

Close Encounters

**What do reports of encounters with imaginal entities (angels, faerie, etc.)
imply about the nature of the human psyche?**

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Introduction

“Fix every wandering thought upon/That quarter where all thought is done:/Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?” (W.B. Yeats, 1996, p.348).

Before talking about what are imaginal entities and what we can learn from encounters with them, I think that it is important to understand what we mean by psyche and, far from being exhaustive, what did psyche mean for Ancient Greek philosophers and the shift that its definition went through in the nineteenth century with advent of psychology and, more specifically, Carl Jung. The definition of psyche that I will be using in this essay in the second and third section is, however, strongly derived from James Hillman’s thought, which is psyche as soul and soul being something that “encompasses all human nature and more” (1988, p.151), that deals primarily with images, reflection, and reflexive insight (1991, p. 32) and is deliberately ambiguous (1988, p.46).

I will also discuss what imaginal and imaginal entities might be, first by laying out Frederic Myers’ systematisation of the imaginal as a world-space that might reveal our potential for evolution, and second by talking about Hillman’s idea of the imaginal as the meeting place of the soul, where we encounter hypostases of our psychological events (1991, p.40) without transforming them into ego-based constructions or projections. It is Hillman’s take on the imaginal that interests me the most and upon which I will draw the basis for my own reflection of what the encounters with imaginal entities imply about the nature of the human psyche.

Close Encounters of the First Kind

Psyche as Immortal Soul

Plato in the *Apology* defends that caring about the perfection of their souls is the most important thing people should do and that the gods urged him to engage with everyone in order to make them realise that there is nothing more important than the betterment of the soul (29e-30b). In *Phaedo* he argues that the body is a prison and that the soul is the immaterial part of us which is akin to the divine (80a). He justifies, in *Phaedrus*, the immortality of the soul by saying it is self-moving and “only that which moves itself, since it does not leave itself, never ceases to move” and thus cannot decay or be destroyed (245c-e). The soul in this dialogue is of “the composite nature of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer” (246a). His preoccupation with the perfection of the soul in the *Apology* is teleological, for when the soul “is perfect and fully winged, it mounts upward and governs the whole world; but the soul which has lost its wings is borne along until it gets hold of something solid, when it settles down, taking upon itself an earthly body (246b/c) and these wings are what brings us to the gods (246d). He also places in the soul two polarities: the white horse, or the desire for the good and virtue and the black horse, or evil and unruly passions (247b) and it is the duty of the charioteer to control the dark horse so that the white horse may bring her closer to the heavens.

Besides being the animating principle, Plato considers higher the soul “as the 'subject of knowledge or of cognitive activity in general” (Roberts, 1905, p.372). In the *Republic* he says that the lover of knowledge comes “into touch with the nature of each thing in itself by that part of his soul to which it belongs to lay hold on that kind of reality—the part akin to it, namely—and through that approaching it, and consorting with reality really, he would beget intelligence and truth, attain to knowledge and truly live and grow, and so find surcease from his travail of soul” (490b). There is an affinity between the Soul and Ideas, “for he holds that without it knowledge would be impossible. Affinity is the condition 'in virtue of' which the soul 'contemplates' or 'apprehends' true being” (Ibid., p.373). For Plato, gaining knowledge is the soul remembering what it forgot by incarnating (*Phaedo*, 75c). Only an immortal faculty could be able to recollect absolute Forms and Ideas (76e) and the existence of the first postulate the existence of the latter and vice-versa.

