

“PSYCHOLOGY—
MONOTHEISTIC OR
POLYTHEISTIC”:
TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER

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Twenty-five years ago, in the *Journal*, *Spring 1971*, there appeared my article “Psychology—Monotheistic or Polytheistic?,” a first attempt at revisioning depth psychology and its therapeutic practice, an attempt based upon very old, very tangled, and in some ways Florentine, roots of Western culture. That article placed the dilemmas of psychotherapy in a cosmological context prior to Freud’s nineteenth-century medical positivism and to Jung’s Romantic origins and influences. Yet it drew upon the same sources as they—the Greek and Roman mythic imagination, attempting to take these classical sources to their full implication by exposing the inevitable conflict of that mythical imagination with the dominant one of Western culture: that of the Bible. I referred to this conflict in the manner of usual scholarship as one between Hellenism and Hebrewism.

This essay of twenty-five years ago sought to expand the psychology of the consulting room toward philosophy and mythology on the one hand, and on the other to turn the attention of therapeutic theory backward to the basic cleft in the ground of Western culture and which Western culture straddles, the clash between pagan and Christian, that is, between the Greek, Roman, Etruscan, Carthaginian, Celtic and Germanic imagination and the imagination of the Bible—Christian, Hebrew, Mohammadhan.

Further, I began there a review of the basic idea of diagnosis, the *Krankheitsbild* or “clinical picture” in terms of cultural illness, the sickness of images in our culture, owing to the long historical prejudice against images for their association with polytheistic paganism, or in monotheistic language: “idolatry and demonism.” I urged the clinician to study not only the images of sickness but also this sickness of images.

As we all know this historical conflict persisted for centuries and was never laid to rest, resurrecting in poets and painters and composers who attempted to restore the ancient myths and Gods, in folk festivals with their evident traces of Mediterranean paganism, and in the Church councils’ theological controversies over images, and the trials of heretics. All this is well known. That these same issues arrive in psychological practice, that this conflict between monotheism and polytheism is fundamental to depth psychology where the old pagan forces arise again, was less well known, although Freud and Jung opened our eyes to the myths in the pathos, the Gods in the diseases. Both also wrote strongly against the unconsciousness resulting from Western religious thinking.

And, as you also know in that essay of twenty-five years ago, I tried to rejuvenate the faded awareness of that war between monotheism and polytheism by throwing myself full tilt into the battle on the side of pagan polytheism. Though an old warrior, and living in a rural retreat, unlike Cincinnatus I have not retired from warfare.

What I did not then recognize and now begin to see is that a monotheistic vision informed my own eyes when reading and interpreting the monotheistic position. In other words, I was fighting in my martial manner—intemperate, unrelenting, and

blind—not as an old Roman Pagan, but with the very, almost fanatical, attitudes of what I was attacking! I was acting as a monotheist even while defending polytheism. I took the Bible—Hebrewism, Christianity—with the very literalism that I accused it of.

How would a pagan read those pages? To answer, I do not want to turn back to the Origen/Celsus arguments—largely anyway obliterated by Christian censorship—or the discussions in the Renaissance by Pico and others who tried to amalgamate and resolve in subtle ways all these differences.

Rather I want to demonstrate how we can review, revision even, fundamental Biblical tales in such a way that our method of reading and the meaning emerging from the reading happily accord with a pagan feeling. By this “pagan feeling” I mean a style that welcomes myth, personification, fantasy, complexity, and especially humor, rather than singleness of meaning that leads to dogma. Now, when we turn to the Bible it will be with an eye freshened from twenty-five years of mythical sensibility and metaphorical understanding.

II

To show you what I mean by this re-reading, let us look at four particular passages, all of them rather crucial for the Western religious traditions. For example, the Fifth Commandment (Exodus 20:12), “Honor thy Father and thy Mother.” Why in the world does this appear tucked in the middle between the four great theological ordinations that come first and the societal prohibitions of the last five commandments about murder, adultery, theft, perjury, and envy?

I believe this fifth commandment is precisely placed and holds the first part and last part together. If we read the text (Deut. 5:16), this commandment establishes the personal parents as guarantors of fate. It reads: “that thy days may be prolonged and that it may go well with thee, upon the land which the Lord thy God hath given thee.” The parental injunction continues the elimination of “other Gods,” the local, pagan, immanent Gods of the land, and replaces them with your personal parents.

