



School of Childhood and Education Sciences

MA in Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred

Symbol and Imagination

Imagination and Theurgy

A discussion about the revival of theurgy in contemporary studies of active imagination

Answering the question:

What are the differences between Corbin, Jung and Hillman in their understanding of the active imagination?

Student: Simão Cortês

Tutors: Dr. Angela Voss
Dr. Geoffrey Cornelius
Dr. Simon Wilson

Introduction

In the beautiful talk “Dreamwork as Theurgy”, Gregory Shaw, a prominent expert on theurgy and Neoplatonism, argues that there are some striking similarities between some psychoanalytic dreamwork and Iamblichean theurgy. In this talk he draws on Bosnak, Hillman and Jung, three analysts fascinated by the possibilities of active imagination.

From the various arguments Shaw presents, two seem particularly interesting. The first one would be the fact that Iamblichus believed that the first steps in theurgy begin “ in the density of our material existence by ritually honoring those daimons who rule over material instincts and all life’s pleasures and agonies” (Shaw 2002, p. 4), just like dreamwork which, as described by Hillman and Bosnak, “requires a firm foundation in those very elements we most abhor and try to rise above: the shit, the mud, the ugliness of our existence.” (Ibid.) The second point refers to an aspect of Bosnak’s practice, in which Bosnak attempts to swap the consciousness of the dreamer with the consciousness of one of the dreamed objects, a practice that has striking resemblances with taking the shape of the gods in theurgy (Ibid., p. 9).

However, while it’s true that Hillman often refers to complexes as gods and even talks about “polytheistic psychology” (Hillman, 1991, p.39) and Jung roots the belief in spirits in “the seeing of apparitions, dreams and pathological disturbances of psychic life” (Jung, 1970, p. 305) we need to be rather careful when comparing modern studies on imagination with theurgy.

The objective of this essay will be to discuss the thought of three of the most influential thinkers on active imagination of the twentieth century (Jung, Hillman and Corbin) and its connection to theurgy, as defined by Iamblichus and Gregory Shaw. For this, we will look especially at the psychological and metaphysical assumptions of the three authors, as well as their views on mystical or esoteric practices. I will occasionally draw on other thinkers like Tom Cheetham and Robert Bosnak.

Iamblichus and Theurgy

In order to compare theories on the nature of imagination to theurgy as defined by Iamblichus, a working understanding of theurgy is needed. Etymologically *theurgy* comes from the Greek *theourgia* - the work of the gods, as opposed to *theologia* - the study of the gods. As such we can think of theurgy as the immediate experience of the gods as opposed to the intellectual study of them.

The practice as described by Iamblichus, a Neoplatonist of the late third and early fourth centuries of our era, would consist on rituals in which the theurgist became the executor of divine will in the world in a process that has been equated to possession but only superficially resembles it. In the words of Gregory Shaw in his seminal work *Theurgy and the Soul* (1995, p. 5):

Iamblichus maintained that the divine principles invoked in these rites were exemplified abstractly and theoretically in the teachings of Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle, and that both cultic acts and philosophic paideia were rooted in one source: the ineffable power of the gods. In theurgy these divine principles were embodied and enacted, not merely contemplated, and in whatever context this occurred “it was a work of the gods” (...) in which the human soul participated both as recipient and beneficiary.

The participation of the human soul in the gods occupies a fundamental cosmological role in Iamblichus’ Neoplatonism. For the philosopher, the soul becomes “mortal, self-alienated and estranged from divinity” (Shaw, 2016, p. 181) when it is embodied in order to fulfil its role as a cosmogonic mean. Shaw explains this role in the following way: “Iamblichus believed that the unifying principle that transformed the soul in theurgy was the same principle that held the cosmos together as its universal *philia* or *eros*.” (Shaw, 1995, p. 123). In short, the love that drives the estranged human soul to find salvation in the gods through theurgic ritual is the same love that constitutes all of the universe.

These ideas are radical and, as Shaw explains in his 2016 paper, they go against most of the Neoplatonic ideas of Iamblichus’ time. I believe we can discern three fundamental motives behind theurgic ritual in them. First we have a religious-mystical motive, i.e. the desire of the

soul to re-encounter the gods. Second we have a cosmogonic motive, i.e. the *eros* that drives humans to the gods is part of what holds the universe together. Third, we have a therapeutic motive, i.e. the soul strives to find in the gods the cure for the mortality and estrangement that result from its own embodiment.

