

Patricia Kirkpatrick and Emily August

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRENDA HILLMAN

Brenda Hillman is a master of the “highly charged lyrical phrase.” Her poems are filled with the music and images of thrush and redwood, hawk and plum tree. But she also takes readers to the mall and recycling center, to the United States Senate chambers, and to the toll booth overlooking San Quentin prison. She quotes from Aristotle, the Bible, and the old desert texts of the Gnostics, and fiercely explores the journey of the soul. She also reminds readers that the Enron executives took the fifth rather than come clean about what they did with their employees’ money and that the war in Iraq is “forget forgot forgotten.”

Her recent poetry explores a variety of forms, including the ode and the epic, yet she is increasingly associated with poetics that have come to be called experimental, which in her words feature “a movement from the idea of poetry as talismanic object to a concept of writing that could include process as part of the poem.” Her poetry shows the influence of philosophy, literary theory, and science and is characterized by a multiplicity of voices, fragments, fracture, and juxtaposition.

Brenda Hillman is the author of seven books of poetry, including *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, winner of the William Carlos Williams Prize in 2005; *Cascadia*; *Loose Sugar*, which was a finalist for the National Book Critic’s Circle; *Bright Existence*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; and *Death Tractates*. She has also published three chapbooks. She is the co-editor, with Patricia Dientsfrey, of *The Grand Permission; New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood* and the editor of a collection of Emily Dickinson’s poems published by Shambhala Press.

She has received awards and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Poetry Society of America. She holds the Olivia Filippi Chair in Poetry at St. Mary's College in Moraga, California, and lives in the Bay Area with her husband, the poet Robert Hass.

This public dialogue with Brenda Hillman was held in front of a live audience on March 17, 2006, during her visit to the Graduate School of Liberal Studies at Hamline University. Patricia Kirkpatrick, a member of the faculty, and Emily August, a student in the M.F.A. program at Hamline, conducted the interview. Questions at the end were from members of the audience.

Kirkpatrick: Both *Bright Existence* and *Death Tractates* were informed by your readings in Gnosticism: I'm thinking of the books' visions in terms of their subjects – existence, life and death, the soul – and also in terms of models for some of their forms, such as “Twelve Dawns” in *Bright Existence*. For those of you who, like me, need a reminder here, the Gnostics were denounced as heretics by more orthodox Christians in the middle of the second century BCE. Yet the Gnostics persisted in secrecy if not outright opposition to the developing Christian church, and some of their writings survived. In the 1940s some Gnostic texts were found in the desert at Nag Hammadi, Egypt by a shepherd boy who, so the story goes, brought the papers home to his mother: she burned some of them in the fire she made to cook the night's dinner. Elaine Pagels, in her book, *The Gnostic Gospels*, writes that although the Gnostics use Christian terminology and draw on a Jewish heritage, they are different:

Orthodox Jews and Christians insist that a chasm separates humanity from its creator; God is wholly other. But some of the Gnostics who wrote these gospels contradict this: self-knowledge is knowledge of God; the self and the divine are identical.

Pagels emphasizes the distinction in the Greek language between “scientific or reflective knowledge . . . and knowing through observation or experience . . . which is ‘gnosis’.” Thus, the term ‘knowing’ could be translated as insight or intuition, a kind of knowing which seems to have everything to do with writing poetry. What drew you to Gnosticism? What does the term mean to you at this point? How has it influenced your writing?

Hillman: I first ran across Gnosticism in college. "Gnostic" as an adjective refers to the sort of anti-cosmic strain of Christian thought that applied to some of the Romantic poets, particularly Blake and Yeats. I put the word on hold for years, and then when Bob [her husband, the poet Robert Hass] and I started going out, we went vegetable shopping and I said something about loving the shapes of the bell peppers, how they get in these agonized shapes and twist around themselves. Bob answered with some version of “Bless your little Gnostic heart.” He suggested I read a book by Hans Jonas called *The Gnostic Religion*. Hans Jonas was a scholar of early Gnostic thought who was working without the benefit of the Nag Hammadi texts which were discovered by, as Patricia said, a shepherd, Mohammed Ali in Egypt. The papyri found in these urns are the equivalent of the Dead Sea Scrolls for Gnostic religions. Ali recognized he had made a find, put the papyri back in the urns, and left them with his mom. She burned some of the papyrus to start dinner. I love that story and its metaphor of a text that is practical. The

fragmentation produced not just by the original writing but also by the burning of the texts makes a fragmented wisdom, a wisdom that parcels itself to us in little packets, little quanta.

