

Animae

The invisible sources of the artwork:
talks with today's artists

Emma Coccioli

Series in Art



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Introduction

In choosing the title of this work, *Animae*, I was inspired by the book *Anima: An Anatomy of a Personified Notion* by the psychoanalyst James Hillman.

To the ancient Greeks the soul was the “vital breath”; according to certain pagan philosophers, meanwhile, the term “psyché” (ψυχή) also means “butterfly.”

In its metamorphosis the butterfly transmutes from a chrysalis into a winged creature; similarly, the soul leaves the body upon death.

Some Scottish and Swedish legends associate the departure of souls to paradise with a golden butterfly.

To Herman Hesse the symbol of the butterfly involves the sphere of the metaphysical; it evokes secret affinities, a mystical, almost physical and mutual interpenetration between the visible and the invisible world, a meeting point between time and eternity.

I envisioned an image with oxymoronic black and white wings to represent the butterfly as it is so well illustrated in the following words by Hesse:

The butterfly does not live to feed and grow old, lives only to love and conceive, and for this reason it is wrapped in a wonderful dress. [...] It has become, as a shining metamorphous, an emblem of both the ephemeral and the everlasting, and a symbol of the soul.¹

What, then, is this book actually about?

This work is a collection of interviews with contemporary international visual artists, selected with care among those whose art expressions are connected, in my eyes, by a red thread made of special skill, refinement, sensibility and a sort of “soulful” beauty.

By some of these, I felt particularly called to try and shed a brighter light on the human depths beyond the shining surface of the art object, the fascinating inner worlds that are glimpsed through it: unique combinations and complex interplays of mind and heart.

These are animae – souls in movement, restless souls in search of answers and equilibrium. Souls taking shape.

¹ Herman Hesse, *Farfalle* (Viterbo: Edizione Nuovi Equilibri, 1997), 9; my translation.

This has been my polar star in the journey through different countries, cultural traditions, aesthetical codes and styles to pick precious samples; it was never beauty as such nor as opposed to ugliness.

(Now allow me a little digression on the variability of these notions. First of all, the perception of the ugly and kitsch changes dramatically in a relatively short span of time. As the philosopher Umberto Eco, author of two extensive essays about beauty and ugliness, points out: “One of the problems with kitsch is that it is difficult to define whether or not an object is kitsch in itself. For example, the objects in Nonna Speranza's parlour were touching to Guido Gozzano², kitsch to his first readers and no longer so according to retro, vintage or camp tastes.”³ And judging from the number of their fervent apologists, especially nowadays, ugly and kitsch may well be thought of as coinciding or coalescing with beauty.)

Some of the professional artists I have interviewed, greatly curious to see how they would respond, are already successful, others are less known; my aim in selecting them has not been based on any art market coefficients relating to their work.

In choosing artists, the criteria adopted are inevitably somewhat personal – after all, as the saying goes, art is in the eye of the beholder!

My guiding idea has been the identification of a certain kind of meaningful intensity, sometimes enhanced by a visionary quality and a touch of mystery, in the representation of subjects – like, for example, nature or the female figure – linkable with themes that are revealing and relevant for the purpose of this book.

The questions I asked were suggested to me by each single artistic discourse in an effort to create a dialogue as spontaneous and as engaging as possible, similar to a live conversation. Therefore, although many of them recur, they could not be the same set for every one, nor be always punctually related to specific works or to all of the images shown. Moreover, they often developed and changed in the course of time and dialectic interactions with the interviewees.

By letting the artists speak freely also in terms of personal experience and/or general *Weltanschauung*, a deeper and sometimes even surprising understanding both of them and their art can be reached (and partly of what is moving behind the scenes of contemporary art). Even from reading the

² In his poem *L'amica di Nonna Speranza*, Gozzano celebrated “le buone cose di pessimo gusto” (the good things of awful taste).

³ Umberto Eco, *Storia della bruttezza* (Milano: Bompiani, 2007), 394; my translation.

unsaid or the overlooked, and between the lines of the verbal utterances, there emerge insightful hints.

