TOM CHIMES: A PERSONAL ODYSSEY

by Stephen Martin

(From the catalog)

For us Greeks, mythology is psychology! —George Chimes

Greece persists as an inscape rather than a landscape, a metaphor for the imaginal realm in which the archetypes as Gods have been placed. We may therefore read all the documents and fragments of myth left from antiquity as accounts or witnesses of the imaginal. Archeology becomes archetypology, pointing less to a literal history than to eternal actualities of the imagination, speaking to us of what is going on now in psychic reality. —James Hillman
The artist's psyche is like a marvelous lens, through which the concrete impressions of the surrounding world are filtered and transformed into a new vision of reality. Plumbing the meaning of this new vision traditionally has meant discovering its sources and the historical mechanics that underlie it. I call this process *contextualization,* because it anchors an oeuvre in solid historical and artistic time and space. Yet, what about the analysis of the lens itself? How does its essence affect production and conditions, if not determine, the deeper meaning of the work? More and more, inquiries are being made in this direction by art historians and psychobiographers.

Unlike working with *context,* tinkering with psychological meaning is an elusive task. Can the researcher really pin down the inner currents that subtly shape the work from within? However careful one is, the pressure to abandon such efforts is great, for the task is speculative, inexact, maddening. Nevertheless, the search for psychological meaning cannot be left behind, because it is here in the essence of the lens, the nature of the artist's personality, that his creativity's primary cause is found. The psyche of the artist is the focal point and must be recognized as a decisive part in creation. Without this perspective, this inner noncontextual mind-set, the essence of the work of Tom Chimes would be missed entirely.

A number of perceptive writers have applied themselves to the context of Tom Chimes. Patricia Stewart calls attention to a series of mysterious nostalgic portraits of poets, writers, and personalities that formed the subject matter of Chimes's work from 1973 to 1978. These eccentric paintings entice the viewer with their interplay of photographic fidelity (Chimes copied them from contemporary photoportraits) and odd domestic intimacy. Chimes, Stewart writes, presents "old-fashioned images of modern saints," which, being "morally [and] tragically exemplary," are meant to instruct us in some arcane manner. Chimes's portraits blur the boundaries between the "real"—the historical personalities and their photographic sources—and the "memorial" in which the portraits have "an object-like density earlier ascribed to memory." The portraits are like. magic lanterns, seducing the observer into turning back to an earlier, more comfortable, less complex time. Others, when discussing earlier periods in Chimes's career, have pointed out an affinity for the surrealists, tachism (action painting), as well as his disinclination toward abstract expressionism while living and studying in New York during the 1940s.

As a Greek, Chimes naturally inhabits a world of objectified myth; as such, his art is an art of the imaginal, of the imagination. Like his favorite ancient hero, Odysseus, Chimes has been traveling and now is charting a return home, a departure from being entrapped in the styles of the 1950s and 1960s, back to himself, to an art form that is of his own experience. Through his art, Chimes is exploring the essential *edoli,* the original meaning of things, and leaving behind the unnecessary aesthetic posturing that often characterizes more self-conscious modern efforts.
To be an artist of the imagination is to consider the soul fundamental to the creative process. By soul, I mean the "imaginative possibility in our nature," as James Hillman writes, that enables us

to experience life through “reflective speculation, dream, image, fantasy—that mode which recognizes all realities as primarily symbolic or metaphoric.” This is not the soul of Christianity but classical Greece, where, as psyche, it was the vivifying energy that animated all existence. Human life “is set within the field of soul,” a psychological space that abounds in inner image and rich, deep feeling. We learn from ancient and contemporary depth psychologists (most notably, Heraclitus, Paracelsus, Nietzsche, Freud, Jung, and Hillman) that informing or structuring this world of soul are *archai,* or “governing root metaphors,” which we have come to call archetypal patterns. Such patterns account for, and are the basis of, myth and story, whether in the collective versions expressed in art of all variety or as they happen in individual lives, in dreams, behavior, and the grand patterns of human existence. These archai are the universal possibilities in life that are fleshed out uniquely, eloquently, in the lives of cultures and people. When an artist reaches inward and downward to draw upon soul, “the imaginative possibility,” his art becomes a reflection of the counterpoint between his identity and the archetypal patterns. His images become expressions, in time and space, of the many sides of soul, imbued with profound feeling and visual liveliness. When an artist is committed to objectifying these patterns, he is “soul-making,” making “the persons of the imagination real.” Tom Chimes is a soul-maker.