Naturally, the divisions between these motives are not clear-cut but they are interesting fictions for the analysis I propose to make in this essay. Since we can discern a therapeutic function in theurgy it is only natural that Shaw recognized a practice akin to theurgy precisely in a therapeutic environment. But only by analysing the metaphysical and cosmological stances of thinkers like Hillman, Jung and Corbin can we see if the potential for theurgy is indeed present in their practices.

Although the main objective of this essay is not to discuss theurgy in itself, some final remarks must be made about the usage of this word outside Neoplatonism and the confusions this usage has created. The online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines theurgy as “the art or technique of compelling or persuading a god or beneficent or supernatural power to do or refrain from doing something”. It is not hard to see the harsh contrast between this definition and Iamblichus’ pious approach to theurgy. In Iamblichus’ ontological hierarchy, embodied souls are the lowest possible form of spiritual being¹, which by definition forbids humans to compel or persuade other spiritual beings. In theurgy as defined by Iamblichus, the command is never given by the theurgists, but by the god that is in communion with them:

The theurgist, through the power of arcane symbols, commands cosmic entities no longer as a human being or employing a human soul but, existing above them in the order of the gods, uses threats greater than are consistent with his own proper essence—not, however, with the implication that he would perform that which he asserts, but using such words to instruct them how much, how great and what sort of power he holds through his unification with the gods... (Iamblichus, DM, p. 287).

¹ All the relevant quotes are too long to transcribe here but the fifth paragraph of the first book of *De Mysteriis* discusses the ontological status of the human soul in great length.

However, Franz Bardon, a famous occult writer, writes in his book *Initiation into Hermetics* that a certain practice is “indispensable in theurgy as well as in the conjuring magic, as it is the only way for the magician to bring about the union with a Godhead at any time, *forcing the lower beings to execute his will.*” (Bardon, 1987, 156-157 my emphasis). In this quote, Bardon shows how the hierarchy of being seems to have been, at least to a certain extent, inverted in contemporary Western esotericism. Some spiritual entities are now regarded as lower than human beings, something that would be impossible for Iamblichus, and the magicians can “force” these “lower beings” to do their bidding. How this tradition results from a long line of grimoires like *The Picatrix* or *The Key of Solomon* is beyond the scope of this work, but it is fundamental to understand the difference between theurgy as understood by contemporary culture and theurgy as understood by Iamblichus.

I will now lead you into more recent ideas on the imagination, hoping I could transmit to you at least a working notion of the unimaginably complex ideas Iamblichus developed on Theurgy.

Active Imagination - The Psychoanalytical Approach

The first step we need to take in order to understand the function of active imagination in psychoanalysis is trying to understand where it comes from, and how it has been defined both by its inventor, C. G. Jung, and its later re-inventor, James Hillman. Jung developed the technique during his breakdown following the schism with Freud. As he himself says: “after the parting of the ways with Freud, a period of inner uncertainty began for me. It would be no exaggeration to call it a state of disorientation. I felt totally suspended in mid-air, for I had not yet found my own footing.” (Jung, 1997, p. 54).

Chodorow, an expert on Jung, tells us: “... for three years he couldn't get himself to read a professional book and he published relatively little. He suffered from lethargy and fears; his moods threatened to overwhelm him.” (Jung, 1997, p. 19) It was during this time, she proceeds to explain us, that Jung started to explore his psyche in new ways, including playing like a child, and exploring his own fantasies. He came to understand, during this process, that imagination when followed can be interacted with to a certain degree. As Jung himself explains to us:

Critical attention must be eliminated. Visual types should concentrate on the expectation that an inner image will be produced. As a rule such a fantasy-picture will actually appear – perhaps hypnagogically – and should be carefully observed and noted down in writing. (Jung, 1997, p. 115-116)

The material will then be used to explore the unconscious in ways that are hard to predict *a priori*:

We now come to the next question: what is to be done with the material obtained in one of the manners described. To this question there is no a priori answer; it is only when the conscious mind confronts the products of the unconscious that a provisional reaction will ensue which determines the subsequent procedure. (Ibid.)

