

Giegerich/Hillman: What is Going on?

Psychology at the Threshold

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Since the program of this conference went out, I have received, in person or via email, many reactions to the title of this lecture, which reads: *Hillman-Giegerich: What is going on?* I understand that the expectations are not only numerous but also contradictory, setting me up for failure to meet them. In this context, I would like to begin by stating what I cannot or will not do today and by clarifying my position.

My standpoint is not that of arbiter of a debate, not that of talk show head who wants to play hardball, nor its opposite, the good mother who wishes to reconcile everybody before dinner. It is not the pledge of allegiance of the faithful devotee, who comes to pay her respect, nor the rebellion of the ex-devotee who, having blindly followed the party line, now confuses critique with rebellion.

My standpoint has not changed; from the very beginning I would not have wanted to be part of a school of thought that would not tolerate critique or demand ideological submission. I believe even friends should not ask that of one another. My admiration for James Hillman goes to the rhetorical genius, to the generous defender and lover of ideas and not to a founding father, guru, or party leader. If there is an image of the father, I suggest Zeus the host, hosting us today at his table for a feast of ideas. An editor also hosts authors and James Hillman has invited many of us to publish at Spring.

I believe the only way to be really loyal to our tribe is not to be too loyal, not to be too reproductive; we need the kind of lack of piety that exist in families who are secure enough to discuss what is omitted, forgotten, expelled, scorned, or concealed. That is one of the reasons why I welcome Giegerich's criticism of "us"; he is a member of our tribe, pointing at what is omitted.

It takes the determination of a philosopher to write his critique of the archetypal theory as it is a theory which has the mercurial ability to recycle any critique as just another archetypal configuration, as only one more position

among many, all equally being treated like fantasies anyway.

But courage and determination are also needed from the reader, to cut through Giegerich's heavy hegelian language. He seems to intentionally wrap his ideas in layers and layers of impossible language and germanic heavyness to protect them from uninitiated frivolous French amateurs like myself. To this I answer, and this will be my only critique of Giegerich, as my goal is not to do a critique of the critique, that obtuse academic style creates a problem similar to that of pharmaceutical companies who produce unaffordable medicines for deadly diseases. Those of us, psychologists, who are most hungry for philosophy cannot all afford the time or training it takes to dig for gold in scholarly journals or in Hegel. But I was determined to do some roller blading through Giegerich terminological maze and to extract gold nuggets from his philosophical gravel. My intention is to present them to you today, for your examination.

First, there is gold in the fact that he writes to transform not only the way we think about ourselves by transforming the way think our theories, as most psychological theories will do, but also to change our sense

of what is possible. His is an ambition for our future, the future of depth psychology. And the reason why we should all be interested by this kind of exploration is very simple: psychology, as the title of this conference suggests, is at a threshold, and that means that we need to bring up, once more, one terribly plain but fundamental question, a question we are gathered here to ask: What is psychology? What should we keep, what should we leave out, what should we search for.

Giegerich raises this question in indirect way, by asking what is the relation of psychology to logic, rationality and truth.

I thought for a long time that we could evade the question of logic ,truth and rationality by affirming that psychology is more akin to a genre in literature than to a science. But even if that is so, we still have to define our genre as each genre, interestingly enough, has a relation to truth and rationality. In a detective story, truth is finding who done it, through a rational demonstration of guilt. The genre of science fiction is based on stretching to the limits the rational possibilities of science and technology. Historical novels are based on a mix of truth (the historical facts) and fiction (the imagined emotions and narrative

twists). As for sentimental novels they are forever trying to sell their definition of true love and forever trying to defend passion against reason. Even the genre of fairy tale and mythology has a relation to truth and rationality by defining the fantastic and divine in contradistinction to the realistic and profane. As for the genre of recipe books, well, the proof in is the pudding!

In the genre of psychology, how to we define our rapport to truth and to rationality? Which is another way to ask; what is the logical life of the soul? Especially now that psychology borrows more and more concepts and metaphors from alchemy, astrology, physics, oriental cultures, shamanism, dead religions also called mythologies, that all have their own relation to truth, it makes the definition of our relation to truth and rationality, in other words the setting of our boundaries, all the more urgent.

I would like to give you an example of how I came to think that Giegerich might be right in stating that archetypal psychology must redefine its relation to truth and rationality, and must not satisfy itself with the imaginal life of the soul because soul also has a logical life. I agree with Giegerich that soul should think, and should think harder, not just imagine and fantasize. So, here is how I understand

his critique, through my most humbling experience as therapist.

