An Appreciation of James Hillman, 1926–2011†

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With the passing of James Hillman on 27 October 2011, at his home in Thompson, Connecticut, the field of depth psychology has lost one of its most controversial and creative figures of the last half century. Hillman was drawn to Jungian psychology in the early 1950s, but began to break away from 'mainstream' Jungian thinking by the early 1970s, initiating what he called 'archetypal psychology'.[1] He claimed that the Jungian world had become dogmatic and resistant to new ideas, and he wanted to experiment with the Jungian legacy, which for him meant championing creativity, philosophical enquiry and risk-taking. His school or movement attracted a great deal of interest from fans and critics alike, who watched closely as 'archetypal psychology' began to expand across North America, influencing fields as diverse as literary studies, the creative arts, phenomenology, ecological studies, urban planning, Neoplatonic studies, art history and psychotherapy.[2] What we found in early Hillman was a revival of the human spirit, and his goal was larger than psychology itself: he sought the restoration of imagination to a central place in experience and the restitution of poetry and vision to consciousness.[3]

I sometimes imagine that Hillman deliberately styled himself as a psychologist of the postmodern era. He emphasised and developed those features of Jung's psychology that chimed in with the postmodern condition: polytheism, plurality, the poetic basis of mind, imagination, subjectivity, criticism of science and medicine, the rise of the feminine, disillusionment with religious systems, and a mocking tone towards academic psychology. The aspect of Hillman's work that was *not* postmodern was his focus on archetypes and universals. Strict postmodernism would seek to 'deconstruct' these 'essences' and not treat them as absolutes. Hillman's stance, however, was that archetypes did not 'exist' in themselves, but were phenomena expressed mainly in image and metaphor. Hillman distanced himself from those features of Jung's psychology that were no longer fashionable: the search for unity, the Self as archetype of wholeness, individuation and mandalas, empirical 'proof' for the collective unconscious, the desire to rescue Christianity from itself, and fascination for 'primitive' cultures. Hillman threw all of this out, but to some extent he allowed these elements of Jung's work to stand for 'Jung', while he identified himself with those aspects of Jung's psychology that resonated with postmodern sensibility.

I don't think Hillman reconstructed the field merely to be fashionable, although he has been accused of doing this. The contemporary spirit suited his own; it was an inner experience imposed from within and not something arrived at for external or showy reasons. His spirit drew from the same sources that nourished the postmodern, and it may have something to do with Hermes, as I will explain. I am not sure how many of his ideas were original, and this needs scholarly exploration, but his highlighting of aspects of the Jungian opus based on postmodern sensibility was original. No one before Hillman had 're-visioned' Jung for a postmodern audience; in fact, other Jungians of his time seemed oblivious to the postmodern as a social reality. Analysts such as Marie-Louise von Franz, Edward Edinger and Barbara Hannah were still writing about the 'search for wholeness' as if this might grip the world, but Hillman had sensed that it only appealed to a few, and for the rest it was a turn-off. There was always something strongly contemporary about Hillman, which gave him a sense of being in step with the time and relevant to a world beyond the Jung institutes.

Non-Jungians could read and enjoy him, but increasingly Jungians found him objectionable, not only due to his revisionist habit but because his constant criticisms made him the *enfant terrible* of the Jungian

movement. Hillman wrote in a number of places that the *puer aeternus* was at the bottom of his style and approach,[4] and even as an older man he kept a certain youthful appearance and vitality. Some of the Jungian world seemed to act as *senex* to his *puer*, and this seems to me to account for the history of strife and tension. As recently as April 2010 he gave a public lecture series on *senex-et-puer*, and returned to this problem almost as an unhealed wound, as he thought his *puer* style was constantly misread as destructiveness. He attracted to himself a range of analysts and intellectuals who were more interested in breaking the law than in preserving it, and his archetypal psychology acquired a sense of being antagonistic to Jung. I think this was a mistaken impression, as all along he wanted to preserve the spirit of Jung and only challenge the letter of dogma. In his obituary to Hillman, Thomas Moore refers to his 'loyalty to Jung expressed through his original and fresh re-working of key ideas'.[5] I agree, but few, if any, characterise Hillman by such loyalty. They tend to see only the protest. However, Hillman's loyalty to Jung did not extend to Jungians, to whom he remained contrary.