Gnosticism is not one thing; it is a set of different kinds of thought right before and after the time of Christ. It was not just Christian but belonged to many other spiritual traditions and so made its way as little threads of things. Most Gnostic groups—as well as neo-Platonists and medieval alchemists – seem to have had in common an otherworldly sense that it's not ours to be at one with matter and that we keep a place in our soul that is not material. So every time you hear of the inner light or the inner fire in Quaker or Protestant thought, or the appeal to Emersonian inner-wisdom's idea that the soul is inside yourself, that it's a different thing from your material being—that's a form of Gnosticism.

This way of thinking about reality has made its way through many parts of our culture, not just in Protestantism, but also in rock and roll and a lot of popular culture that seeks to find the self elsewhere, in a different form. When I was newly divorced, which was also a time when the straight-on, simple sentences stopped sounding inside me, it seemed interesting to think about the soul as a process and not just a thing. As Jonas suggests, these are ancient principles from pre-Platonic times – useful really for being in the world with a sense of hope: the soul is on a journey, and the work of **being** is to evolve.

Kirkpatrick: The idea of the poet being on a journey of the soul or soul-making is familiar and has been associated with lyric poetry, going all the way back to Keats and before. But it sounds like Gnosticism opened up multiple possibilities of voice and form

for you and also was in line with something you said about yourself today in the master class, “I like to break rules.”

Hillman: In the eighties when I was reading a lot of feminist theory and also a lot of experimental writing and thinking about nature as an evolving thing, I found that Gnosticism offered an interesting and ancient take on Protestant thought. Having been raised Baptist, I was interested in the appeal to the soul that defies official authority and seeks the wisdom within. So it went really well with experimental writing – the power of non-conformity and the intuitive traditions.

Kirkpatrick: I find it intriguing that an ancient spiritual tradition could model for you both the lack of set forms associated with experimental writing and the link to subjective states of feeling and experience associated with traditional lyric poetry. I find that inspiring actually.

Hillman: A lot of the objection to the soul as a concept is that *soul* thought of in this way is very essentialist. Gnosticism as it’s described by the writings in the Nag Hammadi library reveals a process of discovery, through searching in your life's experiences, to get to whatever *God* is through your own nature. It’s very much a way of being, rather than just a place where you arrive where the silverware is all set up for you when you get there. The idea of knowledge in process does have to do with the experiments and explorations of writing, I think, and not just arriving at a spiritual center.

Kirkpatrick: You said last night at your reading that you encouraged people to have a spiritual practice as a foundation or support for their social activism and political work. I wonder if you have what you would call a spiritual practice.

Hillman: Bob says, “Brenda never met a religion she didn’t like,” and it’s true. I ’m a pagan animist, that’s probably my spiritual practice, but

Kirkpatrick: Well, you better say what that means!

Hillman: Talking to rocks! No, seriously, I do a lot of meditative practice that comes from various traditions, but I guess I’m still basically interested in western esoteric practice, whatever comes out of the more esoteric traditions, you know, alchemy and the things that came from this sort of Gnostic underground outsider tradition of Christianity. When I attend church I attend mass, but I would say that my spiritual practices have to do with meditating and visualization that come out of the Jungian mode. I have done a lot of work with self-hypnosis and I do have conversations with non-human objects on a regular basis.

