

Michael Vannoy Adams. *The Mythological Unconscious*. New York: Karnac, 2001.

Reviewed by Dennis Patrick Slattery

I like critical and theoretical works that find themselves at home walking along the margins of disciplines or fields of inquiry. As part of a faculty teaching mythological studies, I felt my own hermeneutic interests heat up over what the title of Adams' new book promised: a venture along the cusp of dream interpretation, mythology, poetry, the unconscious and depth psychology. Although I was disappointed in some places on the journey, I was not discouraged enough to be forced off the path before I reached the end of this lengthy and involved exploration (488 pp.). More of that later.

Adams builds convincingly from his earlier study, *The Multicultural Imagination: "Race," Color and the Unconscious*. (London: Routledge, 1996) In this new work, his focus is different but not unrelated. He takes as his point of departure Jung's own observation that "the whole of mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious." (p.12) From that observation, almost a catalyst to the study, Adams develops a sustained and often subtle comparison and contrast of Freud's work over against Jung's in the areas of dream interpretation, the structure and contents

of the unconscious, as well as the respective heuristics that guide each of these early pioneers of the psyche. The author is particularly strong in outlining and illustrating Jung's method of amplification, which is both a methodology as well as a certain poetic disposition towards psyche's metaphorical motion.

The more interesting exploration occurs in Adams' linking the value of comparative mythology to amplifying images in dreams, a method which can also be appropriated nicely to the study of literature in the form of what Julia Kristeva called "intertextuality." In addition, something else that lends itself to classroom use is free association with a mythic image, in order to observe what is evoked through a recognition of analogy. However, to further and deepen such a process, Adams calls for a stronger "archetypal literacy" (p. 41) that all analysts ought to have a working knowledge of in their training programs. I applaud and support his idea; such an addition would strengthen and deepen analysis through contact with the ancient images of myth.

In the same spirit of expanding the method and content of apprehending both myth and dream, Adams cites Joseph L. Henderson, "who introduced the term 'cultural unconscious' into Jungian analysis. Adams concurs with Henderson's observation that "what Jung called

collective was also culturally conditioned.” (p.106) This second order of unconscious material appears as a subset, so to speak, of the collective unconscious and develops through “cultural ingraining.” (p.107) Thus, a chapter entitled “African-American Dreaming and ‘The Lion in the Path’: Racism and the Cultural Unconscious” both resonates a major concern of his earlier work and points to the value of knowing a host of mythic narratives globally and locally.

For students of mythology, especially, but not exclusively, chapters on the Centaur, Pegasus, the Bull, the Minotaur, the Unicorn and the Griffin envisioned in myth, literature and dream provide some provocative bridges between the poetic, mythic and personal imaginations. These figures, often given their own chapter, constitute the bulk of the book’s content. Without stating it directly, Adams’ study is concerned with the richness of the imagination’s ability and propensity to engage in what Aristotle called a mimetic action. Mimesis was understood as a making, a forming and shaping into a coherent form some construction or image, from what had been suggested or confronted in daily life, or had been imagined out of whole cloth by one’s individual imagination. Part of the suggestion here is that the unconscious may not only be mythological but poetic at ground level.

By keeping the reader closely involved with these mythic images, Adams describes how the psyche seeks a confluence of experiences that graze around a central image to make sense of experience, be its source imbedded in dream, literature, mythology or waking life. He quotes Jung half way through his discussion: “symbols function to transform libido, or psychic energy. (This is what he means by ‘symbols of transformation.’)” (p.236) Given the metamorphic nature of symbols, their strength seems to rest in their power, Jung continues, “to act as *transformers*, their function being to convert libido from a ‘lower’ to a ‘higher’ form.”(p.236) Such a transformation suggests that the energy of libido can be raised to a mythic or symbolic level. Jung’s interest in the transformative nature of symbols suggests that energy from libido is altered, refined, shaped into a higher form of consciousness, which may be termed symbolic.

In fact, the symbolic nature of the psyche reaches into the heart of Adams’ explorations, which use individual dreams, including his own, as major texts throughout the study. Here he is careful to make some clear distinctions between mythological and archetypal dreams. His idea is that all mythic dreams are archetypal, but not all archetypal dreams are mythological. (p.245) He takes this opportunity to point out a common error regarding archetypes, an error worth noting. Again, and this is one of the

strongest qualities of his study, he returns to Jung's own words for us to contemplate: "It is necessary to point out once more that archetypes are not determined as regards their content, but only as regards their form, and then only to a very limited degree." (p.246) Adams underscores Jung's insistent distinction: "*archetypes are not images*. An image becomes 'archetypal' *only* when it functions as the *specific content* of an archetype, but the image that serves this purpose only occasion is not *the* archetype. While the archetypes are more akin to "constant forms," the archetypal image is are "particular... contents of these forms." This difference is well-known to Jungians, but for many entering the deep waters of Jung's *Collected Works*, it is a difference worth repeating.

