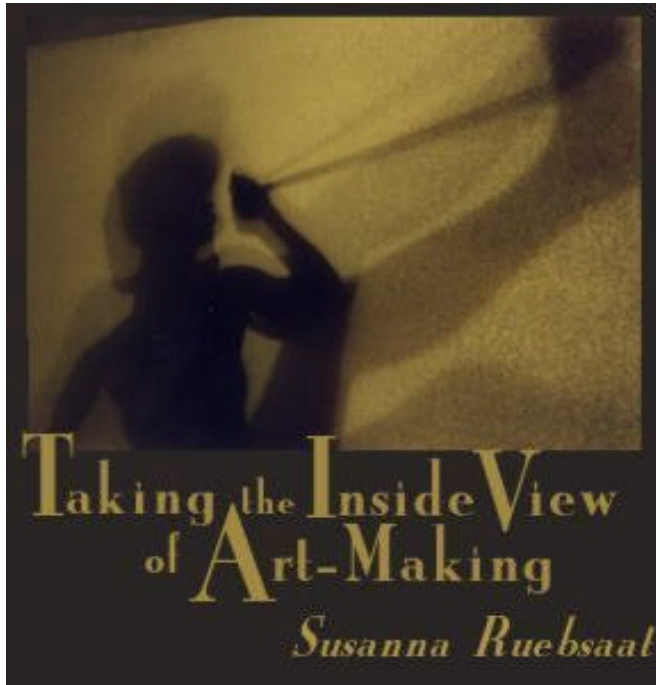


Mundus Imaginalis/Anima Mundi: Neither Fact nor Fiction



Pulling the reins of my own horse. I am the rider it seems. What/where is the implied/hidden horse? The reins are made of pearls so there must be some kind of wisdom involved. Or is it simply a stringing along of isolated moments of seeming insight? Either way there is a tension that asks for something, something that is not seen but indicated through its absence. I can only trust the validity of what is there, the body/self pulling, tugging at something that lies outside the frame.

Corbin (2000) writes that the contents of the unconscious (images) could be the most important field of exploration of the twenty-first century (p.54). If one could truly free oneself of one's attachment to one's idea of oneself and what one thinks 'reality' is, one could step into the endlessness of the invisible world, into mythology, and take on many shapes and forms, like Hermes. In short, one could step into the contents of the unconscious, the imaginal.

The *imaginal*, not to be mistaken with imaginary, is a word used to describe that world between sense and intellect where the mythic dimension of experience lives. This 'world' is really a plane of awareness that is different from our usual day-to-day practical, sometimes linear awareness. It affords a different kind of experience. In short:

...the *imaginal* is everything that surpasses the order of common empirical perception and is individualized in a personal vision, undemonstrable by simple recourse to the criteria of sensory knowledge or rational understanding ... It is often completely misconstrued through the habits of the rational mind, which identifies it simply with the unreal. (Corbin, 1997, p.87)

And yet, the imaginal, the *mundus imaginabilis* does not belong to the unreal, the void; otherwise we would not perceive it or have any opinion about it (Corbin, 1997, p.87). But, since in Western cultures the habits of the rational mind are so inextricably yoked to language as a legitimizing function, perception and/or opinion cannot seem to stand on their own without it.

So it seems then, that for many people the first obstacle regarding the *mundus imaginabilis*, or the *imaginal*, is that of language; Language as legitimiser versus the language of image (Hermes). The difficulty of translating the experience and thus 'language' of the *imaginal* into the language as legitimiser of every-day reality is much

like trying to fit a mystical shape into a practical mould. The danger of misinterpretation lies deep in the heart of any translation. When levels and layers of meaning within culture are being discussed, one is immediately. It affords a different kind of experience. These assumptions of course come from the core of one's own cultural schemata and their inherent limitations.