Psyche as Processes

Raymond Martin and John Barresi argue that Plato's division of the soul (...) may be the ultimate theoretical origin of the idea of the unconscious. In Augustine, the view became of true and false selves. In the twelfth century (...) it spawned the notion of self-deception. Subsequently, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the view that the soul is divided and in conflict with itself resurfaced in an army of thinkers (...) until in the nineteenth century (...) the lower parts of the soul were relegated to the unconscious (2006, p. 20)

In the nineteenth century, with the advent of psychology, there was the need to distinguish *psyche*, as the objective subject of study of psychology, and *soul*, as something that intrinsically metaphysical in nature. Jung says:

I have been compelled, in my investigations into the structure of the unconscious, to make a conceptual distinction between *soul* and *psyche*. By *psyche*, I understand the totality of all psychic processes, conscious as well as unconscious. By *soul*, on the other hand, I understand a clearly demarcated functional complex that can best be described as a "personality" (1971, Def. 48 par. 797).

These processes according to him are not randomised, but contain "a teleological orientation" (Jung, 1967, p.128). Jung's *psyche* however is also polarised. One pole has the body as basis and the associated processes are caused by a physiological function. The other in an independent and autonomous reality, separate from the body and its functions (Demos, 1955, p.76) He also speaks of a "higher" *psyche*, the one that is not chained to the physiological but one that forms, instead, a

highly complex determinant, as for example certain rational, ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other traditional ideas which cannot be scientifically proved to have any physiological basis. These extremely complex dominants form the other pole of the *psyche*. Experience likewise shows that this pole possesses an energy many times greater than that of the physiologically conditioned *psyche*. (Ibid, p.77)

He also claims the nature of the processes of the psyche is dialectical (Ibid., p.85) and much like Plato, he argues that the *eros* and the *logos* are the two forces that coordinate the psyche and that the instincts should be kept in check by the *logos* (1967, pp.19-26).

Psyche as Everything

James Hillman's conception of psyche is an all-encompassing one. It joins Plato's and Jung's ideas in an incredible original fashion. He acknowledges that whilst the terms psyche and soul can be interchangeable, psyche is a term that is more rooted in physical life as it is more recent and linked with biological processes (1991, p.20) He admits, however, that science cannot describe soul and that its meanings is highly dependent on context. He opens up the semantic field of 'soul' in order to "amplify it further: mind, spirit, heart, life, warmth, humanness, personality, individuality, intentionality, essence, innermost, purpose, emotion, quality, virtue, morality, sin, wisdom, death, God." (Ibid., p.19) Soul, for Hillman has inevitably "metaphysical and romantic overtones" (Ibid., p.20) and is intrinsically connect with fate.

What is interesting in Hillman's conception of psyche is that he does not reduce it neither to the immortal and more elevated part of the human being nor to a complex of psychic processes. He says that "by employing the dream as model of psychic actuality, and by conceiving a theory of personality based upon the dream, we are imagining the psyche's basic structure to be an inscape of personified images. (...) We can describe the psyche as a polycentric realm of nonverbal, nonspatial images" (Ibid., p.48). This realm is shared by myth, which "offers the same kind of world. It too is polycentric, with innumerable personifications in imaginal space" (Ibid., p.49). More than a place of pure intellect, the soul sits in a place of metaphor, symbols and the imaginal that should not be reduced to one human being's psychological processes and complexes - we are inside and composed of images, not the other way around. As an example, in his book *Animal Presences* he talks about how dreaming about a fox does not mean that the fox is

merely an image of your "Shadow problem," your propensity to stealth. (...) The fox comes into your dream as a kind of teacher, a doctor animal, who knows lots more than you do about these traits of yours. And that's a blessing. Instead of a symptom or a character disorder, you now have a fox to live with, and you need to keep an eye on each other. (2008, 95%)

For Hillman the myth, the image, the being that visits you in the night, “has a redemptive psychological function, and a psychology derived from it can inspire a life founded on it” (1996, p.8). They are a call from action in your soul for “the myths unfold downward into one’s personal soul” (Ibid., p.47). What is behind them, however, is inscrutable, ethereal and invisible (Ibid., p.94) and, necessarily, other. We are embedded in this mythical reality, in this “quickenning soul.” Hillman says that “what the Romantics called the ‘quickenning soul’ is today named psychic reality. It is all over the place, although we insist it is invisible.” (Ibid., p.97)