Although he was an American, most of his sources, influences and references were European, in particular Swiss, German, Irish, Renaissance Italian and ancient Greek. He remained resistant to French influence, which seems hard to fathom, given that the French had invented postmodernity. In a number of places he refers to French postmodernism as too intellectual and abstract, and he wrote mockingly of the 'French disease' of linguistic analysis. There was much in French philosophy that might have interested and even guided Hillman if he had persevered. I am thinking in particular of Jacques Derrida, with whom Hillman has frequently been compared,[6] but who, apparently, he did not read. There we have the same interest in fragments, bits and pieces, inscribed subjectivity, the suspicion of master narratives, and yet, beneath all the deconstruction, a deeply Jewish desire to read all signs for the apparition of the sacred. Like Derrida, Hillman seemed to be both very and not very Jewish, by which I mean that his intellectual intensity and penetrating hermeneutical gaze were Jewish, but he did not identify with his tradition and was non-observant. I notice that most obituary writers are lost for words to describe his religious outlook. Some refer to him as mystical, others as spiritual or soulful. But James was not a new ager, and I would say that, like Derrida, he practised 'religion without religion'.[7]

Like some creative Americans before him, he turned away from the New World and back to the Old. His first port of call was Dublin, where he studied at Trinity College, and in 1953 he moved to the C.G. Jung Institute in Zurich. By 1959 he had become Director of Studies there, and engaged in battles, friendly and unfriendly, with leading analysts. He left Zurich in controversial circumstances, and returned to the States in search of a new life. He made a valiant attempt to influence academic culture, and in 1972 delivered a dazzling array of topics for the Terry Lectures at Yale, which were published as *Re-Visioning Psychology.*[8] But the desired impact on academia was not achieved. Hillman was too artistic to be taken seriously by the academic establishment. He said he was doing psychology, but psychologists felt his discourses on the gods were philosophy or theology; however, philosophers did not recognise themselves in his work either, apart from a school that might be called 'depth phenomenology', which harboured scholars willing to dialogue with him, including Robert Sardello and Robert Romanyshyn. It was in 'phenomenological psychology' that he was employed at the University of Dallas, but he tired of the constraints of academia and sought a new kind of freedom. With Donald and Louise Cowan, Gail Thomas and Patricia Berry, he set up the Dallas Institute for Humanities and Culture, which has led a lively and creative existence supporting the arts and urban planning. But Hillman never found an institutional solution to his life. He was not really an institutional man, as the puer aeternus struggles to break free as soon as it is put into an enclosure of any kind.

The influence of archetypal psychology spread from the United States to Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Japan, Korea, Australia and New Zealand. But two of the major centres of Jungian activity, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, seemed detached from the 'phenomenon' of James Hillman. Zurich remained unimpressed by its exiled son, as he seemed to be repackaging a modified form of classical Jungian psychology under a new name. The Society of Analytical Psychology in London was cautious and at times critical of Hillman. Other groups in London, such as the AJA and IGAP, were more open to Hillman's message, but it seemed to the SAP that Hillman was not supporting analytical psychology in its bid to become scientifically established. Hillman was, indeed, moving in the opposite direction: promoting Jungian thought as 'myth' and

discounting 'science', in accordance with postmodern taste, as just one 'perspective' on reality. It should be noted, however, that Hillman published six articles with the *Journal of Analytical Psychology* from 1962 to 1977, so the situation was not as dire as some have imagined. But the UK was generally more 'empirical' in its tastes, and comments about Hillman's work suggested that while he did offer food for the imagination, he was not offering sustenance to therapists in their daily encounters with clients. Hillman did not respond to criticisms that his work was impractical. He presented no case studies or clinical reports, and his work kept revolving around the mysteries of imagination. He wrote about anima and soul, but clinical reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic said there was no 'embodied' soul in his work.

In my country, Australia, the situation was different. Jungian psychology had never impacted on the intellectual life of Australia. Having missed the Jung wave, Australia found itself on a 'Hillman' wave, and surfed it across two decades. The wave has stopped, because his later work did not develop beyond a certain point, but reworked theories and interests that emerged in his most creative period, 1970–1982. But in the 1980s and 1990s, Hillman's work was taught in various departments in Australian universities, including philosophy, sociology, environmental studies, indigenous studies, and literary studies – seemingly everywhere except psychology. I watched these developments with interest, but was astonished to find that Hillman was represented as a lone genius, divorced from the Jungian context from which he had emerged.

I wonder if similar conditions prevailed in other countries such as Brazil, Argentina and Mexico. Jung had not impacted these countries in the early years of analytical psychology, and so it was as if the richness and profundity of 'Jung' had appeared for the first time, only it was called 'Hillman'. But it could have much to do with timing: the Jungian concern for wholeness seemed passé by the 1970s, and this made Hillman a stand-out performer, since he was strongly in touch with the *Zeitgeist*. Although many of Jung's features could be adapted to a postmodern world,[9] Jung did not present initially as conducive to contemporary taste, and was seen as a throwback to older times. Hillman was the right man at the right time, and able to serve up the Jungian meal in a non-Jungian format. But because he was so good at the art of 'making new', ideas which were central to Jung's opus, such as *anima mundi*, the underworld as metaphor for the unconscious, and psyche as a 'cosmos' which included the world, were viewed as inventions of Hillman's. These confusions happen when an extraordinary writer such as Hillman comes along, and reaches publics who know little about the history and development of depth psychology.