This important distinction Adams leverages into the foreground of his study and keeps it there. The distinction offers rich possibilities for investigating the nature of poetic form in poetry, mimesis as the heart of poetic action, and the nature of poetic coherence in a narrative. It also allows one to muse that perhaps poetry, as much if not more than dreams and mythic images by themselves, takes up the material world in language in such a way that it leads psyche back to these primordial forms. Such may be poetry's archetypal fundament and its most intimate association with the paradoxical world of mythology.

Also central to his study, in addition to the images mentioned above, are the shapes or structures of the labyrinth and the spiral, which he investigates through Freud and Jung, as well as the thought of James Grotstein. What emerges from his discussion is a provocative connection between, for example, the labyrinth and the interior of the body. A strength of the study resides in the manner in which Adams will offer several major thinkers' interpretations of the same theme; the overall effect is a large and sustained comparative approach to psyche and myth, all finding their common ground in the unconscious. "For Freud (and at least some contemporary Freudians), the mythological unconscious is ultimately an 'anatomical unconscious.'"(p.268) One can easily make some connections between Freud and Joseph Campbell's work on mythology and the organs of the body through what Adams evoked here in psyche's anatomical unconscious. Campbell's fundamental belief that mythology has its genesis "in the energies of the organs of the body in conflict with each other" (*The Power of Myth*. New York: Doubleday, 1988, p. 39)

He also treats the spiral well through both his own insights and those of Jung: "According to him[Jung] the analytic process is not linear but circular (or cyclical)—or, more accurately, spiral—and finally centripetal."(p.279) The spiral is the *sine qua non* archetypal image for

psychological development. In Dante's *Commedia*, for instance, this image is essential for the pilgrim's progress through the territories of Inferno and Purgatorio, both of which consist of continuous spiral movements as they lead to the central image of the Griffin in Paradiso. This same spiraling assumes the form of the whirlpool generated by the white whale in Melville's epic, *Moby-Dick* as it pulls the Pequod with its entire crew down into the realms of the unfathomable Pacific ocean, leaving only Ishmael, swirling and spiraling at the margins of the whirlpool, finally popping to the surface and rescued to tell the tale of the hunt to us.

To speak of Dante the poet and Ishmael the writer is to tap another image Adams values: that of the hero, often bashed today as nothing more than egoic testosterone ebullience. Adams confirms some of my own beliefs regarding James Hillman's harsh treatment of the heroic when he writes that it is an image Hillman tries to slay. Claiming that Hillman literalizes the hero, Adams rightly identifies the fact that the heroic can appear in many guises. This important archetype transcends Hercules as the absolute and only image of the heroic. Adams allows us to think more freely and range more widely, for example, to include the wide differences between, say, Achilles and Odysseus, Penelope or Portia from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, or Bilbo Baggins or Harry Potter, for that matter. The tragic, comic

and epic heroes are very different figures of psyche, existing most often in very varied landscapes, and Adams is to be credited for insisting we make distinctions between them.

Towards the end of his study, he returns to the different methodologies of Jung and Freud, in order to consider the writings of Jacques Lacan, who follows in the grooves set down earlier by Freud himself. At times jargon in the writing detracts rather than promotes interest in the discussion. For example, one section refers to Lacan's and Freud's methods as "derivative-reductive" and the method of Jung's as "explicative-amplificatory." A Jungian will follow within this method what Adams has termed in his earlier book "phenomenological essentialism," by which he means that the dreamer of images "sticks to them and defines them in terms of what they essentially mean..." (p.376). Perhaps simply describing the phenomenon in a shared prose style would help the average reader grasp the various theoretical ideas and methodologies.

These phrases should, however, not block the perceptions and insights that offer the reader a thick and sophisticated comparative approach to dream analysis, myth studies and image making. I must commend the excellent bibliography that will guide the reader not only to the citations of Freud and Jung, but also to the writing of poets like William Blake and

H.D., novelists like Herman Melville, Jorge Luis Borges and Ursula Le Guinn, and to additional psychologists like Edward Whitmont, Edward Edinger, Marie-Louise von Franz and Rafael Lopez-Pedraza. Adams successfully bridges the chasm between disciplines, in order to move all of us towards a more holistic approach to working psychotherapy, teaching literary works from a depth and archetypal perspective, and seeing with a fuller vision the myth-making or mytho-poetic impulses of the psyche, which is incarnated in its movement in the world, seeking to create meaning through imagining and remembering.

I recommend his study to people interested in mythology, poetry, literary theory, depth psychology, theology and counseling psychology. The Mythological Unconscious is a secure and seasoned witness to the truth that psyche moves in and finds its meaning through images embedded in narratives. The storied or poetic psyche lives a healthy full life within the pages of Adams' study.