Close Encounters of the Second Kind

After years of research into paranormal events, Frederic Myers developed four altered world-states in *Human Personality*: the subliminal, the supernormal, the telepathic, and the imaginal (Kripal, 2010, pp. 57-58). What is interesting is that these states are a way through which he gives us “a plausible explanation of why the impossible seems impossible but is not. He teaches us that the impossible may in fact be a function not of the unreality or fiction of psychical events, but our own inadequate models of human personality (...)” (Ibid, p.81). The question here is not if the psyche has any external manifestations outside of our minds, but how the way we look at the psyche might be ignoring some, if not most, of its actual range of abilities. “Images, myths, and symbols” (Ibid., p.82) become the vehicle to which we can access this world what exists beyond the threshold of ‘reality’.

Jeffrey Kripal defends that Myers was the first person to use the term imaginal in a consistent way (Ibid., p.83) and that he understood that “human imagination works in many modes and on many levels” (Ibid) including the transcendental. The imaginal for Myers, however, is intrinsically linked to an idea of evolution, defining it as “a word used of characteristics belonging to the perfect insect or imago; —and thus opposed to larval; — metaphorically applied to transcendental faculties shown in rudiment in ordinary life” (HP 1: xviii, as quoted by Kripal, Ibid.). This opens up the path to conceiving supernatural or paranormal encounters, that always seem so weird and unreal, as we are looking into a more advanced human nature, at another evolutionary state of the human being. An interesting anecdote to support Myers’ idea can be found in sci-fi author and famous abductee Whitley Strieber. In his book with Kripal, he narrates a episode of when he had a sexual encounter with

an alien and muses on the reaction of his wife upon him telling her his violation of their marital vows:

I'd assumed Anne would be furious (...), but she took it all in stride, so much so that I came to wonder what her level of involvement really is. Could Anne be one with the woman depicted on the cover of *Communion*? Are they the same person in two different forms, or do I perceive her that way - and by extension, do we all sometimes perceive others around us as being in different forms? (2017, p.98)

Myers believed that Plato was the first philosopher to get a glimpse of this evolved state of consciousness (Kripal, 2010, p.84). He thought that Plato's doctrine of reminiscences was similar to his proposal that the imaginal is a rediscovery of human potential (Ibid.). He argues that there is a "similarity of structure between our own intelligence and some unseen intelligence" (Ibid.) and that this invisible intelligence may be, at the same time, to what we need to return *and* "may be destined again to be" (Ibid.).

For Hillman, crossing the threshold into the invisible requires a mythical thinking that bridges the chasm created by philosophy forcibly cutting apart mind and matter (1996, p. 94). "Mysticism," he says, "unites visible and invisible; all things are transparent and proclaim their invisible ground" (Ibid.) He argues that there is a mystic sensibility in the intellect that can understand the authenticity of invisible things (Ibid., p.97). This is what allows us to see the Angel, the daemon, and to regard the world as "permeable, inhabited by both physical and imaginal bodies" (Ibid., p.109). Hillman says that "the retraction of our interest from what rational consciousness calls magical, mystical, and mythical merges all the imaginal bodies indiscriminately into the monstrous. Result: The invisible becomes 'alien'" (Ibid.).

He argues that the rational mind prefers to keep the chasm between us and the imaginal wide open, than to try to bridge it. He believes, however, that "the copresence of visible and invisible sustains life" (Ibid., p.111) and that we, as a culture, need to keep the invisibles attached through rituals and myths, for "myths keep their daimonic realm invisibly present" (Ibid, p.112). Hillman argues that we "exist and give existence by virtue of perception (Ibid., p. 126). We bring into being what we perceive, and we maintain their existence also by perceiving and when this vision comes from the heart, "things are revealed that prove the Truth of the Imagination" (Ibid., p. 127). He says that "images are souls" and that we need to meet them at

this level (1991, p.24) Tom Cheetham says that “the move from the literal to the imaginal is the heart of spiritual work for Corbin, and the principal technique of soul-making for Hillman” (2013, p.2)

