MEINRAD CRAIGHEAD AND THE ANIMAL FACE OF GOD

PART 1

Mat Osmond, September 2016

Oh what a catastrophe, what a maiming of love when it was made a personal, merely personal feeling, taken away from the rising and setting of the sun, and cut off from the magic connection of the solstice and equinox. This is what is the matter with us. We are bleeding at the roots, because we are cut off from the earth and sun and stars, and love is a fringing mockery, because, poor blossom, we plucked it from its stem on the tree of Life, and expected it to keep on blooming in our civilised vase on the table".

D. H. Lawrence: *Apocalypse*, 1929

NOTE

This paper, that I read at the Schumacher College’s *Landscape, Language and the Sublime* forum in June 2016, is the first part of a longer piece of writing about Meinrad Craighead that I’m looking to publish in 2017. The full text goes on to discuss the connections between Craighead’s art and her lifelong devotion to the Black Madonna, and to posit imaginal prayer as a gesture of ‘moving out’ (*vs.* looking inward), one that situates our personal lives within a daemonic, supra-personal ecology of mind.

1. ANGELS TALKING BACK

WHOM DO YOU PRAY TO?

In her 2005 book *Findings*, the writer Kathleen Jamie muses on the nature of prayer whilst sharing fish and chips with a friend. (1) For Jamie, her friend’s question, ‘Whom do you pray to?’, posed in relation to her partner’s life-threatening illness, elicits an unequivocal response. Jamie prays, she replies, to ‘No-one’: to ‘Absolutely nothing’. But, in place of the appalling ‘crush of hope’, of the futility of ‘haggling with God’, Jamie offers a notion of prayer as, more simply, a ‘paying heed’: as an immediate, moment-to-moment attention to ‘the care and maintenance of the web of our noticing’.

It’s a memorable passage. But its Jamie’s friend - specifically, his inarticulate, off-hand retort to his own question, when she turns it back on him, ‘Dunno, Great Mother, or something’, that has acted as the spur for this rumination. Jamie’s pared-back notion of prayer has stayed with me, in part, because it leaves me with a certain residue. I see thatI’m not quite in step with her dismissal of a Who – or perhaps, of a shifting plurality of whos - on the other side, as it were, of prayer. So, in a spirit of ‘neither of the above’ to the options Jamie’s passage seems to imply, I want to look for another understanding of how we might approach art practice, on the one hand, and our apprehension of landscape, on the other, in terms of prayer.

SOMETHING IN HER WATERS

*Before I could read, when words were only sounds, not yet ciphers in a book, when words arrived as melodies to my ears before my eyes could decipher them, I heard a word which forever made of word, water and God one round whole. Lying with my dog beneath blue hydrangeas in my grandmother’s garden, shaded against a hot Arkansas afternoon, what I heard within my little girl body was the sound of rushing water. And in the roar, ebbing and flowing as I listened, a word: Come. And I knew that the watery word was God.* (2)

I’m going to talk about Meinrad Craighead, an American painter whose career has included fourteen years living as a Benedictine nun at Stanbrook Abbey, England. I’m going to talk about Craighead’s intense religiosity - her sense of sustained encounter with a feminine presence that first flooded into her child mind during the experience she recounts above.

I’m going to talk about how what happened to Craighead that summer afternoon remained foundational to her understanding of herself as an artist: as she put it, ‘It was water that first told me I was an artist, and I believed the water’(3). I’m going to look at how whatever it was that this experience introduced her to, has run like a central current through her work,

a current that’s been closely associated, at all times, with her experiences of landscape as ‘sacred place’.

The readings from Craighead’s memoirs that punctuate this talk span her lifetime: from that abrupt childhood awakening, to a year spent alone, aged 28, at the mountain shrine of the Black Madonna of Montserrat, to her eventual return from England, recalled from monastic life by a recurrent dream to what she considers her spiritual home: the desert landscape of New Mexico, watered by the Rio Grande. There she found, in the face of Crow Mother, that feminine presence who had shadowed her since childhood. (4)

And I’m going to talk, in particular, about how this mingled current of sacred presence and sacred landscape has presented itself within Craighead’s work as a mutating flux of animal or half-animal figures, shifting personifications of those ‘animal mysteries’ towards which she’s understood herself to be in lifelong pilgrimage.

