Imagination as Reality
Chapter 5 from:

INVISIBLE GUESTS
The Development of Imaginal Dialogues

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CHAPTER FIVE

Imagination as Reality

What is meant by “reality?” It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable—now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now in a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech—and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly. Sometimes, too, it seems to swell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is.

—Virginia Woolf, 1929, 113-114

How different Woolf’s vision of reality is from that of mechanistic philosophy’s. Whitehead characterizes the latter as “a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material endlessly, meaningless” (1925, 56). In Woolf’s vision, the real darts between the social world, the world of nature, and the world of things; it darts not alone but hand-in-hand with the imaginal. How different from conceptions of the real as only the external and the material, of the imaginal as a confusion of wish-laden

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9 Hillman (1982) reminds us that in ancient Greek physiology, as in Biblical psychology, the heart was the organ for both sensation and imagination. Thus, sensing/perceiving the world and imagining the world were not conceived of separately, as they were later by the Scholastics, Cartesians, and British Empiricists. In these later psychologies sensing facts (inevitably about the external, material world) and intuiting fantasies are radically distinguished, sundering the connections between reality and imagination.
distortions! Certainly these views illumine some of our experience of the imaginal as a needed preserve against the harshness of reality. The word "real" functions not to tell what something is, but rather to delineate what it is not. It excludes possible ways of being "not real." The problem is that what "real" is cannot be pinned down in general, as it differs in various contexts. In dealings with imagining, the words "real" and "reality" are abused. Sarbin states:

The traditional diagnostician uses these words in two ways: he says, for example, "the patient claims the hallucinated object has reality or is real;" that "the patient is out of contact with reality or the real world." The non-identity of the meaning of "real" for the diagnoser and the patient reflects some of the problems in the employment of the words real and reality. (1967, 376)

Different notions of the real yield vastly different valuations of imagining.

Let us therefore turn a corner and search out other perspectives on the real and see where they would lead imaginal dialogues and how they would understand the functions of these imaginal conversations. In doing so we shall turn to religion, aesthetics, and philosophy to put into question the presuppositions of those contemporary developmental theories which regard the imaginal as a distortion of reality, or as derivative from and subservient to external, material, and social reality.

We follow this course not because we tacitly subscribe to a religious ontology. Rather, we seek points of view which are different enough from developmental psychology’s that the very contrast shall enable us to reflect more precisely on the nature of our usual theoretical commitments.

**Imaginal Dialogues as Mirrors of Reality or Its Creator?**

The contemporary Western psychological world view claims that images are internalizations of material and social reality which serve the function of representing this reality. In aesthetics this corresponds to the view that the mind and the imagination are reflectors of external objects— their mirrors—and that the function of art and of imagination is to reproduce external reality. From this perspective,
the process of invention consists in "a reassembly of 'ideas' which are literally images, or replicas of sensations; and the resulting art work [is] itself comparable to a mirror presenting a selected and ordered image of life" (Abrams, 1953, 69). Divergences between the image and what it was modeled after—always a problem in such theories—are dealt with by mirror theorists in one of two ways. First, "any aesthetic apprehension which culminates in another view of objects and relations is viewed as a distortion or as a manifestation of pathology: at worst, a disease of the mind; a disease of the heart, at best" (Kaplan, 1981d, 7). Alternatively, art is seen as imitating not what we observe but what is "in" or "behind" what we observe, such as the Ideas or Forms which gave rise to nature as well as art (Abrams, 1953).

M. H. Abrams' book The Mirror and the Lamp (1953) contrasts this mimetic view with the expressive theory of art proposed by the Romantics. These theories are not presented as incompatible viewpoints to be chosen between, but as perspectives which allow us to see more of the complexity of the phenomenon of art. This is our own aim with respect to imaginal dialogues—not to pit one theory against another with the hope of one taking a last fall, but to see if we can begin to move more freely among viewpoints which have been banished from our developmental theorizing, as well as those sustained by our present conceptions.

In the Romantic view the imagination is not merely a replica of preexisting external reality. It has its own "internal source of motion;" it does not merely represent scenes but creates them (Abrams, 1953, 22, 25). When images of the natural or social world are evoked they do not function as copies of the "real," but rather serve to symbolize something else, often emotions\(^{10}\) and experiences.

This is a radical shift. It demands a change in our developmental notions. Because a copy theory of perception views images as replicating the external world, then divergences between image and external referent are taken as pathognomic, as developmentally inferior to those images which faithfully copy natural or social reality. Thus we have arrived at theories stressing that development coincides with an increasing realism. But if the mind and the imagination

\(^{10}\) "Not these plants, not these mountains, do I wish to copy, but my spirit, my mood, which governs me just at the moment..." said Tieck, a German Romantic (quoted in Abrams, 1953, 50).
are seen as contributing creatively to perception, then divergence between image and some external reality need not be negative. As soon as we allow that the image represents something other than the external, realism is no longer the measure, but rather the fit between the symbol and the symbolized. To achieve this fit, all manner of "distortions" of natural or social reality may be called for, and their achievement must be seen as a sign of development.