Along this rather long and often crooked path I just happened to spot my target mostly in photographic images – by sheer chance, not for any a priori preference on my part. There may be other formal affinities between the works presented, but they are collateral, so to say, with respect to my scope. Likewise, I do want to stress that my interest has been focused on the personality of each individual rather than the artistic movement to which they belong.

Now the way towards the souls is open.

The romantic vein

In view of James Hillman's Jungian background, I have attempted to concentrate this book on artists who have some romantic vein (which embraces, however, a different type of ideality than that of classic Romanticism). Hillman referred not only to Jung, in fact, but also to Nietzsche and the phenomenologists, to the romantic poets, to the hermetic and mnemotechnical Renaissance of Ficino and Bruno, to Plotinus and the gnostic philosophers.

For those who are perhaps not familiar with this author, however, I shall attempt to briefly outline his ideas and thoughts.

First of all, his method. James Hillman was a psychoanalyst with a poet's approach, a sort of artist of the soul. As explained in his *Re-Visioning Psychology*, he opposes 20th century biological, behaviourist and cognitive trends making psychology a soulless, reductionist discipline and practice based on quantitative models and a materialistic conceptual apparatus; while true psychology is a talk, or an "art of the soul", aimed at the deepest and mysterious substratums of life.

Hillman often refers to the "soul-making" of romantic literature, an expression coined and explained by John Keats, evoking a concept in William Blake's *Vala*, in a letter to his brother George: "Call the world if you please 'The vale of Soul-making'. Then you will find out the use of the world."⁴ The human adventure in the world takes on the meaning of "soul-making", i.e., the turning of every obscurity into meaning: the soul is "that unknown human factor which makes meaning possible, which turns events into experiences, and which is communicated in love."

Regarding Jungian archetypes, Hillman defines them as "the deepest patterns of psychic functioning, the roots of the soul governing the perspectives we have

⁴ Ed Friedlander, "Enjoying 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', by John Keats", *Ed Friedlander MD*, April 20, 2018, <http://www.pathguy.com/lbdsms.html>

of ourselves and the world. They are the axiomatic, self-evident images to which psychic life and our theories about it ever return.”⁵ They can also be reached through the analysis of dreams, whose “underworld” re-connects us with the universal shadows of the collective unconscious.

Archetypes are the root of myths, and myths are potential entities, “inner figures” concentrating and expressing the energy of the soul, of individual living souls. These powerful archetypal/mythological images, though, may be in contrast with the ego and generate an intra-psychic conflict, which in some cases, when they take possession of the person, leads to the alienation or loss of the self.

Symbols can be traced back to archetypes, just as archetypes are the containers of symbols. Consequently, the analysis of the symbols used by the artists interviewed in this book has been a source of great interest to me.

Hillman’s theories are generally considered as being somewhat contradictory, and it is partly for this reason that I have maintained a non-committal approach to them in this work, choosing to rather consider the author merely as a reference and a starting-point for new debates.

I have found another theme covered by Hillman particularly intriguing. It concerns the association of the soul with the Yin principle.

Anima and Yin

In *Anima*, James Hillman emphasizes that this particular book was of central importance to him because all his work has revolved around the idea of Anima, or Yin.

The artist Marisa Zattini writes: “Even Bachelard attributes the consciousness of images, reveries and depths to the soul. Making a distinction between Anima and Animus, he associates Anima with reverie, in contrast with Animus and onirical activity, while Corbin associates it with imagination, Marsilio Ficino with mental phantoms (idols) and fate, Onians with life and death, and Porphyry with humid spirit and ‘air opacity’, defining it, in fact, as ‘a thin and imperceptible smoke’. In universal cosmogony, Anima is Yin; it is the feminine archetype, the alchemical Mercury or *anima mundi*, the personification of the Unconscious, a cosmic principle and the archetype of psychic life itself. The alchemist Alan Richard White writes: ‘the human soul is androgynous, because a girl has a masculine and a man a feminine soul’, and adds that the soul is also called an ‘old woman.’ He describes the soul as an

⁵ James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology*, (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1977), xiii.

idea 'of such power that she creates the forms and things themselves, and has within herself the 'selfness' of all mankind.'"⁶

The moral issue

Artists have often been asked questions about their role in relation to the moral issue. Though I think James Hillman does not leave us with a very clear idea about the whole matter, I find his line of interpretation extremely interesting. According to Hillman, in fact, the history of Christianized philosophy separates ethics from aesthetics, and justice from beauty. However, morality without beauty is uninteresting and trivial, and as such impoverishes the heart and the mind.