A bright young woman of 25 had been my patient for a year, mostly lamenting the fact that her mother, a well known editor of a woman's magazine, supposedly had not given her enough 'mothering', leaving her, so she felt, with the emotions of a needy child. As emotions feelings, affects, are the starting point, she used a full box of kleenex and a few sessions crying the tears of the abandoned child. After that we began exploring the images and myths carrying these emotions and found an interesting combination that fascinated her: although she had both parents, she found that she lived her life in the myth of the orphan with variations on the theme of the Little Match Girl. She was that orphan girl watching others feasting on life while she, poor little rich girl of two successful parents, was abandoned to her cold bookish solitude. The silent editorialist mother pounding away at her keyboard on the dining room table, as if behind a windowpane, was to the needy child like the unavailable goodies for the little match girl. Very romantic and dangerously alluring myth; it carried such narrative richness that she was seduced by her own mythology. I kept hoping for a new chapter, for the story to move on and her

to graduate to a more satisfying myth but one can be as attached to a myth as one is attached to one's symptoms.

At this point the father asked to be invited to one of our sessions and my client agreed. I must add that the relationship between father and daughter was a rich and positive one. First, he began by sharing his own observations on the mother/daughter relationship. He suggested that according to what he had witnessed of his daughter's childhood, his wife had been much more available as a mother than his own mother. While he considered his mother to have been a good enough traditional mother, his wife had spent infinitely more time and energy talking, doing things with their daughter. The mothers of his childhood would feed their children and tell them not to come back in the house before the next meal. Why had he never thought of himself as abandoned? His mother played bridge in the afternoon, went shopping, talked over the phone, helped his father with the business, went to her various clubs and never looked at his drawings, never asked him about his dreams, never even talk much with them children. He was not bringing this for us to begin exploring his own childhood; he was raising a philosophical question, asking: could the norm of mothering be relative?

Yes, the daughter agreed. “But all the sociology in the world cannot account for my feelings of abandonment. How can I deny them?” “Of course”, admitted the father. And at this point, he went deeper in his reasoning, in a most surprising way, again not through an exploration of emotions or images, but offering us the result of his sharp thinking, a new theory, a logic that cut through all his daughter’s complexes and instantly dissolved her mythology by moving the whole story to another level. Giegerich uses Hegel’s concept of sublation to describe the kind of sharp cutting through that followed and that I will explain. Sublation is a hegelian word that means a cutting through, a distillation of thought, obtained by a succession of synthesis between thesis and antithesis; I believe the next step of the father’s logic contained a gem, an example of sublating. Here is what he had to say to his daughter: “you were a bright and intuitive child. You perceived the guilt of your mother at being the first generation of women to break with the old model of motherhood. You learned that by pushing the guilt button you could get a lot of benefits. And your mother, being at the historical junction between mothers who played bridge in the afternoon and women who also wanted a career, would do anything not to be guilty of being a bad mother; at that is why the guilt button

worked like an ATM machine for you. This fiction worked for a long time but now it victimizes you, it victimizes your mother, and it victimizes me, as it is my wife whom you upset with your accusations of emotional neglect. If you just stopped using the guilt button you would see that you got plenty of mothering. The problem is not in you, not in her, and not in feminism.”

At this point, I literally saw the daughter being hit by what felt like truth. What else might we call it? Nobody has the power to validate that kind of truth as absolute truth, but the fact is that the daughter was instantly relieved to find that she agreed with her father’s reasoning. She was being freed by a logical truth that cut right through her complexes. The father’s theory, his thinking, completely dissolved not only the daughter’s emotions, but her mythology of orphan and the images of the little match girl. POOF! Gone! Sublated! It was a glorious moment between father and daughter and a deep philosophical insight for me.

In order to sublimate, she as well as I, had to stop trying to represent in images what needed to be conceived in thought and that is one crucial point of Giegerich’s argument. Only through thinking, not imagining, could we reach a level of abstraction that allowed us to understand the

father's theory about the historical and psychological world the daughter and her mother had lived in.