Etienne Gilson, discussing the painter Eugene Delacroix, wrote:

But a true painter does not borrow his subject from reality; he does not even content himself with arranging the material provided by reality so as to make it acceptable to the eye. His starting point is fantasy, imagination, fiction, and all the elements of reality that do not agree with the creature imagined by the painter have to be ruthlessly eliminated. (1957, 130)

James Hillman discusses this conflict of possible interpretations in Re-Visioning Psychology, in which he describes the "naturalistic fallacy"—the tendency to judge "images to be right or wrong (positive or negative) largely by standards of naturalism. The more like nature an image appears, the more positive; the more distorted the image, the more negative" (1975b, 84). Taking issue with this approach, Hillman (1975b) argues:

A multicolored child, a woman with an erected penis, an oak tree bearing cherries, a snake becoming a cat who talks, are neither wrong, false, nor abnormal because they are unnatural. Figures of the imagination are not restricted to jungles and zoos; they can crouch upon my bookshelf or stalk the corridors of last night’s motel. (85-86)

A. C. Bradley, in his Oxford Lectures on Poetry, argues that poetry’s nature is not to be

a part, nor yet a copy, of the real world...but to be a world by itself, independent, complete, autonomous; and to possess it fully you must enter that world, conform to its laws, and ignore for a time the beliefs, aims and particular conditions which belong to you in the other world of reality...

[Life and poetry] are parallel developments which nowhere meet, or, if I may use loosely a word which will be
serviceable later, they are analogous... They have different kinds of existence. (1920, 4, 6, 23-24)

Similarly, Elder Olson insists that poetic statements are not propositions, and "since they are not statements about things which exist outside the poem, it would be meaningless to evaluate them as true or false" (1942, 210-211).11

In the extreme the naturalistic fallacy operates not only to dictate the kinds of characters, the images of self and others which form imaginal dialogues, but to negate and discontinue the existence of such dialogues in thought and private speech. For instance for Vygotsky, when there is no actual interlocutor for whom our speech or thought is intended, our speech should not suggest that there is. If it does so anyway it is not yet efficient; it is insufficiently developed. Thought should reflect material reality. Dialogue that occurs in solitude is superfluous, at best. But what if thought is inherently dramatic and thus dialogical? Then, as Kaplan has said, it is the existence of monologues that we must account for!

Werner (1948) emphasizes the multiplicity of possible worlds and realities to a greater extent than the other developmental psychologists we have so far considered. He maintains that different kinds of creatures experience different "psychological worlds," and that within each of these psychological worlds there are various "spheres of reality." Pretend play and its imaginal dialogues are seen in this framework as symbolizing activity. "This paradigm," says Franklin, "takes as basic the idea that symbolizing does not—in its basic form—merely reflect or communicate what is already known but is formulative, meaning creating" (1981, 14).12 Play creates a reality. From this point of view, development is not seen "as a linear (or spiralling) progression directed towards adaptation to a preexisting 'external reality’ or (alternatively) towards the construction of a psychological reality dominated by a given mode of thought (such as the 'scientific')," but is a "differentiation, progressive construction and integration of spheres within psychological reality" (Franklin, 1981, 2-3). Observations

11 Maritain (1953) sees this liberation from "realism" as at the same time a process of liberation from "conceptual, logical, discursive reason" (80). This is apparent in the work of the surrealists, for example, which follows neither the rules of realism nor of reason, but through improbable juxtapositions creates a new reality with its own set of meanings (Gilson, 1957).

12 See Werner and Kaplan, 1963/1984; Kaplan 1981d.
of young children—Piaget’s included—can be used to support the developmental notion that children are increasingly able to diverge in their imagery from a replication of material and social reality and not just that their images become more realistic.

Lowe (1975), in her study of the development of representational play in infants, maintains that at first the child applies his own activities (being fed, being combed, and being put to bed) to himself, and that with increasing age these are applied to the doll. So at first the doll is known through what the child does to it. The child makes the doll the object of activities that the child has previously been the object of. In so doing, the former object (the child) becomes the subject or agent (the one who performs the activities on another). This kind of play liberates children from the object role which so often characterizes the early dependence of the infant. It allows children to reflect from a distance upon the roles which are necessarily theirs.

At first the imaginal other is a passive recipient of the child’s attention. Lowe suggests that it is not coincidental that the age at which the child begins to animate the doll is the same age at which the child begins to put words together (approximately 21 months). Indeed, she claims that some de-centering is necessary for both activities. She suggests that as a verbal component is added to these early action sequences, there is a “progressive animation of the doll, culminating at a point where the doll becomes an agent in its own right rather than a recipient of the child’s care” (1975, 45).

