

BOOK REVIEW

THE DREAM AND THE UNDERWORLD by James Hillman.

The dream and the underworld, in a very real way, is the first new vision of dreams since Freud and Jung. It is a radical criticism of all that has gone before, offering a new-again understanding based on mythic roots. And it offers a praxis. But first, let us listen to Hillman:

*'I have come to believe that the entire procedure of dream interpretation aiming at more consciousness about living is radically wrong. And I mean **wrong** in all its fullness: harmful, twisted, deceptive, inadequate, mistaken and exagetically insulting to its material, the dream. When we wrong the dream, we wrong the soul . . .'*

And more?

' . . . the dreams belongs to the underworld, but ever since Freud, interpretation of the dream has meant translation into the upper world. Depth analysis, despite its name, moves dreams towards daylight.'

For Hillman, all therapy which uses the dream so the ego may live the better in the dayworld is an echo of the descent of Hercules into the underworld to kill the king there.

Dreams as an exploration of depth is one of the main rationales for working with dreams in therapy. But, what kind of depths are we working with, and what kind of deeps do dreams come from? To follow Hillman we must know the three (at least) distinctive levels of underground and underworld. Where one level is earthy, the place of living roots, food and fertility: another is community, rituals and laws: and the third is the underworld of dead souls, and, this kind of deep ground is not the same as the dark earth.

These are psychological distinctions. And are real. Bear them in mind. It is from this last level that dreams come from and it is to this last that we must return to acknowledge the dream without violating its very nature.

Accept for now that the dream belongs to the underworld. What does this mean? This means that we must dissociate dreamwork, the work that dreams do, from the notion of Herculean labour. Dreamwork is an imaginative activity and the imagination has its reality, just as the ego has. And dreamwork is a digestive process which, Hillman says, takes the matters of the dayworld, assimilates them into psyche, and makes them into 'soul'. Therapeutic ways of working with dreams by drawing them into the light of the dayworld disrupt this process, harmfully.

And the underworld is the realm of death. So, finally, dreams are the work of death. Let us talk about this for a moment. For, to dream is to step into the underworld, and to remember a dream is to recollect death. The call of the dream beckoning us downwards, Hillman tells us, *'suggests that all aspects of the process of the soul must be read finally, not only as part of the general human process towards death, but as particular events of and in that death.'*

But wait. All is not what it seems. The above is true. And so is what is below:-

*'When I use the word **death** and bring it into connection with dreams, I run the risk of being misunderstood grossly, since death to us tends to mean exclusively gross death . . . the death we speak of in our culture is a fantasy of the ego, and we take our dreams in this same manner.'*

Literal death is the viewpoint of the ego that cannot get out of its own life except by dying, which it takes in that same physical manner as it takes everything else. Hillman is in the tradition of depth psychology stemming from Heraclitus, that returns to our culture a sense of the underworld. This is the radicalism of Hillman's vision. His is an awareness that stands on its own legs only after we have put our dayworld notions to sleep. **Death** is the most profoundly radical way of expressing this shift in consciousness.

It seems to me that there are a number of ways of understanding the therapeutic process as a developmental journey (from Freud) - as a journey of growing and growth (emphasised by humanistic therapies) - as enlightenment (zen, gestalt sometimes). And Hillman offers the perspective of death, where the world of the dream is not a place to look at, but a place to look from. And looking from there, I see my dying.

I wrote at the beginning that this book offers guidelines for a praxis - a praxis for, as Hillman puts it, making dreams matter. This is not the place to argue this. For the matter of working based on the themes here must first be based on the understanding of the themes.

Hercules descended to **take**. Hillman talks of the myths, like that of Ulysses, which let us know it is possible to go there to **learn**.

This book is not a dream. I think. Yet it speaks to other than the ego:-

'The work on dreams follows the work of dreams. We work on the dream, not to unravel it . . . but to respond to its work with the likeness of our work.' This feels a teasingly good place to stop. Or start from. Hermeneutic even.

Ronnie Walker