

**Why Hillman Matters**  
*By Lee Robbins*  
A tribute on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday  
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In the Spring of 1979 I completed a joint masters degree in psychiatry and religion at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary with Ann Ulanov. After graduation on a beautiful May afternoon in NYC, I made a final visit to the seminary bookstore to pick-up some summer reading. I cannot remember why but I was drawn to browse through *The Myth of Analysis*. I bought it and read it voraciously, especially the chapter “On Psychological Creativity”. Hillman’s exegesis of the Eros and Psyche myth was a revelation to me. The myth that parents depth psychology is not Oedipus, but Eros and Psyche. Hillman’s re-visioning of the origins of our field re-educated my understanding of love in all aspects of my life. Love does not have to be blind, compulsive or tragic as with Oedipus. Rather, the story understands Psyche’s suffering as a necessary initiation, leading to a change in the structures of consciousness and a psychological discipline of eros development. The aim of psychological life—all life, is to bring love to psyche and psyche into all the movements of love. Were I to have stopped here and read no further, this learning alone would justify why Hillman matters.

Several years later I found my way to Thompson, Ct. and after a handful of turbulent sessions with Hillman and his then cat Picasso, I conceived a dissertation topic for the doctorate degree I was about to embark on. Some years later, having immersed myself in his work I turned out a piece called “The Childhood of the Underworld Gods: towards a poetics of the archetypal child in the soul” for which I was awarded the PhD degree in Archetypal Psychology.

### **Shattering of Belated Vessels**

These words from literary critic Harold Bloom help me to explain why Hillman's work is important: "There is no reading worthy of being communicated to another unless it deviates to break form, twists the lines to form a shelter, and so makes meaning through the shattering of belated vessels".<sup>1</sup>

Hillman the iconoclast shattered the belated vessel of psychoanalytic theory as he emptied and deconstructed the field of first principles or god terms in which it had become entrenched and that were too small for the psyche's breadth and depth. These terms include concepts we are all familiar with: ego, child, mother, health and development. Moreover, Hillman deviated from the dogma that psyche is stunted or fixated by parental failure suffered in infancy and childhood. He moved the psyche back to her original home in the timeless world of the archetype where life flows uninterrupted through the immediate present into time before birth and after death. He located the origin of human suffering in the transpersonal realm and with this move; the whole historically determined causal network collapsed.

I would like to briefly review four basic themes of archetypal psychology in which our human experience finds shelter and renewed meaning as a result of shattering the belated vessel of psychoanalytic theory. These themes are soul, pathologizing, language and beauty.

#### **Soul**

The first vessel that broke was the privileging of the western ego and in its place Hillman gave us soul, a word with an ancient and dignified heritage going all the way

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<sup>1</sup> Bloom, p. 22

back to Heraclitus. Let us recall the nature of soul. It is **not** a substance; rather it is a perspective, a way of seeing with depth. What is really seen with the deep vision of soul? We see the underworld of the image, as it is displayed in the myriad appearances of the phenomenal world. Thus, to view life through the lens of the image means to see with a perspective that darkens for soul “sees through all things non-substantially...to the forms of things unknown”.<sup>2</sup>

Another important quality of soul is that it is a symbol, not a concept. It is deliberately ambiguous and resists all definitions in the same way, as do all ultimate symbols. Soul as symbol occupies a middle ground of experience, an idea which we have returned to so many times throughout this gathering. Hillman is clear: the nature of soul is formed out of the gap, the empty space between spirit and flesh and so its nature is to be open, a window into the unknown, another synonym for depth.

Soul then is the center or perhaps we may even say the sun of Hillman’s psychological universe and around it all the other related themes of his work orbit. But, if I use the metaphor of the sun to describe soul, I must qualify exactly what kind of sun this is. Soul is a sun that gives off a dark burning light. It kills: “bringing about the death of naïve realism, materialism and literal understanding”.<sup>3</sup> The relation of soul to death—a theme running all the way through archetypal psychology—is thus a function of psyche’s metaphorical activity.

