

## Knight Errant

A tribute to James Hillman (1926-2011)

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In an interview at the end of the nineteen nineties, James Hillman, who died on 27 October 2011, said, speaking of his book *The Soul Code*: “My book is about a third view. It says, yes, there's genetics. Yes, there are chromosomes. Yes, there's biology. Yes, there are environment, sociology, parenting, economics, class, and all of that. But there is something else, as well”<sup>1</sup>. That something else he defined, defiantly, unfashionably, single-mindedly as ‘soul’. Crucially for Hillman, we are inside soul rather than soul being inside us. ‘Soul’ decentres the ego; it also decentres the human within the world. For ‘soul’ it’s not the individual soul some religions talk about, but a collective soul, the soul of the world, or *anima mundi*.

Presenting, as he did, a ‘third way’ in psychology meant being inevitably misconstrued by both ‘materialist’ and ‘spiritualist’ factions: the former all too easily dismissed Hillman as bordering on ‘new age’ esotericism, whilst the latter understood his definition of soul too literally, for ‘soul’ in Hillman – a connoisseur of languages, including ancient languages - is a painstakingly accurate translation of ‘psyche’. Hillman was inspired by the definition given of it by one of his favourite thinkers, Heraclitus, who famously said: “You could not discover the limits of soul, even if you travelled every road to do so; such is the depth of its meaning”. The astonishing thing about Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher of 500 BC, whom Hillman saw in his most important work, *Re-visioning Psychology*, as the first psychologist<sup>2</sup>, is that his fragments show no trace whatsoever of Platonic (and later Cartesian) division between mind and matter, soul and body.

Hillman’s roots were firmly in Jungian analytic psychology, and later developments in his thinking led to the creation of *Archetypal Psychology*, a ‘third generation’ derivative of the Jungian school in which Jung is the source but not the doctrine<sup>3</sup> – an orientation that not only took on board changes occurring in society at large – feminism and pluralism among them – but also moved away from a Platonic understanding of archetypes, astonishingly

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stating that *archetypes are always phenomenal*, belonging to the ordinary world rather than some 'spiritual realm'<sup>4</sup>.

His emphasis was on 'soul' – ineffable, often expressed through art and indeed symptoms -- rather than on hierarchic, divisive and dualistic notion of 'spirit' and the 'spiritual'. Hillman's thought is too mercurial, too profound to be easily categorized. His philosophy is the philosophy of the *Knight Errant*, who does not belong to any church and has no credo or dogma to defend, who is allied to the god Hermes (Mercury) and under the spell of mercurial power.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1980s, Hillman and two friends, the poet Robert Bly and the writer and storyteller Michael J. Meade, started facilitating workshops and gatherings of men using poetry and story-telling – which struck a chord with many of us who felt displaced and misrepresented by the media indoctrination of what it means to be male.

At the heart of Hillman's polemic was the medicalization of psychology and psychotherapy. In the same interview quoted above he said: "When the medical becomes *scientific*; when it becomes analytical, diagnostic, statistical, and remedial; when it comes under the influence of pharmacology— limiting patients to six conversations and those kinds of things — then we've lost the art altogether, and we're just doing business: industrial, corporate business"(1).

Equally shrewd was his critique of existentialist thinkers who for better or for worse influenced psychotherapy (the convoluted and tyrannical mixture of capitalized abstractions and abject concreteness in Heidegger, the myth of the heroic individual in Sartre). Equally fierce and articulate his appraisal of humanistic psychology, in curbing the buoyancy and exaggerated expectations of ego- driven 'self- actualization', although I do believe that humanistic practitioners can greatly benefit from reading Hillman.

Above all the greatest emphasis in Hillman's psychology seemed to be on the *plural* nature of the psyche – not in the sense of a bland pluralism but in the more profound, elemental sense of *polytheism*, i.e. the acceptance of many gods, or many perspectives within the psyche, even of those who are 'pathological'. If his mentor here remains Jung, the unspoken influence is certainly Nietzsche, a thinker who practically invented perspectivism and clarified the importance to deeply honour every aspect of the psyche.

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A gifted writer, a citizen of the cosmos, Hillman was a man who injected beauty and poetry into the therapeutic endeavour; he was an attentive listener of the collective subliminal, of what is *sub limine*, at the edge of awareness.

On a little table by Hillman's bedside, in the living room of his home with a large window overlooking a glorious New England autumn, there was an anthology of haiku poetry by Zen monks, one of which, written by Fukyu, read: *Kokochiyoshi aki no hiyori o shide no tabi: A bright and pleasant autumn day to make death's journey*<sup>6</sup>.

## References

1 London, S., On soul, character and calling: a conversation with James Hillman; 1998  
<http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/hillman.html>

2 Hillman, J. Re-visioning psychology. New York: Harper and Row; 1975

3 Goldenberg, N. Archetypal theory after Jung, in An annual of archetypal psychology and Jungian thought. New York Spring; 1975

4 Avens, R., Imagination is reality, New York: Spring; 1980

5 Bazzano, M. Buddha is dead: Nietzsche and the Dawn of European Zen. Brighton/Portland: Sussex Academic Press; 2006, pp. 7-8

6 Ronchey, S. Hillman Obituary Torino: La Stampa 28 october 2011

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