic imagination going on day and night.”

James Hillman, *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World Is Getting Worse*, p. 62

*Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
Such shaping fantasies that apprehend,  
More than cool reason ever comprehends.  
The lunatic, the lover and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact:  
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold,  
That is, the madman: the lover, all as frantic,  
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt;  
The poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
Turns them into shapes, and gives the airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.*

William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act V, Scene 1.

With the departure of James Hillman we have lost the physical presence of the most poetic of psychologists, a lover of the imagination, both an iconophile and an iconoclast, an ebullient lunar thinker who with martial zest gave many invisibles of the soul a local habitation and a name in our rational, destitute

times. While nothing will replace his living presence--a loss we grieve deeply--the imaginal Hillman will accompany us as long as with “quiet attention and emotional participation” we polish words of his opus. As he moves, slowly (*festina lente*, to hurry slowly, was his favorite Renaissance speed), into the realm of the ancestors, I hope (one of the words that he despised the most, as too Christian and too optimistic) that he will forgive me (his thoughts on betrayal notwithstanding), for evoking him as an authorial spirit. (An “author,” as a designation, was too egoic for him; he believed that what we speak is soul’s self-expression.) Yet I wish for him as a guide in my attempt to give a modest appraisal of his ideas.

When I first discovered Hillman’s writings, in the initial year of my psychological training (not through academic teaching, but guided by library angels at the NYU Library), his psycho-poetic imagination blew my mind and re-opened my appreciation of Jung. Given the revolutionary impact his ideas had on me, ideas that formed me as a psychologist and Jungian analyst, I lack the critical distance to offer a balanced overview of his work. I imagine that James would not mind, as he loved extremes and biases of all kinds. So what follows will be an appreciation of some of his ideas and images that I have found profoundly inspirational for psychological, cultural and political understanding of life, and nourishing for my soul. Here I will stay close to his images, both to preserve some of his poetic thoughts and to be true to the basic tenet of archetypal psychology (as he called his approach)—*Stick to the image*.

From the beginning Hillman, has consciously made “soul”--an outdated

word--a central term in his psychological language and a governing idea of his psycho-logical thinking:

...by “soul” I mean the imaginative possibility in our natures, the experiencing through reflective speculation, dream, image and *fantasy*—that mode which recognizes all realities as primarily symbolic or metaphorical,...that unknown component, which makes meaning possible, turns events into experiences, is communicated in love, has religious concern [deriving from its special relation with death] (*Re-Visioning Psychology*, p. xvi).

In *Suicide and the Soul* (1964) Hillman explored this special relationship between soul and death in challenging and profound ways. Already in 1964, he manifested his unique critical style and radical fearless thinking. Even now, almost fifty years later, we can appreciate how deep and fundamental his analysis of suicide is. He sees death as a permanent resident of the psyche, and Thanatos as a mode of soul-making: “The death experience brings down the old order and in so far as analysis is a prolonged ‘nervous breakdown’ (synthesizing too, as it goes along), *analysis means dying*” (ibid., p. 68). In the analysis of the suicidal patient he advises valuing soul over life: “loss of soul, not loss of life, should be [the analyst’s] main dread” (ibid., p. 83). By being in-between, both experiencing and observing, the analyst is in unique position regarding suicide: “he is able to understand a suicide better than the one who commits it” (ibid., p. 53). Hillman advocates the development of a conscious philosophy of death, demonstrates that death and life are not psychological opposites and argues that “...*any act which holds off death prevents life*” (ibid., p. 61). He believes that suicide is natural, as

“a possibility of our nature, a choice open to each human psyche” (ibid., p. 63). The analyst’s task is to help the person to understand such a choice, which may be essential to his individuality, rather than to prevent it. He considers suicide an “attempt to move from one realm to another by force, through death” (ibid., p. 68). Therefore, suicidal fantasies aim at detaching the ego from the usual view of things and direct it towards facing the reality of the soul. To be true to the soul, the analyst has to follow the desire to die. The analyst needs to enter analytical despair: “to hope for nothing, to expect nothing, to demand nothing” (ibid, p. 88). By entering through this Dante-esque gate of abandoning all hope, and accepting “the patient’s experience that there is nothing to be done,...he offers nothing but the experience itself” (ibid., p. 89). Maintaining this attitude is extremely difficult, yet if the analyst stays true to the hopelessness and analytical despair he accompanies the patient in the experience of death:

...the analyst now plays the true psychopompos... By preventing nowhere, the analyst is nevertheless doing the most that can be done to prevent actual death. By his having entered the other’s position fully, the other is no longer isolated (ibid., pp. 92-93).