Chimes’s soul history began early, as early as his sixth or seventh year, when he dreamed powerful dreams that remain with him to this day. They involved numinous figures appearing to him in exotic settings. One figure was a tiny black male, with round, staring eyes and a piercing, undulating whistle, who terrified him. There were women—a luminous young girl with palpable life energy, and three dancers, in diaphanous robes, enrapturing him. Whether we think of the alchemical homunculus, as Chimes later identified the first inner person, or, perhaps, the Muses or Graces, one thing is certain: From as far back as he can remember, these mythlike personifications of the soul were alive and compelling for Chimes, mattering more, at times, than external reality. Staying with him like a treasured fairy tale of childhood, these and other figures were the guiding voices—in Greek, the *daimones* which only would be replaced by his portrait cycle of creative isolates some fifty years later.

Chimes first picks up the trail of his soul history in the early 1960s, during the period of his crucifixions. Prior to this time, he was going through an apprenticeship, as many artists do before they come upon or return to their truer selves. The crucifixions, which occupied his energy for five years, enabled Chimes to confront the preeminent mythic motif of his outer life. Coming from the Greek Orthodox tradition, Christ stands as a monolithic figure who has all but obscured the natural heritage of pagan times. In this light, we can appreciate the strange qualities of the crucifixion: their hieratic, surrealistic symbology; their monumental size; their intricate, idiosyncratic composition. The paintings are a private passion, the stirrings of some personal meaning that has, as yet, to be crystallized. This was recognized in an unpublished paper, by Alfred Scheinberg, dealing with the *Ringling Mural.* In the mural, Chimes attempted to “gain a realization of the Self . . . and thus a sense of identity and the meaning of existence . . . through the symbols of the cross and the crucified Lord.” Scheinberg concluded that although Chimes failed in this task, he captured, in his own fashion, the very real meaning of the passion. The mural and the other crucifixions are best understood as road markers on a much longer journey, which required, as a first step, the deposition of a prevailing collective symbol.

A remarkable dream, when Chimes was fifteen years old, seems to have presaged this shift in consciousness:

I am walking on the street where my family was living at the time. Crossing an intersection, I suddenly hear a deafening clap of thunder. I turn and look up. In the sky, I see the head of Christ, in agony, with blood dripping from his mouth and falling on the city. I stagger back and fall against the porch railing of a row house, as if being crucified on the cross.

This is no beatific vision of the passion, but the terrifying beginning of Chimes’s separation from his Christian roots. The dream does not affirm a belief in Christ, but rather starkly shows how the young Chimes was, like the dying Lord, crucified between two opposing tendencies: the safety of

home and tradition and some awesome personal destiny that would have to be lived to the fullest. Moreover, coming during adolescence, a time when cryptic germs of the future often explode on the scene, this image has the power of truth that was to remain fresh in his soul for decades. By returning much later to this seminal image, Chimes was living more consciously through the relinquishment of the Christian mythos, and, with it, a dependence on tradition in any form. In a psychological sense, it was like the sacrifice of a defined artistic identity for the imperative of the soul—of the day-world of ambition and success for the more individual and lonely existence of the ancient seeker. As an archetypal paradigm, Christ represented, for Chimes and for his work, the significant moment of psychic, crisis in which a shift away from the world of outer dogma resulted in the eruption of a pantheistic, if not animistic, world of soul where the many obscured daimones finally would find voice. Instead of the smooth flow of an evolving style sanctioned by the ruling powers, Chimes opted for hard questing and private turmoil. In so doing, he voluntarily entered his own underworld.

