

The Escape from Subjectivity in Jung, Corbin & Hillman

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We begin with a poem by Rilke:

I live my life in growing orbits,
which move out over the things of the world.
Perhaps I can never achieve the last,
but that will be my attempt.

I am circling around God, around the ancient tower,
and I have been circling for a thousand years.
And I still don't know if I am a falcon,
or a storm, or a great song.¹

The movement of the soul into the world is the theme I want to address. It is a peculiar fact of history that what modern Westernized people take to be a universal experience of the human person, what we call our subjectivity, has in fact a historical origin, perhaps more than one. It is not given with the origins of consciousness. The ways in which individual humans experience themselves and world are varied and culture-specific. The particular history that I want to talk about is that of Western Europe, where the peculiarly modern sense of subjectivity seems to have first developed, and according to many persuasive accounts, can be detected in writings that date from about the 12th century onward. In the terminology of the historian F. Edward Cranz, this change amounted to a shift from the experience of an ancient "extensive self" to our brand of subjectivity, the "intensive self."² The "ancients", that is

¹ Ranier Maria Rilke, "I live my life," translated by Robert Bly, in *News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness*, San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1980, 76.

² F. Edward Cranz, *Reorientations of Western Thought from Antiquity to the Renaissance*. Edited and with an Introduction by Nancy S. Struever. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006. Also see Illich, Ivan, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A*

the Greeks and Romans according to his account, lived immersed in an animate world and did not experience a division between ideas in what we now call “the mind” and “things” in the world. Aristotle for instance could say “the soul (*psyche*) is, somehow, all things.” The continuity between world and soul, world and body was the primary fact - it is only later that person and world were cut off from one another. Homer had no word for “human body” in our sense. He couldn’t conceive it - he had *anthropos*, the totality and unity of soul, spirit and body. And this body was continuous with the world.³ But whatever the reasons may be, these continuities were broken in the early medieval West, and the modern subjective self began to take shape. With the intensive self comes the sense that our experience of the world occurs somehow in our heads, that language is a human construct which is the source and origin of meanings, and that the individual is cut off from the world and other persons by a kind of wall, so that our lives are lived inside a container from which we struggle to emerge. This situation is admirably and concisely summed up by René Descartes in the 17th century who felt he could find only one certain fact in all his experience: “I think therefore I am.” Suddenly there we are, all jammed up inside our own heads with no sure way out. This is, from the point of view of an extensive self, not just absurd but wholly unintelligible. Such a philosophy is unthinkable in Homer’s world. Likewise, only on the basis of the experience of such an isolated self can anything like modern psychology arise. The world is split into mind and matter. On the one hand you can deny that subjectivity and consciousness are important or even that they exist at all and then you get B.F. Skinner and the early behaviorists and experimentalists. On the other, you can take the interiority of the depths very seriously and spend a lot of time in there trying to get yourself and your patients in therapy out and back into the world. And since Descartes much of Western philosophy has attempted to solve this riddle of how mind and matter, subjectivity and objectivity, might be related. The real push in modern philosophy started with Husserl and then Heidegger, and after that things get really interesting, if this kind of intellectual exercise is to your taste.

Poets never fell for any of this. They have always had imagination as their primary means of interaction with the world. And with imagination none of these troubles ever occur. But however limiting the mind/matter schism is, it has not been without its fruits. Most of modern culture is based on the actions and understandings made possible by the experiences of the intensive self. And we, most of us, know what that self is like, and many, if not most of us, know we are missing something and want to get back into our bodies and into the the world. So many of us long to experience the continuity between our soul and the world soul - between *psyche* and the *anima mundi*. For that reason we will look here at the work of three

Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

³ As noted for instance by Robert Kelly, *A Voice Full of Cities: The Collected Essays of Robert Kelly*, Edited by Pierre Joris and Robert Coglebergh, New York: Contra Mundum, 2014, 305.

thinkers who performed the important and useful function of showing us some ways to do just that.

C.G. Jung: The Objective Psyche

In a conversation with Sonu Shamdasani, the editor of the *Red Book*, James Hillman said:

It seems to me that [the *Red Book*] restructures, or deconstructs, or changes... the idea of the profoundly personal - the deep subjectivity. It turns out what's profoundly personal... is *not* one's personal life, the depths of one's childhood, the trauma, the family; all of that isn't what one encounters in the depths... What's in the depths is human history, and figures and creatures and scenes and landscapes and voices and instruction and an extraordinary world, that's the depth of personality, and it makes me no longer psychological. I'm no longer caught in the hundred years of Western psychology.⁴