Kirkpatrick: I want to move to the book you edited with Patricia Dientsfrey, *The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood*. The essays in this book, and your essay, “Split, Spark, and Space: A Poetics of Shared Custody,” in particular, describe experimental poetics in lucid yet lively ways, and express profound but often unspoken ideas about mothering. Your characterization of the shared custody of a child, for example, as being what Demeter had to accept when she gave up Persephone to the underground for six months of every year speaks to much that is lost, invisible, or out of one’s control in mothering. Yet you note that Demeter not only “lets go” but also “plants and retrieves.” For me, such retrieval comes in the brilliant way you link your personal experience of shared custody to poetic practice. “The spiritual features of poetry are held in shared custody in this world and the unknown one,” you write. “Like a child traveling

back and forth, each poem is based on a reverberation between magic and suffering.”

Shared custody implies suffering. Where does the magic come in?

Hillman: *Magic*, of course, is a rather silly word now, referring to everything from the woman's nose on *Bewitched* to additives in petroleum products. When used about creative experience, I think of *magic* as being in senses beyond your immediate senses, a knowledge – back to Gnosticism – that has to do with a psychic richness that surrounds immediate, common life and that gives hope for the power of awareness of other beings, other truths that are known over time. I have a sense that this layered life, the life of the ineffable, as it translates itself into daily life, gives great joy, even in times of struggle or of political chaos such as we are experiencing now. A more childlike use of the word *magic*, having to do with rituals, like all religious thinking, is a series of metaphors.

Kirkpatrick: You write in that same essay that during childhood we build a survival kit. Play seems such a part of your process as a poet, both leading to the poem and once the poem's on the page, that I want to ask what you were putting in your survival kit as a child out there in the desert? What were you doing as a kid? And what does all of this have to do with what happens to *nature* in your poetry?

Hillman: I grew up in Tucson in the 50s. I think childhood is astoundingly difficult, and we don't give it the homage it deserves. We sentimentalize children and we neglect and punish them in ways that deny the fact that they are seeing the astonishing world for the first time. As a child, you're storing all that up. My experience of being a child in the desert – since I didn't have anything to compare it to but what I read – was

that my life was full of struggle and imagination. I loved my family but often lived in a kind of fugue state.

To keep the freedom of your childhood is a very great task. I see experiment as having to do with the playfulness that was crushed out of you in some way. Experimental writing is not some esoteric, extreme thing for me, but has accessed a somewhat natural life of play.

My sense of the natural world as a salvation, a separate set of realities, of ourselves as apart but a part, has always been there. I consider myself to be a nature poet despite, or even because of, my Gnostic bent. The sense that the world is magical and created has never been opposed to the sense that nature is all there is, and that the inhuman world is miraculously there without us, and that it is inconceivably grand and unknowable except in bits. The postmodern nature poem is a subject of great interest to me.

Kirkpatrick: The voices in your poem often capture that first perception of the physical world. How do you keep that freedom, or sense of play, in your writing process?

Hillman: For one thing, not confusing your poetic *issue* – in the biblical sense of what you produce – with your self, your essence or that illusive thing we were talking about before. Whatever a ‘Brenda’ is when I start writing is much more active and fluid than the ‘Brenda’ that has to get to the store before it closes. I do a lot of recopying of poems, trying things over and over in ways that will offer delight. Doing lots of extra writing but keeping only the best work – those are the two parts of the freedom.

Kirkpatrick: You’ve asked women to think of motherhood as a core feminist issue, and one of the premises of *The Grand Permission* is that when women experience

motherhood, it has consequences for their chosen forms and aesthetics as poets. You've spoken of the feminist lyric as a type of poem. The Irish poet Eavan Boland, who spends half of each year in this country where she teaches at Stanford, has said on a number of occasions, including when I interviewed her, that she thinks of feminism *as an ethic that is not an aesthetic*. Are you saying something different in your essay in the book? Do you see feminism and motherhood as having aesthetic as well as moral consequences?

