The Dialogues Between Multiple Characters: The Monologues of Multiple Personality
Chapter 8 of:

INVISIBLE GUESTS
The Development of Imaginal Dialogues

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CHAPTER EIGHT

The Dialogues Between Multiple Characters:  
The Monologues of Multiple Personality

I cannot understand the mystery but  
I am always conscious of myself as two.  
Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
I am large, I contain multitudes. —Walt Whitman

There never was...a good biography of a good novelist.  
There couldn't be. He's too many people if he's any good.  
—F. Scott Fitzgerald (quoted in Rogers, 1970)

Whereas psychoanalytic and developmental theories advocate a developmental unification of the various imaginal personae over time, a perspective which valued dramatic thought would struggle to maintain multiplicity. Contrary to fearful expectation, this multiplicity of characters in an individual's experience would not resemble a pathological state of "multiple personality." In the latter there is no imaginal dialogue, only sequential monologue. The person identifies with or is taken over by various characters in a sequential fashion. The ego is most often unaware of the other voices. It is paradoxical that the illness of multiple personality is problematic precisely because of its singleness of voice at any one moment, not because of its multiplicity. Improvement starts when dialogue and reflection between the selves begins to happen, when there is multiplicity in a single moment of time, rather than multiplicity over time (see Schreiber, 1973).
The multiplicity we are advocating from a dramatic point of view is one where the characters are in dialogue. Why? What virtue do we see in multiplicity? This is like asking what were the virtues of polytheism, or of the experience of multiple souls prevalent in many earlier cultures. The questions are analogous because in all three cases an individual relates to a multiplicity of figures, and experiences him or herself and the world through this multiplicity of selves, gods, or souls. The rejection of polytheism can be likened, as it has been by Hillman (1971), to the rejection of a polycentric psyche.

In the history of religions and in ethnology there have been moves to see monotheism as a developmental advance over polytheism. Scholars such as Paul Radin (1954) have argued that such supposed developmental facts need to be called into question. In his monograph on “Monotheism among primitive people” (1954; quoted in Hillman, 1971, 794) Radin rejects an evolutionary view and argues that “as most ethnologists and unbiased students would now admit, the possibility of interpreting monotheism as part of a general intellectual and ethical progress must be abandoned.” Cassirer also argues that a multiplicity of souls and gods is not only found in elementary forms of myth, but even in more “advanced configurations...the motif of the soul’s division far overbalances that of its unity” (1955, 163).

In discussing the function and virtue of this multiplicity in other, earlier cultures, Cassirer illuminates the virtues of a multiplicity of imaginal figures in our own experience:

In the multiplicity of his gods man not only merely beholds the outward diversity of natural objects and forces but also perceives himself in the concrete diversity and distinction of his functions. The countless gods he makes for himself guide him not only through the sphere of objective reality and change but above all through the sphere of his own will and accomplishment, which they illumine from within. He becomes aware of the trend peculiar to each concrete activity only by viewing it objectively in the image of the special god belonging to it. Action is differentiated into distinct independent functions not through abstract discursive concept formation but by the contrary process, wherein each of these functions is apprehended as an intuitive whole and embodied in an independent mythical figure. (1955, 203-204)
In other words the multiplicity of souls could be successive in
time or simultaneous, a person might receive a new soul at different
life transitions or have more than one soul throughout life. Cassirer
goes on to say:

for mythical thinking the same splitting process can be
successive as well as coexistent: just as very different
"souls" can live peacefully side by side in one and the
same man, so the empirical sequence of the events of
life can be distributed among wholly different "subjects,"
each of which is not only thought in the form of a sepa-
rate being, but also felt and intuited as a living demonic
power which takes possession of the man. (1955, 165)

Here multiplicity is viewed not as a fragmentation or splitting of a
unity—as in psychoanalysis—but as a process of differentiation. Each
imaginal figure provides a different perspective through which events
and the self itself can be viewed. We readily acknowledge the virtue
of this multiplicity in literature and drama, but distance ourselves
from it when it is suggested as a personal experience. We would not
judge a play or novel with one character as necessarily better or worse
than another with several characters. So why should we impose this
kind of ideal on the richness of our own thought?24

In the tradition of psychology, the notion of multiplicity reared
its head in discussions of spiritism and hysteria in the second half of
the nineteenth century. At that time Flournoy, Janet, Myers, Jung, and
others noted how the personhood of the hysterical or medium would
be as though given over to another whose ways of speaking, moving,
thinking and valuing might be wholly inconsistent with the person
with whom the observer had been familiar. These observations led to
two distinct notions about multiplicity which have since been consist-
tently confused: 1) multiplicity as symptomatic of disease; and 2)
multiplicity as an inherent result of the mythopoetic nature of mind
(see Watkins, 1974). From the latter point of view, it was argued that
it was not multiplicity of imaginal others that was pathognomic, but
rather the co-presence of other factors such as the de-differentiation
of the perceptual and the imaginal, the disowning of relation to the

24 In therapy we can sometimes follow the course of how one character becomes
two. Often this proliferation does not result from a lack of integration, but issues
from a high degree of differentiation, of characterization. For example, see the
case presented in Chapter Twelve.
imaginal others, over-identification with one figure, or a lack of awareness of figures. Personifying was a universal tendency of mind that did not in itself bode illness. From this point of view multiplicity of imaginal figures was viewed positively, as yielding imaginal backgrounds that specifically symbolized the multiplicity of life experiences and activities. Just as dreams bring before us multiple characters, so it was felt that such figures are close at hand when we feel or think, or even perceive; when we love, fight, or desire.