In Mundus Imaginalis: Or the Imaginary and the Imaginal, Henry Corbin (2000) presents an example of the limitations of these assumptions through how the word 'imaginary' is often used to describe something unreal or even utopian. Corbin feels that this term would never do justice to what he describes as the world that is perceived through the organ of imaginative consciousness or cognitive Imagination; what the philosophers of Islam refer to as the "eighth clime" (Corbin, 2000, p.72). Even though it would seem logical to move from imaginative to imaginary, the latter would, in Corbin's mind, be a betrayal of the Arabic and Persian concept of "the country of nowhere" (Corbin, 2000, p.72), "... a place out of space, a "place" that is not contained in any other place, in a *topos*, making it possible to give an answer to the question "where" by a gesture of the hand" (Corbin, 2000, p.75). I can see this hand gesture arcing through the air as if to cover 'everywhere', (and out of the corner of my eye, I think I caught a glimpse of Hermes).

Corbin then describes the movement that takes place in the "nowhere" to be inward, towards the interior. In keeping with the paradoxical nature of this "place", the movement then becomes outward, towards the exterior. Seeing this inward/outward as one movement thus presents the non-dualistic essence of the *imaginal* and its resistance to translation and being legitimized by language. In order to maintain its integrity, it must

resist being translated into a language of assumptions that deny its very being, and that of the 'soul', the soul being conceived as an intelligence independent from time and space (Ellenberger, 1970, p.688); And because psyche [soul], like "matter" and "spirit" points to mysteries always beyond mortal comprehension (Sells, 2000, p.4). "Although we cannot know what psyche "is" in any final way, we can investigate its precisely presented images in terms of their psychological significance [i.e. their basis in soul]" (Sells, 2000, p. 4).

The limitations of scientific civilization - which is said to have gained mastery over images, and is even referred to as the "civilization of the image"- are in its radical misunderstanding, or complete misapprehension of the image [the root and vehicle of the imaginal] (Corbin, 2000, p.87).

... instead of the image being raised to the level of the world to which it belongs, instead of being invested with a symbolic function that would lead to inner meaning, the image tends to be reduced simply to the level of sensible perception and thus to be definitely degraded. Might one not have to say that the greater the success of this reduction, the more people lose their sense of the imaginal and the more they are condemned to produce nothing but fiction?

(Corbin, 2000, p. 87, 88)

In other words (worlds), the image/*imaginal* is brought down to the lowest common denominator and thus completely loses its potency. In this case the imagination remains subservient to sense perceptions (and Hermes has been banished, but not for long).

However, the imagination could also serve the intellect by being the intermediary between it and the *sensorium*. In this way, like Hermes moving back and forth between, even connecting the two, its images are metaphysical and, in mystics and prophets, it is the organ of visionary knowledge (Corbin, 1983, p.1). Corbin (1983)

writes: “Thus the ambiguity of the image comes from the fact that it can be either idol (Gr.eidolon) or an icon (Gr. Eikon). It is an idol when it fixes the viewer’s vision on itself” (1983, p.1). Because of its lack of transparency, the image as idol remains at the level of that from which it was formed. It remains static, stuck. But when its transparency does let a viewer see through it to something beyond it, it is an icon. This is particularly the case when what is beyond can only be seen through the image. Here is the borrowing of the mercurial ability of Hermes to see what we cannot. Corbin (1983) uses the term “theophanic form” to define this seeing through (p.1). I suspect that this might be where James Hillman coined his concept of seeing through an event to its image (Hillman, 1988). It is “... to see in each luminous thing the light that reveals it, ... and is precisely that which promotes the Image to an icon, redeeming it from its degradation as an idol. Idolatry, on the contrary, is seeing the object as if it were itself the light that reveals and makes it visible; it closes off access to anything beyond” (Corbin, 1983, p.2).

When the image is raised to the status of icon, when it is not fixed upon itself - when it is invested with its theophanic function - it opens the way to what lies beyond it, toward what it symbolizes with (Corbin, 1983, p.2). As god of boundaries and borders, Hermes will certainly be present in this process. I would like to see here if I can bring this “theophanic function”, this ‘seeing through’ into operation by looking through the phenomena of the misunderstanding, or complete misapprehension of the image Corbin (2000) writes about in *Mundus Imaginalis* (p.87). I would like to attempt to do this by taking a more *imaginal* perspective of this phenomena (event), and suggest that the lowest common denominator mentioned above could be perceived imagistically, as if through the eyes of Hermes, as a symptom of confusing the mythical with the utilitarian

dimension and the desire for, or even obsession with, objective realities (Durand, 2000, p.54). In this manner, I would like to explore a statement made by Gilbert Durand in Exploration of the Imaginal.