Of course truth is a big dangerous word. Just try adding it to the program that James Hillman suggested in his opening remarks : to Justice, Beauty, and Destiny, add Truth and immediately the whole program feels terribly ponderous. The search for truth is especially ambiguous for us, psychologists, as we work with the psyche's tendency to distort and fictionalize. But if we go past that fear of the word we discover that looking for truth is exactly like fighting for a better Justice system: absolute Justice, like absolute truth is impossible to obtain. Still, as we never stop trying to reach for Justice we should also never trying to get closer to aTruth.

In his lovely short essay titled *Truth*, the British historian Felipe Fernandez Armesto, professor at Oxford, writes of the history of the pursuit of truth as the most cherished and widely shared project of mankind, even though suspicions that reality is intractable and inexpressible have been there all along, way before post modernism made a specialty of it. He remarks how against this background of long standing truth-quest the scale of current indifference to the concept of truth looks like a

sudden and dangerous novelty. Following his thinking, we must see that psychologists, like every body in this post modern context, have been caught in the cross fire of a culture-war between religious extremists, who think they know the truth, and secular nihilists, who teach it can never be known. We psychologists, want to avoid both camps. But, as Fernandez Armesto suggests, the search for truth is still on and we should leave relativists and nihilists where they belong, that is, on the margin of history.

As psychologists we cannot not be concerned with truth because like others, we are looking for a language that can match reality. Even when Lacan was trying to show how our dependence on language makes it impossible for the psyche to speak the truth, still, his concern was with truth. And Derrida, for all his extravagances, was and still is in search of truth; deconstruction may have defined truth as “that which inevitably gets distorted” but that is precisely why we should never give up deconstructing as a way of cleaning truth of its bugs and parasites, as we go along trying to deconstruct and reconstruct again to produce new meaning. When deconstructionists set out to ‘read between the lines’, or even ‘read against the grain’ it remains an attempt to understand a distorted truth hidden in the logic of the text. By text they mean anything that can support an

interpretation, like for example the body can be read like a text, or your personality and mine, the architecture of this room, the setting of this podium on this stage; all of that can be interpreted. Archetypal psychology carried a similar project, but with the imaginal realm instead of language, aiming to see through, to get at and reveal the myths active in the background. Giegerich now criticises our project by reminding us that image is not all, that soul also has a logic. Even though we might not be able to define once and for all the kind of truth or logic psychology is after, we can at least agree that psychology has to stay preoccupied with it, just as we remain preoccupied with having a better justice system.

If psychology as a discipline gets back to thinking and logic, our patients will too.

I am sure you can think of those well intentioned patients or students, who began exploring the wetlands of imagination and got lost in some swamp of their fantasies. I think therapists and teachers share some responsibility in those failures as the wetness of imagination should be balanced by the dryness of logic. As psychologists, we are trained to explore the emotions first, and then if you are an archetypal psychologist, you will also want to discover the images and myths that are active in the background. But I

hear Giegerich saying that it is not enough, that psychology could go one step further because we all need a philosophical system, to understand and sublimate our psychological problems. It is not enough to reveal the myth we live by, we also have to reveal and work on the philosophy we think with. There are plenty of philosophical systems to choose from, and I don't think Giegerich is suggesting that Hegel is the best or only one. Neither is he suggesting that philosophers should take our jobs. We don't need to be philosophers to help our patients understand the logic of their souls. In changing her vision of the world, of history, of her mother and of herself in the world, the young woman who was my patient became conscious of her logic. So, the end of therapy in her case, coincided with a sublation of the imaginal. The image of orphan is gone, just like in a distillation of gin or cognac, the grain that started the process is now gone. Finding the images of orphan got us a long way, but there was also a need for something else, and that something else, I understand as being what Giegerich, after Hegel, calls sublation.

Negating

Now, I would like to pause here, and to move to another concept that Giegerich recycles from Hegel for the

benefit of psychology and it is the concept of negation. The need for Sublation and Negation are the two ideas of Giegerich 's book that I found most interesting. Again, I am not a Hegel expert, so all I can do is explain how this concept of negation felt so useful to me as a psychologist.

The process of negating is not the same thing as the Via Negativa and maybe it is useful here to point at the difference. Saying to someone "I do not love you anymore" is an example of negation, not of via negativa. If the other then asks: do you mean you hate me? And you answer, no, no, I don't mean I hate you. Do you mean you want to move out of the house tonight? No, it's not that. Do you love someone else? No, not at all. Do you pity me? No, there is no pity in my feeling... etc... This succession of no, no, is the via negativa, weeding away what does not quite fit.

