THE ARCHETYPAL DESCENT IN FULLER'S *FLYING TO NOWHERE*

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ABSTRACT

Death is not only a biological reality in life, it is also a reservoir of culture. The theme of death has intrigued minds of intellectuals in religion, philosophy and literature. The article presents views of death in James Hillman's philosophy and how it finds its manifestation in a literary work, Joh Fuller's *Flying to Nowhere*.

Keywords: Death, nekyia, James, Hillman, John Fuller, *Flying to Nowhere*

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Throughout the ages and in all cultures writers and philosophers have grappled with the idea of what happens after people die.[1] Often the idea that life is superior to death and the practical reality that people are buried under the earth when they die have created images of the underworld.[2] The existence of an underworld is actually a seminal belief in most belief systems, ancient and modern, and what death signifies is related to what cultures assign to life itself.[3] In some cultures, it is life and what one does in life that determine the underworld.[4] The paradigm that underlies both oriental and occidental belief systems is that one's lifetime is a process of trial and test. Thus, life determines one's final destination as an abode either of reward or of punishment.[5] In others, the underworld has a significance that goes beyond death;[6] the descent into underworld means conquering death and reclaiming life.[7]

In modern literature, too, the image of the underworld has found its reflections. The present paper proposes to examine the concept of "nekyia," the archetypal descent, and its chthonic aspects in relation to psyche and death in John Fuller's *Flying to Nowhere* (hereafter FTN)[8] in the light of James Hillman's theory in *The Dream and the Underworld* (hereafter DAU).[9] Carl Jung inspires James Hillman's archetypal psychology.[10] Yet Hillman, in the spirit of Jung himself, moves beyond him to develop a rich, complex, and poetic basis for a

1 See Jan N. Bremmer, "The Soul, Death and the Afterlife in Early and Classical Greece", *Hidden Futures: Death and Immortality in Ancient Egypt, Anatolia, the Classical, Biblical and Arabic-Islamic World*, ed. J. M. Bremer, Theo P.J. Van Den Hout, and Rudolph Peters (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994), 91; and Donald G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1998), 130.

2 William J. Murnane, "3 Taking it with You: the Problem of Death and Afterlife in Ancient Egypt", *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*, ed. Hiroshi Obayashi (New York: Praeger, 1992), 43.

3 Joseph L. Henderson and Maud Oakes. *The Wisdom of the Serpent: The Myths of Death, Rebirth and Resurrection* (New York: George Braziller, 1963), 15.

4 Jon Davies. *Death, Burial, and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 43.

5 Lewis R. Aiken. *Dying, Death, and Bereavement*, 4th ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 157.

6 Melissa F. Zeiger. *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 93.

7 David E. Stannard. *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 8.

8 For the text, see John Fuller, *Flying to Nowhere* (Virginia: Penguin, 1985). References to the work will be provided within the main text for convenience.

9 James Hillman. *The Dream and the Underworld* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979). References to the works will be provided within the main text for convenience.

10 Sonu Shamdasani. *Jung and the Making of Modern Psychology: The Dream of a Science* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 79; and Sonu Shamdasani, "2 Memories, Dreams, Omissions," *Jung in Contexts: A Reader*, ed. Paul Bishop (London: Routledge, 1999), 33-47; Stephen Goode, "Freud Is Losing out to the Jung-at-Heart", *Insight on the News* 20 Sept. 1993.

psychology of psyche as "soul."[11]

What makes Hillman's work so important is its emphasis on psychology as a way of seeing, a way of imaging, a way of envisioning what it means to be human.[12] Hillman's roots are mostly classical, but in the service of retrieving what has been lost to psychology and, thus, in the service of psychology's future disclosure of "psyche" or "soul."[13] The power of Hillman's thought, however, has more to do with how he approaches phenomena rather than what he has to say about it.[14] Soul making is a method, a way of seeing, and this cannot be forgotten. Hillman's roots include Renaissance Humanism, the early Greeks, existentialism and phenomenology.[15] His thought is rhetorical in the best sense of the word; thus, imaginative, literary, poetic, metaphorical, ingenious, and persuasive.