Parents have been elevated to the position of ancestor spirits: they bestow long life and protect from early death; like invisible daimones, they bear good fortune ("that it may go well with thee"); finally, like pagan nature spirits they are attached to the land, the earth belonging not to them but claimed as His, by the transcendent God above.

Once the relation with the local ancestral spirits is replaced by human parents, then a moral code for a social contract must be spelled out—the final five commandments. In a pagan world, the moral code is upheld by invisible forces, articulated in rituals. Societal order depends on the ancestors, gods and daimones and lesser animated powers who take part in human affairs and keep them in a lawful order.

In place of ritual and taboo, we are given commandments; in place of ancestor spirits, personal parents.

A narrow reading, a literal reading, sees only the reduction of the pagan protectors and bestowers of life to ordinary human parents. As well, this narrow reading sees the human parents exalted to supra-human dimensions. This cosmic position of the Father and Mother reinforced by the place of the commandment following directly upon the first theological four defining God and his worship, affects our theories of therapy to this very day. Parents are honored in every therapeutic system as the determinants of each case history. The fifth commandment thus becomes the basis of humanism and secularism and the narrowing of the idea of family to hereditary relations.

But there could be a wider, more generous reading, a pagan reading. It would say that we can find a father and a mother in all things that prolong your days, wherever things go well with thee, and parenting may be discovered in the place, the land, the earth where we inhabit. Such would be a more environmental and animistic way of honoring the Father and the Mother, and would deliver your actual parents from having to carry in their persons the exaggerated burdens of your destiny—the length of your life and its fortune.

The Second Commandment, my next example, is even more subtle to read. It seems so clearly a prohibition of the pagan mode of worship, the pagan mode of thinking in images. The text reads:

(Exodus 20:12) "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water..."

Very clear and straight forward—no imitation of nature, no likenesses. Don't focus on nature if you are going to pay attention to God. God is very jealous of images of nature, maybe of nature itself—for in the next line, God says exactly this. Don't pay obedience to nature because I am "a jealous God."

But then this most curious event occurs. Moses comes down from the mountain "with the two tables in his hand; tables that were written on both their sides...and the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables...(Exodus 32:15)." You can see an icon of these tablets in most any synagogue anywhere. So, the very commandment that says "no graven images" is graven on an image by God himself and becomes a graven image.

Even more subtle, more perplexing: God does not ban images as such—fantasy images, dream images, the images such as Ezekiel saw. It is the graven kind, the fixed, chiseled, or what I am calling literal. God seems to warn less against images than against literalism, saying, in brief, "Don't take your images literally."

What kind of trick is God playing here?

How else read these seemingly straight directions except as strange conundrums? They present subtle twists that displace the subject and deconstruct the first literal meaning. Such twists we nowadays call "jokes" and which may be the *fons et origo* of Jewish humor.

For instance, two stories of Abraham (Genesis 17, 18 and 22): Now Abraham is the great traditional patriarch, God's most devout servant, pious, righteous, a true believer. God has to put him to the test, of course, because God doesn't seem to believe anyone—not Abraham, not Job. Anyway, God demands a demonstration of faith from Abraham. Take your little boy Isaac up the mountain and slay him for a burnt offering, showing your devotion beyond all human attachments.

Clearly what God asks doesn't make sense. The future generations would come from this son, God's whole chosen people. It's not only short-sighted, it's horrible. An atrocity. But good old

Abraham goes right along with the plan; gets up early in the morning, cuts some firewood, and goes where God told him to go. He laid the fire and bound his son upon it, and had his knife at the ready. Just as he was about to kill the boy, he was stopped by the voice of God. Lo and behold, right behind them a ram was caught in a thicket which then became the sacrificial offering.

Abraham, in his literal understanding of God's will, had to be stopped by God himself, who was, in effect, saying: Hold it, old man! Don't take me so literally. This murder of your boy is not what I meant. I want you to dedicate your son, to offer your son, recognize your son's sacrality, but not *kill your son!* You have to hear through my messages; that's why I sent the angel, to intercept you. You have to hear the *angel* in the words; the invisible *angelos*, the message, not just the literal words.