Lowe notes that around 30 months of age, the children in her study would sometimes both express an awareness of their identification with the doll (“like the girl who placed the doll prone on its bed with the comment ‘I sleep like that’”) and would attribute their own dislikes to the doll (“She doesn’t want to go to bed;” “She says she doesn’t want dinner”). It would seem that with the acquisition of language the imaginal other can begin to be more than just a passive recipient of the imaginer’s actions and it can begin to be articulated with respect to feelings and desires. However, this does not mean that the onset of language necessarily entails more animation and articulation of the other with respect to psychological properties. One finds even in the imaginal dialogues of adults that the other may be presented as a mere shadow or stick figure.
As the imaginal other is granted its own animation and agency, it can surprise the imaginer with its words. The imaginal other can act upon the self as well as be acted upon. Thus the range of situations which can be represented is enlarged, since one can now become the object of the other's actions just as the other was earlier the object of one's own actions.

If one analyzes the imaginal dialogues presented by Piaget in *Play, Dreams and Imitation* (1962b), the identity of the imaginal other appears to go from a vague younger child (i.e., the child's own role with respect to actual others), to the child's mother, to someone outside the child's family but known to the child, to someone heard about but not known, to a character which is entirely a creation of the child's mind. Both Piaget (1962b, 130) and Vygotsky (1978, 103) note how in the beginning the imaginary situations between self and imaginal other are repetitions or transmutations of the child's actual experiences. Only gradually does there ensue a shift from the simple "transposition of real life to the creation of imaginary beings for which no model can be found" (Piaget, 1962b, 130). Piaget observed play in which imaginary lands were created. The action in these worlds extended over time and involved increasingly complex scenarios and relations between characters. For instance Sachs' 10-year-old daughter complained to her mother that it was very "hard to use her model horses in play with new friends because they did not know the characteristics of each horse and the history of the herd" (Sachs, 1980).

The liberation of characters' identities from a narrow repertoire of known others is not only experienced in imaginal dialogues with respect to the role of the other, but even with respect to the role the child herself takes in these dialogues. Turning again to the protocols in *Play, Dreams and Imitation* (Piaget, 1962b), "J." is first herself, then either herself or a mothering-caretaking figure, and only five months later a person outside the mother-child dyad (i.e., the farmer's wife, and then the postman). Still later she plays the role of a real person whom she has never met before, only heard of. And finally, she is an imaginary being altogether. Piaget points out that only when his subjects reached two years of age was there a transition from attempting to imitate actions of the other while continuing to be oneself to actually becoming the other. Research carried out by Garvey (1979) and Garvey and Berndt (1977) has identified three stages the child passes through in
becoming the other: 1) the child acts the role of the self in relation to the
imaginal other; 2) during a transitional phase, the child neither is herself
nor has she assumed a role; 3) the child takes on imaginal identities.

In psychoanalytic theory as well as in Piagetian theory, the move-
ment from direct imitation to portrayal of imaginal others for whom
no direct model can be ascertained is neutralized by a theory of dis-
tortion concerning imagery and the imagination. Just as the child’s
images begin to flower, the distortion theory explains, they must
disguise themselves in order to elude the censorship of repression.
So they are tidied up. Characters change role and costume. The char-
acters of social reality—mother, father, brother—don the costumes
of fancy. Through interpretation the make up is taken off, revealing
once again the reals and knowns of Freud’s reality. But a lion image
which is interpreted to be a little boy’s father may not simply be an
instance of distortion, attempting to spare the boy the anxiety of
dealing directly with the father image. If we turn to Jung, we find a
different theory of symbolism that helps us escape from such total
reduction to external reality. Here the character of the lion serves
quite a different function, that of symbolizing an idea which is not
yet known and whose best expression at the moment is this lion. In
other words, the symbol does not reiterate what is already known but
attempts to give form to what is not yet realized in its particularity.
Kaplan calls this a “radical aesthetic,” where “aesthetic creation is
the imaginative realization of some lived-through, had experience,
which would—save for the aesthetic activity—resist objectivity and
realization” (1981d, 7). It is the “bringing of experiences and enjoy-
ments out of the darkness of mere existence into the bright sunshine
of contemplation and knowledge”; it is the “giving of significant
form to what is otherwise ‘unbodied,’ formless” (Kaplan, 1981d, 7, 10).

To return to the image of the lion we need to study carefully the
rest of the image’s context. It is not evident simply from “lion” which
attributes of lion are salient, which are hidden but meaningful, and
which are inappropriate. A lion may scare its accompanying partner,
but this frightening aspect may actually be less meaningful than the
respect the lion commands in his terrain. Although these characteristics
are indeed inextricable, they can be arranged in different hierarchies
of meaning. The lion may very well have reference to the father. But
as we pay closer attention to the image of the lion, its meaning goes
beyond simple synonymy with the father. As we all know, the child encounters many lion-like aspects in the world.

