

**The Violence of Innocence: A Critical Archetypal Inquiry into the American Psyche**  
*Opus Archives & Research Center New Mythos Grant II Final Report*

In a letter to Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig dated May 10, 1985, Hillman wrote that innocence is “*the* theme of the American psyche” (Box 154A). Hillman (2004) later defined this innocence in terms of “an addiction . . . to not knowing life’s darkness and not wanting to know, either” (p. 133). As he saw it, America has perpetually escaped its history in order to avoid taking responsibility for it. Even in the face of current and utmost apparent troubles of economic recession, income inequality, political polarization, ecological destruction, social and racial discrimination, America holds onto its idealism through denial, Hillman criticized in a 2011 interview. It does not want to admit faults and losses. It does not want to question or analyze its notions of power, progress, and freedom, or its self-image of inherent goodness (Peay, 2011). However, Hillman (2004) observed, while America sees itself as good and innocent, other nations often perceive its intents and actions as righteous and violent (p. 133). He touched upon this contradiction in many of his books, lectures, and interviews. I embarked on this research project in order to gather Hillman’s critique of America in one place, and to better understand the significance of innocence in American history, politics, and culture, while also shedding light on its dark side.

In the course of my work, I conducted research using the James Hillman Collection at the OPUS Archives on three occasions: May 28-29, 2013, January 6-8 2014, and May 6, 2014. During these visits I had the opportunity to survey a wide range of Hillman’s works: published and unpublished essays, notes and drafts, interviews, lectures, and letters. Whether he was addressing issues regarding welfare, warfare, white supremacy, or psychotherapy in America, Hillman always encouraged us to see through the given descriptions, so-called facts, and dominant ideologies, and to read each event for their deeper meanings. “What I’m reaching for is

to shift the idea of depth,” he wrote in a letter to Michael Ventura, to create “a depth psychology of extraversion” (Box 136).

In the archives I came across Hillman’s drafts for his two-part essay “Silver and the White Earth” (Box 149) presenting a thorough study of the alchemical phases of Nigredo and Albedo. Here, Hillman described that the alchemical process starts with the primary white—immaculate, innocent, and ignorant. The first goal of the work is to blacken these original white conditions. Using this alchemical perspective, I began to regard the place of innocence in the American psyche as the first condition, or *materia prima*, which needs to be worked on to bring about the necessary paradigm shift. Hillman explained that the blackening, or *nigredo*, responds to psychological examination, looking backward and downward in search of the old roots of trauma. This engagement with and through memories “stains [the] innocence,” Hillman wrote (1986, p. 46); it darkens the white imagination and grants it the sobering night vision so it can bring to light what is repressed and disavowed. Out of the blackness emerges the second white, or *albedo*, which does not represent mere innocence, inexperience, or ignorance, but rather carries a new consciousness of the Underworld realities—it “bears blackness within it, the blues of memory and regret, as it intends toward a further dawning, a waking-up to itself” (p. 38). Reading Hillman’s analysis, I realized that the work with innocence in the American psyche could initiate the necessary deconstructive process. By exposing the shadows, complexities, and paradoxes, it could darken America’s eye for self-reflection and self-knowledge.

In a draft of “Farewell to Welfare” (Box 154A), Hillman stated, “America was set up as an Ideal. Founded in individual freedom yet brought slaves & conquest. Founded in individual opportunity yet limited to winners,” and continued, “Left within the shadows of your ideals: the enslaved & conquered; the losers.” He dared us to “face the shadow: Imagine.” As I imagined

into the ideals, myths, and images on which collective consciousness has long depended in the United States—such as the Promised Land, New World, City upon a Hill, Manifest Destiny, American Dream, and Pursuit of Happiness—in them I began to discern the fantasies of innocence. Hillman (1985) maintained, “Becoming conscious would now mean becoming aware of fantasies and the recognition of them *everywhere*” (p. 95). In American psyche’s ubiquitous fantasies, innocence continually introduces itself in different guises: It announces new beginnings—the New World, New England, New Mexico—implying a re-birth and return to the pre-Fallen state. It explains its pure and virtuous character through self-identification with the Chosen People with a Promised Land and a Manifest Destiny. It proclaims noble ideals and intentions such as “civilizing the savage” and “spreading democracy” across the globe. It reads the world in terms of good and evil, its stance always aligned with the former. It deplores the distressing sight of the poor and dispossessed masses which do not fit with its optimistic and prosperous Dream. It insists on happiness, which results, in Hillman’s (1963) words, in the “collective repression of the affective side of the psyche in our culture” (Box 203).

As Hillman (1986) put it, “The adamantine spiritualization of innocence together with the arrogance of the spirit regarding its own ignorance—this doubling of the two supremes generates a consciousness numbed by its own light” (p. 35). Thus, the dazzling light of innocence is self-blinding. In its brilliant immaculate whiteness, innocence obliterates all other colors and shades of truth, in particular the darker hues. As a result, often we cannot see the shadows in our bright ideals and motives, virtuous deeds and beliefs which may end up justifying conquests, genocides, tyranny, and violence.

The fantasies of innocence in America rely on amnesia, oppositional thinking, projection, denial, dissociation, anesthesia, and repression. When we place their contents in the alchemical

vessel of consciousness and kindle the critical fire beneath, they begin to blacken, blister, and rot. We begin to see through the decomposed fantasy-matter: In the Discovery of the New World we encounter the enslaved and slaughtered Natives. In claims to Manifest Destiny, we recognize the latent contents of greed, arrogance, and violence. We see the long shadows cast by our glowing ideals of independence, democracy, and freedom, darkening other nations, races, and religions. In the margins of the American Dream, we greet those who are condemned to the economic underworld. We hold the self-evident truths of racism, sexism, and classism. In our Pursuit of Happiness, we come to feel the depth of endemic depression and psychic numbing.

Hillman did not believe in treatment plans, transformation, or transcendence. He warned against simplistic resolutions and short-term solutions. Instead, he advocated for vigorous reflection and remembrance. In a lecture he gave at the Los Angeles Public Library on October 12, 1997, “The Big Questions” (Box 115), he declared, “We need ideas that we can cogitate a long time rather than quick fixes.” At OPUS, sitting with Hillman’s scraps of paper, reading material, typed and re-typed essays and lectures, I got to satisfy my own thirst for questions and ideas that are invigorating, thought-provoking, and inspiring. In *Re-visioning Psychology* (1975) Hillman wrote, “Our wrestling with ideas is a sacred struggle, as with an angel; our attempts to formulate, a ritual activity to appropriate the angel” (p. 130). While looking at those typewritten pages which have been cut and pasted in multiple places, and scribbled all over, I was fully present to this sacred and angelic struggle. Observing Hillman’s rituals of writing, re-writing, and re-visioning helped deepen my understanding of his archetypal vision at work. It taught me patience, perseverance, and a new level of reverence for the processes of critical psychological inquiry. For this insightful and intimate experience, I am forever grateful.

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