What followed was a series of metal boxes (1965–1969). They seem so different from the bravura crucifixion paintings that it is difficult to perceive any connection between them. Yet, from within the framework of imagination, the metal boxes are a logical step in the descent. They are the coming to ground of the dogma in a reverse incarnation, as if the Christian spirit were forced back into the earth, into the metal. Chimes is not the first who has felt compelled to image the darkness of the descent in this way. His forebears are the ancient Gnostics, a complex group of early Christians who refused to abandon many of the neoPlatonic ideals of their time. Central to their cosmology was the idea that in the beginning, the divine light of the deity was dispersed and lost in the world of matter. Redemption of the divine light could only be accomplished by descending into the physical universe and liberating it through gnosis, or self-knowledge. Despite the anonymity of the metal boxes, one feels that Chimes may have been engaging in some beautifully crafted yet haunting, private research, even more obscure than his crucifixion paintings. Perhaps it is not coincidence that the word “metal” is from the Greek *metallon,* which means *search,* and that Homer, Chimes’s favorite poet, uses the verb form in his Odyssey. The boxes indicate a new preoccupation with the soul’s depth and how it emerges from within the personality. The boxes stand as protoportraits, icons of the individual search in contrast to domination by tradition.

In two of the metal boxes, Chimes acknowledges this quarrying operation by making allusions to Antonin Artaud, a modern French writer of Greek descent, whose mad, productive genius epitomizes the tortured soul. In these pieces, Chimes invents a strange bird’s head, a glyph representing Momo, the self-deprecating clown persona Artaud portrayed on the Paris stage. Struck by this identification with the fool, Chimes felt kinship to Artaud, as if, in his lunacy, he was speaking from a place that Chimes was trying to reach. How similar in feeling, at this time in Chimes’s development, were Artaud’s earlier words, taken from *A Journal in Hell:*
I have chosen the domain of pain and darkness as others have chosen that of light and the accumulation of things. I do not work within the limits of any domain. I work in eternity itself.
Eschewing the material world of fame and success to immerse himself inwardly, Chimes, too, was dealing with eternal things, the archai. No glorious task this, but a dangerous homecoming that may lead to a differentiation of personal meaning and the emergence of a strengthened direction in life and art, though only after much suffering. A dream in the late 1960s suggested this possibility:

I am in a vehicle with my wife, son, and daughter We lose control of the car and crash. I am now outside the vehicle; my wife is there, but my son has disappeared. My daughter I recognize as a large, flat, almost perfectly round stone at the edge of the road. The stone has a pattern on its face radiating from a center. I concentrate on the stone and am amazed.

The car crash symbolizes the horrific dissolution of an ordered and safe world. Yet, distilled from this unimaginable event is something of duration and profound affirmation—the round stone that is his daughter. It is a poetic image of the soul, the beloved child of conscious experience, which endures and fascinates with its inherent meaning. When one is thrown into the inner work, the

soul responds amidst the pain, revealing inner order, patterns of meaning, which sustain the seeker when all else seems hopeless. So it Was with the legendary philosopher's stone that would emerge from the chaos of the alchemical work, if only for a moment, to confirm the rightness of the effort. Like the alchemists before him, Chimes had nothing but the stuff of his own imagination, as reflected in his work, with which to break through to personal meaning.
The transition from the metal boxes to the painted chamber portraits signals the full-fledged descent into the darker regions of the soul. The alchemists—those wise, well-schooled protopsychologists—called this state of being the *nigredo,* the stage of blackness, where we are caught, fixated in a melancholic and despairing experience of the world. No longer do coveted idealized fantasies of the future, ambition, or value support one's self-image. What reigns, instead, is a condition of inner confusion—the *massa confusa,* as the alchemists called it—which must be faced with courage. The artwork expresses this confusion, and, like the dream, those inner patterns that are seeking recognition. The artistic task is to provide that imaginal channel. There is no doubt that the portraits completed between 1973 and 1978 represent an extensive personification of the archai or daimones whose spirit was informing this period. Almost all of them are remarkable personalities who were, to a greater or lesser extent, fused with their art. This fusionary quality is the underlying leitmotiv of their selection, as such they stand as icons of soul-making, a gallery of men and women who were conversant with, and could speak honestly from, the imagination, the dream, and the fantasy, no matter how bizarre or idiosyncratic. Identified with their own inner worlds, these characters embodied, for Chimes, the nigredo, complete with the destructive aspect that, for some, lead to their undoing.