Such symbolization of course pertains to the role of the self as well. Role taking is often seen as the child's attempt to assimilate societal roles other than his own, and their perspectives on himself. However, with symbolization in mind the child never just practices a role but uses the role as well to express himself and to create an alternative world. Thus one is not a policeman for the mere practice function of exploring "policeman" as a role, but because issues of power, protection, and vulnerability are afoot. To look at it in this way is similar to dream interpretation where one must ask, "Why out of all the possible day residues, is it this particular detail around which a dream has grown?" The child does not ask himself how to express a sense of some naughtiness. He becomes and acts the part of a dirty, slippery, hungry little pig. Instead of saying one is needy, one acts the part of a crying, hungry, whining infant. This enacting is not only relevant to understanding children and adults' dreams and imaginal dialogues, but also to changes of tone and voice in conversation.

This line of development, away from images as imitations of reality to images as creators of new worlds has been overshadowed by Piaget's and Vygotsky's assumption that this form of play gradually fades as games with rules replace it. Rather than join the debate over whether play is exclusively replication, reconstruction, or transformation, Franklin (1981) offers the alternative of delineating two tendencies in pretend play (and, I would add, in imaginal dialogues): one toward realism, the other toward the fantastical. While the fantastical by definition breaks the rules of everyday reality, there is within such play a development toward greater inner coherence, just as in reality-oriented play. Such movement toward inner coherence, Franklin remarks, characterizes all forms of world-making. In imaginal dialogues this might mean that characterizations of self and others become more stable, that dialogues follow the rules of conversation, or that individual situations begin to coalesce into more structured and well-defined worlds of particularized relations.

This differentiation between realistic and fantastical development of images and imaginal dialogues is an old one. The notion that imaginal dialogues are copies or imitations of actually occurring dialogues is of course suggested in the very root of the term imagination—
imago, an imitation or copy. If we turn to Vico, we find him differentiating between *imaginatio* and *phantasia*. In the latter one does not simply represent the given (as in the former), but creates or brings something new into being. Thus, the image is liberated from a position of inferiority with respect to external reality, as "image does not represent a given. It is a given...[it] is not an extension of reality. It is the novelty in the sense of creating something new from a present reality... It is the making of reality itself" (Verene, 1979, 47-48).

Recent research has also helped to dispel the prejudiced conception that involvement with imaginal companions necessarily conflicts with involvement in reality and with interpersonal relations—and is thus suggestive of pathology. Singer in 1973 studied 141 three- and four-year olds, and found that 65 percent reported having imaginary playmates. The children who reported having such companions were less aggressive, more cooperative, smiled more, were better able to concentrate, were less frequently bored, and were more linguistically advanced than their companionless cohorts. They were clearly cognizant of the difference between external reality and the worlds of their imagination. There was no indication that these children as a group were supplanting object relations with fantasy.13 Similarly a study done in 1968 by Lewinsohn of patients with hallucinations found that other psychiatric patients judged the hallucinating ones to be more friendly and less defensive and to have more positive expectations regarding others than non-hallucinating patients.

**Personifying**

*The intelligible forms of ancient poets
the fair humanities of old religion...*

*...all these have vanished.*

*They live no longer in the faith of reason! But still the heart doth need a language, still*

*Doth the old instinct bring back old names...*

—Coleridge's expanded translation of part of
Schiller's "Die Piccolomini"

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13 Hillman (1977) and Watkins (1981a) also note that in psychotherapeutic work with adults, imaginal figures often desire not to separate their fleshly conversant from daily life, but to be taken by the imaginer into the world. See the case presented in Chapter Twelve in this regard.
For the Romantics the poet's creation of imaginary beings, the personification of virtues, vices, passions and nature, likened the poet to God, joining Him in the peopling of worlds, in bringing "possibility over into the realm of being" (Abrams, 1953, 288). The poet and the painter may use the natural world, but their intention is to create with it a new world, another world—which has been called a "heterocosm" (Abrams, 1953, 27). At the center of this other world, this alternate world, are imaginal others. We hear this in the words of Romantics such as Addison, Young, Aiken, Warton.

[Poetry] has not only the whole circle of nature for its province, but makes new worlds of its own, [and] shews us persons who are not to be found in being... (Addison, quoted in Abrams, 1953, 275)

For Young the human mind "in the vast void beyond real existence...can call forth shadowy beings, and unknown worlds." And in John Aiken's mind, the imagination could not be content with "the bounds of natural vision," and quickly "peoples the world with new beings...embodies abstract ideas" (both quoted in Abrams, 1953, 382).

