BOOK REVIEWS


Dick Russell’s long-awaited biography of James Hillman runs to nearly 700 pages, and this is only the first volume of a two-part project. It is well written and designed, and Russell manages to weave an interesting narrative through a welter of facts, travels, events, friendships, and hostile liaisons. Too ambitiously, the title announces that this is a narrative of Hillman’s life and ideas. My view is that Russell does justice to the life, but not to the ideas. Russell is not a scholar or an historian of ideas. Nor is he familiar with the field of depth psychology or Jung. To tackle Hillman’s ideas without knowing the context and background out of which the ideas arose is unwise. Why not just the ‘life and times’? It would have made more sense, been more manageable, and the result would have been less flawed. As it is, I am left with an impression of what this book lacks, rather than what it achieves. What it lacks is a mind capable of taking Hillman on and critically evaluating his contribution.

Russell has a ‘popular’ or non-scholarly engagement with Hillman’s ideas, reflecting the kind of soft or uncritical following Hillman sought in late life, when he was writing pop psychology for the mass market. But not knowing the field means that when Hillman boasts that his psychology is original, and his ideas are born of his own genius, Russell is unable to separate hyperbole from reality. Russell says he is not writing a critical study, but how can he produce an intellectual history of ideas without a critical position? Russell strives to present an ‘objective’ view of Hillman’s achievement, but the lack of a critical perspective means that he adopts Hillman’s self-assessment by default. Everything Russell says about Hillman’s ideas echoes Hillman’s opinion of himself, and is cast in Hillman’s style. This, I fear, is why Hillman chose an outsider to tell his story: because he remains firmly in control. An insider might have taken issue with Hillman’s claims, or tracked down where he was original and where he was derivative. Russell has allowed himself to be out-foxed by the subject of his biography, thus reducing the merit of the work.

Shamdasani supports the boasts of Hillman and his biographer. In his Preface, Shamdasani claims that there have only been two greats in the field, and Hillman is one of them:

Strikingly in contrast to Freud’s legacy, there have arguably only been two major original figures following in the wake of Jung: Michael Fordham, who sought to redress lacunae in analytical psychology with his developmental model, and James Hillman, who took on Jung’s daimonic inheritance. (Sonu Shamdasani, in his Preface to Dick Russell, The Life and Ideas of James Hillman, Vol. 1, The Making of a Psychologist, p. xi)

Shamdasani has not written about Hillman before, and it is surprising to see him elevating Hillman to this status. But what is this elevated assessment based on? For years, serious
scholars in our field have questioned Hillman’s work and criticised him for being showy, egotistical and derivative. Admittedly, these criticisms were not always made public; but they were definitely being made. Hillman appears more worried about his reputation than either biographer: ‘I worry often though about critics like the people who find me a fraud or ambitious or extraverted or tricky, and I hear the criticisms inside me’ (Hillman, in Russell, p. 573). When I was a young man and had not read Jung in depth, I discovered Hillman, devoured his books and believed much of what he said about himself. But as soon as I read more deeply into Jung, I realised the extent to which Hillman had borrowed from Jung, and the claims of originality rang hollow.

Hillman certainly ‘took on’ Jung’s daimonic inheritance, as Shamdasani says, but did he extend or develop it? Despite the hype about Hillman’s ‘archetypal psychology’ being new and different, he is not an original thinker, and all of the ideas expressed in his seminal Revisioning Psychology (Hillman, 1975) can be traced to Jung. Hillman’s emphasis on archetypes, gods and goddesses, dreams and the underworld, the poetic basis of mind, psyche as ‘soul’, anima mundi, personifying, pathologising, polytheism – all of this was explored by Jung long before Hillman moved from America to Zurich. Hillman’s writings can be seen as creative and sparkling footnotes on Jung’s opus, in which Hillman clarifies certain aspects of Jung’s thought, such as images, alchemy, gods and myths, and brings them into contemporary focus. But many of Hillman’s admirers, especially his popular following in America (including his biographer), seem not to have read Jung thoroughly, or perhaps not at all, and are thus unaware of the extent to which Hillman is indebted to the Swiss master.

Hillman’s claims to originality are most strident in his polemical work, Archetypal Psychology: A Brief Account (Hillman, 1983). The book was mainly read by his friends and followers, who did not complain. In fact, Hillman has kept himself protected from criticism most of his life. He self-published a great many of his essays in Spring Journal, and quite a few of his books, including the multi-volume Uniform Edition of the Writings of James Hillman, were published by a company he owned. Hillman rarely, if ever, subjected his work to critical scrutiny. I would appreciate critical scholarship on Hillman by people who are not fans, friends, acolytes or loyalists. Perhaps in due course we will see more balanced writings on him, but I suspect critics have remained muted for diplomatic reasons. Also, critics were concerned about repercussions: Hillman’s reprisals could be withering and long-lasting.

Hillman was drawn to Jungian psychology in the early 1950s, but began to break away from ‘mainstream’ Jungian thinking by the late 1960s. He changed Jung’s work to suit his purposes: he took what he wanted from Jung and called it his own. He altered Jung’s opus, not by adding to it but subtracting from it. He threw out Jung’s interest in religion, especially Christianity, which he found abhorrent. He threw out Jung’s focus on the archetype of the Self, and with it the wholeness that Jung saw as the Self’s essential character. For Hillman, ‘Self’ was almost a Nazi term – centralised, authoritarian, fascistic; it destroyed the plurality of psyche. Jung did not intend the Self to be read this way, but Hillman claimed this is what Jungians had made of it. Hillman was prone to exaggeration, and his jaundiced reading of the Self suited his purposes, but is not always reflected in the literature. Hillman confessed that he was dominated by the anima, and while the anima animates the personal style, it is prone to hyperbole and distortion.

Hillman upheld a single-minded attention to anima or soul, which put him at odds with the Jungian tradition. Jung believed that the anima was subordinate to the Self, and its role was to build a bridge to the Self and to a wholeness in which masculine and feminine would be united. Indeed, Jung thought the ‘autonomous’ figure of the anima