Lament of the Dead: Psychology after Jung's Red Book

James Hillman & Sonu Shamdasani

New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
Hardcover: 256 pages
ISBN: 978-0393088946
RRP: $27.95; £17.50; €20.50

Adapted from the cover: ‘With Jung's Red Book as their point of departure, two leading scholars explore issues relevant to our thinking today. In this book of dialogues, Hillman and Shamdasani explore a number of the issues in Jung’s Red Book – such as our relation with the dead; the figures of our dreams and fantasies; the nature of creative expression; the relation of psychology to art, narrative and storytelling; the significance of depth psychology as a cultural form; the legacy of Christianity; and our relation to the past – and examine the implications that these have for our thinking today.’

While attending a presentation of Dick Russell's first volume of his biography about a lyrical writer and interpreter of the soul, the late James Hillman (1926-2011), in New York's Jung Foundation, I strolled through their well-stocked bookstore. There, I picked up Hillman's final book, a conversation with Sonu Shamdasani. I was already taken slightly aback by the mixed feelings that I had concerning the book's title, as well as the identity of Hillman's conversation partner. Leafing through the book and glancing at their exchanges about that C.G. Jung had worked out in his Red Book, I realised immediately, this was not a heart-to-heart conversation, but rather an exchange between two individuals trying to better each other at intellectual word games. “No need for this”, I thought and put the book down, thus saving myself from spending nearly $28.00.

Glad at heeding my inner voice, I went on to Russell's entertaining talk. Yet, when we broke for tea and delicious cakes, I thought that I should possibly give the book a second chance. I had met Hillman once, and served as his translator in 1995 for a day-long seminar in Bern, Switzerland, on his then just published book, Kinds of Power. I had also been an avid reader of his work since Francis Huxley had introduced me to it in 1976, so I bought this book simply to complete my Hillman collection. I said to myself a simple “Why not?” but was I thinking of something else when I made this decision? Yes, because this book is a very good example of the psychologically pompous, with its dance between the upper and lower world.

Carl Gustav Jung, in 1930, in his Liber Secundus, in the Red Book, ended with the following words: “Der Prüfstein ist das Alleinsein mit sich selber. Dies ist der Weg. [The touchstone is the being alone with one self. This is the Way.]” With these encouraging words, he advocated that, to be on one's way; to listen to the answers out of the silence from within, while enjoying one's own company; to stick our neck out to the weathering, elation and music of our soul, while kissing the mood of life's compassionate tolerance; – was all that was even needed!

For those who are not familiar with it, briefly, The Red Book is divided into two parts. The first part begins with the way of 'that which is to come' and makes its first steps in the rediscovery and the service of the soul, while conveying the mystery teachings of the monotheistic Gods. The second part opens with the pictures of those mislead by daily consciousness. Then follows a detailed rendering of his active imagination, iconographical, as well as in imagined dialogues. As in many fairy tales, there is an entering into the darkness of the
forest, or a descent to hell, then a time spent there (often lost and in despair), before an eventual laborious return to the light: this is the usual pattern of journeys to the underworld, as told in myths from all over our world.

He wrote in his afterword of the 1959 book, “I have worked on this book for 16 years.” It all began on 12 December 1913, in Küsnacht, Switzerland. His psychological-scientific experiment of his confronting of his unconscious took Jung into its thrall: the experiment, he felt, now “was done with me.”

We have all experienced, once in a while, that we both live and are ‘being lived’. As a psychotherapist, my main motto is: “Never go against the unconscious”. We are now able to read in this intimate and private bible, the results of Jung allowing himself to fall into the realm of his active imagination. We can participate in Jung's investigations of the processes of the collective unconscious. As a 55 year-old, in 1930, he encountered alchemy and the translation, from Chinese, of The Secret of the Golden Flower, thus discovering a mirroring of his own imagined wanderings therein, with the result that he could no longer work on The Red Book. That is the book that was being discussed.