Hillman says that myth and images created by our imagination are the foundations of our psyche. He says that “*becoming conscious* would now mean becoming aware of fantasies and the recognition of them everywhere and not merely in a ‘fantasy world’ separate from ‘reality’” (1991, p.33. Italics in the original). W.B. Yeats recounts in *Regina, Regina Pigmeorum, Veni* that after calling forth the Faery Queen one night on a sandy beach he entered “a kind of trance, in which what we call the unreal had begun to take upon itself a masterful reality, and [he] was able to see the faint gleam of golden ornaments, the shadowy blossom of dim hair” (1902, p.94). He asks the being whether their kind are “dramatizations of our moods” (Ibid., p. 95) - a projection of our psyche. The girl who was being the interpreter between the Faery Queen and Yeats replies that the faery did not understand his question “but says that her people are much like human beings and do most of the things human beings do” (Ibid, p.96).

Hillman says that the interest in superstitions, folklore and other practices that might be considered “inferior religion” (1991, p.41) is what allows the “anima/animus aspects of the psyche to begin to find traditional reflection and containment in an impersonal background” (Ibid.). The paradox that Hillman lays out is that we need to accept that “all figures and feelings of the psyche are wholly *mine*, while at the same time recognizing that these figures and feelings are free of my control and identity, not *mine* at all” (Ibid., p. 47. Italics in the original).

Close Encounters of the Third Kind

Both Myers and Hillman admit that encounters with imaginal beings say something about the nature of our own being. If for Myers they reveal teleological evidence of human evolution into a higher state of consciousness, for Hillman they are more a reflection of our conscious processes which manifest itself in myth, dreams and fantasies. What is interesting is that for both authors, whilst they might not be literal reality as perceived by our “ego-consciousness” (Ibid.,

p.33), they are as ontologically real as us - as Corbin says regarding the *mundus imaginalis* (1972, p.5) - and their existence is directly connected with ours. Drawing on George Berkeley's idealism and immaterialism, one might argue that if there is no objective reality, if something exists just as long as someone perceives it, the perceiving mind being either human or as Berkeley says, "any other created spirit" (2009, section 2, §6), then our knowledge of imaginal beings is as valid as our knowledge of rocks. He says that

It is evident to anyone who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge, that they are either IDEAS actually imprinted on the senses; or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind; or lastly, ideas formed by help of memory and imagination--either compounding, dividing, or barely representing those originally perceived in the aforesaid ways (Ibid., §1)

Admitting then that imaginal beings are as real as our physical reality and that the knowledge derived of our perception of the imaginal is also as valid as knowledge derived from our perception of our physical reality, must imply that we can derive knowledge from encounters with the imaginal. Plato goes even further when he says that theory of Forms which are recollected by our immortal soul (Meno, 81b) are *more true* than knowledge obtained by sense-perception.

Taking Hillman's concept that we are embedded in a psychic reality and Plato's idea of knowledge as recollection of the soul, I would like to argue that the encounters with the *others* is a mirrored recollection of soul in the imaginal beings. Furthermore, I would like to argue that the soul that we encounter is very often the soul which we somehow reject as not part of us, but that need to find some kind of expression in the world. Hillman argues that "the endless variety of figures [in mythology] reflects the endlessness of the soul" (1991, p.43). Taking as an example the encounter with faeries, Björn Sundmark says, regarding W.B. Yeats, that "his Fairyland, then, is an abode of the dead, and, as such, a dangerous liminal space as well as a wellspring of poetic inspiration. But the word 'fairy' also has to do with *fata*, fate, and destiny" (2006, p. 103). A Fairyland is a land of soul and this is why the Faery Queen tells Yeats that she is very much like the humans, for we both are soul. Yeats writes that different folktales will have different explanations for the existence of such spirits: fallen angels who are neither good enough nor bad enough, old gods, unbaptised children, heathen people who lived before the advent of