Hillman: I understand you to be asking if there is any such thing as female experimental writing? Of course, a different group of hormones don't give people different writing styles! In practical application, however, women's bodies have given them access to profoundly different experiences – not just all the obvious things, not just bearing live young and being assumed to be the primary caretakers. As we note in the book's intro, there are not too many diaper-changing areas in men's rooms, though that is changing. I do not believe biological facts determine writing styles. The fact that women are writing with permission and with support from the culture as a group has for the first time produced writing that unfolded from those contexts – feminism, an awareness of psychic process, increased power – and this has produced different writing because it has been identified in that way, but the writing didn't come out because women have the hormones they have!

I see the radical nature of *The Grand Permission* as having to do with the fact that there were finally enough published women poets making literary decisions for this book to have been written. Some of these essays are written by Adrienne Rich's generation and some by the generation after her. Although there are many notable women writers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the number of women

poets who have children and have been publishing regularly enough to compose and assemble bodies of literary work had never been sufficient for such a volume. That's very late in the game for human life.

Kirkpatrick: Your co-editor, Patricia Dienstfrey, said at the 2006 Associated Writing Programs (AWP) panel that she did with you and others on poetry and motherhood, "It's shocking to me that women have been left out of these discussions for 2000 years." I've always thought that women who didn't write criticism are penalized in the canon, that is, *left out of it*. Now you and Patricia have compiled an entire anthology of critical essays by women: we'll see what happens in ten, twenty, thirty years.

As I've read your work over the years, you've obviously been influenced by lyric poetry and the history of lyric poetry. Yet as an experimental writer, you've spoken of wanting to write a lyric that's social: in an interview with Sarah Rosenthal, you spoke of wanting your lyric speaker to have a "stretchy sense of self." I find myself wondering if you are revising the sense of self in your poetry or dispelling—dispersing—the self altogether?

Hillman: The issue of the lyric could keep us here all day. I have been trying to write about the term. People come to poetry because they have a certain sense of the world that nothing else satisfies but poetry. I've never left the lyric behind. I've not only been influenced by lyric, I am a lyric poet. You're brought to poetry and to any art by a sense of the turbulence of your nature in relation to your environment that's profound and that needs to be expressed.

Artists make pieces of art to objectify both their sense of play and their sense of dismay. Of course, the self is a social construct, and it's also some other indefinable

things. That is, we know ourselves through others and thus we say, “Well, this has to do with what Aunt Zelda said to me when I was five, and this has to do with what I thought about it when she left the room,” but I have the sense of something else that is not fashionable and that is the idea of the circulating soul.

One of the great benefits and wonders of this moment in poetry is that we’re able to re-examine and re-contextualize what the lyric speaker is in poetry, so that it’s not just about the little Brenda, it’s about all the other things that a Brenda might be if there were a Brenda, if Brenda hadn’t had 15,000 moments of non-being, and ironically, these moments of non-being will turn out to be what made a Brenda.

Kirkpatrick: I ‘m reminded here of what you wrote in “Split, Spark, and Space”:
“The metaphor called ‘I’, unhinged from its autobiographical story or used as a swinging door between the visible and the invisible, doesn’t have to be an ego-bound instrument.”

Hillman: Yes. So all those ways in which I’m a representative of all women, I’m a representative of all people: I’m just myself. I’m a nothing, or I’m the twelve dawns of the poems that you referred to. When you wake up in the morning, you aren’t anything, you just aren’t. Or you’re a set of relations: I’m a mother, I’m a teacher; this morning I was a loser of cell phones; often I’m a maker of poems. None of which defines you by itself. Just as it’s false to say the self doesn’t exist, it’s also false to say I speak from one voice and I’ve found my voice and I’m sticking to it. The only appropriate stance, to me, is to be confused about the subject of the self but to write anyway. It’s not that there is no you there, it’s that everything is you.

Kirkpatrick: Your poem, “Winged One,” in *Death Tractates* expresses a lot of what we’ve been talking about and has always read for me as a kind of primer for a

Brenda Hillman poem. There's a bird, of course, a creature to go back and forth between worlds, and also the notion of multiple – and colliding – voices, being broken, “stealing whole passages,” and not being normal. But you also say in that poem, “break the rules/with your singing.” Singing—including sound and musicality – is what I often feel is left out of contemporary discussions of lyric poetry. What for you does such singing entail? How do you create music and patterns of sound in your poems?

