

CARL JUNG  
"ON THE RELATION OF ANALYTICAL PSYCHOLOGY TO POETRY" (1922)

Jung, Carl. "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry." The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature. Vol. 15 of Collected Works. Ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. 20 Vols. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953-1978. 65-83.

Jung states his opposition here to what he describes as Freud's "reductive" (69) notion of art. He refers in this respect to the Freudian view that the work of art "arises from much the same psychological conditions as a neurosis" (68) and thus has much in common with a night-dream. The goal, from the Freudian perspective, is to "bring certain peculiarities of a work of art into relation with the intimate personal life of the poet" (68) by peering through the "foreground of consciousness in order to reach the psychic background, or the unconscious" (69). The unconscious within this schema, Jung writes,

betrays itself by its characteristic effects on the contents of consciousness. . . . [I]t produces fantasies of a peculiar nature, which can easily be interpreted as sexual images. Or it produces characteristic disturbances of the conscious processes, which again can be reduced to repressed contents. (69-70)

Just as a neurosis is symptomatic, within the Freudian scheme of things, of the process by which a "neurotic patient represses certain psychic contents because they are morally incompatible with his conscious values" (69), so art gestures, within the Freudian schema, to certain repressed or unfulfilled wishes, most frequently of a sexual and / or heroic nature, on the part of the writer. The danger in such a view is, according to Jung, that our focus is deflected away from the work entirely to what Jung terms the "psychopathia sexualis" (68) of the writer.

Jung contends, by contrast, that the "work of art is not a disease" (71) and thus requires a different critical approach. It is less a creation intimately tied to the personal life of the author than it is something supra-personal which has "soared beyond the personal concerns of its creator" (71). Moreover, its meaning and quality "inhere within it and not in its extrinsic determinants" (72), it is not something merely "transmitted or derived" (72) from external sources, that is, the author's unconscious. Indeed, Jung seems to say that it is less the case that the literary work is a symptom or side-effect of the unconscious forces at work in the writer's psyche than that the writer's psyche is itself a symptom or side-effect of the very archetypal forces which impel the literary work into existence. Hence, Jung's description of literature as a "living being that uses man only as a nutrient medium, employing his capacities according to its own laws and shaping itself to the fulfilment of its own creative purpose" (71).

Concerning the creative process, Jung contends with the aid of seemingly scientific jargon, that the "nascent work" (78) emerges in the "psyche of the artist" (78) in the form of an "autonomous complex" (78), that is, as a "psychic formation that remains subliminal until its energy-charge is sufficient to carry it over the threshold into consciousness" (78). An autonomous complex arises when a "hitherto unconscious portion of the psyche is thrown into activity, and gains ground by activating the adjacent areas of association" (79) and develops by withdrawing energy "from the conscious control of the personality" (79). However, this psychic formation is never fully "assimilated" (78) by consciousness, merely "perceived" (78). In other words, it is "not subject to conscious control, and can be neither inhibited nor voluntarily reproduced. Therein lies the autonomy of the complex: it appears and disappears in accordance with its own inherent tendencies, independently of

the conscious will" (78). The presence of such a complex, while similar to a pathological state, is not identical to it since mentally healthy people also fall temporarily under its domination.

Like Freud, Jung contends that there are two types of literary creation: one in which the writer's personal intentions predominate and the other in which personal intentions are subordinated to the raw material with which (s)he is working (the myths, legends, etc. handed down). The second type of literature, he argues, offers proof that the conscious is not only influenced by the collective unconscious but is in fact entirely guided by it. Such literary works allude to "something suprapersonal that transcends our understanding" (75) by forcing us to

expect a strangeness of form and content, thoughts that can only be apprehended intuitively, a language pregnant with meanings, and images that are true symbols because they are the best possible expressions for something unknown – bridges thrown out to an unseen shore. (75-6)

The "pregnant language" (77) of works that are "openly symbolic" (77) in this way, Jung contends, "cries out at us that they mean more than they say" (77). Such works possess, in short, "symbolic qualities that are outside the range" (76) of the poet's own "range of . . . consciousness" (76).