### **Pathologizing**

Hillman presents soul’s immediate affinity to death in the idea of pathologizing. He is certain that soul may indeed live without its therapists but it cannot live without its

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<sup>2</sup> Hillman (1983) p. 21

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

afflictions or its infirmity. Pathologizing is the name Hillman gives to soul's autonomous ability to create illness and experience life through a deformed perspective. It is not an accident and it is not chosen. It is necessary to the nature of soul and is fundamental to the bi-polar nature of each archetypal pattern. All human symptoms, both physical and mental, become an opening into and revelation of the infirmity of a particular transpersonal pattern, so that each life with its array of symptoms has a particular way of leading into death.

Pathologizing is also a hermeneutical style. It is a way of knowing and understanding psyche that grows out of the symptoms intimate relationship with archetypal infirmity. With this kind of knowledge awareness of limitation, decay, finitude and life's destiny in death as Freud would say, inform every earthly event, as values sacred to ego like health and growth are balanced and even fade in importance.

If we cannot get rid of symptoms because they are necessary, then a way must be found to live with them. So, a cure is sought for soul's wounding activity by returning the symptom to its likeness in the imaginal world which Hillman calls "epistrophe"—a term he takes from Henri Corbin. He identifies the imaginal background for pathologizing in Jung's alchemy, Freud's Oedipus, and myths of underworld together with their gods who provide an eros connection to the human condition. When symptom finds image, or the mythic is discovered in the pathic, the human condition is elevated to and dignified in the world of the gods. This is what I attempted to do in my own work—return the infirmitas in the child archetype—out of which the whole field arose, to the godlings of the underworld to whom the psychoanalytic child originally belongs: Oedipus, Dionysos, Brimos, Persephone, the children of night including, Eros and Thanatos who are brothers.

**Language**

Soul does not want to remain silent about its pathologizing and its felicity with death. Speech arises out of the human emotions that belong to the soul's necessary suffering, and these emotions are contained and find a home in the images that hold them. With the marriage of emotion to image Hillman has shattered the language of psychopathology with its diagnostic categories ruled by the head, and in its place he has given us a speech of the soul which comes right out of the logos of the heart and has come to be known as the "poetic basis of mind".

**Beauty**

I there is "a poem at the heart of all things", then Psyche's labors must be beautiful because they are imaginal. All of her afflictions flow into a pastiche of metaphors strung together by the trails she endures to find love. Thus, the tale with which I began this homage to Hillman ends by stating so clearly that the ultimate beauty of Psyche comes from the knowledge of death that is revealed to her as she opens Persephone's beauty box in the underworld. Eros is lured to psyche because she knows and personifies death—confirming a primary theme in Hillman's opus that love is to be found in the images that bear the more unhappy areas of the soul's life.

**End**

I haven't remained faithful to Hillman. I have gone East to the Buddha, his Noble Truths and the Discourses of the Pali Canon, in much the same way Jung did to explore yet another hermeneutical style for understanding the psyche's unknowable depths and working with the complexity of the mind: its shameless penchant to deceive itself and so create suffering and its extraordinary capacity for awareness, kindness and generosity.

But I have discovered in writing this tribute a correspondence between two of the basic archai that govern archetypal psychology and Buddhist theory. I refer to **pathologizing** and its proximity to Buddha's first truth: namely, that suffering is inherent to the human condition—we might say archetypal and necessary. And the radical **relativization of the ego** that bears a strong resemblance to the second truth: that our distress is caused by ego's greed for more and more experience.

In *Archetypal Psychology: A Brief Account* Hillman himself writes: “archetypal psychology is nothing less than a parallel formulation of certain Eastern philosophies. Like them, it too dissolves ego, ontology, substantiality...and literalisms of self...the entire conceptual apparatus which northern psychology constructs from the heroic ego and in its defense—into the psychic reality of imagination experienced in immediacy”.<sup>4</sup>

Hillman matters because the aesthetic dimension of the work embraces the central multicultural core of the human condition. He touches us where we live and love and fail to love, where we are fragile and sometimes hopeless, but then like the Phoenix rise up again out of the ashes of our own necessity.

### Sources

Bloom, Harold (1986) *Deconstruction and Criticism* New York: Continuum

Hillman, James (1983) *Archetypal Psychology- A Brief Account* Dallas: Spring

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*p. 31-32