What Abraham had to give over and kill off was the thick-skulled, ram-headed quickness in his mind-set that gets caught up in the thickets of literal understanding.

The second story of Abraham shows him again needing a lesson about literalism. This story seems more to do with Sarah his wife and her conception of Isaac. They were both very, very old; and, as the text says: "It had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women." When God informed her that this couple, "well stricken in age," would bear a child, Sarah laughed—"After I am waxed old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"

When Abraham hears this pronouncement from God that Sarah will give birth to their child, Abraham laughed, too, and "said in his heart: 'Shall a child be born unto him that is a hundred years old?'"

Their laughter gives earnest commentators much to worry about—especially Sarah's laugh. Is it a laugh of mockery and irony and plain disbelief—like saying, 'Get on with you, God, don't be pulling my leg. Don't make fun of an old women who has no son.' Mockery as "laughing at" is how the word laugh is generally used and especially in the Gospels (Mt. 9:24; Mk. 5:40; Lk. 8:53), referring to scornful disbelief in the words and acts and prophecies of Jesus.

Or, is the laughter in Sarah already a sign of fertility? An indication of crone wisdom in her—like that of Baubo in Greece and

the Oni witches in Japan? Her sexual fantasy is very much alive—speaking to God about *Edna*, "pleasure" as if it would be impossible with such an old husband. Although her natural time had passed, she had knowledge of the unnatural aspect of sexual fantasies and their procreative power. And Abraham, too, had to work through the naturalistic fallacy, the literal limits on his imagination of creativity.

The marvelous detail in this story is less the fertility marvel as such than the fact that both of them—90 and 99 as the Bible states—laughed, and produced a child. Clearly, the laughter and the fertility belong in the same image, and, note well, *laughter comes first, preceding procreation*. Laughing produced the child, and that's why its name, Isaac, derives from the Hebrew root, "to laugh." And—I draw your attention to this further exegetical particular: laughter and fertility are joined *only* in this image. No one in the whole big good book has such good laughs.

Monotheism cautions us *not* to laugh, and the words translated as laugh and laughter in both Greek and Hebrew generally mean "laugh at," deride, mock; only Ecclesiastes says there is a time for laughter and that one of these times is feasting and celebration. Otherwise, Luke warns: "Woe unto you who laugh now, for ye shall mourn (6:25); and James (4:9) writes: "Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep; let your laughter be turned to mourning..."

That's about it! There is praise and jubilation, but no good laughs. No smiles either—a word for "smile" doesn't even appear! (Remember the tradition that the Greek Gods smile, especially Aphrodite, called "the smiling one.")

But Abraham and Sarah—they laugh. For them God is telling them a dirty joke, like the sort we still hear about old people and their ribald fantasies.

By the way, a little excursion for Biblical scholars who are probably anyway uncomfortable with my exegetical style. The word *edna*, translated "pleasure" in the Jewish Bible and the King James Bible, is *voluptas* in the Vulgate of Jerome. It is, however, altogether excluded, the phrase not appearing at all, in the Septuagint. Today probably, *edna*, *pleasure*, *voluptas* would be translated by French Freudian Feminists as *jouissance*, that is, if they look into that patriarchal text at all.

III

Now, with the mighty authority of the Bible to back us we may turn to the attack on literalism, my favorite enemy. I have called literalism the enemy in various writings. It is still the danger, the disease endemic to psychology. The God in this disease is monotheism—even if not the God whom the monotheists refer to, since that God, as we just saw, plays tricks and makes jokes, and tries to teach his beloved patriarch, Abraham, about multileveled understanding.

The disease of literalism comes with writing, that is, when images are graven. This is the deep prophetic implication in the second commandment: Moses, you are going to get all this written down, and therefore henceforth your followers are going to be the people of the book. Moreover, that sect coming along later known as Christians are going to write sacred books of their own, one of which announces, "In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." That is, giving to the word the utmost divine omnipotent authority. (Of course, the Bible says God doesn't begin with "the word." He begins with *making distinctions* about light and dark, above and below, etc., and also with *mythical tales* about mythical places, like Eden, and mythical animals and people like Adam and Eve.