To use the words of the Italian philosopher Umberto Galimberti (from an article dedicated to Hillman), "True beauty, therefore, lies in goodness, which transfigures the face and gives a serene countenance. What is at stake [...] is the attaining of that self-knowledge urged by the Oracle of Delphi, to the end that the inner harmony in which beauty is rooted might be created in each person."⁷

Serious as it is, the subject can also be treated with a touch of light-heartedness; self-irony and wit can help the beauty of a soul to shine through when they are added to strength of character. My American grandmother used to recite an old limerick by Woodrow Wilson that is both amusing and meaningful:

*For beauty I am not a star,
There are others more perfect by far,
But my face I don't mind it,
For I am behind it,
It is those in front that I jar.*

Even a face that bears the marks of character is beautiful. In *The force of character*, Hillman says that just "as the character directs aging, so aging reveals the character"; "Aging is no accident, it is necessary to the human

⁶ Marisa Zattini, "Mitografie dell'anima: frammento per Floriano Bodini", *Il Vicolo*, 2 April, 2018, http://www.ilvicolo.com/arte/cataloghi/bodini/testi_cri/testi_cri_14-19.htm; my translation.

⁷ "James Hillman: dall'analisi di Jung ai miti greci, addio al poeta dell'anima", *La Repubblica*, Oct. 28 2011; my translation.

condition, intended by the soul.”⁸ Nor is it a disgrace or an artificial state pursued by a medicine obsessed with longevity. Aging is a natural phase in the process of life and even more is a form of art that needs to be cultivated.

The topic of morals has an important place also in the work of Galimberti, who considers that today it is essential to redefine the concepts of good and evil if we are to avoid falling into total chaos or nihilism (a subject covered in his book *L'ospite inquietante. Il nichilismo e i giovani*).

Galimberti often refers to the words of Immanuel Kant from *The Critique of Practical Reason*: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily reflection is occupied with them: the starry heaven above me and the moral law within me.” Defining the good and the evil should not be necessary at all, as we simply should *feel* the difference between them: “Neither of them need I seek and merely suspect as if shrouded in obscurity or rapture beyond my own horizon; I see them before me and connect them immediately with my existence.” Unfortunately, today our psyche tends to be rather apathetic and has little emotional resonance on our actions and behaviour. This is why we need to re-examine these concepts.

The future of the world

In my interviews I presented a particularly important issue to the artists that is the world’s future in relation to global overpopulation, climate change and the planet’s limited resources in the face of an unlimited demand.

On this subject, the visual artist Giacomo Costa recently wrote: “We need to discuss what factors determine the quality of life we now identify with the compulsive consumerism that makes us depend on the symbols and behaviours imposed by the production system. The conviction is widely accepted in the scientific community that if countries like China and India (and, in a following stage, the African countries) should (legitimately) reach the level of wealth and the lifestyle of the rich world, the impact on the Earth would be devastating. Suffice to say that the Global Footprint Network, the research center that analyzes our ability to dispose of the waste we produce and to regenerate the natural resources we use, tells us that the ‘planet system’ already drained this capability, symbolically, on the 19th of August 2014. Starting from that date, therefore, we are in debt, and the autonomy of our production system is now over: that is, we are taking more than is available!”⁹

⁸ James Hillman, *The Force of Character*, (New York: Random House, 1999). Preface to the Reader, vii–vixiii.

⁹ Personal communication; my translation.

In the conviction that artists are gifted with a special point of view, because it is precisely in their sensitivity towards the things around them that their art lies, in my interviews I have tried to encourage them to indicate what they believe to be the greatest dangers we are heading towards today, and which of the proposed solutions to be adopted in future scenarios of the global society they consider most valid.