WAYS OF SEEING

*If a forest is a metaphor for the unknown, a drawing is the stroke-by-stroke journey through the unknown: a laying this in, a wiping that out, all the time watching for the image to take shape and lead you into its very specific story. The image begins to give itself to you; you follow it, you serve it. Hence the kinship of making and prayer manifests, with each evoking and shaping the other, creating images which walk right out of the emptiness which has contained them.* (5)

First, though, about the angels of of temporary and borrowed title. In his 2011 essay *Angels Talking Back and New Organs of Perception* (6)*,* the Dutch anthropologist Jan Van Boekel offers a rough – and clearly, leaky - distinction ‘between two basic orientations in the way the natural environment is approached’ by artists working within an ecological paradigm.

On the one hand, Van Boekel observes practices that involve the cultivation of *new organs of perception:* that approach art as a process which ‘nourishes a state of receptivity’, with artists adopting an ‘observant, minimally interfering, and attentive’ attitude to their environment (7).

In bringing Craighead here, it’s the other of Van Boekel’s categories that I want to consider, that frames art practice as ‘an active engagement with the circumambient universe’, one that involves a ‘dynamic, open-endedimmersion in a fundamentally improvisational undertaking’. (8)

An assumption underlying Van Boekel’s distinction is that ‘artistic experiences improve one’s ability to see’(9): that, in one way or another, art helps us to know the world around us more authentically, more intimately. What I want to look at here, then, is the nature of the intimacy, the kind of seeing, to which Craighead’s figurative improvisations invite us.

But to name the kind of seeing I have in mind, I need to take a step back. Van Boekel’s framing of art as an emergent encounter with images that necessarily come ‘from behind one’s back’, and his labelling of this category of practice as *angels talking back*, are both informed by the work of the Jungian art therapist, Shaun McNiff, renowned for his clinical innovation of the ‘image dialogue’ (10): literally, inviting patients to talk *to*, rather than about their images, and inviting their images to talk directly back to them.

Likewise, McNiff’s notion of art as a daemonic, transformative force, one capable of initiating a spontaneous process of recuperation in both maker and participant, flows directly from the work of the archetypal psychologist, James Hillman. So its to Hillman that I’m going to turn*,* here, for a way to approach the kind of seeing we find in Meinrad Craighead’s work.

THE CAPTIVE HEART

*It was at Montserrat that I first understood Crow Mother’s fierce presence moving within a Black Madonna.* *Although I had been in Italy for some years, away from the land of New Mexico, I was never not there, for the spirits of that land clung to me in dreams, in memories, and in the animals sacred to the spirituality of its native peoples.*

*There in the semi-darkness, I stood before La Moreneta, the Little Black Virgin of Montserrat. This daily rhythm – walking up the mountain, walking down to my bell tower – shaped the solitude of those months, as if I were inhaling the silence and exhaling the potent darkness into the charcoal drawings. The double spiral of beginning-midpoint-ending imprinted each day as the phases of the moon imprinted the nights.* (11)

So how might Hillman read Craighead’s assertion of the ‘kinship of making and prayer’, and what connectivity might he observe between her overtly figurative improvisations, and her engagement with landscape? To answer that, I’m going to consider the way that imagination and prayer are approached in his seminal essay *The Thought of the Heart,* in which he reflects on the classical notion of the heart: of what the heart is, and of what the heart *does.* (12)

Before he can get to this, Hillman has first to set out ourprevailing stories about the heart:those accretedfantasies which have, he suggests, long ‘held the heart captive’ in Western culture. The most obvious of these stories is also the most recent – what he calls *The Heart of Harvey* (13): the heart of post-enlightenment *scientism*: a circulatory organ, a pump, and as such, an interchangeable spare part within what is, so the story goes, a complex organic machine.