Myths have no "authorized version" as the main Protestant Bible is called in the English-reading world. Myths are best authorized on the authority of their teller. Oedipus is told by Sophocles, but also by Voltaire, Cocteau and Freud; Ulysses' wanderings by Homer, but also by extraordinary authors such as Joyce and Kazantzakis. Myth allows many versions; myth contains many versions; myth requires many versions. No *graven* images.

However, when a pagan like D. H. Lawrence tells a Jesus story embroidered with unauthorized details, or the filmmaker Martin Scorsese presents his invention of the "Last Temptation of Christ"—these versions are heresy.

An authorized version, sanctified as Holy Writ, is essential to all monotheistic literalism. Simply said: God himself speaks in the book; the book is God's word, is God in verbal form. Yet the

God we have uncovered in the two Abraham tales breaks the naturalistic fallacy of fertility, and even deconstructs his own clear instructions to Abraham by producing the ram in the thicket in place of Isaac. It would seem God is not the literalist that orthodox monotheism would wish him to be. Or, perhaps he deconstructs his own message as if he likes to joke.

IV

Let us become too literal ourselves—always the risk in a martial discourse—let us return to smiles and laughter. For it is the laugh, a primal laugh not a primal scream, that brings together our main themes: Hebrew monotheism, Hellenic paganism and psychoanalysis.

First, we may remember that one origin of depth psychology is Freud's great Jewish joke book, one of the thickest and longest of all his treatises. Freud, however, owing to his Hebraic tradition got something backwards. He read the jokes for their instructive lesson, their secret hidden meaning. A pagan-influenced psychology reads secret hidden meanings as a joke. Not what's hidden in a joke is sexual innuendo; but hidden in sexuality is grand comedy, and which provides the stuff through the ages for comedies such as the bedroom farce. As the poet W. H. Auden wrote in his "New Year Letter" (1940):

...truth, like love and sleep, resents
Approaches that are too intense,
...through the Janus of a joke
The candid psychopompos spoke.

Sarah understood this, but Freud didn't. Yet today how we laugh at the subterfuges of Freud regarding Martha and Minna, and at the ridiculous material of those early cases and their comic figures: Little Hans, the Wolfman, Dora, Anna O., Irma's Injection. All taken so intensely by those scientifically deliberating bearded men of Vienna and the non-drinking clinicians and serious women devotees in Zürich.

The reduction of the pompous to the humorous, the conversion of the sexually hidden to a joke (rather than the joke to the sexually hidden), is what Charles Boer and I tried to exhibit with our own little joke, *Freud's Own Cookbook*.*

That book, a seemingly simple parody of Freudianism and the serious history of psychoanalysis, is actually an exemplary text of the pagan view. It claims the laugh is essential to meaning, the deepest meaning brings a smile, a laugh, and is therefore closer to the nature of the Id and to redemption of personality from the oppression of a laughless biblical superego than any other mode of "becoming conscious." The Bible itself considers the laugh redemptive, as in Psalm 126: when Zion is restored then the "mouth is filled with laughter," or as Luke says (6:21), "ye shall laugh later," that is, in the afterlife, in heaven.

To the propositions that laughter is redemptive, that it cures the insanity of literalism and that the God of monotheism himself jokes, I summon evidence from an incarcerated madman, John Percival. I reported on Percival in my 1985 Eranos lecture, "On Paranoia."** Percival, an Anglo-Irish, practicing Christian, and the son of a British Prime Minister, went into a religious paranoia in the 1830's and was locked away for three years, during which he suffered all sorts of delusions, including hearing God's instructions and commandments—like Abraham, and like Moses. He wrote in detail about them in his diaries (London 1838-40), edited by the eminent philosopher Gregory Bateson and published as *Percival's Narrative* in 1961. Here is what Percival says:

I suspect that many of the delusions which...insane persons labour under consist in their mistaking a figurative or a poetic form of speech for a literal one...the spirit speaks poetically, but the man understands it literally...the lunatic takes the literal sense (270-71)...it does not follow that things seen in the spirit are to be practiced in the flesh. (307)

* James Hillman and Charles Boer, *Freud's Own Cookbook* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

** James Hillman, *On Paranoia* (The Eranos Lectures Series, 8, Dallas: Spring Publications, 1988).

As if Percival were addressing Abraham, he writes:

Lunacy is also the mistaking of a command that is spiritual for that which is literal—a command which is mental for one that is physical...the intention was...not practically to put the words in execution. (279)

As his cure progressed, he "obeyed the spirit of humour" because "the Deity...often intimates his will by jesting..." We may let revelations, epiphanies, prophecies, daimons descend without believing, or disbelieving, them. *Serio ludere*, said the Renaissance maxim.