Chapter 1

Paul Benney

I would like to ask you to make a few comments on the subject of the flame and fire (defined by Leigh Hunt as “the most tangible of all visible mysteries”), based on the following reflections by Gaston Bachelard in *La flamme d'une chandelle*.

“In front of a flame, as soon as you dream, what you perceive is nothing compared to what you imagine.”; “The flame is a world meant for man only. And if the dreamer of the flame speaks to the flame he speaks to himself, and then he is a poet. By dilating the world, the destiny of the world, and meditating on the destiny of the flame, the dreamer dilates language because language expresses one of the beauties of the world. [...] Meditation on the flame offers the psychism of the dreamer a sort of vertical nourishment, verticalizing food. Aerial nourishment, which is poles apart from all types of ‘earthly nourishment’ – there is no principle more active than this in giving a vital sense to poetic determinations.”; “Within the flame even time holds its vigil. Yes, he who keeps his vigil before the flame no longer reads. He thinks about life. He thinks about death. The flame is unsettled and wavers. It takes no more than a breath to put out this light, a spark to rekindle it.”; “But to the wise man that I imagine the teaching of the flame is greater than that of the sand that sinks [in the hourglass]. The flame calls those who keep vigil to abandon the time of duty, the time of reading, the time of thought. Within the flame even time holds its vigil.”¹

Traditionally, the flame is a symbol of religious ardour (especially the burning heart) and is attributed to St. Antony of Padua, St. Augustine and others. It is also an allegorical symbol of charity and, in profane iconography, of Venus. Moreover, “trial by fire” was used to prove someone’s faith or innocence, as in the story of Moses...

You have chosen several of the most interesting and profound writings on the flame and I can’t myself add much more to that except that my personal meditations on “the flame” fall into two or three categories. The first is that on attempting to capture the elusive heart of the flame in paint, I am aware of the impossibility of physically conjuring up this primary and essential

¹ *La Flamme d'une Chandelle*, (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1961) 8-32, passim; my translation.

element. However, there is something in the ordered chaos of the inferno that resonates deeply. The flame, the fire, reflects, in its indiscriminate and frenzied nature, something of our own relationship with existence. Secondly, the flame initiates a sense of renewal, of beginnings and endings. It holds both dread and promise. Passion and rite of passage, all themes that interest me. Lastly, smoke is a theme that appears in my work frequently. As in many cultures, it reflects a need to form a physical connection with the heavens through an evocation of spirit. The smoke or steam that arises from many of my figures is an attempt to animate the spirit in two dimensions.

Fire can certainly be meant in two opposite ways – as divine light, illumination, or as hellfire. In the context of this latter value I would like to ask you to comment on the following thoughts: “There may be a great fire in our soul, but no one ever comes to warm himself by it, all that passers-by can see is a little smoke coming out of the chimney, and they walk on.”² (Vincent Van Gogh); “It is a heretic that makes the fire, not she which burns in’t.”³ (William Shakespeare)

You are correct in thinking that the inspiration for all of my paintings named *Heretic healers* arise from issues you have raised here.

The candle represents the element of fire, but in actual fact in a lit candle all four of the elements are represented, both symbolically and otherwise: the flame that burns represents Fire; the smoke and hot air stirred by the flame represent Air; the liquid wax around the wick represents Water, and the solid body of wax represents the Earth. Depending on the colour of the candle its meaning varies considerably. The green light that, I would say, emanates from the almost white flames in your painting *Speaking in Tongues* (2014), shines bright against a plain background of an unusual shade of green. A green flame or green candle has a particularly magical and mystical value. It would represent the lifeblood that corresponds to renewal, nourishment, the energy of nature, in relation to the cycle of the plants and the seasons (green is one of the colours of Venus, a symbol of fertility and growth, of precisely the Venus-Taurus that represents the Mother Goddess and Nature, even though it is also used for male gods). It is said to also stimulate the development of an affinity with Nature, especially

² Vincent van Gogh, ed. Mark Roskill, *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 122.

³ William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, Act II, *The Winter's Tale: Second Series* (Boston: Cengage Learning EMEA, 1963), 50.

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