Over the years, Hillman’s penetrating analysis of the soul has shifted from mirror to window, from internal *anima* to *anima mundi*, from the consulting room into the world, into a therapy of ideas that we use to see ourselves and the world. His caring for the soul led him to deconstruct our “sacred” therapeutic notions and develop a piercing critique of analytic insularity, as he put it, in a provocative title: *We’ve Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World*

*Is Getting Worse*. In 1992, he analyzed contemporary American culture and developed a notion of “*empty protest*” that offers profound insight into the current Occupy Wall Street movement. He starts with the Christian theological concept of *kenosis*, which in Greek means empty, void, fruitless. It refers to the Christ’s entering the world as a man, suffering human existence and death by emptying himself of his divinity. Hillman states:

*Kenosis* seems now the only political way to be—emptied out of certainty...*Kenosis* is a form of action—not masochistic action, victimized, crucified...[but] empty protest: I don’t know how to do the right thing. I don’t even know what’s right. I have no answer. But I sure smell something wrong with the government...‘empty protest’ is a *via negativa*, a non-positivist way of entering political arena. You take your outrage seriously, but you don’t force yourself to have answers. Trust your nose. You know what stinks. Don’t try to replace the hopeless frustration you feel, the powerless victimization, by working out a rational answer. The answers will come, if they come, when they come, to you, to others, but do not fill in the emptiness of the protest with positive suggestions before their time. First, protest!...[An empty protest] doesn’t have an end goal...Empty protest is protest for the sake of the emotions that fuel it and is rooted not in the conscious fullness of improvement, but in the radical negativity...Not only will you be seen as stupid because empty, but you will be also alone,...So empty protest for me is really a *kenosis*--giving up both the vanity of being admired and the surety of a sound position, and doing it in public (ibid., pp. 103-107).

In each theme that he explored, from alchemical operations to political analyses, from psychic polytheism to fundamentalist monotheism, from masturbation to paranoia, Hillman paid close attention to the images that the

soul presents. Regarding the image, the only immediate but perpetually elusive element, a personified presence, intimately related to us, he wrote: “man was created as an image, in an image and by means of his images” (*Egalitarian Typologies versus the Perception of the Unique*, p.44). Hillman extended Jung's psychological insights into a phenomenology of the imagination. If Freud was a thinker of eros and Jung was a thinker of psyche, then Hillman was a thinker of images--an imaginologist--as Jungian analyst Michael Vannoy Adams called him. From Jung's approach to the dream: "To understand the dream's meaning I must *stick as close as possible to the dream images*" [emphasis mine] (CW 16, para. 320). Hillman extracts the principle: *sticking to the image*. He follows Jung's understanding of image as a primary phenomenon of psychic life, that “image is psyche,” (CW 13, para. 75) where image is taken “in the poetic sense, considering images to be the basic givens of psychic life, self-originating, inventive, spontaneous, complete, and organized in archetypal patterns...[they] are both raw materials and finished products of psyche” (*Re-Visioning Psychology*, p.xvii). Hillman has brought the Jungian symbolic process closer to the phenomenology of the soul as it emerges through images and as an image. [Archetypal psychology is] “a psychology of soul that is based in a psychology of image” (ibid.). Images are a *via regia* to the soul. Images are self-referential. They do not require validation by reference to external events; mythopoeic imagination is the only ground they need.

While Jung, as one of the founders of Western psychology, had to keep the concept of the psyche firmly within the bounds of science (as critical as he was of its positivistic limitations), Hillman freed psyche and image from extra-psychic

constraints and allowed them to take the central place in his psychological thinking. Jung was engaged in the task of discovering and constructing the archetypal architecture underlying human experience, seeing through the multiplicity of psychic images into the invisible archetypes, as impersonal structures and the source of the dynamics of the psyche. Hillman's love of the beauty of images led him to stay with the image, seeing even the archetypal architecture as an image, making the image itself the foundation of the soul.