For Joseph Warton, writing in 1753, personification is the peculiar privilege of poetry and ingredient to a lively imagination:

It is the peculiar privilege of poetry...to give Life and motion to immaterial beings; and form, and colour, and action, even to abstract ideas; to embody the Virtues, and Vices, and the Passions... Prosopopeia, therefore, or personification, conducted with dignity and propriety, may be justly esteemed one of the greatest efforts of the creative power of a warm and lively imagination (quoted in Abrams, 1953, 289)

Whereas developmental and psychoanalytic psychologies focus on how the imaginal other is an internalization of actual others, or of aspects

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14 W. B. Yeats, in speaking of elves, spirits, fairies, and goblins said, "all nature is full of invisible people...some of these are ugly or grotesque, some wicked or foolish, many beautiful beyond any one we have ever seen, and...the beautiful are not far away when we are walking in pleasant and quiet places" (Arrowsmith and Moore, 1977).

15 In a discussion of the painter Delacroix, Gilson (1957) said that "the final causae of all operations performed by a painter is to casue the existence of a self-subsisting and autonomous being—namely the particular painting freely concieved by his imagination" (131).
of them—albeit often disguised and distorted representations—the Romantics and others see imaginal beings as donning the costumes of figures in the upper world. Personifying is not an anachronistic relic of social life which serves merely to compensate for absent or inadequate "real" people. The personifications in dreams and imaginal dialogues are not always or only by-products of "schizoid operations"— "a splitting of the ego in the service of defense, with a consonant splitting of a fundamental, core object that was libidinally invested and yet frustrating at the same time" (Kemberg, 1980, 6). From the Romantic point of view personifying, which occurs naturally in dreams, myth, poetry, and play, is a process which underlies thinking and is reflective of the poetic nature of the mind. It is not merely that the mind can conjure up figures to represent abstract ideas, but that Virtue, Evil and their respective hordes appear as persons.

Thus Hillman defines personifying as "the spontaneous experiencing, envisioning and speaking of the configurations of existence as psychic presences" (1975b, 12), and differentiates it from personification, animism, and anthropomorphism. Animism and anthropomorphism imply that the imaginer has made certain category errors by either attributing living soul to inanimate objects or by projecting human attributes to inhuman forms. With the term personification, the emphasis is on the self's attribution of its own characteristics to a thing or abstraction.

Wordsworth criticized earlier poets such as Dryden, Gray, and Cowper for using personifying as a rhetorical device, and thereby denying its religious dimension. For Coleridge and Wordsworth, personification, as animism and symbolism, were "to move and please the reader" and were "natural expressions of the 'creative imagination'" (Abrams, 1953, 292). These imaginal others were not moved as puppets, but were experienced as autonomously affecting their listener. Recently Wordsworth's criticism has been resumed in the writings of Jung and Hillman. Both stress that imaginal others appear not just through conscious attempts to personify, but are experienced at times as being outside of and independent of one's conscious agency. In their treatment of imaginal others there is no pressure for experience to conform to a theory of projection (i.e., for such others to be eventually experienced as self or as created by self.) Instead it is emphasized that the experience of self changes through dialogue
with an imaginal other. It seems as though the imaginal other is creating the self, as much as the self is creating the imaginal other. These imaginal persons bring us up as surely as our parents, not simply as substitutes for our parents, but as companions in imaginal worlds. And it is not only children who invite imaginal others to the dinner table. Machiavelli had imaginary dinner conversations with historical personages (Hillman, 1975b, 199). Petrarch wrote letters to the eminences of classical antiquity. Landor (1915) wrote volumes of imaginal dialogues between sages and stars of different centuries. Pablo Casals (1967) told his listeners, “Bach is my best friend.” It seems art, drama, poetry, music, as well as the spontaneous appearance of personifications, keep us in conversation with imaginal others. From this point of view these imaginal others affect our interactions with “actual” others just as surely as the other way around.

Whereas psychoanalysis has tried to cope with the differences between actual and imaginal others by saying the imaginal is a representative of an external reality, other psychological theorists such as Jung and Melanie Klein have taken other routes. Each noticed that imaginal others and their scenarios cannot be accounted for even by a detailed examination of the person’s experience in the social and external world. For each it was necessary to posit some other factor apart from internalization to explain the deviations between the real and the imaginal. For Jung, this was accomplished by his notion of archetypes: one inherits forms through which one experiences. The form is distinct from and prior to experience, although dependent on experience for its expression as a particular image. Due to Klein’s emphasis on biology, her puzzlement at the discrepancy between children’s imaginal family figures and their actual parents was put to rest by a theory of instinct. In her model the powerful life and death instincts reshape experience to formulate the character of particular imaginal others and their scenes.

