

Art Therapy Online: ATOL

Obituary - James Hillman (1926-2011)

The archetypal psychologist James Hillman, who died on Oct 27th 2011, led a remarkable life: after the war, during which he worked in American Navy hospitals with terribly maimed servicemen, he went to Europe to study philosophy and literature as well as psychology. Although he had encountered Jung's ideas during this period, it was not until after a year spent in India that he ended up in Zurich and followed the long journey, first training and then practising as an analyst between 1955 and 1969 that led to him taking up the position of Director of Studies at the Jung Institute. A crisis led to him stopping analysis for over a year: he resumed, but ended up leaving Zurich for Dallas in 1978. By now he had turned away from analytic work with the inner world towards addressing the world outside. He was a founding member of the Dallas Institute: here psychological perspectives were applied to a wide range of problems, including architecture, economics and other urban issues. He also got deeply involved with Robert Bly's experiments in revisioning and supporting mens' self-image, co-leading workshops and retreats. Later Hillman was passionately engaged with ecological issues, challenging the traditional Cartesian view of soul as being an exclusively human attribute. He was never afraid of tackling big issues, and whilst he delighted in controversy, he was an unfailingly sharp and stimulating thinker.

During most of this time Hillman wrote articles and books on an impressive range of topics- emotion, suicide, dreams, spirituality, money, power and war- as well as being engaged in an interminable battle to redefine the notion of therapy itself. For a couple of decades he was the editor of 'Spring', a brilliant, scholarly and reliably provocative journal of archetypal psychology. By temperament he was a contrarian, loving to turn ideas on their

heads and to upset orthodox assumptions. He was also a superb public speaker and relished debate and controversy; but at the same time he had a remarkable and patrician courtesy, giving every questioner his full attention. He was certainly no dry scholar, having a great love of good food, an insatiable curiosity and a vivid sense of humour. Although he was a truly inspirational figure, he wore his growing fame well: in many ways, he would have said, it was the work that shaped him rather than the other way around, and he was its servant.

It is of special concern to art therapists that Hillman was such an insistent champion of the image, but this was always in ways that fought against its becoming fossilised or being seen through. His interest in mythology was coloured by his ability to turn the traditional Jungian search for symbolic meanings and the archetypal clichés that so often followed in their wake into more open-ended and creative explorations. Through a kind of jujitsu reversal of perspective, he transformed the concrete or literalised into something more active and personified. Hence, for example, he transformed the clinical and symptomatic notion of 'pathology' into the active idiom of 'pathologising': the soul's inherent tendency to use an idiom of sickness, morbidity and suffering that was beyond any clinical or diagnostic perspective.

In many ways Hillman was drawn to pay attention to what could be called the blind spots in Jungian psychology: such as the negative image of the Puer or the uncertain status of the anima; but he also extended classical Jungian thinking in other domains such as soul-making, polytheistic mythology and the underworld. Central to his approach was the proposition that every system of ideas, however intellectual or scientific it might seem, has a psychological or imaginal dimension to it: 'Thus archetypal psychology's first links are with culture and imagination rather than with medical and empirical psychologies' (Hillman, 1983:1). This insight is central to his advocacy of image-work as a key component, not only of therapy in the consulting-room, but of those forms of therapy (or soul-making) that are inherent in living life more generally.

Although an archetypal image presents itself as impacted with meaning, this is not given simply as revelation. It must be *made* through “image work” and “dream work”. The modes of this work may be concrete and physical as in art, movement, play and occupational therapies; but more importantly (because less fixedly symbolic) this work is done by “sticking to the image” as a psychological penetration of what is actually presented *including* the stance of consciousness that is attempting the hermeneutic (Hillman, 1983: 14).

In fact, in a series of articles published in *Spring*, Hillman demonstrated his ways of dealing with image at some length, and also explored some of the difficulties and objections arising there from. Although the images in question are primarily from dreams, many of the strategies deployed are translatable to images in art and art therapy. However Hillman later cautioned against the use of art therapy as a means to some other end- catharsis or sublimation, for example- and insisted on its essential connection with imagination. Indeed his approach could be called a therapy *of* the imagination as much as a therapy through imagination. Curiously, though his last wife was, amongst other things, an artist, Hillman wrote very little about art itself, and once told me that where he lived he had no artworks on the walls.

Nevertheless, it is for these reasons that he is one of the invisible guardians of art therapy. In a talk given to BAAT members in 1969, Hillman asked,

Would it be possible [...] to realise another kind of approach where the complex is encouraged to spin out its fantasies and where therapy becomes an exercise of fantasy and where problems themselves are simply part of the fantasy. Then one goes into the imaginal world, not for the sake of a problem, not for the sake of the control apparatus [Ego] and the restoration of it, but for the sake of the imaginal world itself, in order simply to explore it, to be at home in it, develop an imaginal ego that can live in it. In this sense the art therapist (who is supposed to be at the bottom of the hierarchical system in the mental

health world) would take a much more important position (Hillman, 1970: 6).

Sadly, this stance, while it is not fully applicable to all the areas in which art therapists work, has yet to be adopted by art therapy, let alone the wider world of those in the 'helping professions'.

Sharp, but kind, generous with recognition, but with a penetrating, slightly scary capacity for concentration, James Hillman was as unforgettable in person as he was honest and thought-provoking on paper. He was a rare spirit whose work will long survive him.

David Maclagan, August 2012

References

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Biographical details: David Maclagan is a writer, artist and retired Art Therapist. He has published three books (Creation Myths, Thames & Hudson 1977), Psychological Aesthetics' (Jessica Kingsley 1999), and 'Outsider Art' (Reaktion 2009) and his next book 'Line Let Loose: scribbling, doodling and

automatic drawing' will be published by Reaktion next spring. He has also published numerous articles on art, psychoanalysis and art therapy. He lives in West Yorkshire.