

# Poetics of Soul: Revisioning Psychology As Mythical Method

by Dennis Slattery

Excerpt from his latest book:

## Creases in Culture: Essays Toward a Poetics of Depth

*Every text reveals the weaver's predilections*  
—James Hillman, *Revisioning Psychology* ix

The beauty and complexity of James Hillman's *Revisioning Psychology* rests substantially in how it creates a new metal as an amalgam of poetics, mythos and archetypal psychology; its consequence is iconoclastic, insightful and innovative for any of us interested in the cross currents of poetry and psyche. Where the two meet and converse is quite possibly one matrix where myths have their genesis.

I imagine *Revisioning Psychology* as James' *Moby-Dick*, with all the complexity, episodic turns of plot, and meditations on the soul of matter and the mothering of soul that Melville's whaling voyage invited on board the Pequod. The white whale, for James, is the psyche itself—seductive, slippery, sagacious, serious, serene, twisted like the crooked lower jaw of the elusive whale, fierce in its seduction, oblique as well as ubiquitous and occupying multiple latitudes at once. Moreover, like the white whale, soul itself in James' lexicon is the *anima mundi*, the world soul, which only the deepest philosophic and poetic meditations are capable of approaching, much less grasping.

Moreover, we each comprise qualities of the figures of Ahab in his quest to disarm what cannot be affected, really; Ishmael in moments of quiet reflection when something subterranean reveals itself in a breach of imagining; a bit of Stubb who wants to seize the whale as a commodity and pin it to the main mast of nature or cut a slice and have it served raw on a dinner plate; and even a sliver of Pip, who, upon jumping from the whale boats not once but twice, sees the immensity of soul in the waters of the mind and matter and speaks a foreign language from that day forward, influenced by the grammar of divinities that stir mysteriously in the deep.

*Revisioning Psychology* shows clearly in its wake the levithanic theme of the soul itself—not only the individual soul we are personally guided by, but the *anima mundi* herself. His vision, however, is that large, that epic because it engages one of the grand qualities of this inclusive genre: re-founding old verities into a new order of nuanced and complex understanding.

---

**Dennis Patrick Slattery, Ph.D.**, is a core faculty member at Pacifica Graduate Institute. He is the author of several books including: *The Idiot: Dostoevsky's Fantastic Prince*; *The Wounded Body: Remembering the Markings of Flesh*; *Grace in the Desert: Awakening to the Gifts of Monastic Life*; *Harvesting Darkness: Essays on Literature, Myth, Film and Culture* and *A Limbo of Shards: Essays on Memory, Myth and Metaphor*.

Only a few souls will and have been called to muster the courage to explore such a region that stretches both horizontally across the landscape of history and downward mythically to the depths of pathology and afflictions. Grand courage must be part of one's cargo in order to witness fully, without flinching, the soul's enormous motions. In one of his memorable insights, James affirms that "the soul can exist without its therapists but not without its afflictions" (71). Few have understood both the voice as well as the value of our infections and wounds as has he.

I am going now to take just a small parcel from James' work, one of my favorite sections that I recently typed from the hand-written notes that number some 150 pages and blends his insights with my own thoughts and analogies gathered in my rereading; in this way I feel a joint stock company of mutual participation as a revisoner of his *Revisioning*. I believe it was one of his main intentions, if not hopes, that we each would take up the challenge of his take on the soul's mythical method and extend it along our own corridors of understanding. No wonder he dedicated the book to "The Reader, without whom all is Vanity." A stronger invitation to take up the author's words and rework them has not been issued.

### Recovering the Soul

James' work, you may remember, is divided into four sections: 1. Personifying or Imagining Things; 2. Pathologizing or Falling Apart; 3. Psychologizing or Seeing Through; 4. Dehumanizing or Soul-Making. In each of these sections James wrestles with, so to realign the work of psychology—the logos of the soul—with the imagination, something lost, he affirms, with the development of psychology along the sluices of fantasies heavily naturalistic and scientific. A too literal reliance on one's history flattens the power of the imaginal life into insignificance. Moving between a phenomenology that returns us to the lived experience of an event and an imaginal mythology that seeks primarily through afflictions the movement of the soul to a fuller awareness of itself, *Revisioning* recalibrates the nature and purpose of psychologizing as a form of mythologizing. Its overarching aim regarding psychology James is very clear about when he affirms in his Preface to the 1992 edition: "to revert its vision to poetic principles and polymorphic Gods... of ensouling the nonhuman" (ix). Each section of his quaternary structure can stand alone, but each assumes a deeper richness when placed in relation to the others.