Christianity (Briggs, 1970, p.91). However, they all have something in common. They are all displaced souls that dwell on because they have nowhere to go. Interestingly enough most folklore teach us how to work with the spirits, how to integrate the displaced soul in a productive symbiosis. You free a genie, and you get three wishes. In the fantasy novel *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman there is a tale of how an Irish girl develops a relationship with a leprechaun. When she remembers to do her offerings to the leprechaun, she has luck, but when she gets too much involved with herself and forgets that her luck came from something *outside* her life is ruined. Dealing with the faery folk is dealing with fate (Yeats) and fate is also soul (Hillman). In our encounters with faeries, we are recollecting the entanglements of soul that talk about death, displacement and fate and the more we deny that part of our soul, the more we will be visited by these beings, which might take several forms.

In our modern age, faery lore has been mostly forgotten, but the soul needs to manifest itself, it needs to be *perceived*. One example of this manifestation is encountering the alien, both in real life encounters and science-fiction. Not being able to surpass our materialistic heirloom from the Enlightenment, we gradually forgot how to conceptualise the imaginal, Myers' liminal space where these beings inhabit and that we too can share in our own world, and have sent them to another planet, another galaxy, but the soul comes back in a shiny spaceship. It is important to note that most of alien lore has the alien species as being more advanced than us. This correlates with Myers' idea of the superliminal being as us but more advanced. It also, however, can be seen as showing the superiority of soul in comparison with our material body. If, as Plato says, our soul is our elevated self that recollects the knowledge of the ideal Forms, then the alien manifestation of soul needs to be more advanced technologically because that is how we measure knowledge now. And since we have lost our methods of communicating with the displaced soul (prayer, offerings, contracts, libations, rituals) the interaction will be violent, intrusive and demanding. Most contemporary stories about aliens are about abducting us, invading us, nesting in us, because we have lost the concept of consciousness as soul and it being manifested in myth and images. The accepted narrative is that "consciousness should be understood as consisting of narrations, produced by the brain, the point of which is to interpret objects and events in some way" (Martin & Barresi, 2006, p.279) and does not allow, unlike Berkeley, for

consciousness to be placed anywhere but in our human brain. Any encounter with any type of consciousness that is not explained by synapses will be utterly terrifying in a mechanistic world view. Hillman says that psyche had become alienated from the world because the world had lost its soul and that Jung found the soul again in the sick (1988., p. 112), but even that soul was taken away from us by psychiatry and cognitive psychology. The loss of our own soul makes it impossible to recognise the soul in the other and have no way to integrate it except through trauma. As Hillman says, trauma might be a way through which the soul demands transformation (1988, p.144) and since our rationalist society has burned all the bridges to the other world, it overflows into us like a destructive river in order to quench our thirst for soul. The sleek and slippery pink river dolphin of the Amazon river¹ that transforms itself into human in order to have intercourse with a human gives place to the sleek and slippery Martian alien that rapes their abductee. If some of the faery folk can still at least pretend to have some humanity in them, most of the aliens cannot. We used to recognise humanity in the faery folk because we also recognised soul in ourselves. When it becomes completely displaced, so does the imaginal being loses its humanity.

There is one cultural phenomenon, however, in which the alien and the imaginal being is also perceived as a benefic influence: comic books. Taking Superman, the archetypal superhero, as an example, we can see how the imaginal and the soul finds a place in our world again. It crashes down into earth (trauma) but it is integrated in a human family and becomes human. Clark Kent, the human soul, and Kal-El, the alien soul, are two sides of the hero and shows us what happens when we integrate the displaced soul. We step into the imaginal and become super-Men. Myers' larva evolves into a butterfly and flies away.

¹ This is a traditional folk lore that originated in the north of Brazil.

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