Durand (2000) states: “The basic disease from which our culture may be dying is man’s minimization of images and myths, as well as faith in a positivist, rationalist, aseptized civilization” (p.54). I would like the reader to consider for a moment, that the images of the symptoms of this disease, or symptoms as images, may have the capacity to reveal something that is missing in Durand’s argument - also keeping in mind Janet’s notion of the symbolic character of symptoms (qtd. in Ellenberger, 1970, p. 777). If these ‘symptoms’ could be “seen through” as James Hillman would request, could not the *desire* for these ‘objective realities’ be authentic and faithful to the *imaginal*, and the *obsession* (idolization) be the misplacement of that desire (Hillman, 1988)? This consideration takes me out of looking at whether it is ok or not ok for me to have desire for “objective realities”. It relaxes the clenching jaws of judgment I find myself being crushed by when faced with the desire to see something ‘real’ outside myself that intersects with my inner vision or image. In short, it frees me from the inevitable isolation that results from succumbing to idolatry. “Idolatry consists in immobilizing oneself before an idol because one sees it as opaque, because one is incapable of discerning in it the hidden invitation that it offers to go beyond” (Corbin, 1983, p.2). I am reminded here of the cathexis of commodity in chapter three being the inanimate animated by hope (idolatry), an attempt at the incarnation of the realities of the Self, trying to fulfill the task of bringing the imaginative psyche into reality (trying to be an icon).

Rather than succumbing to this idolatry and being thus cut off from what lies beyond the image, toward what it symbolizes with, I would rather see if I can call in the theophanic function to the operation at hand. If I can see the image of the image, as Hermes can, this “seeing through” guides me back to the realization that it is clearly the obsessing, the being fixated on an image that stops the inward/outward movement, the dialogue. It is not the initial desire to give form to ‘objective realities’, to create an intersection/meeting point between inner and outer. In fact, the very process of literalising or making concrete helps me realize the image I am living in, this literalizing acts as a mirror reflecting back the image. “It is ... true to say that the theophanic form is a mirror, [a hermetic mirror that helps us search theories for their secretly hidden images. All our philosophers who share the theophanic sense of things have gone back to the motif of the mirror....” (Corbin, 1983, p.1).

In their imaginal function of mirroring, seeing ‘objective realities’- and the process of literalising or making concrete - allows these very ‘objective realities’ to be ‘seen through’. In this sense, the images reflected back as the objective realities become transparent and thus vehicles of the imaginal. The image I am living then, in its transparency and acting as a vehicle of the imaginal, is mirroring the inward/outward movement that is one movement. An essential point of what I am discussing here is that:

The ego will not be transformed merely by experience of the imaginative psyche because the task is to bring the imaginative psyche into reality. If that equation is left suspended, if a route back into literal and material reality is not found, then nothing fundamental is ever accomplished.

(Lockhart, 1987, p. 76)

This in mind, I see the process of literalizing as an attempt at incarnating realities of the Self, of trying to fulfill the task of bringing the imaginative psyche into reality. It is a trick that Hermes plays on us with his many double meanings and mixed messages. The route back to literal and material reality necessary for bringing the imaginative psyche into reality lies in those 'objective realities' and the psyche's relationship to them. If this is in fact the case, then the polarization of 'objective realities' with the imagination becomes a form of idolatry that limits the images involved. This is understandable in light of the fact that Hermes can blur the distinction between reality and reflection. However, this could be a provocation to look more deeply and ask more thoughtful questions, to see the depth lying on the surface.

Not asking these more thoughtful questions may here lead to the danger of falling into what I perceive as the trap of polarizing the 'good' use of image as creating inner meaning, and the 'bad' use of it as a means of fulfilling the desire to make concrete. This danger is present in the assumption that one is better than the other. This assumption turns the image into an idol, just as King Midas turned everything he touched into gold thus preventing him from receiving the symbolic reality of the gold. But if the above-discussed movement of inward/outward is both one and the same, why exclude the outward, manifesting aspect, the giving form to image? Unless we have Midas' golden touch of course. I am reminded here of Jung saying that an image always wants another image.