The *Red Book* is the monumental record of Jung's escape from the confines of a narrow psychologism and his discovery of the deep connection between the psyche and the world. Poet and ecologist Gary Snyder expresses the relation this way: "It is in the deep mind that wilderness and the unconscious become one, and in some half-understood but very profound way, our relation to the outer ecologies seems conditioned by our inner ecologies. This is a metaphor, but it is also literal."⁵ Jung's turn inward, his descent into the underworld, was an encounter with the reality of the objective psyche and the interiority of the external world. This obliterates the disjunction that gave rise to the intensive self in the first place. In the extraordinary journey recounted in the *Red Book*, Jung turned the world inside out. He turned inward and discovered that the inside is actually outside - that the subjective is objective. He said "the psyche creates reality everyday." But the psyche is not in us - we are in the psyche. When Jung tells us that psyche *is* image what he means is that *reality* is image. All of it. We are in the world of imagination because there simply is nothing else.

Poets know this. They pretty much take it for granted. Robert Kelly gives us some of the best succinct comments on Jung's work:

Jung appeared in the world like a personage in one of those very dreams he taught his patients to dream. His uneasy presence in

⁴ James Hillman and Sonu Shamdasani, *Lament of the Dead: Psychology After Jung's Red Book*. 2013, 99.

⁵ Gary Snyder, quoted in the Introduction to Clayton Eshleman, *Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & the Construction of the Underworld*. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2003.

psychology, literature, comparative religion was less a comment than a demonstration. Even his most doctrinaire, hard-edged articulations ... have the air of theater: reckon with this Figure.

Better than analysing something merely there, he looked about him & synthesized a new narrative for us to enact, dream by dream, hermeneutic act by hermeneutic act, a pas de deux for analysand & analyst. He gave us not a science but a story.⁶

Here we have the essential Jung. Not Jung the scientist or the mystic or the prophet, but Jung the Imaginer-in-Chief, the poet, the writer, the dramatist - enacting and demonstrating life as it can be lived. Here I am, he says. Come and look what you can see from here!

Of the dreamwork as a continuous engagement with the riches of the imagination Kelly says this:

Awkward luminous important arousal that is not the dream and not the day, that stands up out of dream & haunts the day. We say: I remember the dream, I remember this from my dream. But the remembered thing is constantly reconstituting itself all through the lived day. It is not a memory but an upwelling, not an image but a shaping tendency, a *rhythmos* that marshalls event and response.⁷

This seems to me to capture the energy, the mood, and the sheer *normality*, of active imagination. Dream life and waking life are continuously interpenetrating aspects of reality. The remembered dream is a fragment of a continuous process that proceeds simultaneously with waking life.

Jung understood that the journey into the underworld ultimately ties together the inner and the outer, the upper and the lower. His vision of the wholeness of the psyche provides a powerful way to conceive and to enact the reunification of the unity of soul and world and so to heal that ancient wound in the body of reality. His courage in the face of his own fear of psychosis and of the misunderstanding and ridicule of others, and the example of his life lived in the pursuit of an ideal of wholeness seem to me, as they have to so many others, not merely admirable but heroic.

Henry Corbin: The World Turned Inside Out

Jung's colleague at the annual Eranos Conferences in Ascona, Switzerland, Henry Corbin, shared his devotion to the task of resuscitating the imagination in the modern Western world. But whereas Jung retained a belief in the status of psychology as a science and always refused to make theological claims, Corbin was

⁶ Robert Kelly, "On Jung," in *A Voice Full of Cities*, 307.

⁷ loc. cit.

both a philosopher *and* a theologian, The distinction between philosophy and theology is entirely modern and Corbin refused to participate in that schism. And this is precisely because he placed imagination at the center of reality. From the perspective of the imagination there simply is no chasm separating faith and reason - they are on a continuum - and the objects of faith are facts of the imagination just as real as the objects of rationality. Both are based on data of the senses - it is only the nature of the senses that differ. For Corbin the imagination is an organ of perception. All the visionary experiences of all the religions of the world are perceptions made possible by the exercise of the imagination. The imagination is the matrix out of which all knowledge, all perception, all reality derive. All the sciences are just as much functions of the imagination as art, poetry and religion. So where Jung draws a line and says, as he so often does, I am merely a psychologist, a scientist, observing the data thrown up by the psyche, Corbin crosses over effortlessly to live and breathe the same air as the participants in all the religions of the world.

There is not a very great deal in Corbin's work which reminds us of the dark and hellish experiences recounted in the *Red Book*. He did not write explicitly of his own spiritual life. And he does speak more than once of the passage of the soul through the hell of unconsciousness. He knows very well that the mystical journey is fraught with dangers and darkness. But Corbin is focused on the soul's voyage towards the light. And his attention is on all those glorious "recitals" of the Islamic mystics which figure so centrally for him and about which he writes with such passion and beauty. There is one lapidary description of an event that Corbin refers to as "coming to consciousness" which is critical to understanding his vision. Short as it is, this passage provides an analogue to Jung's inward turn and his awakening to the reality of the objective psyche, his dawning realization that the inner world is at least as real, indeed more real, than the outer.