The absolute primacy of image allows Hillman to shift Jung's emphasis from the archetype per se to the archetypal image. While he acknowledges that archetypes are the deepest patterns of psychic functioning, we can experience only images arranging themselves in these archetypal patterns, which we imagine as underlying universal principles, or envision in personified forms as gods. They are the invisibles that forever defy our definition and can only be imagined as metaphors. They have emotional power to possess us and govern consciousness invisibly, offering us a coherent way of perceiving, experiencing and imagining. By qualifying the image with the adjective "archetypal," Hillman does not want to privilege certain images as more central to the archetype, but to emphasize their importance, their value:

As all images can gain this archetypal sense, so all psychology can be archetypal when it is released from its surface and seen through to its hidden volumes... Archetypal adds the further implication of basic root structure, generally human, a necessary universal with consequents. ("Inquiry into the Image," *Spring* 1977, p. 83-4).

Jung had already realized that images have a quality of consciousness and

thus denied an ego monopoly on consciousness. Following this move, Hillman imagines images as souls that we need to befriend, or as animals that we need carefully to observe, to understand their behavior and ecology. However, to fully engage the image we need to love it: “we cannot get to the soul of the image without love for the image” (“Inquiry into the image,” *Spring 1977*, p. 82). In this engagement, image personifies itself and reveals itself as a psychic subject living in the inscape of personified images, which constitute the basic structure of the psyche, “a polycentric realm of nonverbal, nonspatial images” (*Re-Visioning Psychology*, p. 33). In essence we are images too, so to really perceive the other “we must look into his imagination and see what fantasy is creating his reality” (*Egalitarian Typologies versus the Perception of the Unique*, p. 44).

This image-based psychology brought Jungian psychology back to the aliveness and intensity of the Jung of *The Red Book* and made it possible to see through reified psychoanalytic concepts like ego, shadow, complex or self and rediscover their imaginal roots. It is as if under Hillman's poetic glance, image grew down into itself, into itself as psyche, and assumed center stage in psychology, as logos of the soul. Hillman had read Jung archetypally, thought through Jung's ideas imaginally and through *epistrophe* brought them back to their origins in images. After his “confrontation with the unconscious” Jung spent the rest of his professional life carving out the petrified lava that had erupted during his *Red Book* years, and conceptualizing and articulating a psychological method and theoretical system that would be acceptable to the scientific establishment. With Martian heat Hillman liquefied this conceptual rock and released the primordial wildness, aliveness and intensity of images,

freeing the butterflies of the soul.

Focus on the primacy of the personified, alive image brought Hillman closer to the appreciation of poetry and arts and led him to critique the language of psychology that had become the language of abstract scientific concepts alienated from the soul: “the language of the imaginal realm is nearer to the language of the arts than it is to the language of concepts” (*The Myth of Analysis*, p. 180). Psychological language that moves the soul needs to be rooted in poetic metaphors, which are psyche’s native tongue. Although Jung had already seen the importance of metaphors in psyche (“Every interpretation necessarily remains an ‘as-if’” CW 9i, para. 265, and “[A]rchetypal content expresses itself in metaphors” CW 9i, para. 267), it was James Hillman who would establish metaphor as a language of the soul:

The comprehensive metaphor, answering our requirements for intellectual puzzlement and explanation through enigma by providing as-if fictions in depth, complexity and exquisite differentiations, is myth” (*Re-Visioning Psychology*, p. 153).

He believes that “...every statement regarding the archetypes is to be taken metaphorically, prefixed with an ‘as-if’” (ibid., p.156). Hillman sees metaphor as an “as-if fiction,” both a form of being and a style of consciousness, a way for the psyche to see through itself. The metaphor itself is a myth in brief, an expression of creative mythopoesis.

Archetypal psychology sees “mythology [as] psychology of antiquity” and “psychology [as] a mythology of modernity.” Hillman calls this a fundamental tenet that allows us to see through “every psychological position as a fantasy....”