An Image Always Desires Another Image

Corbin (2000) writes that the contents of the unconscious (images) could be the most important field of exploration of the twenty-first century (p.54). However, I do not believe that this would mean to the exclusion of the forms the images are asking to be embodied with, the ‘products’ (‘objective realities’) of the unconscious. Seeing what is, I

think, is a prerequisite to “seeing through” (Hillman, 1988). To live in the image of a utopia where a positivist, rationalist, aseptized civilization does not exist is, in my mind yet another dualistic (and naïve) activity. It is a futile attempt at blocking out one side of the duality for the sake of the other, creating splitting and projecting (George, 2000, p. 24). This defensive way of organizing experience cannot tolerate the ambivalence inherent in the *imaginal*, even though; ironically it is an image itself. This splitting and projecting could be considered a form of idolatry in the above analysis, disallowing the image - whatever the image - to fulfill its imaginal (theophanic) function by blocking the deeper questions that lie within the double meaning (that lie on the surface).

Living in the image such as the above-mentioned utopia, is like living an imagined truth. It is a kind of myth that could be deceptive or merely fiction, as stories/images pick and chose which elements to include, exclude or invent (Nixon, 1992, p. 6). This ‘myth-making’ could be a limiting or creative process depending on the kind of awareness present at the personal and cultural/collective levels. It could be a form of idolatry in the sense that Corbin uses the term. Or it could be promoting the image of itself to the rank of icon through which it “...becomes one immense iconostasis (in the liturgy of the Eastern Christian Church, the division supporting the icons and forming an intermediate space, a harzakh, “in-between” the naos [or inner part of the temple] and the Holy of Holies, or sanctuary)” (Corbin, 1983, p.2). (This ‘in-between’ I believe, is symbolic of what is being referred to throughout this thesis as the *imaginal*).

I understand Durand’s (2000) argument: “That the basic disease from which our culture may be dying is man’s minimization of images and myths...” (110). I also see that he is pointing out the limiting aspect of ‘myth-making’ [idolatry]. But I do not

necessarily disagree with this opinion. What I do believe is that if the top layer of his argument were to be peeled back for a moment, an underlying, hidden, invisible, in fact well-meaning image (icon) of the psyche/soul would very gladly reveal itself in its capacity, if not necessity, for imaging. And I strongly believe that it is this image that could exercise its theophanic function, making itself transparent and thus rise to the level of icon. If, however, the theophanic capacity is hindered and not heeded with a creative impulse that embraces ambivalence in a similar capacity to metaphor, the imaging process could become lopsided and destructive (von Franz, 1974, p.156).

This lopsidedness comes about if the image-making/myth making proclivity of the soul is not translated into creative activities that embody the image in the form that has the image's best interests in mind. If this does not happen the energy of this latent creative potential will, instead either explode destructively, or methodically implode; reconstruct or deconstruct. I reflect back again to the deconstructive and reconstructive Post-Avante-Garde movement in the art of postmodernism of chapter two. Ironically, the risk of the intent of image-making/myth-making being merely that of fitting the habits of the individual and/or collective rational mind i.e. adaptation, is the loss of the essence of imaging, of that which makes the mundus *imaginalis* what it is:

... the imaginal world is by its essence the intermediate world, and the articulation between the intellectual and the sensible, in which the Active Imagination as *imaginatio vera* is an organ of understanding mediating between intellect and sense and as legitimate as these latter ... The imaginal realm is a concept generous enough to embrace both the spiritual and the aesthetic.

(Bloom, in Corbin, 1969, xv, xixi)

Through the desire/obsession with legitimizing experience - even in the name of the 'good' use of image - the meaning is lost in the translation and the image has remained at

the level of idol. It is then simply a matter of using the imagination as a means of placing the imaginal into the sensible. This is in my mind, a form of idolatry. Here the danger of falling into the trap of polarizing the 'good' use of image, and the 'bad' use of image is a question of simply legitimizing for the sake of legitimizing. This is not even close to giving form and expression to the nature of the *imaginal*. Yet here again we encounter another example of the tension of the opposites in this idol/icon polarity.