Here Corbin describes a spiritual birth, a rite of passage that is an awakening of the soul to itself:

...[I]t is a matter of entering, passing into the interior and, in passing into the interior of finding oneself, paradoxically, outside... The relationship involved is essentially that of the external, the visible, the exoteric..., and the internal, the invisible, the esoteric, or the natural and the spiritual world. To depart from the where... is to leave the external or natural appearances that enclose the hidden realities... This step is made in order for the Stranger, the gnostic, to return home - or at least to lead to that return.

But an odd thing happens: once this transition is accomplished, it turns out that henceforth this reality, previously internal and hidden, is revealed to be enveloping, surrounding, containing what was first of all external and visible, since by means of interiorization one has departed from that external reality. Henceforth it is spiritual reality that...contains

the reality called material.⁸

It is striking that while Jung's transformation really is a descent into hell, Corbin is always ascending. Much hinges on that difference of course, but the inversion of the world, the turn inward to discover the real world and connect with it, is the same for both. In both cases deep subjectivity reveals itself as a doorway into a wider world. And in both cases, this transformation depends upon the imagination.

And this transformation of psyche into world by means of what Corbin calls "interiorization" can be found elsewhere than in depth psychology and gnostic mysticism. A strikingly similar transformation is championed by ecologist and philosopher David Abram in his argument for a renewed attention to the depths of our sensuous experience. Here too the cure for our disease requires a recognition of the missteps made in that peculiar Western history that gave rise to the inward-turning, isolated self. Abram describes a meditative technique that he found helped reconnect him to the state of being he had achieved among indigenous peoples in southeast Asia. Rather than moving down into unconsciousness or upwards into realms of spirit, Abram is moving consciously and attentively out into the sensuous physical reality of the ecosystems in which we are immersed.

As we become conscious of the unseen depths that surround us, the inwardness or interiority that we have come to associate with the personal psyche begins to be encountered in the world at large: we feel ourselves enveloped, immersed, caught up within the sensuous world. This breathing landscape is no longer just a passive backdrop against which human history unfolds, but a potentized field of intelligence in which our actions participate. As the regime of self reference begins to break down, as we awaken to the air, and to the multiplicitous Others that are implicated, with us, in its generative depths, the shapes around us seem to awaken, to come alive...⁹

Though it isn't apparent here, Abram's argument, and more importantly his practice, depend upon the continual, creative imaginative interaction which ties together our flesh and the flesh of the world. Every act of perception, he argues, involves imagination to some degree. Imagination *is* our engagement with the world. So here, in an explicitly biological, ecological context, we find an argument completely in harmony with those of Corbin and Jung.

⁸ Henry Corbin, "Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal," in *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, West Chester, PA, 1995, 6.

⁹ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*, New York: Pantheon, 1996, 260.

James Hillman: The Poetic Basis of Mind

James Hillman was the most modern, even post-modern, member of our trio. He was from a generation fully at home in the culture of modernity - modern art, modern literature, modern technology. This is decidedly not true of Jung and Corbin, both of whom were in a variety of ways highly conservative from a contemporary point of view. It is worth noting that Jung was born in a small Swiss town in 1875, Corbin in Paris in 1903, and Hillman in Atlantic City, New Jersey in 1926 in one of the hotels owned by his family. Something of the carnival atmosphere of that birthplace characterizes much of his work.

As with both Jung and Corbin, any short summary of Hillman's thought is a distortion. It is not possible to convey the rich complexity and originality of his work. But one central notion increasingly stands out for me as a window on his world. The primary act defining the psychological stance towards reality he championed all his life is what he calls *deliteralization*. The primary distinction is between the literal and the metaphoric. This seemingly "literary" dichotomy applies to everything. Jung tells us that the psyche creates reality everyday, and Hillman begins with this as the fundamental tenet of his psychology. But, as with Corbin's theology, Hillman's stand escapes the bounds of psychology to become a cosmology. To fully grasp the radical nature of his claim we have to make the final jump with him when he says that the literal is itself a mode of imagining. It is not the case that there is the literal world "out there" about which we weave metaphors. It is all imagination - even the most objective of the sciences are modes of imagining.