This view deliteralizes our theoretical psychological statements about psyche and sees them as metaphors (*The Dream and the Underworld*, p.23f.). It challenges the positivistic bias of psychology and opens our perceptions towards the depths of the soul: "...mythical images offer depth and background, a psychic dimension that rather voids a positive statement than confirms it. The support they might contribute to any positive reality is its background in fantasy" (ibid., p. 106). As Jung said, psyche produces new reality every day, which we call 'fantasy.'

Hillman's phenomenological analysis of the contemporary experience of fantasy brought back notions of the soul, spirit, and *memoria*, long absent from psychological discourse.

What we hold close in our imaginal world are not just images and ideas but living bits of soul; when they are spoken, a bit of soul is carried with them. When we tell our tales, we give away our souls. The shame we feel is less about the content of the fantasy than it is that there is fantasy at all, because the revelation of imagination is the revelation of the uncontrollable, spontaneous spirit, an immortal, divine part of the soul, the *Memoria Dei*. Thus, the shame we feel refers to a sacrilege: the revelation of fantasies expose the divine, which implies that *our fantasies are alien because they are not ours*" (*The Myth of Analysis*, p. 182).

Soul expresses itself in images, and constitutes an archetypal way of seeing itself and the world. Any perspective that we can have on the soul is its own self-expression as well. We are not observers from afar, as if seeing soul from outside, but always participants subjected to and suffering her images. When we think

that we see our troubles from outside, objectively, we have just shifted from one explanatory system into another and that new perspective is equally fantastic, i.e. negative, purely of psychic substance; for instance, when we see depressive phenomena from Demeter's position, or Peresphone's, or Hekate's, or Hades', or Saturn's or the ego's or DSM-V's (whichever invisible entity has financed it.) It is a world of radical or logical negativity, a world of which dreams are made and also the ailments of our souls.

Thus, for Hillman, "psychological sickness is an enactment of pathologizing fantasy" (*Re-Visioning Psychology*, p. 99). To examine pathologizing, Hillman uses *epistrophe*, or reversion, a method inspired by Plotinus that traces fantasies back to their archetypal origins: "Only in mythology does pathology receive an adequate mirror since myths speak with the same distorted, fantastic language" (ibid., p.99). Thus "pathologizing is a way of mythologizing," where soul is reminded of its mythical existence, to the distress of our egos, which tend to take myths literally:

Mythical metaphors are perspectives toward events which shift the experience of events. They are likenesses to happenings, making them intelligible, but they do not themselves happen... *We* are those stories, and we illustrate them with our lives (*Re-visioning Psychology*, pp. 101-2).

Over the years, James Hillman has taken his reflection on myth and psyche ever deeper, tracing not only the mythical underpinnings of our fantasies [*Abandoning the Child, Bad Mother, Betrayal, Going Bugs, Abnormal Psychology, Incest Dream, Pan and the Nightmare, Myth of the Family*], but

also of our systems of ideas, moralities and styles of consciousness. His critique has been particularly devastating to the primacy and identity of ego and consciousness. Inspired by the Renaissance psychology of Marsilio Ficino and Giambattista Vico he deconstructed the monotheism of consciousness into 'basic styles of consciousness,' discerning their archetypal architecture, and identifying their archetypal creators. Here, Hillman's imaginal feat of reflection is particularly distinguished; his psychologizing, or seeing through, penetrated to the mind's eye, discovering its transparent contact lenses:

Our notion of consciousness may derive from the light and form of Apollo, the will and intention of Hercules, the ordering unity of [Saturn], communal flow of Dionysus (*Re-Visioning Psychology*, p. 103).

Ego can identify with any of these patterns and see other archetypal styles as psychopathological. When we are governed by the Herculean lens, we experience, see and reflect in a manner consistent with our ego, we are all ego, all conquerors of the id. Herculean-ego identification with will power creates a singular monotheistic consciousness that takes other fantasies literally, sees them as monstrous and wants to assert its dominance by destroying them.