This new book, Lament of the Dead, is one of many books that have sprouted up, since the publication of The Red Book in 2009. However, it doesn't elucidate or amplify any of Jung's writings; it expresses opinions and judgments in a very dogmatic way. Many others have, by now, explored the labyrinth of associations and the monotheistic track of explorations, explanations and hermeneutic interpretations. The academic publishing industry today harvesting a growing crop of these, elucidating many psychological theories around what is really the matter with Jung's personal and collective unconscious.

In their exchanges, Hillman and Shamdasani come across as toadyish fashion, anxious to please each other, in this role of being Jungian intellectuals. Hillman quotes his favourite poet, Auden's mantra a few times: “We are lived by powers we pretend to understand.” How true, especially when the dialogue is being conducted in a quasi- “we know it all” manner. Two years after Hillman's death, we are served up with fifteen conversations, which have passed the individual approval of his widow, Margot McLean (for she holds co-copyright). Hillman and Shamdasani held their first conversation on stage in Los Angeles; the others took place in Connecticut and New York. Their aim was to determine the current status of psychology after Jung’s Red Book (2009). Usually, western academic psychology is occupied with studying and understanding human nature and its defined normal behaviour, in a given society. Furthermore, psychologists often report how ordinary citizens manage to articulate their experience of living. This is not Hillman's view or manner.

He, as the grand master of re-visioning psychology as a soul-making experience, and as the teller of events about what takes place with us humans on a grand scale, fancies the myths and activities of bringing words to the soul, more from the field of arts than science. His work has mostly focused on one's own imagination, dreams and the restoration of the Gods, of whatever dominion they may be.

Personally I didn't enjoy the publication of the Red Book, even though the private spheres of the late C.G. Jung are enormously fascinating. Nevertheless, I can see the value for airing the cloud of the unknown, being encouraged by the likes of C.G. Jung, to tread our idiosyncratic way to inner soul treasures, as the experience of our own bitter herbs of healing.

Of course, it is also fun to exchange one's thinking and experiences, of what life is all about. James Hillman has already offered us two fascinating 'interview' books
before this third one. 1 And, there are some gems in this, as I would have hoped, from Hillman, dropped here and there within his ambiguous threads of conversation. At times, he is endearing with his self-critical courtesy that shows how he is still longing to get to whatever lies below the surface, or of what meets the eye. The veil of storytelling usually covers up the more sordid facts of life, even though this particular ‘conversation’ about the stories in the Red Book, attempts to be both a social and scientific one.

For Hillman, his own and Jung’s psychology, is obviously a practice, a way to be authentic with one’s experience. It is a way of living, a way of seeing, a way of hearing, a way of responding, a way of sensing the Gods in the world: similar to how the Greeks did it, when they went to the theatre and watched plays all day long, by their favourite dramatist. Life as we know it is not a dress rehearsal: it is always the opening night. Here Xenophanes says: “No man knows, or ever will know, the truth about the gods and about everything I speak of: for even if one chanced to say the complete truth, nevertheless one would not know it.”

The way forward for Hillman’s psychology is the way back, to understand human nature through literature and biographies. But, where have I heard this before?

It was thirty years ago exactly, listening to the philosopher Hans-Peter Rickman, going on about hermeneutics and descriptions of lived lives, as well as in social anthropological seminars by Francis Huxley, who in his The Way of the Sacred (1974) covered the ancestor cults and its various follies and self-deceptions. Hillman has described himself as a failed novelist, but he now writes artfully about the soul’s appearance (psyche: breath of life), that can be put into words (logos).