By placing imagination and metaphor at the center of things, Hillman is always straining at the limits of psychology and turning it towards the imagination as it manifests in art, literature and poetry, taken very seriously indeed, so that the poetic basis of mind becomes a central feature of psychology, and the poetic foundation of the world becomes the central feature of his psychocosmology. In a lecture delivered in Buffalo in 1983 for the Analytical Society of Western New York¹⁰ the poet Robert Duncan said that Hillman's work very nearly breaks into poetry in his alchemical writings. Speaking of "Alchemical Blue and the Unio Mentalis"¹¹ Duncan said "it seems to me ...[this] is the place where I find my goodness, aren't you in trouble, Hillman, because you have entered very close to the poem in what you are doing."¹² Duncan is pointing out the subtle but utterly crucial difference between speaking *about* something and *speaking the thing itself*. Hillman is "in trouble" because reality is breaking into his conceptual scheme, his "psychology." The difference is that between literary criticism and poetry, between observing and acting, between being in the audience and being the actor, between a

¹⁰ Robert Duncan, "Opening the Dreamway," in *Opening the Dreamway in the Psyche of Robert Duncan*. Woodstock, Conn: Spring Publications, 1996, 1-45.

¹¹ In Hillman, James. *Alchemical Psychology*. Putnam, Conn: Spring Publications, 2010.

¹² Duncan, "Opening the Dreamway," 35.

psychology based on the poetic basis of mind and the poetry itself. Works of art aspire to *be* something, not to describe or interpret. Hillman's psychology is, at its best, not so much about *understanding* anything - it points us towards a new way of being.

This way of being requires an inward turn that is very like what we have seen already. In his marvelous book on Jung's notion of the *anima*, the archetype of the soul personified as a female figure, Hillman describes deliteralization as the essence of anima consciousness:

Unless we understand the "within" in a radically new way - or classically old way - we go on perpetuating the division between my anima and the world-soul (objective psyche). The more we concentrate her inside and literalize interiority within my person, the more we lose the sense of soul as a psychic reality interiorly within all things. Anima within is not merely within my breast; introjection and internalization do not mean making my head or my skin the vessel inside of which all psychic processes take place. The "within" refers to that attitude given by the anima which perceives psychic life within natural life. Natural life itself becomes the vessel the moment we recognize its having an interior significance, the moment we see that it too bears and carries psyche. Anima makes vessels everywhere, by going within.¹³

Here again, we are to turn inward, towards the soul, only to discover that we are outside ourselves, freed from subjectivity as inhabitants of a world replete with meaning, with interiority - all of it outside of the ego. Then wonderfully, he gives us a *praxis*:

The means of doing this is fantasy. Phenomena come alive and carry soul through our imaginative fantasies about them. When we have no fantasy about the world, then it is objective, dead... Fantasy is not merely an interior process going on in my head. It is a way of being in the world and giving back soul to the world.¹⁴

In his great book on William Blake, Northrup Frye expresses the psychological heart of Blake's creative passion. He writes, "The more a man puts all he has into everything he does the more alive he is... [The world] is more real to the man who throws his entire imagination behind his perception..."¹⁵ For both Blake and Hillman

¹³ James Hillman, *Anima: An Anatomy of a Personified Notion*, Dallas: Spring Publications, 1985, 81.

¹⁴ loc. cit.

¹⁵ Northrup Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1947, 21.

imagining is the fundamental act of human being. It is what makes us *be*. Imagination is the fabric of the reality, more fundamental than space or time or energy.

Coda: Freedom for the World

The grand project in which these three seminal thinkers were engaged was nothing less than an attempt to rescue the modern Western psyche from the trap of subjectivity. However it was that it came to dominate so much of Western thought, the delusion that Descartes so succinctly articulated with “I think, therefore I am” stands as an indictment of an entire tradition. To cure the many ills to which this mode of consciousness is prone, these radical reformers turned to the imagination. But for them imagination is not a merely human faculty, but is the broadest possible cosmological ground allowing an experience of reality that does not suffer from the dichotomies that split the Western mind. Their sources are many and varied because there are rich traditions in every culture, including that of Western Europe, that run counter to the dominant ego-driven subjectivity that leads to a society of independent, isolated individuals unconscious of their subjugation by a collective, and anonymizing, societal imagination. Jung found one of his most important precedents in alchemy. Corbin turned to the mystical traditions of the great monotheisms, and particularly those of Iranian Islam. Hillman built upon the foundations they laid and embraced a fully post-modern and explicitly poetic conception of imagination. But not “poetic” in the all-too-common sense of “literary” but as a poetics of all reality, of a world where, as in all the religions of the Book, language in the broadest possible sense is continuous with the ultimate ground of being. Each in their own style, these three revolutionaries can help us all to escape the traps of dogmatism, fundamentalism and egotism that threaten always and everywhere to close the hearts of us all.