But prior to this, and suffused throughout our everyday use of the word, Hillman observes *The Heart of Augustine*: a deep-rooted notion of the heart as the seat of our *person*, and as such, an organ of sentiment, an organ of feeling. In this story, what we know of the ‘secret chamber of the heart’ is that this inner core of our person is most authentically revealed through intimate confession, which is, by definition, a confession of personal *feeling*. (14)

What would it mean, then, if we were to suggest of an artist like Craighead that ‘she works from the heart’? Especially if that that phrase came parceled, as it often does, with ideas like ‘following her intuition’, or ‘working from her imagination’*,* it might invite a certain suspicion: of suggestibility, perhaps, or of sentimentality. A lack of hard-headed conceptual rigour.

If any of that sounds familiar, then I’d suggest that what we find at work here, for all our post-religious, secular criticality, may turn out to include a specifically Augustinian brand of Christianity, alive and well with its persistent interior *person -* a person who we take to be somehow or other set apart from Van Boekel’s ‘circumambient world’.

And there’s more: within the ‘contemporary cult of feeling’ (15) spawned by this story – not least, within the confessional industries that it fuels – we’re also presented with the self-deceiving, distractive, and – so the story goes – ‘unconscious’ chimera of imagination. As Hillman puts it, ‘we have so long been told that the mind thinks and the heart feels and that imagination leads us astray from both’.

HIMMA

*In dreams we go down, as if pushed down into our depths by the hands of God. Pushed down and planted in our own inner land, the roots suck, the bulb swells. In her depths everything grows in silence, grows up, breaking the horizon into light. We rise up as flowers to float on the line between the above and the below, creatures of both places. She who gives the dream ripens the seeds which fly in the air and float in the water.* (16)

Prior, then, to scientism’s motor part, prior to Augustine’s organ of sentiment, Hillman steers us back to the classical understanding of the heart, drawing his sources from Ancient Greece, from European Alchemy, and, through the work of the theologian Henry Corbin, from Islamic tradition. The central idea within Hillman’s essay is one that he takes directly from Corbin: what Islamic culture calls *himma -* a word which translates, roughly, asthe thought of the heart, the intelligence of the heart, the action of the heart.

Here, crucially, the heart is not understood to be an organ of feeling, but an organ of sight.

A way of seeing. And the mode of seeing peculiar to this classical notion of the heart, is that which arises through images: through the spontaneous movement of images within the mind. The kind of seeing which arises, in other words, through imagination. Hillman proposes Corbin’s studies on *himma* as the foundation stone for a renewed culture of imagination, whose first principles declare ‘that the thought of the heart is the thought of images, that the heart is the seat of imagination, that imagination is the authentic voice of the heart, so that if we speak from the heart we must speak imaginatively.’ (17)

AN ANIMAL MODE OF REFLECTION

*The movement towards pilgrimage begins as a hunch, perhaps a vague curiosity. We cannot anticipate these whispers, but we do hear them, and the numen aroused has teeth in it. Thus a quest is initiated, and we are compelled or shoved into the place of possible epiphanies.* (18)

Of the many aspects of Hillman’s reading of *himma* that I find illuminating in respect of

Meinrad’s Craighead’s work, perhaps foremost is his take on why this heart of imagination

is shown, mythogically, as *animal:* within European tradition, as *le coeur de lion*, the lion in the heart. What this image remembers, Hillman muses, is that imagination constitutes ‘an animal mode of reflection’, an instinctive faculty prior to the ‘bending back’ of deductive reasoning, which, by contrast, arises after the perceptual event, and moves away from it. (19)