As Jungians we are indebted to James Hillman for analyzing and re-visioning the ego identity complex. His further reflection on the ego-dominance and its afflictions by other complexes (imagined as dwellings of other Gods) allowed for the revision of our identifications with the values of the ego world and for opening to the values of the soul:

The wound and the eye are one and the same. From the psyche's viewpoint, pathology and insight are not opposites....

Pathologizing is itself a way of seeing... Without psychopathology there is no wholeness; in fact, psychopathology is a differentiation of that wholeness (*Re-Visioning Psychology*, p. 107f.).

This radical description of wholeness is both true to Jung and prevents the common confusion of wholeness with perfection. The process of engaging our afflicted soul--individuation in Jung's terms--is soul-making in Hillman's terms. Hillman was acutely aware of the limitations of consciousness. He saw the contemporary ego as a delusional system and wanted archetypal psychology to explore

...the parts [of the psyche] into which we fall, releasing the Gods in the complexes, bringing home the realization that all our knowing is in part only, because we know only through the archetypal parts playing in us, now in this complex and myth, now in that; our life a dream, our complexes our *daimones* (ibid. p. 110).

His radical seeing-through of often-reified Jungian concepts has stirred up a lot of controversies in the Jungian world, such as the response to his description of individuation as a psychic fantasy, as one of many ways of seeing psychic life:

The process of individuation is an archetypal fantasy, it is of course ubiquitous and can be 'demonstrated' in texts and cases, just as any archetypal fantasy has its manifestation in historical events... But this process is not an axiomatic law of the psyche, the one purpose or goal of ensouled beings. To assert this even as a hypothesis or to establish it with instances is to desert psychologizing for metaphysics. It is to literalize and systematize one psychological idea, forgetting that *individuation is a perspective*. It is an ideational tool; we do not see individuation, but by means of it (*Re-Visioning Psychology*, p.147).

Further, in *Healing Fiction*, Hillman considers self-understanding an imaginative act in which “each image is its own beginning, its own end, healed by and in itself...” (*Healing Fiction*, p.80).

Hillman advocated that in order to be able to relate to “our fantasies” as autonomous subjects we need to develop an imaginal ego, an ego that behaves imaginatively. This is an ego that Jung acquired through his own *Auseinandersetzung* depicted in *The Red Book*. The imaginal ego is permeable to the soul, it can move from light to darkness, it can circulate through regressive and depressive twists and turns of libido:

[Such] repeated remembrance of things past leads to the memorial core of these remembrances, their archetypal meaning and necessity, and to the scintilla of insight at that core. The vicious circle is also the *iteratio* of alchemy and the way of becoming who one is (*The Myth of Analysis*, p. 186).

*...and so on...as Hillman developed so many other great notions that take the soul out of the consulting room into the world, into the vale of soul making...*

But, who was James Hillman, the pen behind these profound ideas that have changed our relationship to soul and will keep influencing soul-making for the future?:

The question of authorship cannot be answered except by imaging psychology as a religion...and the book, like a totem object, a fetish statue kept alive by its readers, who, by picking it up and turning its pages with quiet attention and emotional participation, polish the statue called a “book.” Like that statue, a book gives physical form to invisible presences, gives to the angels in words a local habitation and a name. May both the readers and the angels be

pleased and linger a while longer (*Re-Visioning Psychology*, 1992 edition, p. xiv).

## Bibliography

Hillman, James. "An Inquiry into Image" in *Spring Publications*, 1977, Zürich.

Hillman, James. "Egalitarian Typologies Versus the Perception of the Unique" in *Eranos Lectures, 4*, 1980, Ascona.

Hillman, James. *Re-Visioning Psychology*. New York, 1975.

Hillman, James. *Suicide and the Soul*. Zürich, 1976.

Hillman, James. *The Dream and the Underworld*. New York, 1979.

Hillman, James. *The Myth of Analysis*. New York, 1972.

Hillman, James and Michael Ventura. *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy—And the World's Getting Worse*. New York, 1992.

Jung, C.G. *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*. Volume 9,i of *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. New York, 1959.

Jung, C.G. *Alchemical Studies*. Volume 13 of *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. New York, 1967.

Jung, C.G. *The Practice of Psychotherapy*. Volume 16 of *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. New York, 1954.