Foremost among this cast of characters is, of course, Alfred Jarry, in all his permutations—as Ubu Roi, as Dr. Faustroll, and as his own hermetic self. More than any of the others selected by Chimes, this satirist-poet-dandy-actor-madman merged with his creations, becoming, at times almost delusionally, Ubu or Faustroll. Jarry exulted in and died from a surfeit of soul, a dramatic victim of his own urge to image and imagine. Roger Shattuck, in his masterwork *The Banquet Years,* states the case succinctly:

Jarry's life became the virtual incarnation of a dream [where] . . . the unconscious and conscious fuse into a continuum which coincides with the fusion of thought and action, art and life, childhood and maturity.

Jarry is, for Chimes, the spirit of perpetual transformation, guiding the peregrinations of his soul much like Hermes, who led the souls of the Greek dead to their resting place in the underworld, or his medieval Latin brother, Mercurius, who, as daemonic patron, directed the alchemist's work. Staring out from his many portraits, Jarry beckons with his eyes, drawing the viewer into his metamorphic world. Through him an imaginal threshold is crossed, and one is transported into dreamtime and dreamspace. He is yet another personification of the tiny black man from Chimes's first remembered dream, the dark counterpart to the figure of Christ, who helps the imagination bypass dogma and connect with its polymorphous pagan sources. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Dr. Faustroll, one of Jarry's greatest creations, would be a professor of arcane (alchemical?) Pataphysics, which is, according to Chimes, "The science of imaginary solutions, which attributes to the shapes of objects a meaning that comes from the description of their essence or essences." This synthesis of the imagination and reality produces a unified, and unique, vision of existence.

What of the other imaginal luminaries who occupied Chimes during this fertile period? He draws from diverse disciplines to assemble his cast, and all the portraits are eerie copies of contemporary photos, their general effect disquietingly paradoxical. Their small size, subtle coloration, and heavy wooden frames render them frozen in time, like the faces on Fayum sarcophagi from Coptic Egypt, while they are vitalized by their frontality and palpable physical presence. Naturally, there is a haunting image of Artaud, whose "lucid madness," to quote Chimes, typifies the creativity that explodes when daimon and personal identity fuse. Also present is Edgar Allan Poe, perhaps Chimes's most distant "imaginal kin." And fittingly, too, for Poe was, according to D. H. Lawrence, "absolutely concerned with the disintegration processes of his own

psyche . . . a disintegrating and sloughing off of the old consciousness [and] the forming of new consciousness underneath." This dynamic of creation and destruction was, for Lawrence, the substance of Poe's "Soul."

Chimes also enshrines young Arthur Rimbaud, whose *Season in Hell* and tumultuous life with his lover, Verlaine (another member of the portrait cycle), spoke passionately of the dangerous, dark fire of the imagination. The trickster genius, Duchamp, is represented several times in various guise, celebrating his protean character and his singular commitment to, and identification with, the life of the mind. From Vienna and Cambridge comes Wittgenstein, the gentle philosopher, who rose above mere intellectual speculation to grasp that it is the human imagination that gives meaning to the world of facts and that being philosophical means wandering in search of soul. Apollinaire, the warrior, is depicted, from a photo taken after his return from the front in WWI. We are struck by the soft vulnerability of his eyes and face, cradled in his uniform's large, stiff collar. The leather band around his forehead doubles as a sad testimony to his character-changing injury and a metaphoric restraint to contain his poetic imagination. Chimes included many others—"journeyers" (to use his appellation} such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Marcel Proust, and, most importantly, James Joyce, as well as androgynous figures like Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley. In all, they symbolize various embodiments of the creative personality who became identified or possessed, if not tragically consumed, by their own imaginations and ruling daimones.

By depicting this imaginal family lineage, Chimes discovered a critical pathway back to himself, a remembrance of things he had lost long ago, and a vehicle for entering his future. This may have been the prescient message in a dream a few years before the portraits:

I was at the shore, admiring a counter covered with seashells that glisten in the sunlight. I can see a calm ocean and empty beach. I lean over the shells to study them closely, fascinated by their shape and jewellike surface. I am thus absorbed when I feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn to see a tall, graceful woman in a white robe, standing there statuelike. Her hair is dark. Turning and gazing at her; I ask, "Who are you?" She replies, "Memory."

Absorbed in the unworked creativity of nature, much like the natural potential of the imagination, Chimes is awakened by an inner urgency. Here, the daimone, the guide, appears as "graceful memory"—to the classical Greek mind, Mnemosyne, mother to the Muses, whose function was to record and ennoble the history of gods and men.