Hillman: To put it another way, the rehabilitation of the word *lyric* in contemporary poetry has also rehabilitated the concept of singing, and so on; there was just another panel on this at the AWP Conference this year. The anti-lyric/lyric debate has been modified now by the fact that the terms *analytic lyric* and *speculative lyric* have brought together different modes of writing that can be both intimate and detached, and can toss the sentence around a bit more than it was.

Kirkpatrick: Okay, you toss the sentence around. Do you also pay attention to patterns and the repetition of sounds, qualities like assonance and alliteration, or do those things just come?

Hillman: As the lyric transforms itself, attention to the song-like elements occurs in many non-traditional ways – patterns, sounds, the spikiness of overheard phrases, the "fallen" word as music, the ragged, the mixtures of genres – and thus we have a bumpier blend. But I like to think the abstract lyric includes massively reconstructed beauty as well.

Kirkpatrick: In your books I've admired your references to working people: the woman who takes money in the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge toll-booth, brick layers, clerks, a shoe repairman, the Oakland mommies. In your new book, *Pieces of Air in the*

Epic, we hear from a seamstress who says, “I have no country . . . My needle means nothing to the state.” As the seamstress sews flags and shrouds of all countries, she is “Haunted by the / need to work, blinded / by cloth, I take / my needle through gates / of ivory and gates / of horn . . .” She speaks sometimes in the pattern of the sewing machine: “white white white white / thread . . . The war is forget forgot forgotten,” bringing poignant political concerns to the book’s nine epyllions, or *little epics*. In part, the seamstress seems to express your commitment to the presence of daily life in poetry, and at the same time in this book you explore the epic form which has traditionally been associated with the feats of a hero whose experience may unite a community, but is otherwise beyond the daily life of the community. It’s super-human and powerful in ways the rest of us aren’t. I’m wondering if the idea of a hero, ‘shero,’ or heroes is relevant to you at this point, and, if it is, who you see as the hero, ‘sheroes,’ heroes of these epics?

Hillman: I guess heroic or the hero-like lyric is also, to me, not an entity but a set of qualities, just as the lyric isn’t one kind of poetry. The same with heroism and heroic behavior – I don’t know anybody who sticks to such things for very long – I’m sure even Mother Teresa had her bad days. We just have moments of knowing our personal courage when we’re able to enact the heroic (or the ‘sheroic’). I was interested in writing about the epic because I teach the epic so much at St. Mary’s, and the students always have to write essays defining the heroic. The last time I taught *The Aeneid*, we were invading Iraq. The epic form seems in part to be about imperial certainty. The idea of putting holes in the epic form which was about imperial conquering and colonial behaviors was appealing because it undermined that certainty.

Kirkpatrick: You may just have answered what was going to be my last question, which is actually a question you pose in the poem, “6 Laws of Aristotle,” in *Pieces of Air in the Epic*: “How does one write when the laws that limit power have / failed. Corporate with the celestial.” Do you stand by the answer you just gave: that when laws that limit power fail, one writes to put holes in imperial power, behaviors, and certainty?

Hillman: I have a very long answer to that which will appear in some forthcoming essays. For one thing, writers should always have a sense of relationship to moral certitude – even if it is an absolute skepticism about whether it is possible. I have been thinking a lot about politics and the poet – not just about our social role, but about our ethical roles as writers. We have to find forms that communicate to people. Some folks have noted the work in *Pieces* is very hard—stylistically difficult, that is. I was interested in pushing the reader into places that are exhilaratingly uncomfortable. Some of my poems are straightforward and some are not, but I hate polemical verse, and political anger needs new forms of appeal, not just preaching or testimony.

Kirkpatrick: Emily, your questions?

August: What strikes me as a theme in all your books is the sense you create of a fever dream. Your poetry seems to take place in a middle in-between space. In *Loose Sugar*, power comes up in-between the voices. In *Pieces of Air*, it’s the place where the voice can rest. What do you look for in these ambiguous intermediary zones, and what do you find?