But the negation of "I don't love you anymore" is not a via negativa, it is a full insight, a logical insight of the most important kind for psychology.

What sort of insight are you having when you say to someone "I don't love you anymore"? What is the image of "I do not love you anymore" ? None. It is without an image, without a myth, even maybe, without a feeling, yet it is a crucial logical insight: it is the experience of the negation

of a previous experience of love; you know for sure that you are experiencing this negation of the love that once was, that is all you can say about it but it is a crucial insight. Ibsen's Nora, that Ted Roszack so beautifully resurrected yesterday, does not yet know who she wants to be, or what she wants to do, or where she should go, but she certainly knows that she is no more primarily a wife and mother. That is why the director having her close the door is such good staging. Her extraordinary insight is a negation.

Just as nobody has ever been able to define happiness but everybody knows when one is not happy, so, most of our psychological insights are negations; we know what is not there. You may find a multitude of examples of that form of insight: the director with his actors on the stage knows when the acting is not good, fake, false, does not sound true, but it is almost impossible to define what will work.

Without getting too technical, it might be useful here to point out that there are two sorts of negations. If I say for example, this podium is not a chair and this mike is not a part of my body, I am not negating the existence of this podium or of the mike or of my body. But let's say you came in the room this morning expecting to see someone very

important to you, a longtime friend, a lover, or a respected enemy, someone you spent a sleepless night thinking about, anticipating a reunion. You come into the room, you look around, you see that this person is not here. It makes sense to say that you are experiencing the presence of absence; the negation of the presence of that person is a nothingness, as Jean Paul Sartre would have said, full of meaning for you. If, by comparison, someone had announced this morning that Bill Clinton would not be attending our conference, it would have been simply an absurd announcement, not a negation, as he was neither invited nor expected. But the absence of the expected friend is full of implications, his or her not being here, this absence is omnipresent to our consciousness and may occupy your psyche more than anything that positively exist in the room.

The reason I was so excited when I was reminded of this philosophical concept of negating, while reading Giegerich, is because so many of our psychological insights have that status of negativity ; most of our neurotic traits, well, I should say most of mine, are about what is not there, holes in the fabric of my existence, missing elements, missing persons, missing time, missing turns of events in the past, missing qualities in me. I actively miss so many non existing “nothingness” that, yes, I do, think, with Giegerich

that we need to train ourselves to think logically and negatively, not only positively and imaginally.

To further explore negativity, let's take a simple word, for example the word 'Village'. Village is a thought, just like soul is a thought, or unconscious, or anima mundi. And it may bring up an image of a village green with a café and a bookstore. 1000 houses may make a village, yet none of these individual houses are the village. Nor do we really see the transition between dwelling to village to city. It is all in thought. So 'village' does not exist. But we all understand what Hillary meant by the title of her book: "It takes a village to raise a child". She was pointing at the sense of community that the thought of 'village' is supposed to carry. But community is another concept that has no existence except in thought so that if you define 'village' by the sense of 'community', then how can you explain that one can live on an island with only three houses and a total population of 15 (which is not a village) and still have more of a sense of community than on living in an apartment in a large city?

One of Giegerich's points is that we limit ourselves and get into all sorts of messes and contradictions like the preceding example whenever we begin objectifying or

positivizing our psychological concepts or our images and myths. Archetypal psychology at its beginning was criticizing ego psychology for objectifying concepts like unconscious, individuation or Self, and now Giegerich is criticizing archetypal psychology for positivizing images and myths. Aphrodite, Hermes, the orphan or the little match girl do not exist, no more than village and community, self and unconscious; all of these are useful *only* as long as they keep their status of negativity.

The use of mythology asks for vigilance, as it tends to positivize just like ego psychology does with its concepts. This tendency to positivize cannot be helped: even though James Hillman is not guilty of it in his writing about the acorn and the myth of the daimon, I am sure you have had the uneasy experience of someone talking about his or her daimon as if it had a positive existence somewhere behind the liver. The unease comes from the fact that metaphor is gone, the acorn or daimon is now as positivized as the genetic code.

That is why, no theory, especially a theory of the imaginal, can remain fresh without a critique, and also a certain sense of humor that allows for play. Two persons may both be saying that Demeter or the Trickster has been

activated in their psyche, and with one it will feel ok, and with the other, you might feel that this person is smoking her own dope. The difference is in the positivizing.

This insistence on negation is not a fancy philosophical hair splitting as negation is a road to consciousness that has as much power as emotion or image.

