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Book Review by Peter Dicker
A Terrible Love of War by James Hillman

I am not a child of Mars as James Hillman claims to be. In fact, in my youth (in the early 1980's) I was something of a peace activist, passionately attending anti-nuclear rallies, marches and activist groups. I remember attending a memorable Sting concert in Sydney around that time and feeling a tingling moment of solidarity as the whole crowd joined in the refrain, "I hope the Russians love their children too."

Perhaps this background in peace affairs might explain why I had some initial resistance to reading Hillman's latest book, *A Terrible Love of War*. 1. I feared the journey I would need to take when the insights of soul psychology were conscripted to the battlements of war. As it turned out my fears were partly well-founded for Hillman takes the reader on a journey that at times is difficult to stomach. He can seem vigorous, even brutal in the manner in which he lobs his ideas and arguments at the embattled reader and also in his own willingness, it seems, to defend these ideas to his death.

Indeed, this seems to be a book written by someone who, at many levels, is contemplating death and the journey that his life has taken. In this book Hillman weaves case history and soul history in a way that seems most appropriate for someone who considers that this book may well be his last. The inclusion of the autobiographical in a work such as this can often muddy the waters of discussion with its subjective detours and preoccupations. In this case I appreciated the mud. I was drawn into the various reflections on how, from an early age, Hillman became fascinated with the subject of war. This subjective element not only helped me to enter the almost unbearably inhuman realms of war explored in this book but, in an unexpected way, it also helped me to better apprehend the full canon of Hillman's ideas about the life of the soul.

Perhaps it was the introduction of this element of mud – the mud of the trenches, the mud of the subjective, and the furious, even desperate slinging of mud at enemy targets - that has enabled Hillman to here restate some of his now familiar ideas in a manner that appears more clarified and distilled than in any previous work.

There are two ideas in particular that seem to make clear the purposes of this book. The first concerns the inevitable role of the imagination in drawing closer to the phenomenon of war while the second derives from a dream that Hillman shares with the reader. In the first few paragraphs of the book Hillman lays out the groundwork for all that follows when he states that: the first principle of psychological method holds that any phenomenon to be understood must be sympathetically imagined. No syndrome can be truly dislodged from its cursed condition unless we first move imagination into its heart (p. 2). This perfectly simple statement not only takes us forward into his analysis of war but also backwards into all that has preceded this, for is this not a perfect mission statement for the psychological method that Hillman has championed in all his work? To "sympathetically imagine" the many ways that psyche manifests in the world, even when these manifestations repel us, is surely the great task and challenge of a soul-making psychology.

On the subject of war, Hillman won't let us slink away from the edge by declaring that war is unimaginable, for that would be to hide behind the shield of innocence; to deny Persephone her fateful descent into the underworld. War and the martial spirit is ever with us as "the necessity of war is laid down in the cosmos and affects life with the unbearable, the terrible, and the uncontrollable to which all measures of normalcy and abnormality must adjust" (p. 40-41). There must surely be a mighty space in the halls of the underworld reserved for the inhuman trails and trenches of war. Hillman does not flinch from acknowledging this profound inhumanity and the fact that "war does not yield to the human mind's day-world of comprehension, it makes no evident sense – or it makes sense only invisibly, in terms of the buried powers and governing gods who humans, on the field of battle, meet and at moments become" (p. 103).

I do not see this discussion as offering, in any way, an apology for war, for war is always at some level, indefensible, and must necessarily present itself to the humanist's mind as a particularly troubling conundrum. We have all learned to carry and foster this humanistic sensibility, as shown in our sincere hope and belief that the battlefield can be outlawed, perhaps through better systems of government, or more humane child rearing habits, or through the renewal of the bonds of love – the making of love not war. Yet it seems that a generation of flower children has not served to make war either more scarce or more humane, and perhaps this is in part because we have not progressed in our understanding of war at a psychic level. To this end, Hillman is asking us to imagine and affirm "the presences who give war its inhumanity" (p. 103). This must necessarily lead us to consider the life, the loves and the complex motivations of our gods of war, but Hillman suggests that such a consideration is difficult while we remain blind to the warrior mentality that lurks in the consciousness of the Christian world.

Hillman traces his own grappling with this matter back to a dream he had more than fifty years ago, shortly after he began his analysis in Zurich:

I saw in a dream a Christ figure on a cross, or at least pinned upright, with the point of a spear coming out from his side... Together with my dream image was the dream sentence: 'See (or get) the point from the inside' (p. 188).