As briefly stated before, the therapeutical drive of theurgy was real and we can see some echoes of it in here. Jung lets the imagination present certain images that are (at least apparently) independent from our will and inevitably wake in ourselves ideas of gods and spirits. These images can then have a therapeutic effect on the psyche. But the similitude beyond the therapeutic drive is merely formal because of the radical difference in metaphysical stances between theurgy and psychoanalysis. In the words of James Hillman:

(...) Jung's method of interior imagining is for none of these reasons - spiritual discipline, artistic creativity, transcendence of the worldly, mystical vision or union, personal betterment or magical effect (...) primarily, it aims at healing the psyche by re-establishing it in the metaxy from which it had fallen into the disease of literalism. (Hillman, 1991, p. 58)

By removing the metaphysical and spiritual drives in active imagination, Jung and Hillman make it impossible to associate their practices to theurgy on more than a superficial level. We can certainly argue that Jung has developed active imagination as part of a therapeutic practice and therefore, since his program was psychological, he has no need to enter into metaphysical questions. This is a fair argument. However it is important to note that Jung's approach to metaphysics is rather reductionist. Although it is easy to miss this since Jung is much more respectful of metaphysical symbology than most twentieth century academics, it does not change the fact that he explains away spirits as *subjective* elements of the psyche: "these parapsychic phenomena (...) are, so far as my experience goes, the exteriorized effects of unconscious complexes." (Jung, 1970, p.318)

Even if we take the totality of the Jungian psyche (unconscious, conscious, anima, animus, etc.) as an expression of what Iamblichus describes as soul, this statement would be deeply heretic from a Iamblichean point of view. The spirits and the gods are above the human soul in the hierarchy of being and the idea that they are "complexes" of the human soul "exteriorized" is deeply antagonistic to Iamblichean principles.

On the other hand, Hillman's approach is not as reductionist² so we could admit that he avoids metaphysical questions because he is a psychoanalyst, despite having no problem with metaphysics in itself. For example, Hillman does not consider active imagination to be an artistic endeavour (Hillman, 1991, p. 57) but naturally has no problem with the existence of artistic endeavours. Besides, Hillman's metaphysical stances remain conveniently hard to pinpoint in his work: "gods, for psychology, are neither believed in nor addressed directly. They are rather adjectival than substantive; the polytheistic experience finds existence qualified with archetypal presence and recognizes faces of the gods in these qualifications." (Ibid, p. 42)

Although he speaks rather contemptuously about metaphysical stances sometimes, it is possible to read this contempt as relating to the usefulness of metaphysics in a psychoanalytic context. As he himself puts it, "thus it [active imagination] is not a mystical activity (...) that would be imposing a spiritual intention upon a psychological activity; that would be a domination of, even a repression of, soul by spirit." (Ibid, p. 57)

Despite the fact that the idea of spirit repressing soul would be completely absurd and offensive to Iamblichus, we can admit that the program of both authors is separated by millenia and it remains relatively similar despite extreme cultural differences. It is harder, however, to escape Hillman's criticism of theurgy:

(...) active imagination is not (...) theurgy (ritual magic), the attempt to work with images by and for the human will. (...) we have been warned against opening the floodgates to the 'black tide of mud of occultism.' Active imagination becomes popularist superstitious theurgy when we activate images artificially (drugs), perform it routinely as ritualism, foster special effects (synchronicities), further divinatory abilities (turning to inner voices to interpret dreams), use it to augment self-confidence in decision (power). Each and all of these uses are no longer modes of self-knowledge but self-aggrandizement (...) (Ibid. p. 57-58)

While it is easy to dismiss Hillman's criticism as a mere misunderstanding or ignorance of Iamblichean theurgy, this is not enough. It is true that the reference to human will shows that Hillman does not think of theurgy in the same terms as Iamblichus did. However, the

² Although I have somewhat conflated Jung's and Hillman's thoughts so far, it is important to say that they differ in many contexts. Nevertheless, since I wish to focus on the comparison between active imagination and theurgy, these are beyond the scope of this work. For the differences between Jung and Hillman on individuation, for example, see Hillman, 1979, ch. 2.

performance of images routinely, the fostering of special effects and the furthering of divinatory abilities through dreams are all traits of theurgy as described by Iamblichus.³ This means that even if we consider Hillman's critique to be based on a false perception of theurgy, some of it still applies to Iamblichus' practices.