Reflecting upon his three years in the madhouse, Percival presents at the end of his narrative his theory of lunacy:

I conceive therefore that lunacy is also a state of confusion of understanding, by which the mind mistakes the commands of a spirit of humour, or of irony, or of drollery; ... that, perhaps, this is the state of every human mind.... I mean that in the operations of the human intellect, the Deity...often intimates his will by thus jesting...that in the misapprehending or perverting of this form of address may consist original sin.

The original sin, then, is not the fall from grace owing to what the Church Fathers called "the animal mode of generation" and what Freud called the libidinal Id that is universally basic to human nature. Rather the Fall is the fall from metaphor, the fall into literalism. The Paradise lost is the loss of the sense of humor so that you are no longer able to get God's jokes. As Percival's cure progressed, he said he "obeyed the spirit of humor," whereas while he was deluded he was obeying the will and word of God. *Fiat mihi*. I believe Percival not only was cured, but converted. I think he came out of the asylum with a pagan mind.

V

All along this morning I have been using the word "pagan" quite freely. I like the word for my own self-referent reasons—and it offers us another joke: One meaning of *pagos* in

Sophocles and Euripedes is "rocky hill"; *paganos*, people of the rocky hilly countryside. A pagan is therefore a hill-man.

The Latin *paganus* was used originally in several ways: to refer to native peoples who were civilians and peasants and not members of an alien army. "Pagan" was used in distinction to others, particularly to the *alieni*, that is, members of foreign militia who came into native villages and towns throughout the Roman world, armies composed of Mithraic and mainly Christian soldiers.

Authorities seem to agree that the term *pagani* referred simply to the people of a place, both town people and country people who preserved their customs. *Pagani* were contrasted with *alieni*, the people from elsewhere. These were more likely soldiers, Roman administrators, Christians. Paganism in the ancient world can be defined as the religion of a localized homeland, which therefore accounts for the great diversity among pagan cults, customs and myths.

This basic meaning—"people of the place"—opens one more radical distinction between the two cosmoi we are contrasting. The pagan mind will not submit easily to abstract universals, the logics of science, of mathematics, to general laws. It would find alien the idea of a one, true, and universal religion as the Roman Church has defined itself.

It would be alienated by the placelessness of virtual reality and cyberspace, an internet of websites that is not actually sited, anywhere local and physical, and whose images are not attached to or framed by an environment. The pagan, as I understand its psychology, abjures universals altogether including nationalism and ecumenicalism, unless they be qualified by the particular place where the universals are effective. That's why the ancient Gods and Goddesses were always place-specific, with epithets that located them and brought out their specific local qualities. The Artemis or Hermes or Apollo of one place was not the same Artemis and Hermes and Apollo of another. Hence, "a diversity of pagan practices and beliefs."

Therefore it is so difficult to translate lectures such as this because translation not only raises the question of languages, but of transferring a mind and a soul from one place to another. All

translations are traitorous and treacherous, because they assume what is said in one place can be said anywhere. The Christian missionaries taking the one true word to tribes around the world found they had to compromise the universality of their creed to accord with "the people of the place."

The logic of monotheism attempts to override place. This logic favors a cosmos of space and time, the cosmos of Descartes and Newton and Kant, a single and empty abstraction that can contain all things. The differences among things are merely differences of motions and coordinates. Places, like everything else—tastes, smells, colors that qualify the world—are only "subjective," not inherent in things, but given to them by humans. As Immanuel Kant, the most influential of all modern universalists, said, "The taste of the wine does not belong to the wine but to...the subject that tastes it." Tell that to a Tuscan *contadino*, Immanuel!