Hillman: It seems as if betweenness, ambiguity, or states of uncertainty are the sites for the most possibility. It seemed like a good, contemporary poetics for a woman trying to find herself in the culture, especially when I was a single mother, and waking up

in these in-between states and thinking about reality as an iffy proposition between imagination and realism. My poetry probably takes place between realism and the purely imagined world. "Space cadet" is another word for it.

August: Not only in your poetics is there that kind of in-between resting space – you also seem to advocate it politically. You encourage people to be uncomfortable in their activism. What are your suggested forms of activism for overwhelmed people?

Hillman: A few years ago, when visiting the Gandhi Institute in Memphis, I learned about the activism of Code Pink, and when I got home, I became involved with the organization, doing a grassroots campaign to bring home the California National Guard from Iraq. I had never worked with a group in such an organized way, but we have ended up lobbying legislators, visiting state assembly persons – harassing them to take positions, actually – and getting our resolutions through many city councils. It has not been comfortable or ego-gratifying work. In fact, it can be so embarrassing to try to make a follow-up phone call. But it is necessary for the middle classes to get off their asses and do work that makes them uncomfortable, not just pledge on line.

When I started the work with Code Pink, I was thinking it was going to be impossible to light fires under people about the Iraq war because it hadn't made us uncomfortable yet. If we could only understand how our discomfort is necessary because of the discomfort that we're causing, that would be a profound help. I think it's good to be uncomfortable in a culture like ours, and to be actively aware of our discomfort in relation to what's being done to us and what we're suffering through in our passivity. I don't mean to be offensive around that, but I do feel as if there's a massive, lotus-eating passivity around this present circumstance politically.

August: In your books you use the Gnostic texts, you use myth, you use the epic form. So you have these sort of grand scale themes, and then you've got Microsoft and Visa and the "at" sign on a computer keyboard. I'm interested in what you hope to produce through the amalgamation of contemporary consumer culture alongside these epic themes.

Hillman: That's a big one. What do I hope to produce? Well, *objects of beauty*. Strange objects of interest. Work that will last, and re-make beauty. It may be a bumpy beauty that's not easily absorbable but will take people to the next level in themselves if they read it, even if they don't quite get it at first. Also, a sense of wholeness among and between myself and others that may not have been possible had I not been working at my art in a particular way. I do think of my art as my spiritual practice, without which I couldn't live. The reason all of those things come together, I think, is because that's what we live through, so, to me, it wouldn't be right to leave any of them out, including aspects of popular culture. Like many women of my generation of poets, I grew up with the message that ideas were for other poets, mainly men, to consider, So I took the idea of exploring ideas as a treat I could pursue. I can use the ideas that I come across in as irreverent a way as I want because I'm a poet and not an accountant.

August: You mentioned beauty, wanting to create beauty. How does your aesthetic life get into your poems? What smells do you like? What colors are beautiful, and in what way do you incorporate aesthetics? Reading your stuff, I keep thinking about Gertrude Stein. She seems to me to be the supreme aesthete, and I think your experiments with syntax and also your aesthetics seem in line with hers.

Hillman: Lots of contemporary writing that's kind of out there exploring different sorts of form or ways of seeing does come out of previous writing. Stein is certainly an influence, and she came out of cubism, and cubism came out of Picasso going to Crete, and Crete came out of itself. Mallarmé came out of Mallarmé but also out of ancient book arts. A lot of people have commented about the remaking of beauty in contemporary art, and (Gerard Manley) Hopkins' wonderful line is one of my favorite lines in poetry: whatever is "counter, original, spare, strange; . . . He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change." The sense that the odd placements of things next to each other that came out of modernism, that things that don't fit sing into the dull colors of the universe is one of my favorites.