Both of these theorists introduce a factor, logically prior to experience in the external world, which attempts to account for the fact that imaginal others are not always representations of “actual” others. In each theory, as in Romantic notions of mind, the mind does not just passively receive external images but has a role in actively constructing “what is done with what is seen” (Abrams, 1953, 57). For Klein this constructive capacity of mind pointed to biological substrata.
For Jung, it pointed toward the universals of myth, religion and art. The basic similarity of these moves, despite their apparent difference, is suggested by one of Klein’s students, W. R. Bion. While Klein advanced the postulate that children have an innate knowledge of the genitals of both sexes and of sexual intercourse, Bion (1962, 1963) elaborated this by “postulating an innate preconception of the Oedipus myth” (Kemberg, 1980, 41).

In all three cases—Klein, Jung, Bion—one is struck by a similarity of intuition: fantasies cannot be understood solely with reference to a process of internalization, that the contents of fantasy go beyond the child’s experience, and that they do so in ways that can be classified by the observer into certain common patterns or structures. The problem of how fantasy and its persons can go beyond experiences in the social realm is usually approached by way of some innate contribution, and this usually leads to some mythical conception: a death instinct, archetypes, innate myths. The final conceptualization often obscures the validity of the initial observation, namely, that there is a limit to what the processes of internalization and the mechanisms of defense can account for in the life of the imaginal.

This does not mean to underestimate the contributions of our psychoanalytic understandings of defense and internalization. These have provided the theory and technique that guide the daily practice of psychotherapy. Nor, in suggesting that development does not always coincide with an increasing realism, do we deny the fact that this is often the case. Let us agree for now with the object relations theorists in their insistence that there is a development from polarized (“black or white”) figures to more complexly drawn, multidimensional figures. But, whereas their argument rests on imaginal figures replicating the complexity of actual human beings, our agreement will rest on how added complexity increases the power, autonomy, and differentiation of the imaginal as symbolic in Jung’s sense. This increasing complexity in characterization need not necessarily balance out good and bad qualities. In the imaginal, evil and good figures can exist in great complexity of delineation. There is still room for the Queen of the Night, for Mephistopheles, and the Virgin Mary.

If personification is seen as an aspect of mind which arises naturally rather than only as a result of schizoid operations, then multiplicity of figures is viewed differently. For Fairbairn the ego is at first unitary
and pristine, then under environmental stress it splits into various voices. This becomes exacerbated in schizoid conditions. Thus positive development is equated with a reduction of this splitting of the endopsychic structures. Adding more characters would seem to be negative. In this model multiplicity is the result of a pathognomonic process resulting in representations that are one-sided and superficial. But what if the birth of a new character (or set of new characters!) was seen not as serving a defensive function, but one of symbolic representation? What if multiplicity of characters was not conceived of as synonymous with shallowness of character? Even if personification does first occur as a process of defense, as a reaction to external reality and its frustrations, need it continue to serve only as this? When personifying is construed positively as a symbolic event, then development does not coincide with a shift from multiplicity to integration into one, but with awareness of multiplicity.

Given psychoanalysis’ original concern with pathology and its commitment to the priority of the external and the material, focus on the imaginal has most often involved a set of concerns about differentiating “pathological” from non-pathological phenomena: hallucination from perception, a concrete understanding of images from a metaphorical one, “unrealistic” representations from realistic ones. From the psychoanalytic perspective, imaginal life results from internalization of the external world and this process is itself seen in a pathological light, as we have described. This eye for pathology which derogates the products of internalization contrasts sharply with Mead’s positive construal of the creation of the self and its internal world through internalization. To use psychoanalytic concepts to study imaginal dialogues thus implicitly reduces the phenomenon to concern with pathology. Reality testing becomes the pivotal activity.

For Freud psychical reality, the reality of the imagination, was both derivative from and subordinate to external reality. It had no truly independent status as a reality. If we see some imaginal dialogues as creative—which does not rule out their having borrowed elements from actual conversations and people—then we are confronted with various modes of the real which may be hierarchically organized in different ways depending on the preferred goal in a specific situation.

Casey argues that Freud’s conception of reality was too narrow to include the richness of his own observations about psychical reality.
He proposes that a more adequate model would acknowledge the validity of two different types or modes of reality: objective and experiential. “Objective reality” would denote that:

...realm of definite entities—material, social, or even psychological—regarded as potential objects of scientific knowledge. The objectively real would be that towards which a consensus of impartial inquirers tends. In Peirce’s model, these inquiries “converge” on the objectively real without always, or perhaps ever, attaining it as such. This kind of reality is not always or necessarily experienced) it may possess only posited or constructed status without losing its objectivity. In any case, the idea of objective reality allows both for Freud’s concern for scientific objectivity and for his skepticism with regard to the ultimate knowability of the real. (Casey, 1971-72, 684)

While realism may be the developmental measure for objective reality, it is not always for experiential reality. The mother figure who rapes the dreamer in a dream or waking dream could be entirely at odds with objective reality, and yet capture an experiential reality in a most apt and poignant way. As Casey points out, the shift from objective to experiential reality entails a shift in the nature of representations from being indicative to being expressive (1971-72, 687).