This devastation of the world as a sensory living body and the reduction of place to vast and unqualified space has led us to the architectural and ecological catastrophes we now suffer. A world that is sheer *res extensa*, of course obliterates pagans, "the people of the place," and so we find peoples fighting for place with insane passion, as in Ireland, Kurdistan, Palestine, Yugoslavia, and in the Sudan and Timor where war between polytheism and monotheism has killed perhaps a million people.

The definition of pagan as people of place, as defenders of place against the alienation brought by monotheism, explains to me—twenty-five years later—how and why my work has turned so actively to environmental, ecological and urban concerns. It is the logical outcome of my pagan disposition. Environmentalism is simply paganism in today's world. The active defense of particular sites, the localism, the championing of rivers and forests, the protection of animals and tribes against intruders from universal corporations and abstractions of government—all this is paganism in contemporary dress. The Greens and the Environmentalists will die for a dolphin or a tree. This is religion, even if without the old Gods.

It would be more conventional to regard my ecological concerns of the last five years as a return to the world after the de-

scent into the nether regions, and the burning of the bridge to the dayworld with which I opened my book, *The Dream and the Underworld*.^{*} This would be a Jungian reading of my ecological turn. After the *nekyia*, the introversion; the psyche moves out to the "other." But this explains a human life in terms of a developmental formula in accordance with the path of individuation. Is this not a monotheistic reading? A reading that puts us all on the same one path—first half of life, second half; inward follows outward and vice versa; compensation.

Rather, my polytheism belongs to my character as a hill-man, a pagan. My earliest excitement in philosophy came from reading Plato at Trinity University in Dublin and Plotinus at the University of Zürich, and from the overwhelming emotional impact that the physical places of Greece and Sicily had on me, unlike any I have felt anywhere including the Himalayas or Jerusalem. It was never hard for me to sympathize with Freud in regard to his pathological incident on the Acropolis, and with Jung's fainting at the Zürich railroad station intending to go to Rome, to which he never came. Particular places have singular spirits, and they call us.

The particular spirit that calls us in this place (Florence) is that of Machiavelli. He speaks directly to the martial tone with which I opened this discourse, promulgating strife between monotheism and polytheism. Machiavelli, sardonic or sincere, we cannot know for sure, said, "A prince should not have any purpose or thought...other than war." (*The Prince*, XIV)

The war that has lasted through the ages need not be understood literally, nor Machiavelli, either. I read him and understand war in the sense of Heraclitus, who said "War is the father of all things." It generates heat, focuses attention, stimulates passion, activates ideals.

By thus charging the atmosphere, Mars draws forth Mars' companion Venus, who softens the edges, that sweeter yielding which allows us to see in the Christian John Percival a pagan understanding of God and to find, in the Sufi songs and verses and

^{*} James Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

cosmologies and in Kabbalist expositions and midrashes of Jewish monotheism, a polysemous multilayered diversity of images, metaphors, daimones and personifications that are quite pagan.

We should remember in regard to this Mohammedan and Jewish diversity that place plays a definite role. Diversity of understanding derives from diversity of place—the Mullahs are identified by Cairo or Cordoba or Baghdad and the Rabbis by Safed or Gerona or Minsk, a local school that gives the reading of the Koran a distinct flavor, much as the therapy school of Vienna differs from the school of Zurich, though both are reading the same text, the psyche.

Despite my caveat against taking war too literally and my appeal to Venus, we must never cease playing this "mono-poly" game, for the mind is always in danger of succumbing to philosophies of oneness and to the tyranny of unification in every sort of sphere. Therefore the pagan perspective will always keep diversity in mind, and with it the devotion to places, their spirits and daimones, the singularity of colors and smell, the taste of the wine and the sound of the speech of each distinct locality. For it does not matter to which Church we go, to which God we kneel, or none at all, or how we imagine the next world, so long as we do not neglect the sensate diversity of this world and the local Gods who inhabit it, who bless it with flavor and color, a delight to the eyes in spring and the nose's joy, this incredible richness of each local springtime, restoring us for a short season to Eden—the *eden* that is directly related to *edna*, that Hebrew word for Sarah's "pleasure."