I think a lot about relative forms of beauty, like those anthuriums, Hawaiian flowers with the skinny, little dog-penis thing coming out of the red leaf. If you see one of those, a fresh one is beautiful, but a fake one is the ugliest thing in the world. Why is that true of beauty? You have this crest-fallen moment when you go up and touch a fake flower and you realize, "Oh God, I'm so disappointed. That was the biggest letdown." But if it's a growing flower, you allow yourself to be in a state of admiration. I don't know of anybody who's written an adequate essay about the experience of beauty that has to do with meaning and location in what might be called "authenticity," if such a thing exists. I don't know how to think about that other thing that has to do with a sense that there must be "genuineness" somewhere, even if it's an illusion. Maybe that has to do with a platonic sense of beauty that I can't really contact. I actually love the shabbiness of silk flowers, so all bets are off.

August: I have one more question and then we can open it up to the audience. In *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, you make specific references in a number of the poems to a feeling of dystopia or this sort of futuristic element. There are buried cars and harlequins picking their teeth with match sticks. I wouldn't say it's Armageddon exactly, but just dystopic. I want to know what role the future plays in the book and what role the future plays in your vision.

Hillman: You're mostly referring to the sequences of poems Patricia was asking about – the “Nine Untitled Epyllions,” which I started after we invaded Iraq. I was thinking that it was only possible to write about the condition of this particular moment in time if I wrote almost generically about all invasions. So I was trying to write the poem that was less about the future than about, symbolically, the past lying on top of the future. It actually came from one very specific moment when we invaded Iraq, and I heard about the things that were being carried out of the museums in Baghdad. I heard about one very valuable plate that was irreplaceable, of course, and it had a little animal on it. I thought of those old medieval gryphons and went plunging into what seemed like the core of sorrow about the human condition and thought, *There's no way to get at this unless I somehow get a poem to speak for the despair of taking the objects and disrespecting the whole of history that they represent.*

So those nine epyllions came from trying to get at that very half-minute of feeling. I invented this character whom I thought was the seamstress who made all the flags of all the countries that have ever been at war, and I imagined her through the ages and I let her voice speak. The other poems are out of this very oracular, weird place that doesn't have a human attached to them, but obviously does because it's in English. I

wanted to get at the inappropriate use of human power on other people. How that collides with beauty and whether it seems madness to try to make a beautiful thing out of it, I don't know. When I start writing, I just start with a line or two. We were talking about this today in class, just to start writing with a line or two and then rewrite and rewrite and rewrite and rewrite a hundred times until it sounds like the condition of your mind that you want to get at, but whether it's beautiful or troubled, I don't know. Finally, if you work long enough, you get satisfied or you throw it away.

Question: I'd like to go back to this idea of the authentic when you were thinking about the notion of beauty and whether or not authentic beauty is better than fake beauty, as in the fake flower/real flower question. When you said that you seemed unable to get at that notion of authenticity, I agree with you, but I think that we can't access it anymore as a culture because we're going to argue about each other's authenticity. Is that why it's hard for you to get at, or is there something else going on?

Hillman: I was thinking back to the notion of beauty as a cultural value, and whether beauty is a value we're going to go for. The discomfort around even the notion that we can feel happy with a particular kind of arrival at the beautiful – if it's confirmed to be the beauty that we're expecting, or even a beauty that conforms to our expectations, why does conventional beauty make us a little sad, and so forth. If you expect the touchable *real* and get the silk or plastic version, the disappointment —the sense that there is, somewhere, the authentic version – is pretty interesting. The ah-hah moment we so desire is not available in the same way, but the *in-betweenness* we were talking about earlier is quite present, in the set of processes in relation to an experience, even if it doesn't land us in the *ah ha* moment we so desire. If you think, as an artist, that you're

trying to create a beautiful thing, but the very idea of beauty is suspect, or that we're not supposed to reside safely in a beauty that isn't suspect, where does that leave our Keatsian hearts? Constantly redefining beauty is my answer. That is, the only answer is to constantly redefine what beauty is.

Question: I was wondering if you see the crest-fallenness that comes from the lure of the fake flower in relation to Gnosticism and the lure of the things of this world? And I'm curious about your pattern of abstraction or non-specificity. In your reading last night, you talked about not giving the personal details of the woman's life in the poems in *Death Tractates*. Is that a way of opening the poem by not dangling the lure of the personal and letting each reader—listener—find the connection him or herself, so that you're not setting up expectation and disappointment, except with the conventions of intimacy in lyric poetry?