Thus, even if for Hillman the role of the image (and therefore imagination) is to create a process that allows "bringing soul-laden imagery by means of which the brilliant impulses of the spirit can find witness and know themselves" (as cited by Voss, 2018), a description strikingly similar to some ideas about theurgy, it is not possible to simply take the metaphysical, ritualistic and divinatory sides of the practice without somehow losing its most important point: humans taking the shape of the gods in a cosmogonic effort to keep the universe running.

In all fairness Shaw based himself on Bosnak's work to make the comparison and Bosnak seems to be somewhat less critical of theurgy. In my view, the most interesting point in Bosnak's approach to dreams is a certain radical negative epistemology. When discussing the nature of dreams, he describes it in the following way:

I have an answer to this: I don't know.

But not just the kind of "I don't know" like "I don't know where my socks are" (...) but a not-knowing so profound that it makes me shiver. I *passionately* don't know. Dreams to me are a mystery and so are the inhabitants of the dreamworld. (Bosnak, 1996, p. 11)

This radical approach, in some aspects much more radical than Hillman's, is perhaps the reason why Bosnak is not taken seriously as a dream researcher. But it is precisely this not-knowing that allows the possibility of a true approximation of Bosnak's practice and Iamblichus'. Unlike Hillman, Bosnak does not exclude the possibility that dreams might be prophetic, and even if Hillman is careful in not defining the gods as mere complexes, Bosnak would probably be open to the possibility that gods are substantive as well as adjectival.

This is not to say, however, that what Bosnak does is theurgy, but it may be approximated to it by metaphysically inclined practitioners. Nevertheless, we must not forget

³ The ritualistic side of theurgy has already been discussed above. For Iamblichus on dreams check, for example, Iamblichus, DM, p. 121.

that the fascinating position of ignorance that Bosnak adopts is still very different from the faithful position of Iamblichus. Even if Iamblichus does not admit to know everything, he is certainly sure of the existence of the gods and their presence in theurgy. Otherwise, it would be impossible for theurgy to truly fulfill its metaphysical and cosmogonic role.

Ultimately, all of these practices - Jung's, Hillman's and Bosnak's - are focused on the individual's psyche while Iamblichus' is focused on the relationship between the individual and *external* entities that must be honored for metaphysical and cosmological reasons. This creates a deep schism between both approaches that although can be transposed in certain contexts, still creates a tension between practices.

I hope to have showed in this section that although we can draw some parallels between active imagination as a psychoanalytic therapy and Iamblichus' practice of theurgy, we should not be too hasty in assuming that there is some sort of revival of theurgy in therapy. This leads me, of course, into a most pressing question: is there no academic that can at the same time hold a deep respect for the role of the imagination and situate that respect within a complex and thoughtful metaphysical framework?

Corbin and the Angel

There is one author on active imagination that maintains a strong metaphysical and transcendentalist framework, the French historian Henry Corbin. Since I consider myself to be metaphysically inclined, I will now explain why I prefer this author's work, and its connections with Iamblichus' ideas.

But before properly introducing his ideas, it is interesting to note that many of the people who have worked with them have co-opted them to the point Corbin felt he had to intervene. As Tom Cheetham, a thinker who has dedicated most of his life work to Corbin, tells us "Corbin was upset that Hillman and others were co-opting his terminology and applying it outside of the 'precisely defined schema' provided by the masters of Iranian Islam." (Cheetham, 2015, 8%)

Not only Hillman did this but Tom Cheetham admits to do it as well in the very same book⁴, and even Harold Bloom seems to do it, ironically, in the preface to *Alone with the Alone* by Corbin.⁵ One has to wonder, in the face of this constant co-opting of Corbin's ideas to a context of which Corbin disapproved, what is it about his work that makes people so uncomfortable? Even the people who seem to admire it to the point of shaping their own research after it.

I believe that it is precisely the fact that Corbin is admittedly a metaphysician that creates this resistance. Even admitting that Hillman's ideas are radical for our contemporary scholarship, the fact that he cleverly avoids any metaphysical stance turns him into a much more tolerable thinker. Hillman and Cheetham choose to work with Corbin's ideas on the imagination because they are compelling and fascinating, but they also choose many times to ignore the fact that these ideas openly depend on a metaphysical scheme. The post-Enlightenment active imagination seems to delight in the possibility of its own truth, while wanting to break free from the metaphysics that made it possible to begin with.