The acceptance of multiplicity as a fact of psychic life has far exceeded the valuing of multiplicity. Within orthodox psychoanalysis, multiplicity is synonymous with “fragmentation.” In more popular forms of psychotherapy (psychodrama, gestalt therapy, psychosynthesis, transactional analysis, guided imagery) as well as in some forms of behavior modification (see Meichenbaum and Goodman, 1979), multiplicity is accepted and this acknowledgment opens the door to a variety of treatment techniques. Yet the prescribed developmental course is often from the many to the one, from imaginal to solely historical reality.

Our intellectual tradition sees an ego-centered psyche just as it sees monotheism; not only as a later achievement but a better one than a polycentered psyche and polytheism. As Jung said,

If tendencies towards dissociation were not inherent in the human psyche, fragmentary psychic systems would never have been split off; in other words, neither spirits nor gods would have ever come into existence. That is also the reason why our time has become so utterly godless and profane: we lack all knowledge of the unconscious psyche and pursue the cult of consciousness to the exclusion of all else. Our true religion is a monotheism of consciousness, a possession by it, coupled with a fanatical denial of the existence of fragmentary autonomous systems. (1969a, § 51)

But even Jung, whose psychology was most firmly based on a polycentric notion of psyche, emphasized that the culmination of development was the emergence of the Self, an admittedly monotheistic-like idea (Hillman, 1971). Jung described psyche as a multiplicity of partial consciousnesses (see Jung, 1969, 338ff). Drawing on the imagery of the alchemists, he likened psyche to a star-strewn night sky with multiple planets and constellations (Paracelsus) or of
fish eyes glimmering in a dark sea like gold (Moriens Romanus). In his system these stars or planets were called complexes, and each complex acted autonomously from the ego and presented itself in the imaginal persons of dreams and fantasies. A prime concern of Jung’s opus was to sort out the multiplicity of imaginal figures which occur not only in modern dreams and waking dreams, but also in mythology, religion and literature. For him the parallels between figures arising from these different sources were evidence for the existence of archetypes. As we have seen, object relations theorists have also sorted such figures into different categories arising from radically different conceptions about the etiology and status of imaginal figures: good and bad objects (Klein); exciting, rejecting, and ideal objects; libidinal, antilibidinal and central egos (Fairbaim); sadomasochistic oral and passive aggressive egos (Guntrip).

In Hillman’s work\(^\text{25}\) the “monotheistic” treatment of these dramatic personae (i.e., the kind of treatment that sponsors unity over multiplicity) is brought fully into question. He argues that the usual emphasis on integrating the multiplicity of figures into a wholeness ought to be balanced by a careful differentiation of this wholeness into specific figures. This move to multiplicity is not the same as encouraging dissociation and confusion. Like monotheistic conceptions, it too has its order. This lies in the differentiation of the figures and the manner of relations formed with them.

Kaplan and Crockett (1968) warn that to have unity in diversity one needs a hierarchization which while preserving the differences, modulates and coordinates them as well. One may fail to achieve unity in diversity through merely juxtaposing or sequentializing the diversity (separation without integration) or through collapsing the plurality (syncretism). With respect to imaginal figures the focus would be on the relations between the voices. As in a play one figure does not simply speak after another or while another is speaking, but acts and speaks in relation to the others and to the emerging patterns of significance that make the various scenes cohere.

Biologist Lewis Thomas makes a similar observation in a humorous piece on the multiplicity of imaginal figures:

\(^{25}\) For Hillman’s treatment of polytheism and monotheism with respect to psyche, see the following: 1971, 1972 (265), 1975b (26, 127, 167, 193, 226). Also see Kaplan and Crockett’s (1968) treatment of the theme of unity and diversity and Miller (1974).
Odd to say, it is not just a jumble of talk; they tend to space what they’re saying so that words and phrases from one will fit into short spaces left in silence by the others. At good times it has the feel of an intensely complicated conversation, but at others the sounds are more like something overheard in a crowded station. At worse times the silences get out of synchrony, interrupting each other; it is as though all the papers had suddenly blown off the table. (1974, 43-44)

Thomas questions whether the number of different selves is in itself pathological. He hopes not and argues the following:

It is the simultaneity of their appearance that is the real problem, and I think psychiatry would do better by simply persuading them to queue up and wait their turn, as happens in the normal rest of us...

Actually, it would embarrass me to be told that more than a single self is a kind of disease. I’ve had, in my time, more than I could possibly count or keep track of. The great difference, which keeps me feeling normal, is that mine (ours) have turned up one after the other... The only thing close to what you might call illness, in my experience, was in the gaps in the queue when one had finished and left the place before the next one was ready to start, and there was nobody around at all. (42)