The Real as Inclusive of the Imaginal

When imagination is seen purely as a substitute for a deficient external reality, then it is derogated for its wishing. Wishing is seen as a childish affair that intervenes in the attempt to adapt to reality. It is a sign of inability or unwillingness to make peace with “what is,” with what is real. When imagination is seen as creative of realities, wish is construed positively as a longing that gives rise to this creation. From this point of view imaginal dialogues do not merely ameliorate a harsh reality but are active in the construction of imaginal realities.

An illustration of this creation of other realities through wish and longing and the imaginal dialogues that result is given in Corbin’s (1969, 1980) treatment of Ibn ‘Arabi and Avicenna, mystics of the tenth and eleventh centuries. The relevance of Corbin’s studies, as documents of psychology and not just of history of religions, is that he sought not to present Avicenna per se, but the Avicennean experi-
ence. He is interested in the “mode of perception” and of being implicit in Avicenna’s work (Corbin, 1980, 8). In the Persian mysticism of Ibn ‘Arabi and Avicenna, imaginal dialogues between men and their angels form the central experience around which a cosmology of levels and worlds revolves. One comes to know oneself through coming to know one’s Lord, one’s Angel. Each person and Angel comes into being through the other, not all at once, but gradually through being with each other. In Ibn ‘Arabi’s words,

We have given Him to manifest Himself through us, whereas He has given us (to exist through Him). Thus the role is shared between Him and us... If He has given us life and existence by His being, I also give Him life by knowing Him in my heart.

The voice of his Angel said to him,

If then you perceive me, you perceive yourself. But you cannot perceive me through yourself. It is through my eyes that you see me and see yourself, Through your eyes you cannot see me. (From Ibn ‘Arabi’s Book of Theophanies, quoted in Corbin, 1969, 127, 114)

For Ibn ‘Arabi, to return to one’s Lord is to “return to his self” “to yourself as you are known by your Lord” (Corbin 1969, 253). In “prayer there is between God and his faithful not so much a sharing of roles as a situation in which each by turns takes the role of the other” (264). Prayer is “a dialogue in which the two parties continually exchange roles” (269).

Were it not that Ibn ‘Arabi’s and Avicenna’s interlocutors were Angels or Lords—were their interlocutors reduced to representations of “actual” others—we might hear echoes of G.H. Mead in these thoughts. For did not Mead believe that the Self is created through the child’s transit into others’ perspectives on him? Of course many in Mead’s time argued that his system was implicitly religious, that the “generalized other” was not simply an amalgamation of the society’s points of view, but represented God. Of this Mead could not be convinced. The opposing interpretations of course issued from conflicting ontological commitments: the secular and the non-secular.

In the systems of belief which Corbin presents, imaginal dialogue is prayer. Prayer is not a request for something, it is “a means
of existing and of causing to exist, that is, a means of causing the God who reveals Himself to appear, of ‘seeing’ Him.” He is seen not as He is, “in His essence,” but in “the form” which this person’s being or consciousness calls out. Thus the God does not exist in and of Himself with fixed qualities, but exists through dialogue with a particular man. “No theophany is possible except in the form corresponding to the predisposition of the subject” who receives the theophany (Corbin, 1969, 270).

In the psychological models we have been treating, the others of the everyday material world are given primacy. Imaginal others are derived. In many religious systems, God is primary and creates people. In Ibn ‘Arabi’s system man and God co-create each other. It is longing that begins prayer—both God’s prayer to see Himself in a mirror which sees Him and man’s prayer to become such a mirror (Corbin, 1969, 261). When one does not yet see one’s Lord in his heart, he is urged to pray as though he saw Him, and in so doing to create the situation of longing in which the Angel appears.  

In the Avicennan and Suhrawardian recitals translated by Corbin, the development of the relation to the Angels is recounted, beginning with exodus from the material world, to an encounter with the Angel and the Angel’s world (1980, 32). These recitals record the dialogues between person and imaginal interlocutor. The world of the Angels and the events that transpire there are symbolic in the sense earlier discussed: “the symbol is not an artificially constructed ‘sign’”; it announces “something that cannot be expressed otherwise; it is the unique expression of the thing symbolized” (Corbin, 1980, 30). When the attention returns to events in the everyday world, this symbolic awareness raises everyday events to the level of the dream. This is, of course, the same direction of thought taken in the Italian Renaissance by people such as Ficino. Instead of seeing an opposition between the imaginal and the real, an analogical mode was suggested in which the real is viewed as imaginal and the imaginal as real, reality as a dream and dream as reality. For Ficino the world is thus a theater (Cope, 1973, 77). For Novalis, “the World becomes the Dream, the

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16 A Contemporary author, Marilyne Robinson, puts it this way in her novel *Housekeeping* (1980, 152-153): “For to wish for a hand on one’s hair is all but to feel it. So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again. Though we dream and hardly know it, longing, like an angel fosters us, smooths our hair, and brings us wild strawberries.”
Dream the World” (quoted in Cope, 1973).