My favourite statement in this book is on page 200, where Hillman states his axiomatic sentences of faith: “I always thought that psychology goes on in the writing. So one of the question I used to ask myself was how do you write psychology? Well, you must write it so that it touches the soul, or it’s not psychology. It has to have that moving quality of experience, and that means it has to have many sorts of metaphors and absurdities and things that go with life. Otherwise you’re writing an academic or a scientific description of something but it’s no longer psychology.” Both Hillman and his jouster, Shamdasani, play joyfully with the metaphor of Lament of the Death, going so far as to mention that what is needed is therapy for the dead, and writing for the dead, as a sacred experience.

About his labour of editing The Red Book, Shamdasani says, “I wasn’t editing this for the living. I was editing for the dead.” (p. 27). This brought to mind Jesus telling the man who excused himself that he first had to go and attend the funeral of his father: ‘Let the Dead Bury Their Own Dead’ (Matthew, 8:22). 3 The beatitude of consciousness shining in the richness of our psyche is verily ignored, in this somewhat backward excursion. Some parts of their conversations are tedious, since both speakers presume they know what Jung was going on about, and they are often opinionatedly dogmatic about this. Incidentally, Jung found dogma to be a confession that is only set up where one wants to suppress doubts once and for all, as personal drive for power. The unconscious, being either personal and/or collective, is per operational definition, not knowable. We can theorize about it, yet all we presume, assume, speculate and observe in indirect communication is yet another

1 Inter Views (1983) with Laura Pozzo (a pseudonym for Vincenzo Caretti); and We’ve had a hundred years of psychotherapy and the world’s getting worse (1993) with Michael Ventura.


3 Also as: ‘Let the dead bury the dead’ (Luke, 9:60)
language game.

I was also taken aback by how the Hillman could fall, so late in his rich life, for this nimble witty chat with someone, who was (for me) a parvenu in our field of psychology and psychotherapy, and yet who aims to place his name next to Jung’s own texts, as he has tried to do with Freud’s work as well? Is this a kind of blatant power-play on Shamdasani’s part, to move (or put) himself into a “primary” position, as the one and only historian of Jung’s work? Who among the Jung Family Foundation supported this vested interest, which so often seems to be against better judgements? While reading Shamdasani’s statements, I often asked myself: “How do you know?” Hillman asks his companion to explain his statement, that, as a historian, he can also be a therapist. Shamdasani replies (somewhat pretentiously): “The history of psychology is the therapy of the word. They must recognize that this bit of history is the Red Book, is their therapy of our time.” (p. 98)

Unfortunately, this book is basically a vehicle for self-promotion of Shamdasani, the editor and footnote producer of The Red Book. Both talkers are very opinionated and dare to tell us they know the inner secrets of Jung’s basic private myth: “Myth is the metaphor that translates libido into configurations. That’s what he found. He found myth as basic.” (p. 64). True, we are historical and social beings immersed in the comedia humane. Psychology has a room in the house of psychotherapy, as philosophy, art, science and myth have too. But, as professional psychotherapists, we do considerably more than simply be concerned about ourselves, and our own well-being. Hillman promotes himself as ‘therapist of ideas’, well versed in the narrative of the comedy of errors: “I think we’re sick from ideas” (p. 159) He has been arguing his case of a psychology without concepts, for forty years. “Soul is all fantasy”, he proclaims, and I see his paradoxical ‘symbiology’5 arrive in myth. From these conversations, we can’t really discover whether Hillman actually read or even understood the Red Book. He feels anyhow that he did, “similar parallel work in his own restricted and limited way to what Jung was dealing with in the Red Book.” (p. 80). The dream of psychology, to become once again a romantic undertaking, is a bowing back to the 18th century romantic poets like Blake, Coleridge, Shelley and Heine. Hillman favours this fantasy of a world, as alive as it can be. So, back from the dead, to a living of how we see what we see and feel, and be as whole as one can be. Is this self-indulgence? Probably! Perhaps, we can now return to our daily tasks of listening to our own answers in the silence of our dreams.

Theodor Itten,
Psychologist & Psychotherapist
St Gallen, Switzerland

---


5 A word play uniting symbolism and logos: a favourite Jungian process.