

**A Terrible Love of War.**

By James Hillman

New York: The Penguin Press, 2004

ISBN 1-59420-011-4

256 pp. cloth

Reviewed by Dennis Patrick Slattery

This new book by one of the world's most prolific—30 books—insightful and unsettling psychologists writing today will probably serve as a call to arms for those individuals or groups that have accepted simple and conventional ideas about war's presence in human history. Rather than repeating facile political and sociological talk about war's genesis and its intentions, James Hillman prefers to move vertically, down into myth, into religion, and into the soul's basement in order to discover the most basic impulses to war, which, he believes, is a constant and even normal in the history of humanity. Listen to the language of the media, with its lexicon of war, battle, fight, compete, win, loser—all of these words pointing to conquest.

He begins by quoting **Exodus** in the book's epigram: "The Lord is a man of war. The Lord is His name" (15:3). He then divides his exploration of war into four chapters: 1. War is Normal; 2. War is Inhuman; 3. War is Sublime; 4. Religion is War. The packed 13 page Bibliography encompasses ancient and modern voices on war, violence, battles, defeats, heroics and mythologies of war, often in the figures of Ares (Greek) and

Mars (Roman). What place, Hillman asks, has divinity had in the call to war and to war's justification? We have not, he claims towards the end of this often shocking and unsettling study, even begun to wake up to the complex and nuanced power of the god of war such that we continue as a nation to feel better wandering in the fog of war's purpose and presence than to deepen our understanding of the values we hold, consciously or not, that invite war's presence as a normal occurrence. Not queer or quirky, but quotidian is war's forceful face before us. How our leaders, even ourselves understand war is most often through a failed imaginative engagement with it. Holding us back, holding us hostage to war's might and presence stems directly from our beliefs—religious, political, personal, persistent—that protect us from war with the same ferocity in which we foist this terrible destructive impulse on others.

Hillman states at the end of the book that a large intention in his writing of war is to “expose the unacknowledged force of Ares/Mars within Christianity ever since its origin.” His belief is that Christianity itself hides within a hypocrisy regarding both peace and war, and that nothing short of re-envisioning Christianity's assumptions about these forces will allow us to imagine war and peace in liberating ways. Controversial! You bet, as any serious book on war's pervasive face in the mirror of world cultures should

be. Hillman wishes to expose this fundamental contradiction that while we pretend to seek peace as a nation, we roam the world with large sticks as weaponry looking to pick a fight. Our warring engagement with the world at large, our own harsh statistics on violence at home, should make any serious-minded individual question the paradox, if not the bald-faced irony, of these contrary beliefs.

The most fascinating and provocative chapter, for me, is four: “Religion is War.” It led me to ask if War itself is not a religion, a way of believing that conflict, violence, hatred, prejudice is the final solution to disagreement. This chapter is particularly noteworthy in its distinguishing between religion and myth: “Mythical gods differ from those of religion because myths are stories and their gods are ‘styles of existence,’ in the words of Carl Kerenyi.” Mythical stories, furthermore, are not meant to be taken literally but rather literarily, namely, that they have not occurred historically but imaginally. Myths do not ask us to believe in them, as does religion with its codified matters of faith: “Religion, in contrast, encodes a particular story as the revelation of a particular god’s own word of immortal truth to a historical human in a specific place at a specific moment” ...such that “religion reads the words literally.”

When war is invoked as solution, god, goddesses, divinities, the transcendent is invoked as the vehicle to just such a justification for warring action. Some connection here between violence and the sacred, between love and war, is inevitable. Hillman thoughtfully probes the relationship of love and war, Aphrodite and Ares, as strange and exotic bed partners; he asks that we return to and retrieve the ancient myths of Greece and Rome as ways to reimagine the stilted and sticky and sedate reasonings behind engaging war as a quick and simple way out of complexity.

Our methodology is skewed, believes Hillman: “War is not a product of reason and does not yield to reason.” Note the absence of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq. That they were never found does not matter.

Instead, we might, as Hillman suggests, look at some of the attributes that characterize the American psyche, especially those not often present: “restraint, limitation, prudence.” One of our prevailing gods, he claims, is the god “Rashness—Quick, Fast, Instant, Flash, Time-Saver.” His best, example of this god’s pervasive perversity arises in this citation: “In fact, the war for Iraq began actually when the United States government declared it concluded.”

What I found most valuable in reading this meditative, bold, irreverent and fiercely relevant book by one of our finest iconoclastic thinkers today, is

that I felt, finally, some of the dark underbelly of our own innocence as a people was roused from slumber with a splash of very cold water. We, each of us is paying for this current war; we have a moral duty to pay attention to its deeper mythic and religious intentions.