Hillman's poetical philosophy converges with Fuller's poetical fiction. Fuller, like Umberto Eco in *Name of the Rose*, mingles his poetic background with his extensive knowledge of medieval culture, art, architecture, politics, philosophy, theology, superstition, folkways, daily life, cuisine, and sexuality to create a philosophical novella.[16] He re-creates a transitional phase from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance to shed light on the perennial questions of humanity: the discussions of censorship and access to knowledge, quest for the location of soul, and for immortality, the ideological fragmentation within the Roman and local religious elite, and doubts about church-based teachings.

Fuller's FTN is like a novelistic illustration of the philosophical and psychological theories in DAU in many ways. Hillman, for instance, writes in DAU that one must read all "underworld descriptions" in the light of psyche and that being in the underworld means "psychic being, being psychological, where soul comes first" (DAU 47). Underworld fantasies and anxieties, according to Hillman, are transposed descriptions of "psychic existence" and underworld images are "ontological statements about the soul" (DAU 47). These statements are closely

11 "Re-examining Freud," *Psychology Today* Sept. 1989.

12 Roger Brooke, ed. *Pathways into the Jungian World: Phenomenology and Analytical Psychology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 66-81.

13 Barry Sandywell. *The Beginnings of European Theorizing--Reflexivity in the Archaic Age* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 113.

14 Thomas Singer, and Samuel L. Kimbles, eds. *The Cultural Complex: Contemporary Jungian Perspectives on Psyche and Society* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2004), 185-197.

15 Luther H. Martin. *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 8; Martin P. Nilsson, *Greek Folk Religion* (New York: Harper, 1961) 26-30.

16 Fuller's work has some intertextual parallelisms with Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose* (1983), a novel set in the fourteenth century yet reflecting events on the contemporary political scene in Europe. For information, see David Cowart, *History and the Contemporary Novel* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989).

related to the underworld descriptions, both physical and psychic, in FTN. The "nekyia" of the protagonist of FTN, the unnamed Abbot, as he continues his quest for the location of the soul in the human body, echoes Aeneas' decent into Hades and Dante's into the underworld. However, the Abbot's nekyia is different from both of theirs in mission. As Hillman states, there are various kinds of descent in the history of Western literature: Orpheus' and Dionysus' are for redemption of their close personal loves; Hercules' for fulfillment of his tasks; Aeneas' and Ulysses' for counsel and maturation (DAU 85).[17] Christ's mission to the underworld, on the other hand, was to "annul death through his resurrected victory over death" and "only by losing Christ could the underworld reappear…" (DAU 88-9).

In FTN Christ and the values he embodies are symbolized by Saviour (sic), the horse which is rowed over to the island where there is an abbey is to help Vane move about the island. Vane is an inspector assigned by the Bishop to inspect why the pilgrims visiting Saint Lleuddad's "holy well" on the island to be cured or, as in Abbot's words, "to die" are not going back to their homes (FTN 24). On the other hand, the Abbot, a quite unorthodox and idiosyncratic figure, has been doing researches on the pilgrims' corpses in the labyrinthine well under the ground, dissecting each organ to find the location of the human soul.

The disturbance on the island begins when Vane visits the island on a mission accompanied by the horse on the boat. As the boat carrying it comes ashore, the horse goes mad, jumps towards the rocks, and gets lethally wounded. Allegorically speaking, Saviour's death implies that even religion, here Christian, is helpless vis-à-vis the inevitability of death, thus paving the way for the Abbot's nekyia and chthonic experiences (see FTN 10, 12 and 37). Vane, a representative of the Bishop, who is zealous to discover the truth about the pilgrims dying on the island, is also to die later. It is, thus, essentially after the deaths of Saviour and Vane (which phonetically echoes "vain") that the flow of events gets faster and "scenes of perdition, damnation, and terror" appear; the Abbot's nekyia experiences become more and more dominant in the book. His nekyia turns out to be like Christ's in appearance; however, this symbolic reenactment of Christ's descent is subject to failure as the Abbot himself, too, falls prey to death.