Instead of the real and the imaginal being opposed as the imagi-
nal distorts, condenses, rearranges and negates the real, it is thought
that through the imaginal the truer nature of the real is manifested. It
is the intermediate universe—the universe between pure spirit and
the physical, sensible world—which is the world of the symbol and
of imagining. In it spirits become corporealized and bodies spiritual-
ized. This intermediate world, ‘alam al mithal, the “mundus imaginalis,”
“corresponds to a precise mode of perception” which is imaginative
power or perception (Corbin, 1972, 1). Corbin reflects his authors’
intentions by arguing that this mode of perception, though not sense
perception or intellectual intuition, is nonetheless every bit as real, or
even more real. In this mode of perception development is not atten-
dant to de-personification, to pure logic or abstract thought, to
assimilating the imaginal other into the self, or forsaking him in loyalty
to objective reality. Development has to do rather with attaining a
state of mind, through longing, in which personifying occurs sponta-
neously. The resulting figures are not considered “imaginary” but
“imaginal,” in order to indicate that they are not unreal. For Corbin
these imaginal others are part of the real, where the real is defined
more largely than our modern Western conception of it. Dialogues
with the “Angels” of imaginal reality, far from being symptomatic of
pathology, are understood as teaching one to hear the events of the
everyday symbolically and metaphorically.

The relevance of these ideas to our own psychology is best
expressed by Corbin himself:

Let us not make any mistake and simply state that our
precursors in the West conceived imagination too ratio-
nalistically and too intellectualistically. Unless we have
access to a cosmology structured similarly to that of the
traditional Oriental philosophers, with a plurality of uni-
verses arranged in ascending order, our imagination will
remain out of focus, and its recurrent conjunctions with
our will to power will be a never-ending source of horrors.
In that event, we would be confining ourselves to looking
for a new discipline of the Imagination. It would, how-
ever, be difficult to find such a new discipline, as long as
we continue to see in it no more than a way of getting a
certain distance to what is called reality and a way of act-
ing upon reality. Now, this reality we feel is arbitrarily limited as soon as we compare it to the reality described by our traditional theosophers, and this limitation degrades reality itself. (1972, 16)

It is beyond the scope of this book to describe how the historical pressures of Christianity and the rise of science narrowed the prevailing conception of reality to exclude imaginal figures. Let it suffice to say that as long as reality is defined this narrowly, imaginal dialogues will be seen as either a means to adapt to that delimited reality or as a nuisance thwarting the desired adaptation—and our view of other possible functions of the imaginal will be distorted. From this constricted view of reality such dialogues become merely one among other ways to rehearse future social discourse, practice language skills, guide behavior. In psychotherapy this view results in such practices as teaching schizophrenics and hyperactive children to talk to themselves to guide their feelings and behavior and to adapt to the demands of external social reality. (See Meichenbaum, 1977 and Meichenbaum and Goodman, 1979.)

Once we open up reality to include the poetic, the dramatic, and the spiritual, the development of our relations with imaginal figures can no longer be confined to our customary notions. Development itself needs to be reconceived. Adaptation to reality changes its meaning, as reality becomes not just the sensible, material, and external reality, but created and imaginal realities as well. Adaptation with regard to a redefined notion of reality would no longer reflect a primarily “utilitarian, ‘survival’—or ‘achievement’ oriented context” (Herron and Sutton-Smith, 1971, 2), but would include forming a relation to symbolic and expressive modes of thought. Sutton-Smith argues this point of view with respect to symbolic play, which is among the first sites of imaginal dialogues. Play, he argues, is not solely a cognitive (nor affective or conative) function but “an expressive form \textit{sui generis} with its own unique purpose” (Sutton-Smith, 1971, 341). “Reverie and creative imagination have to do,” he says, “with more novel forms of adaptation” (331). They are creative of realities and not just deficient ones expressive of the child’s inability to accommodate himself to external reality or failure to relinquish a position of egocentricity. They are creative of alternate realities, of symbolic and metaphorical realities.
Corbin is not presented here to advocate a religious point of view with regard to imaginal dialogues. The virtue of the system he describes is that it begins with the experience of the imaginal other and illustrates how, when this experience is engaged, there can develop a metaphorical way of thinking, a reflection between mundane and imaginal realities that enriches them both. The developmental theories dealt with earlier approach imaginal dialogues from a theory of projection which too quickly moves from the experience of the figures to explanatory principles. If one lingers with the experience of the figures' autonomy, as Corbin's poets did, development is seen in terms of the manner of relating to the figures, rather than the gradual reabsorption and disappearance of the figures suggested by the psychological theories we have discussed.