My interest warms up considerably over the last part of section Two: Pathologizing or Falling Apart. It is most interesting right now for a couple of reasons: 1. It most intensely expresses some of the major terms for one to discover through uncovering layers of one's personal myth; 2. It rests heavily on the seminal movement of reversion essential to archetypal psychology's mythical method, namely, a return to the origins, through memory, of one's life story. It also clarifies further the nature of fantasy not as make-believe but as the presence of analogy, metaphor and what Jung earlier, borrowing from the work of philosopher Hans Vaihinger, called the "als ob" or "as-if" nature of our psychological turns. It further highlights the central act of pathologizing, what James calls an "iconoclasm; as such it becomes a primary way of soul-making. Its method is to break the soul free from its identification with egocentric seeing through the upperworld heroes of light and high Gods

who provide the ego with its models...and have cast our consciousness in a one-sided, suppressive narrowness regarding life, health and nature” (89). Finally for my purposes, it asserts as well what James calls the “polytheistic perspective,” which writer of theology and mythology David Miller was to successfully amplify later in his own book, *The New Polytheism* (1974).

### Revisoning Psychology’s Mythical Method

Almost ten years after the publication of *Revisoning*, James was to return to mythos and plot in one of his most popular books, *Healing Fiction*, my second favorite of all of his writings, after *Revisoning*. There, early on, he proposes a startlingly new way for us to understand the plot of a story when he outlines Freud’s seminal contribution to psychology, both positive and negative. First the negative: Freud’s theory of the Oedipus story became the foundation for his theory of human development or its absence, in the form of libido. James observes: His [Freud’s] double style of writing required that what was plot and myth on one level was theory and science on another” (*Healing Fiction* 11). James’ quarrel with Freud’s theory is not that it fails as an empirical hypothesis of human nature, but that it fails poetically; it is in essence neither deep nor embracing enough nor an “aesthetic enough plot for providing dynamic coherence and meaning to the dispersed narratives of our lives” (11). In the last qualifier, note in passing the polytheistic method appearing in the phrase, “dispersed narratives.”

Now to the positive regard James holds for Freud’s theory, its own form of myth, for our theories, he reveals, are forms that our myth assumes. Always a myth peers out from under theory’s clothing. Freud carried his own mythic genius, as James asserts: “Freud developed his one plot after a myth, Oedipus. With this move Freud too placed mind on a poetic basis. He understood that the entire narrative of a human life, the characters that we are and the dreams we enter, are structured by the selective logic of a profound *mythos* in the psyche” (11). In this move of his, Freud had hearkened back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which was the first literary theoretical work to earmark plots as myths: “wherever ‘plot’ appears the original Greek word is *mythos*. Plots are myths. The basic answers to *why* in a story are to be discovered in myths” (11). James’ breakthrough was in recognizing the enormous achievement of both Freud and Jung when in their respective works, and in spite of their disagreements about the range and nature of psychic energy and the layers of the unconscious, they “took the step into understanding human nature in terms of myth” (12); in doing so “they moved from human nature to the nature of religious powers. Here James implements a term he will use throughout his writing: “the poetic basis of mind [which] suggests that the selective logic operating in the plots of our lives is the logic of mythos, mythology” (12).

The second reason for pausing at the way station of *Healing Fiction* as a supplement to *Revisoning Psychology* is that this principle resides behind the 80 or so riting meditations in my book, *Riting Myth, Mythic Writing: Plotting Your Personal Story*. For not only the stories that we have been and are becoming but also the stories we remember, are seminal inroads to contacting the deeper strata of our personal mythos. I want to suggest that the act of remembering is itself a mythic act, a mythic meditation: not their historical accuracy in fact but ra-

ther their imaginal veracity as remembered are the *prima materia* for writing. They are, in the language of *Moby-Dick*, the “Extracts” from which we develop and see unfolding the larger map of our voyage, the rigging and mastheads of our mythology, and the shrouds of our secret life. In fact, the act of writing is itself a ritual way of reenacting our narrative in mytho-poetic ways by memorializing them from within, then writing out our remembrances and mythologizing them in the creative process of recollection.

No wonder then that the Greek imagination discovered and gave shape to Memory as a goddess, Mnemosyne, who first aligned and subsequently mated with Zeus, a divine presence of mind itself, gave birth to the nine muses. Moreover, while we do not know a great deal about Mnemosyne, we are made aware that she it is who makes possible narratives themselves, for the plots of the stories we encounter, including the unfolding complexity of our own, assumes the ability to remember and to imaginably retrieve what has been, to help each part find a place, bit by bit, in the fabrication of our own fiction. Such is the power of this goddess to offer us a coherence that events themselves are incapable of delivering including the soul-making that pathology affords.