The Abbot's nekyia, to use Hillman's phrase, is a process of transition from "the material to the psychical point of view" (DAU 51). His purpose is to study soul, and to do it he has to go

17 Branimir M. Rieger, ed. *Dionysus in Literature: Essays on Literary Madness* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994), 2; Z. H. Archibald, *The Odrysian Kingdom of Thrace: Orpheus Unmasked* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998) 97.

deep; and the deeper he goes, the more deeply the soul is involved. His descent is representative of both a "psychological underworld," a *via regia* to the unconscious, as well as a physical one expressed in symbolic and oneiric terms. One morning, e.g., the Abbot goes down to his study, using the second staircase, which is "a circular one of stone fitted within the buttress of the house" (FTN 19). The narrator also hints that "Perhaps he was still not properly awake" (FTN 20). On his way up, the Abbot counts three thousand and eighty-seven steps, and, "in his willed dream," passes the five-thousandth step, beyond which the stairs still go on (FTN 21). The threshold of the nekyia, thus, marks out the Abbot's initiation into the chthonic world, and is the borderline between the two kinds of consciousness: upper- and under-world. As a matter of fact, delineated by these two worlds are the Abbot's two kinds of personality, which means "mask": an orthodox religious figure and an unorthodox, even heretical, one with a reflective and introspective consciousness.

It is important to note here that in archaic Western symbolism, "the circle" is "a place of death" (DAU 160). Similarly, the staircase the Abbot uses in his nekyia is a "circular" one (FTN 19). This foreshadows the psychological path of individuation and ultimately a preparation for death, which finds its authentic expression in the "purposeful clamour of tiny wings." The verb "to fly" is used in various connotative and denotative senses throughout the book (97). The flight, consequently, refers to the transition from the material to the psychical perspective, which, says Hillman, "represents dream imagery of sickening and dying, and the Abbot goes through both (DAU 53).

There are also other textual evidences that imply the Abbot's eventual death through nekyia. For instance, the Abbot's library is situated beneath his study reached from a hidden staircase from behind a wooden panel in a small oratory adjacent to his study; "it had been a cellar" once, later converted to the present condition (FTN 41). The library, "though a cellar, had cellars beneath it" leading to rooms which the Abbot had never seen before (FTN 76). Once the Abbot happens to place his hand against the rear wall, the only one not filled with books, and sees that it is warm to his touch, like an oven at the very end of "a baking day when the cinders could be raked out" (FTN 42).

The importance of the use of the image "cellar" lies in its etymology. The Latin "cella" is cognate with the Old Irish "cuile" (cellar) and "cel" (death), which is again cognate with "hell" (DAU 29).[18] The cellar in FTN, in other words, is naturally under the ground like a grave

18 All etymological references are from *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, ed. Calvert Watkins (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1985).

with its descriptions of terror and hellish ambience, which prepares the reader for the Abbot's imminent death.

Consequently, Fuller's FTN is a recapitulation of various views about death and the inevitability of death. The Abbot's scientific curiosity about the origins of life and causes of death in the human body places him in the transitional period between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. That is, his position on the island requires a religious approach to life, but he goes way beyond the religious and epitomizes the Renaissance rationale in exploring matters beyond the Scriptural and Church tradition. The Abbot is clearly not an orthodox cleric, spending much of his time in the library, and browsing through the books by Greek and Andalusian philosophers, and dissecting the bodies of the pilgrims to locate the psyche in them. That he resorts to paganic and Islamic heritage accounts for his dissatisfaction with the Church resources. The Abbot is also heretical in terms of his thinking and discourse, and cynical of Papal authority as an institution and cathedra of reference, namely the Christian teachings and Vane, the inspector.

While the Abbot's quest for the location of the soul in the human body passes a comment about the dichotomy between the spiritual and the physiological in terms of what moves the human body, and what happens when the soul departs from the body. The Abbot fails to locate the nature of the moving force, but the signs of potential rebirth after death are clearly there in the library as the Abbot is about the "fly." The Abbot's archetypal descent is both personally ontological and impersonally epistemological. While death is presented as an inevitable gloomy fact, with the pun on the "nowhere" it also refers to nature of life on earth. "Nowhere" is a utopian place where, as the word "utopia" implies, all is good, and which does not exist at all.

Granted, unlike Christ who once proved his dominance over death through his nekyia, the Abbot is doomed to be conquered by death he has tried to conquer. As in the classical tradition, Thanatos embraces Psyche as the Abbot trudges through the well-waters as if to prove Heraclitus' dictum that "To soul it is death to become water... or rather death to souls is to become wet" (DAU 151). Though the Abbot's quest for the soul fails to present a definitive answer for the location of the soul, his courage to find the answer presents silhouettes of life meaningful beyond the physical existence.