He then admits that at the time of the dream he "missed the point of the spear" and has only come to a satisfactory understanding of it's meaning many years later: The point of the dream was the spear; I was being moved from the cult of Jesus, as some Jungians then presented him to a cult of Mars... To see the point from the inside is now this book, the driving emergence of Mars from within my body and my own right hand, my ulcerating anger at my compromises with the Christian compact... (p. 189). The image of the spear embedded in the Christ figure of course represents many things including, in some sense, a kind of initiation for Hillman into his true totem – that of Mars/Ares. It also suggests his life long vocation as an irritant, sharp and pointed, in the side of Christianity, or more correctly, it is his drive to critique the Christian worldview, so unreflexively adhered to by the western world.

While it is probably true that the most controversial sections of the book are given over to Hillman's "attack upon Christendom", he is not, as I understand it, so much attacking the individual Christian follower as he is exposing the denial within "Christianism" of its own martial spirit. Hillman is clearly not distinguishing between the believer and the nonbeliever in this discussion, as he observes that, "wherever you are in the Western world you are psychologically Christian." (p. 190) This suggests that the challenge before us all is to attempt to see the lion of Christian consciousness that has swallowed us.

The presence of war may be universal and indeed "laid down in the cosmos" as Hillman

suggests but two thousand years of a dominant Christian mind-set has left us with certain notions, mostly unconscious, that continue to drive our engagement with war and violence. One such notion is evident in our inclination to split the light and dark qualities and then to champion that which we believe carries the light. From this we split all opposites in a manner that insists that one part must be rejected or repressed. Then, in a state of unbearable righteousness, we make war on the 'dark' and 'inferior' that we have rejected. Over the centuries there have been too many wars, religious killings and appropriations that have been undertaken in accordance with this pattern, while at the same time insisting that our god is a god of peace, meek and mild. In its most contemporary form, this attitude has enabled those of us who belong to the so-called "coalition of the willing" to march into the country of Iraq in order to remove a tyrant while remaining steadfastly blind to the tyrant that grows more ferocious in our hearts and in our midst.

So we can see that at another level the dream image also 'points' to a sobering truth: "The passive sacrificial lamb, in all innocence, conceals a spear's aggressive iron" (p. 189). In defense of the Christian outlook, Hillman, in a later discussion, goes on to speak more positively about certain qualities within this same tradition, as he acknowledges that "reverberating through centuries, there is a profound retardation in the Christian traditions, sounding steadfastness of soul in the individual person against mob panics and enthusiastic hysteria" (p. 207). Here he is affirming the cautious, reflective and deliberating qualities that can generally be found in any well developed religious tradition. This point leads us finally to a brief consideration of the potentially positive aspects of the Ares/Mars figure. As one would expect in a work such as this, Hillman doesn't provide the reader with a list of solutions at the back of the book, but he does make some suggestions that are worth reflecting upon further.

Taking as his starting point the ancient "Hymn to Ares," Hillman suggests that there are a number of potentially helpful qualities to be found within the character of Ares. Most particularly, Ares, at his best, is both a defender of civilization and also of the whole community of gods and goddesses to which he belongs. In his true role, he is a defender of the polytheistic world, and it is through these many complex relationships, both fluid and binding, that certain limits may be placed upon his mighty and terrible power. It is only when he becomes unhinged from this community and placed within a monotheistic context that Ares can, for a time, become the one and only god, answerable to no other divine power. Of particular significance is the relationship between Ares/ Mars and Aphrodite/Venus. Hillman suggests that it is not so much the element of love that we typically associate with this goddess figure but her capacity to inspire aesthetic passion that may provide another less destructive outlet for these aggressive impulses. According to Hillman, "Aesthetic intensity offers an equivalent of war by providing an obdurate enemy – the image, the material, the ideal – to attack, subdue, and convert" (p. 213). This is an interesting idea that is worthy of further reflection.

It suggests that the extent to which people within a community turn away from the task of grappling with their creative urges and the struggle to make of them something beautiful and complete and focus instead upon the mere consumption of the fruits of their labor (ie. consumerism), the less able they will be to contain their aggressive and violent urges, whether these urges take the form of 'road rage' or the desire to rush headlong into invading another country. After all, are not these creative urges that bubble up through the cracks, the gods themselves, or at least their messengers, asking to be attended to in a fashion that befits them? And in so doing, are we not working to safe-keep the polytheistic soul against the unfettered dominion of one god to the exclusion of all the rest? In the end Hillman provocatively suggests that "There is no practical solution to war

because war is not a problem for the practical mind” (p. 214) but belongs to a deeper and more mysterious place than this. As such it deserves our attention as much as any of the soul’s concerns. Perhaps it is true that “war itself shall remain until the gods themselves go away” but that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t “give all our passionate intensity to subverting war’s enactment” (p. 214).

Works Cited

1. Hillman, James. *A Terrible Love Of War*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2004.