If all is thus lost in translation of the *imaginal* into a language we can understand, how then can the *imaginal* be communicated? Perhaps this is entirely the wrong question, the wrong approach. I am faced here with the consideration that we cannot truly communicate our *imaginal* level of experience fully, directly or even clearly. But that we may be able to 'read' or receive another's experience of the *imaginal* as it connects to our own. The other's experience/communication then acts as a trigger for us to enter our own imaginal experience. In other words the memory of our own experience of the *imaginal* can be triggered by that of the other person. This memory can create an entry point to the *imaginal*. And, that creativity could in fact be a process of the magneticism of these entry points; Invitations to the openings, so to speak.

From this vantage point 'we' may be able to admit that 'we' cannot communicate the *imaginal* because of the limitations of our 'language'. But that this limitation is certainly not imposed on the *imaginal*, as it communicates to us constantly through forms that exist within and without us. And that truly our task and desire, even compulsion is to give the *imaginal* form without succumbing to the temptations of idolatry; To translate its ethereal essence into its equivalence in form; To give shape to its integrity; To give colour to its ecstasy; To know its gnosis; To step out of time; To step into the dimension

of non-duality; And to do all of this we must access a certain kind of vulnerability that is a suspension of all we know yet maintaining a sense of all knowing. We must be willing to travel to the Underworld and trust that Hermes will be there to guide us back. This quintessential paradox then, creates an incredible surge of energy, creativity. And it is this energy, this creativity that may override the sense of helplessness we are confronted with in our constant struggle to give form to the formless, fitting the mystical into the sensible. Perhaps if we were to magically pull a mystical shape out of a practical mould we might finally be making meaning rather than just making sense. Sense often comes out of order. Meaning, however, does not necessarily need order in order to be present.



Midnight, Dec.31, 2000/Jan.1, 2001

Susanna

possibility of allowing the meaning of any given event to come forth even if it makes no apparent sense at all. 'To trust the validity of what is there, the body/self pulling, tugging at, or being pulled, tugged by something that lies outside the frame'. The learning of this trust would free us of our attachment to our idea of ourself and what we think 'reality' is. With this trust we could step into the endlessness of the invisible world, into mythology, and take on many shapes and forms, like Hermes. We could step into the contents of the unconscious, the imaginal, which affords so much of a different kind of experience. I

think this is what Corbin (2000) was alluding to in his writing about the contents of the unconscious (images) being the most important field of exploration of the twenty-first century.

This exploration of these contents of the unconscious would show us, teach us how much we are caught in the habits of the rational mind, which are so inextricably yoked to language as a legitimizing function. It would teach us how this habitual (implying unconscious) legitimizing process prevents perception and/or opinion from standing on their own without having to ‘make sense’. Exploring the ‘meaning’ the unconscious contents present to us could teach us not confuse idol with icon and miss the chance of seeing through an event to its image, in its theophanic capacity. Hence, the exploration of the contents of the unconscious, the imaginal, would allow us “... to see in each luminous thing the light that reveals it” (Corbin, 1983, p.2). Through this kind of seeing we will have learned not to cut off from what lies beyond the image, but rather move toward what it symbolizes with. Moving towards the symbolic in this manner, I believe would deeply connect us with our task and desire to give the *imaginal* form without succumbing to the temptations of idolatry.

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Appendix

Regarding the images in the document:

These are photographs of the shadow of a figure (mine) cast onto the walls of a paper light tent. The shadow image is cast by two light sources placed on the floor of the tent behind the figure. The camera is placed across the room using a time- release shutter speed to allow time for me to enter the 'light tent'. In this approach the camera acts as its own entity and the images created are not 'composed'. The composition is left to the arbitrariness of the relations between figure, double light sources, and the split second of the shutter speed.

Symbolically the image stands for itself as image. However, it also represents the properties and their interactions used to create the image: the figure itself; two light sources (creating one image); paper light tent; camera (without photographer); the space between the camera and the wall of the tent, and the distance between the light sources and the figure, as well as between the figure and the surface of the paper and finally; the time to walk into/through the tent, and the split second captured on the film when all properties join in the making of the moment/photograph.