Hillman: That's really interestingly put: intimacy in the new lyric asks the space to be something that's traversed or that the reader is invited to cross into an experience. That's one thing that abstraction in art does. We were talking about Rothko in the class today, how he is setting up a field of color that invites the observer in to make his or her own experience. It's like charisma or something. Getting back to your question, whatever is authentic occurs in the process of one's discovering consciousness, even though consciousness isn't located anywhere. I don't mean to be evasive about this because I really think that experience exists!

Question: We keep assuming that art has to have beauty as its association or shadow self, and yet much of contemporary visual art, certainly performance art, is getting at so much else in the human condition that the artist wants us to think about and

explore. It isn't about beauty. Yet I always associate the poetic object on the page and the poetic experience as being aligned with beauty. How essential is beauty to poetry? It seems to me that you're asking us to have a three-dimensional experience when we look at your work which is impossible because it's on a flat page, but you're pushing the page as far as it can go using the tools that you have: topography and space and paper. And that, to me, is really moving, almost beyond poetry, into performance.

Audience: I think what you do on the page is push a lot of the boundaries of what we think poetry is. Could you speak to how you see the narrative in ways that could help some of us to be more open to what you present on the page?

Hillman: There are narrative elements in so many different kinds of poetry. Our daily lives are so bound up with fragmentation or cut across by interrupted, disjunctive thinking, that how, after modernism, can anybody think that a story has to be told in sequential sentences that are immediately one after another all the time? That's not to say I don't admire and appreciate many of the accounts that do that, but it's just not my experience of the day; it's not my experience of doing anything, really, so it would be a lie for me to put that package together. And I am mystified by why this isn't an accepted form of reading. If people who are presently fixated on the Bible can stay with it through all the "begats," they should be able to read Gertrude Stein with pleasure! As for the page and performance, I think of the use of spatial dimensions, punctuation, and that sort of thing, as asking the reader to be playful, and to consider all parts of the sign systems of a page. My newer work has left some of that behind, but only some of it.

Question: One of the many amazing layers in *Pieces of Air* is how it rubs up against *Cascadia*, a previous book. Basing a tetralogy of poems on classical elements

could be a static experience and yet it's not. I've been surprised by how you are approaching the elements and I've had to rethink ideas about *Cascadia* based on this book. Do you have a grand design for these books, or are you discovering different things as you're writing them? How do you turn off the flow of ideas once you're started?

Hillman: *Cascadia*, the previous book, has to do with geology in California, and that was sort of earth, and *Pieces Of Air* is air, and I'm trying to do water now, and then fire. The problem with setting yourself a task like that is that you don't want it to be so willed that you have to force yourself to do it if it's not working. I have a terror that I won't be able to do water because I am so afraid of water, and so I'm thinking, "Okay, how can I do it unnaturally if it's not coming?" I pray to the poetry goddess that the next line will come. But whenever I come up with an "I think I'll do this next" kind of moment in writing, something always comes along to make me think it's not going to work out, I'm going to have to do it a different way.

Before I came up with the tetralogy idea, I was working on the first poems in *Cascadia* and I was going to do all the California elements in one book – "earth-air-water-fire" – and then earth got out of hand. Geology was a thrilling metaphor to work with in California, and now I see many folks are doing similar things, but I was glad to be sort of a Girl Scout leader with that one. Anyway, poetry that's worth anything has to meld an impulse to control with many impulses toward freedom. Something similar happened when I worked on *Death Tractates*: a friend had died while I was in the middle of writing *Bright Existence* and I was just going to insert a couple of death poems in the middle of *Bright Existence*, thinking that book would embody life and death, light and dark – all those large sorts of things – and I couldn't write for months, literally, I mean

not even a line, because I had told the poetic impulse what to do. As soon as I just started hearing the lines, the thing grew into a whole book. Maybe all poets are committed to experiment with life and art, to explore as much as we are able to in our short time here.