

Retro Review Classic

Review by **Helena Bassil-Morozow**, honorary research fellow, Research Institute for Media Art and Design, University of Bedfordshire

Re-Visioning Psychology

By: James Hillman, Harper and Row, New York, 1975

ISBN: 978-0060905637 (1992 re-issued edn)

Re-Visioning Psychology (originally published in 1975) is a book that is bold and confident in its attempt to restore the soul to its rightful place in the world that has grown soulless and cold. The heroic rationalism of modernity turned the life of the individual into a whirlwind – while his internal, spiritual life is likely to be static and stale. There is no time to reflect, to muse, to honour the psyche. Sadly, psychological sciences have followed this heroic trajectory, attempting to capture the soul, measure its parameters and trap it into formulae, instead of letting it speak for itself, and in its own language – the language of symbols and images.

As Hillman says in the preface to the 1992 edition, he aims to ‘free psychology from personalistic confines and to revert its vision to poetic principles and polymorphic Gods’ (Hillman, 1992: ix). Hillman’s audacious programmatic aim contradicts the spirit of the age of uniqueness and individualism – the author promises to ‘dehumanise’ psychology, and to remind the individual – who has clearly forgotten his psychological roots – that there are phenomena that exist outside the scope of rational analysis. He plans to give the soul a voice, to ‘ensoul the non-human’, to ‘relieve the human of its self-importance’ (ibid.).

Hillman outlines the spiritual crises brought about by the Age of Ragnarok (which our predecessors still regarded and felt as crises, but since our generation was born into this hectic lifestyle, we can only see the symptoms and not the causes of the pain). The contemporary individual is no longer acutely aware of the trauma inflicted by modern lifestyles on to the psyche – yet is forced to deal with the agony accompanying separation from one’s roots (the so-called psychological fragmentation). He or she gets easily obsessed by the sublimated, repressed images and fantasies spewed up by the combination of psyche and life. Unable (and not allowed to by stringent scientific standards) to take the metaphor and the image seriously, we cannot process

them in healthy ways. We end up being fascinated and enslaved by ‘the sublimated forms of culture than by the original metaphors’ (1992: 46).

The psychic life, veneered with professional language and incrustated with all kinds of pseudo-logical theories, is still teeming with images constantly threatening to break the thin layer of veneer and cause the old good havoc. The unscientific and old-fashioned soul, populated with gods and goddesses, is no longer invoked by contemporary man in times of personal or social crisis. This creates a psychological void which becomes dangerously filled with all sorts of individual and mass obsessions: veneration of public figures, idealisation of personal relationships, invention of new cults and rituals.

The soul, Hillman writes, creates an ‘animistic world of personal idols’:

we seek salvation in personal encounters, personal relations, personal solutions. Human persons are the contemporary shrines and statues where personifying is lodged. The neighbour’s nod is the numen. Our cult worships or propitiates actual people – the family, the beloved, the circle of encounters – while ignoring the persons of the psyche who compose the soul and on whom the soul depends. (1992: 47)


Meanwhile, psychotherapy – whatever it may think of itself and however it wishes to present itself to the public – still plays the role of the priest whose task is to make sure that the idols are happy and contented: ‘Of course, these archetypally loaded relationships break down, of course they require constant propitiary attention, of course we must turn to priests of this cult (therapists and counselors) for instruction concerning the right ritual for relation to persons’ (1992: 47). Meanwhile, Hillman argues, psychology is so steeped in Enlightenment prejudices and obsessed with nominalism and pathologising, that it neglects its direct duty – that of tending to the soul (1992: 58).

In criticising the main postulates of the Enlightenment using Jungian tools, Hillman reveals the essentially post-structuralist core of Jungian studies: its ability to see beyond officially prescribed rules, transcend official structures and, most importantly – its ability and willingness to criticise instrumental rationality. *Re-Visioning Psychology* modernises Jungian theory, and it does this not by embellishing it with virtues that it does

not contain and that are alien to it, but by de-fossilising it, by unearthing and re-establishing its founding postulates: freedom of the psyche, freedom of the imagination and images, the right of the psyche to remain unaltered, uninterpreted, wild. Hillman sides with the post-structuralist philosophers, most of whom are post-Freudians – Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault – that interpretation, structuring and analysis do not generate any more meaning than the unrestrained flow of psychic images. Moreover, he reminds the world that the Jungians ‘were there first’ – they were the first to establish that dreams and images were symbols, and not interpretable signs. Meaning and structures are illusions belonging to the ‘fond dream of the Enlightenment’ whose aim was ‘to classify the world of the mind, like the world of plants and animals, into categories, with subclasses, genera, and species’ (1992: 59). Contemporary psychology, too, engages in prescriptive soul-making, and ends up falsifying the process because ‘soul-making is distinct from improving personality’ (1992: 198).

Hillman is brave in his dethronement of traditional ideals of rational existence – which happen to coincide with the virtues which schools of contemporary psychology aim to restore in sick and unheroic souls: wholeness is not better than psychological fragmentation, action is not better than reflection, progressive development and individual growth are good examples of unachievable psychobabble, and observation might be preferable to pathologising and nominalism. The author reveals the chaos behind the rational approach, while discovering and

showing the logic in the wildness of the imagination.

This thinking also underlines Hillman’s own impressionistic style. *Re-Visioning Psychology* is not always easy to read. Its meandering style, interspersed with ‘excursions’ and digressions, infused with poetic and literary allusions, populated by an array of philosophers, poets and historical figures, and accommodating a diverse range of ‘isms’ (often carelessly piled up), is neither tidy, nor does it aim to comply with stringent academic standards. Creating yet another structure was not Hillman’s true aim. The book remains the creation of the psyche – careless and free yet full of ideas which the readers can organise and re-order in the way they wish. Hillman’s task is to stir the audience up and to make us think – and the correct instructions for making people think, as well as the correct recipe for meaning-making, do not exist. Or, at least, this is what *Re-Visioning Psychology* claims. 

Dr Helena Bassil-Morozow is a cultural philosopher and film scholar. Her principal research interest is the dynamic between individual personality and socio-cultural systems in industrialised and post-industrial societies. Her books include *Tim Burton: the Monster and the Crowd* (Routledge, 2010) and *The Trickster in Contemporary Film* (Routledge, 2011). Helena is currently working on two new Routledge projects, *The Trickster in Society and Culture* and *Jungian Film Studies: The Essential Guide* (the latter co-authored with Luke Hockley).

Bookings open

AHP CONFERENCE 2013

7 - 8 September 2013



Remembering the past - Sharing the present - Envisioning the future

Conference fee in £GBP

	1 Day	Early Bird	2 Days	Early Bird
AHP member	£79	£69	£150	£138
Non-member	£105	£94	£200	£180
Conference + 1 year S&S subscription & AHP membership	£130	£119	£230	£220

Concessions for volunteers: **enquire at admin@ahpb.org**

Go to **www.ahpb.org** for info and to book your early bird!