In *himma*, then, we meet imagination as something continuous with the ‘sheen and lustre’ of the phenomenal world – as its own efflorescence, so to speak. In the self-presenting display of imagination, we see ‘the play of *its* lights rather than the light of the consciousness that [we] bring to it.’ And just as we might say of the animal heart that it ‘directly intends, senses, and responds as a unitary whole’, so this upwelling of imagination within the human mind presents us with a mode of ‘mental reflection foreshortened to animal reflex’. (20)

And what of intimacy? What of the interiority of the personal, feeling heart? Hillman suggests that in returning the heart to its rightful place as the seat of imagination, we release intimacy ‘from confession into immediacy’. What the animal in the heart brings, he tells us, is ‘the courage of immediate intimacy, not merely with ourselves, but with the particular faces of the sensate world with which our heart is in rapport’. (21)

This is the species of imagination that I recognize in Meinread Craighead’s images. Not the ‘bending-back’ of ironic, critical reflection,nor any sophisticated interrogation of form and language*.* What I see in Craighead’s work, as she reaches out towards The Black Madonna, towards Crow Mother, forever stuck on the mutating face of her animal God, is something simpler than that. Its something more urgent - more needy, even - than the self-bracketing conceptual athletics that characterize so much of our visual arts. And to my eye, the gaze that Craighead’s work returns to us offers something altogether more interesting.

In both Craighead’s words and her images, what I read, above all, is a dogged, needful return to the slow work of recuperation - to that ‘recuperation of the lost soul’ which both Hillman and McNiff would propose as the central imperative of both depth psychology, and prayer.

We began with the notion of art as a mode of attention to the self-presenting world. Here in *himma*, in the heart’s ‘animal awareness to the face of things’, I find the way of seeing that Craighead’s work invites me to. And if her lifelong imaginal recuperation can be seen as a form of prayer, then I think that such prayer is also, like Jamie’s, an attentiveness - a paying heed. As Hillman says of the instinctive ‘decorum’ which *himma* restores to our wayward human behaviours: ‘in the blood of the animal is an archetypal mind, a mindfulness, a carefulness in regard to each particular thing.’ (22)

Notes

1. *Fever*, (essay in) *Findings*, Kathleen Jamie, Sort Of Books 2005, p. 109-110
2. *Litany of the Great River*, Meinrad Craighead, Paulist Press 1991, p.12
3. ibid., p.13
4. Crow Mother is a Hopi *kachina* spirit. All of the biographical information in this paper, whilst cited throughout Craighead’s various books, can be found within the catalogue raisonné of her work, *Meinrad Craighead:* *Crow Mother and the Dog God*, Katie Burke (ed.),Pomegranate 2003.
5. *Lodestone* (essay by Meinread Craighead in) *Meinrad Craighead:* *Crow Mother and the Dog God*, Katie Burke (ed.),Pomegranate 2003, p.5
6. *Angels Talking Back and new Organs of Perception: Art Making and Intentionality in nature experience*, Jan van Boeckel, (paper presented at) *Shoreline International Symposium on Creativity, Place and Wellbeing*, Ayr Scotland 2011
7. ibid. p.2
8. ibid. p.2
9. ibid. p.2
10. *Art as Medicine*: *Creating a Therapy of the Imagination*, Shaun McNiff, Shambhala 1992.
11. *Lodestone* (essay in) *Meinrad Craighead:* *Crow Mother and the Dog God*, Katie Burke (ed.),Pomegranate 2003, p.5
12. *The Thought of the Heart*, James Hillman, Spring 1981
13. ibid. p.20
14. ibid. p.26
15. ibid. p.27
16. *Litany of the Great River*, Meinrad Craighead, Paulist Press 1991, p.54
17. *The Thought of the Heart*, James Hillman, Spring 1981, p.4
18. *Lodestone* (essay in) *Meinrad Craighead:* *Crow Mother and the Dog God*, Katie Burke (ed.),Pomegranate 2003, p.10
19. *The Thought of the Heart*, James Hillman, Spring 1981, p.11
20. ibid. p.16
21. ibid. p.74
22. ibid. p.75