Corbin believes that Imagination with a capital "I" is no longer taken seriously because there "ceased to be a scheme of reality admitting of an intermediate universe in between, on the

⁴ "Here I depart from Henry Corbin's tripartite cosmology..." (Cheetham, 2015, 79%) is one among many examples throughout the book.

⁵ "I myself am in danger of violating a warning made by Corbin..." (Corbin, 1997, xvi)

one hand, the universe of sensory data (...) on the other hand, a spiritual universe, a kingdom of Spirits (...) The degradation of the Imagination into fantasy is complete". (Corbin, 1997, p. 181).

Corbin's cosmology is, therefore, tripartite. We have the sensory world, we have the spiritual world of God and we have a world in between,

The world of the image, the mundus imaginalis: a world that is ontologically as real as the world of the senses and that of the intellect. This world requires its own faculty of perception, namely, imaginative power, a faculty with a cognitive function, a noetic value which is as real as that of sense perception or intellectual intuition. We must be careful not to confuse it with the imagination identified by so-called modern man with "fantasy", and which, according to him, is nothing but an outpour of "imaginings". (Corbin, 1999 ,p. 9)

In the same essay mentioned above, Corbin ends up drawing a clear distinction between imagination and the *imaginal*, a word that he derives from latin in order to avoid confusions with modern meanings of fantasy. In this metaphysical scheme, unlike with the thinkers we have seen before, Corbin addresses an *external* world that he believes to be as real as ours, but that requires a different mode of perception: imagination. Cosmologically, this makes all the difference in the world. Even if you take into account that Hillman has a horror of the heroic ego version of individuation (e.g Hillman, 1975, p. 180-183), his work still focus on the human psyche as human psyche. Corbin, on the other hand, looks at the human in relation with spirit and the imaginal, ontological levels that are populated by creatures that are *different* and *external*. As Tom Cheetham marvelously puts it: "Corbin teaches that it is not your individuation that is at stake, but that of the Angel." (Cheetham, 2015, 12%).

The Angel in Corbin is our divine double, our personal metaphysical guide. As Tom Cheetham explains

You are a song being sung elsewhere, and resonating everywhere. Learn to let your drama unfold and follow the sound of the Angel, always just on the threshold of consciousness. Listen. Always listen for that faint song of the Angel whose voice it takes more than a lifetime to learn to hear. (Cheetham, 2015,13%)

This relationship upon which each of us depends is absolutely fundamental for our life. As Abu'l-Barakat says, quoted by Corbin (1997, p. 34), “there is a being of the spiritual world who, throughout their [human souls] existence (...) initiates them into knowledge, protects, guides, defends, comforts them, brings them to final victory...”. The Angel is the metaphysical being that allows the human soul to find its divinely defined purpose in the world, and walk towards the re-encounter with its creator, a concept strikingly similar to Socrates’ daemon. Without it, humans would be lost and defenceless. How very different this idea is from the idea that spirits are the projection of our unconscious.

Corbin is, of course, the twentieth century philosopher of imagination that comes closer to Iamblichus’ ideas. Not only does Corbin suggest that intermediary levels of reality are fundamental in spiritual development, he also frames this into a rather strong metaphysical stance. While Jung and Hillman struggle to define their framework (perhaps on purpose), Corbin is able to clearly see that when taken out of context, the idea of imagination as an ontological realm of reality simply collapses. Iamblichus, naturally, would have agreed. And what is this idea that Chetham talks of, learning to be sung by the Angel, if not becoming an actor of divine will on earth? What is the Angel’s process of individuation in Corbin’s if not taking the shape of the gods?

Conclusion

I hope I was able to make my ideas clear throughout this essay. Although I see some of theurgy's drives behind Jung and Hillman's therapeutic techniques, I believe they violate some of its fundamental metaphysical principles. Even when we take into account that they are psychologists and not metaphysicians, some of the schisms seem to be quite hard to integrate. Corbin, on the other hand, has a strong metaphysical background that brings him much closer to Iamblichus' ideas. His metaphysics allow us a glimpse of a pre-modern approach to imagination, grounded in the deepest and most knowledgeable scholarship, something that is no small feat. We can see in his work the possibility for a re-imagining and a re-birth of theurgy, in the form of being sung by the Angel.

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