What remains truly remarkable about Hillman is his style and expression, the ease with which he communicates difficult ideas in fluent prose, the poetic flair in much that he wrote, the depth and resonance that made ancient ideas such as anima mundi come alive to a modern public eager to reanimate a natural world which is imperilled by overdevelopment and pollution. Hillman is possibly the first writer of psychology who made reading psychology an aesthetic experience. His style as a writer and at the lectern were mesmerising for many people, and the anima would frequently dance on his forehead, as it were, as he delivered alchemical or theoretical papers in such a way that people who had never read Freud or Jung could immediately grasp the meaning of the unconscious and its presence in our lives.

Hillman led a rich and varied life, with several incarnations along the way. He shifted from clinical, to academic and finally to popular culture, with his work *The Soul's Code* achieving bestseller status, and his contribution to popular gender discussions earning him the *New York Times* obituary headed, 'Therapist in men's movement dies at 85'.[10] Many in the fields of analytical and archetypal psychology would not know about his extensive work in popular forums, his leadership, together with Robert Bly, of the men's movement, and his contribution to the developing field of eco-psychology. Hillman liked to surprise his audiences, especially those who thought they had pinned him down. If he was categorised in one box, he would break out of the mould and do something utterly unpredictable. Hillman kept everyone guessing, and naturally he aroused a good deal of envious hostility due to his charismatic personality, versatility and many talents. The archetype that I associate with his career is Hermes: the creative trickster god who changes shape. Hillman had the 'charm of Hermes', as Bernie Neville wrote,[11] but if anyone expected him to stay the same, they would be sorely disappointed.

I began reading Hillman in the mid-1970s, and by the early 1980s I was living in Dallas in order to 'work' with him – in whatever direction that would take. I had originally asked him to be my academic supervisor, but

by the time I caught up with him he was disillusioned with academia. 'It has no soul', was the first thing he said to me. He suggested I enter analysis with him and instead of becoming his postdoctoral fellow, I became his patient. It was a good move, and one which enriched my life, although it put my academic career on hold and directed me toward the clinical. Hillman was a brilliant, attentive and careful analyst. Although he claimed to be post-Jungian, I found his techniques and methods to be classically Jungian. The 'post-Jungian' element appeared in his writings, but not in his practice. The last time I met Hillman was at the IAAP Congress in Montreal, August 2010. He seemed to be a luminous old man who was reconciled to himself and the world. His final words to me were about the tradition in which we worked. He said,

> You know, I never saw myself as moving against Jung, only in taking his work in a new direction. I was always part of the family tree, only I confined myself to a few of its branches: poetics of mind, imagination, alchemy. I did not like what some of the other branches were doing but that did not mean I wanted to lop myself from the tree, which is why I am here in Montreal.[12]

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Notes

1 James Hillman, 'Why "archetypal" psychology?', *Spring: An Annual of Archetypal Psychology and Jungian Thought*, 1970, pp. 212–19; reprinted in *Loose Ends: Primary Papers in Archetypal Psychology*,(Dallas: Spring Publications, 1978, pp. 138–45.

2 James Hillman, *Archetypal Psychology: A Brief Account*, Dallas: Spring Publications, 1983.

3 Noel Cobb, 'Who is behind archetypal psychology?', in his *Archetypal Imagination: Glimpses of the Gods in Life and Art*, New York: Lindisfarne Press, 1992, pp. 232–64.

4 James Hillman (ed.), *Puer Papers*, Dallas: Spring Publications, 1979.

5 Thomas Moore's obituary on Hillman can be found at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/thomas-moore/james-hillman-death_b_1067046.html

6 Michael Vannoy Adams, 'Deconstructive philosophy and imaginal psychology: comparative perspectives on Jacques Derrida and James Hillman', in Richard Sugg (ed.), *Jungian Literary Criticism*, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1992.

7 Jacques Derrida, 'Faith and knowledge: the two sources of "*religion*" at the limits of reason alone', in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (eds), *Religion*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

8 James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

9 Christopher Hauke, *Jung and the Postmodern*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

10 For the *New York Times* obituary, see http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/28/health/james-hillman-therapist-in-mens-movement-dies-at-85.html?_r=1&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1319807470-6eOfdlbpAXaMK2/Qp7k/bw

11 Bernie Neville, 'The charm of Hermes: Hillman, Lyotard and the Postmodern Condition', *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 37(3), 1992, pp. 337–53.

12 I would like to thank several colleagues for reading the early draft of this obituary, and correcting certain matters of fact. These include Joseph Cambray, Ann Casement, Andrew Samuels, Thomas Moore and Patricia Berry. However, I am entirely responsible for the narrative thread and point of view, as well as for any errors that might remain.

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