Pathology is less crafted around literal events, sicknesses, excesses, natural events and more deeply around “mythical figures” which James calls “eternal metaphors of imagination,” and “archetypal resemblances” present in literal events and persons but, more conducive to our concerns, in mythical figures in action that allow one to ask imaginably: which figure am I like “and the patterns I am enacting [that] have their authentic home ground?” (99). The impulse at work here is James’ belief that “soul events are not parts of any system”; rather, they reveal an independent primacy of the imaginal. It creates its fantasies autonomously, ceaselessly, spontaneously” (100) not as compensation but as illumination. Reversion is such a formative principle at work in this action of soul because it seeks a return, a retrieval, and, indeed, a revisoning. *Revisoning* is at the same instant a Psychology of Reversion, of a return, of seeing once more, not in the spirit of a repetition compulsion but more through the disposition of a renewed constellation, a spiraling back of the soul’s eternal return and renewal, a return in order to renew or a reversal into the unfamiliar. Reversion comprises the new spiral of archetypal psychology. spiraling down, far from being a motion of degeneration, is here a movement of meditation and remediation.

In this spirit, another tenet of his mythical method is to be wary of taking the myths literally. Rather, and closer to the workings of the imagination, one might enter the spirit of “as if” mentioned above, what Jung called in his writings the “als ob” of the soul, and at about the same time the German Kantian philosopher Hans Vaihinger called his massive study *The Philosophy of As If*. Less so “what if” but rather “as if.”

Originally published in 1924, *The Philosophy of ‘As If’* brilliantly traces and makes connections between a host of disciplines that gather around the nature of metaphor and analogy. Vaihinger understands our ways of comprehension as being founded largely on “analogical fictions” (29). He goes on to develop the idea that “all knowledge, if it goes beyond simple actual succession and co-existence, can only be *analogical*,” followed by an observation he develops from the philosopher Grun:

“Grun is therefore quite right when he says that metaphys-

ics is metabolic, *metaphoric*. What Grun calls metaphors are in the main indispensable fictions” 29). Metaphors work along circuitous lines, around and about, obliquely making connections that are not causal but imaginal, allowing the psyche its poetic toe hold into comprehending by analogy, rooted in the structure of likeness.

Vaihinger’s thought, which influenced C.G. Jung as well, here offers another angle into James’ work through metaphor as an example of an “as if” mode of revisioning, an imaginal correspondence unconcerned about the fact of the event, and more curious about its imaginal circuitry, its energy transfer and translation, through reversion. On the other hand, if reversion becomes too literal, too close to a univocal matching A to B, then we have fallen, he warns, into the same kind of reduction from which his opus is seeking to extricate the thought of the soul from. His caution bears repeating:

Mythical metaphors are not etiologies, causal explanations, or name tags. They are perspectives toward events which shift the experience of events, but they are not themselves events. They are likenesses to happenings, making them intelligible, but they do not themselves happen. They give an account of the archetypal story in the case history, the myth in the mess. (101)

Mythic stories, including the ones we embody through our own woundings, must include a reading of all the figures present, not this or that one that we believe most represents us.

To separate one or another out and to marginalize the rest usually results in calling the marginalized parts of the myth psychopathological. Not always are we to be blamed for such an exclusion because when the myth is experienced along the contours of the above terms, then it is least apparent “for each one characterizes the notion of consciousness itself according to archetypal perspectives; it is virtually impossible to see the instrument by which we are seeing” (103). Yet we may be conscious in the way of Apollo, full of light, or willful like Hercules, or the smooth flow of Dionysus (103). Each divinity is then a style of consciousness, a disposition towards what is present, and an attitude towards a particular interpretation.

Pathology offers pathways to the soul’s deepest nature and temper. Recognizing our own form of pathologizing is an essential dimension of gaining a fuller self-consciousness, for “pathologizing is itself a way of seeing; the eye of the complex gives the peculiar twist called ‘psychological insight’” (107). Eyeing pathos is another vision of gazing at the soul through the analogy of affliction which I wish to extend to include the analogy of affection. I suggest that in our afflictions prowl the deepest plots of our unfolding fiction.

#### References:

- Hillman, James. *Revisioning Psychology*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1975.
- Hillman, James. *Healing Fiction*. Woodstock, Connecticut: Spring Publications, 1983.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*. Introduction by Clifton Fadiman. Illustrations by Boardman Robinson. Collector’s Edition. Norwalk, Connecticut: The Easton Press.
- Vaihinger, Hans. *The Philosophy of ‘As If’: A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*. Trans. C.K. Ogden. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968.