

# THE ALCHEMICAL IMAGINATION

C.G. JUNG AND JAMES HILLMAN'S VISIONS OF THE ALCHEMICAL WORK



DATES:

Aug. 26 - Dec. 16, 2020

9 Meetings | 19:00 - 21:30

*L'alchimiste* (ca. 1645)

David Teniers the Younger

Dear Friend,

We are about to begin a new exploration of C.G. Jung's work, and would like to extend a warm invitation to jump on board our study group – a.k.a. “the ship of fools” – this fall.

Following the thread from our reading of Jung's *Red Book* we will be diving into the peculiar world of alchemy next. Dragons in flasks, green lions and freakish hermaphrodites are only a few of the bizarre images that populate the luscious alchemical imagination. However, tantalizing as these images may be, for Jung alchemy was not merely a treasure trove of symbolism, but it provided the historical basis for his entire psychology. As he writes in his memoirs:

*“If I had not succeeded in finding such evidence, I would never have been able to substantiate my ideas. Therefore, my encounter with alchemy was decisive for me, as it provided me with the historical basis which I had hitherto lacked.”*

During the 1930s, after having laid the Red Book aside, Jung was deeply immersed in alchemical treatises. But it was not until 1942 – the darkest hour of the WWII – that he disclosed a full picture of what he'd been up to. The title he chose for his groundbreaking publication was simply *'Alchemy and Psychology'*.



Carl Jung pumping water in the Tower at Bollingen, ca. 1960.

This foundational work will be our point of departure and roadmap as we dive into the world of alchemy. Through reading selected chapters of the work, we will try to get a sense of Jung's alchemical opus, and understand why it became such an important, indeed *decisive*, factor in the shaping of his analytical psychology. However, our exploration will not be restricted to his work alone. Alongside Jung, we will be reading selected essays from one of his most influential students, James Hillman.

## HILLMAN

While Hillman departed from analytical psychology in several ways, he seemed to share Jung's high regard for the alchemical tradition. Not surprisingly though, Hillman approached the alchemical "work" with a different lens. For Hillman we do not need to translate the alchemical images into a "meta-psychological" framework. On the contrary: If we stay close to the poetic and ambiguous images of alchemy, they can become vessels in which our habitual ways of thinking can be dissolved; looking glasses through which we can see through the literalist and fundamentalists tendencies that haunt our way of speaking about the soul. For Hillman, alchemical language is thus a way of revivifying the imagination and of restoring soul to our language. As he puts it, alchemy:

*"...gives us a language of substance which cannot be taken substantively, concrete expressions which are not literal. (...) It forces metaphor upon us. We are carried by the language into an as-if, into both the materialization of the psyche, and the psychization of matter as we utter our words"*

Our hope with reading Hillman alongside Jung is to get a sense, not only of the difference between "analytical" and "archetypal" psychology, but also of the therapeutic potential of alchemical language itself. How do the alchemical metaphors touch us? Why are they particularly suited to describe the diverse states of the soul? And why do they, according Hillman, contain such a liberating and invigorating potential?

If you would like to join this exploration please write Nikolaj at: [nikolajknub@hotmail.com](mailto:nikolajknub@hotmail.com). We will be a maximum of 8 participants

## ITINERARY

- 26/8 Jung, C.G. *Psychology and Alchemy*, "Introduction to the religious and psychological problems of alchemy", p.1-39
- Hillman, James. *Alchemical Psychology*, The Therapeutic Value of Alchemical Language: A heated introduction, p.9-20
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- 19/9 Jung, C. G. *Psychology and Alchemy*, Part III: Chapter I: "Basics Concepts of Alchemy", p.227-242
- Hillman, James. *Alchemical Psychology*, Chapter 3: "The Suffering of Salt", p.54-82
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- 23/9 Jung, C. G. *Psychology and Alchemy*, Part III: Chapter 2 (first part) "The Psychic Nature of the Alchemical Work". p.242-274
- Hillman, James. *Alchemical Psychology*, Chapter 4: "The Seduction of Black", p.82-97
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- 7/10 Jung, C. G. *Psychology and Alchemy*, Part III: Chapter 2 (second part) p.274-288
- Hillman, James. *Alchemical Psychology*, Chapter 5: "Alchemical Blue and the *Unio Mentalis*", p.97-125
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- 21/10 Jung, C. G. *Psychology and Alchemy*, Part III: Chapter 3: "The Work", p.288-317
- Hillman, James. *Alchemical Psychology*, Chapter 6: "Silver & the White Earth", p.125-166 (part one)
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- 4/11 Jung, C. G. *Psychology and Alchemy*, Part III: Chapter 4: "The Prima Materia", p.317-345
- Hillman, James. *Alchemical Psychology*, Chapter 6: "Silver & the White Earth", p.166-204 (part two)
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18/11 Jung, C. G. *Psychology and Alchemy*, Part III: Chapter 5: "The Lapis-Christ Parallel" (first part) p.345-376

Hillman, James. *Alchemical Psychology*, Chapter 7: "The Yellowing of the Work", p.204-231

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2/12 Jung, C. G. *Psychology and Alchemy*, Part III: Chapter 5: "The Lapis-Christ Parallel" (second part) p.376-432

Hillman, James. *Alchemical Psychology*, Chapter 8: "Concerning the Stone: Alchemical Images of the Goal", p.231-263

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16/12 Jung, C. G. *Psychology and Alchemy*, "Epilogue"

Hillman, James. *Alchemical Psychology*, Chapter 9: "The Imagination of Air and the Collapse of Alchemy"