The completion of the portraits, marking the end of the active phase of the nigredo, left Chimes professionally and personally drained. What followed is best understood as a period of incubation, a psychological condition that the alchemists called the *solutio,* when self-definition is lost in a watery confusion of feelings. Everything in life seems to fall apart. Though experienced as a kind of death by an identity in search of itself, dissolution is a prerequisite for any significant psychological renewal. For Chimes, it lasted several years, until 1980, when, in an explosion of creativity after a long period of introspection, he produced the Waterfall Series. It required his being fully intoxicated, totally watered, to release the images from within. These large, opalescent paintings could not be more stylistically or symbolically different from their pictorially and contextually dense predecessors. One is struck by their space, their freshness, and by the rainbow as an ancient presentiment of the resolution of the watery storm. These paintings herald the liberation of Chimes's imagination, of his soul, from a boundedness to the past and the darker regions of fusion and possession. It is the first vision of the future.

With this breakthrough, Chimes embraced "the white," covering his canvases lovingly with layers of translucent white glaze and tones of red, black, and umber. Emerging from this silvery background were occasional images—trees, in tandem, or experiments with calligraphy, in which he inscribed the bottom of the canvas with verse or phrase from Jarry or Joyce. Early on, there was also a spate of images of Jarry riding his bicycle, a symbol of the mercurial spirit in self-propelled motion. Mostly, overwhelmingly, there was the white, with its glassine, mirrorlike

surface framed and contained by the thinnest of black borders. It was as if Chimes were engaged in some kind of meditation (the *meditatio* was another essential phase in alchemical transformation), a ritual preparation that focused his personal and creative energies. In the deepest sense of the word, Chimes was priming his canvases and himself, readying both to reveal their inherent images.

The fruits of the introversion to which he devoted himself can be seen in his most recent work. What emerged from the white are evanescent views of Memorial Hall, in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, rising like the "man of the hooths" from his long, empty sleep in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake.* And there are the monumental portraits, the return of Chimes's beloved daimones: Jarry the cyclist, poet, victim; Poe, tempered and humanized by his dark passion; Joyce, the bard of the unconscious mind, the soul, the imagination; even Rachilde, the only woman Jarry would ever befriend. Paring down to basics, to white, to circles, to primary colors as glazes, Chimes brings to life the reality of his soul and its dramatis personae. By dematerializing and rematerializing these people, he is making visible his psychological cosmos without becoming identified with it, thereby escaping a cruel fate. Returning to these figures as old friends relieves Chimes of the need for facile, shallow innovation. They anchor him in his own consistent inner reality, and allow him to go deeper.

Relying on the psychological wisdom of the alchemists once again, we know this phase of whiteness to be the albedo, when silver and white replace the darkened, painful mire of the nigredo. Named "the ground of mind in the white earth," the albedo phase "refers to the emergence of psychological consciousness, the ability to hear psychologically and to perceive fantasy creating reality." Inner imagery is reflected in the mirrorlike surface of a soul, of an imagination that has been tempered by suffering, which can transmute even the hottest passions into cool, clarified symbol. Creativity in the albedo phase of mind is safe from being possessed by such passions because it is "the process of indirect seeing through reflection," like the mirror shield of Athena that safely reflected the Medusa's petrifying gaze for the conquering hero, Perseus.

Achieving the albedo phase enabled Chimes to strip away the specific personal characteristics of the image, the heavy coloration, and the charming frames. It signaled his new capacity to see through nature into meaning, which is the hallmark of soul-making. Becoming has become more important than being—a process-oriented creative vision that leaves compellingly semi-substantial the products of the imagination by blending direct presence with ghostly suggestion. In so doing, he captures the metaphoric potential of the world.
Chimes's discovery of his whiteness of mind—a mind whose basis is in poetry, reflection, metaphor, and dream—is the rediscovery of his own, long unknown past. Like Odysseus, he has wandered for twenty years, from Christ in the 1960s to the whiteness of the 1980s, slipping in and out of passions and gaining wisdom from it all. And, like his younger cousin, George, he, too, is returning to the primary truth of the Greek soul: Psychology is mythology, and creativity must rely upon the proper respect for the inner deities, the daimones, in their every manifestation.
Chimes is a pantheist, a painter who sees through manifestation to essence, who reveals the soul in matter.