Let's take the most obvious of problems: the epidemic of violence in schools and gangs. When I imagine this violence, I see scenes of the Columbine, guns hidden in lockers, families glued to their TV, exhausted underpaid teachers. Another way to go, through negation, is to think of violence as essentially a negation of many things: it is a negation of love, or peace, or beauty, civility, manners, codes, rituals, and all the divinitites. When looking at the suicidal youth, instead of looking at him or her positively as suicidal, let's think about what is missing: despair is an absence of community an absence to one's self and the absence of so many other things. It is not what is there, the positive clinical condition, that makes the young person want to die, it is what is not there.

So many insights seem to start in negation: remember how the feminist movement started when woman understood, so to speak, the presence of their absence in

culture, in politics, in history, in psychology, in the family. Look at any relationship; whenever we feel like complaining to the other: “you don’t understand me”, a philosopher could suggest that what we are really saying is: “you positivize me, you take for granted a ‘me’ that does not even exist, you label, name, define, imagine, interpret and objectify me”. Again, Ibsen’s Nora, resist being positivized.

As the image tends to positivize, Giegerich is asking us to understand what we may be missing by considering the image as the final destination. Archetypal psychology’s revised, enlarged program could be “From the affect, move to the image” and then, let’s add another step, which is keep on negating, keep on sublating this image.

Archetypal psychology at its beginning was not so sure of itself, it was negating a lot; it was saying: no, no, the affect is not all, no, the Self does not have a positive existence, our concepts do not exist, they are fantasies, mythologies; one can see through them. Maybe it is the success of our perspective that now confronts us with the danger to get stuck in the positivity of the image.

One of the missions of archetypal psychology is already accomplished: it has claimed back images and myths

and given imagination its dignity. I believe the actual success of the archetypal approach will be durable and its contribution will be recognized in wider and wider circles. But because we are lovers of images (iconophiles) does not mean we cannot also love the logical life of the soul.

Maybe I should speak for myself. I teach mythology and archetypal psychology, and I really love it but I don't want the archetypal perspective, with its return to gods and goddesses, to exalt itself as though it was an alternative religion. Especially if it supports the narcissistic tendency of the psyche that will ask that the divinities be hospitable to our little personal interests. Let's leave that to fundamentalists of all kinds. And although I appreciate a sense of Revelation that comes with studying spiritual traditions, I don't want to lose the sense of the world as a place that can be also understood rationally.

Giegerich happens to be the first to be doing of archetypal psychology a critique similar to that of Lacan for Freud. Through his now famous cliché of "the unconscious is structured like a language", Lacan was trying to make the point that language can only be a compromise between ourselves and reality. Ok Lacan, it took me a while, as I flunked all the Lacan seminars I took in my youth, but thirty

years later, I get it: language is bound to fail us, especially in psychoanalysis. Right.

From Lacan, I moved to James Hillman and loved his insistence of the poetic basis of the psyche; here was someone who was saying the psyche is structured like an image, a myth. Right!

Oh, but let's not forget Derrida and deconstruction: the unconscious is a text, and one needs to read between the lines, always, and the signification escapes the one writing the text, always. Oh, yes, the older I get, the more conscious I am of the subtext, the silent unsaid things.

Giegerich, with Hegel to support his argument, is now suggesting that life of the soul is not only language, not only image, not only text, it is also logic.

Right, I am all in favor of richness.

In conclusion, I would like to add that although I admire Giegerich's ideal of Hegelian progress through perpetual sublation, I need, for my personal sanity to remain skeptical of the power of all systems to lure me to search for places that don't exist, except in the philosopher's mind because I have suffered more from my impossible ideals than from all my failures. On the other hand, I do

believe that systems of self knowledge are like goals for the revolution, that is, beautiful ideals we might never achieve and that without ideals worth pursuing we become self indulgent and petrified in our certitudes.

Let me end by a romantic quote, with proper quotation marks, from neither a philosopher nor a psychologist, but a novelist, a psycho-philosophical novelist, Marcel Proust. It summarizes for me the state of affairs in the kingdom of archetypal psychology.

“The beauty of images lives behind things. The beauty of ideas is ahead of them.”

(“ La beaute des images est logee a l’arriere des choses, celles des idees, a l’avant. “ Marcel Proust, La recherche du temps perdu, Éd. Pléiade, Tome III p. 932.)