Literary works are "amenable to analysis" (79) only to the extent that we recognise each of them as a "symbol" (79) of the contents of the collective unconscious. The goal of the critic, in other words, is to discover the "primordial image" (80) or images (Jung's synonym for the 'archetypes' located within the collective unconscious) which lie behind the "imagery of art" (80). Jung maintains that the literary work has its main source not in the "personal unconscious of the poet, but in a sphere of unconscious mythology whose primordial images are the common heritage of mankind . . . the collective unconscious" (80). The personal unconscious is the "sum total of all those psychic processes and contents which are capable of becoming conscious and often do, but are then suppressed because of their incompatibility and kept subliminal" (80). Art, he claims, "receives tributaries from this sphere, but muddy ones and their predominance . . . merely turns it into a symptom" (80). By contrast, the collective unconscious

shows no tendency to become conscious . . . nor can it be brought back to recollection by any analytical technique, since it was never repressed nor forgotten. . . . [I]t is no more than a potentiality handed down to us from primordial times in the specific form of mnemonic images or inherited in the anatomical structure of the brain. There are no inborn ideas, but there are inborn possibilities of ideas that set bounds to even the boldest fantasy . . . a priori ideas, as it were, the existence of which cannot be ascertained except from their effects. They appear only in the shaped material of art as the regulative principles that shape it; . . . only by inferences drawn from the finished work can we reconstruct the age-old original of the primordial image. (80-1)

This primordial image or "archetype" (81)

is a figure – be it a daemon, a human being, or a process – that constantly recurs in the course of history and appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed. . . . [T]hey give form to countless typical experiences of our ancestors. They are . . . the psychic residua of innumerable experiences of the same type . . . projected into the manifold figures of the mythological pantheon. (81)

He stresses that in "each of these images there is a little piece of human psychology and human fate, a remnant of the joys and sorrows that have been repeated countless times in

our ancestral history, and on the average, follow ever the same course" (81). The archetypes to which Jung refers take the form in literature of recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, character types, images, and mythical motifs. Some of these mythical motifs include: the death-rebirth (organic) cycle of all human and natural life, the divine sacrifice (the dis-memberment and re-memberment of the god or god-like figure), the journey underground, the heavenly ascent, the search for the father, the Paradise-Hades image, the Promethean rebel-hero, the scapegoat, the earth goddess, the femme fatale, etc.

In reflecting universal, primitive and elemental mental forms, the archetypes embodied in literary works evoke profound emotional responses in readers. Accordingly, a peculiar "emotional intensity" (81) almost always accompanies the reader when (s)he identifies an archetypal situation: "chords" (81) in us are "struck that had never resounded before . . . as though forces whose existence we never suspected were unloosed" (81). In a description that recalls Longinus's own description of the sublime sensation evoked by art, Jung writes that we "suddenly feel an extraordinary sense of release, as though transported, or caught up by an overwhelming power. At such moments we are no longer individuals, but the race; the voice of all mankind resounds in us" (82). All human ideals (e.g. patriotism towards the motherland) are archetypal collective representations (e.g. of the mother) that serve to release "hidden forces of instinct that are inaccessible to his conscious will" (82). The "impact of an archetype, whether it takes the form of immediate experience or is expressed through the spoken word, stirs us because it summons up a voice that is stronger than our own" (8). It "enthralles and overpowers" (82) because it goes beyond the "occasional and the transitory into the realm of the ever-enduring" (82), transmuting our "personal destiny into the destiny of mankind" (82). This is the secret of the effect of great art on us.

In short, Jung examines both the relationship between the work and its author (what Abrams calls the expressive pole) and the relationship between the work and its audience (the pragmatic pole). He gives us an account of how the work originates and the impact which the archetypes in it can have upon the audience. The creative process consists in the "unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work" (82). Correspondingly, the audience responds beneficially at deep levels of their being to the archetypes which inhere in literary works. Indeed, art in general and literature in particular performs a therapeutic function. The "social significance" (82) of art lies in the way that it "makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life" (82). Art

is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking. The unsatisfied yearning of the artist reaches back to the primordial image in the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present. The artist seizes on this image, and in raising it from deepest unconsciousness he brings it into relation with conscious values, thereby transforming it until it can be accepted by the minds of his contemporaries according to their powers. (82-3)

Art "represents a process of self-regulation in the life of nations and epochs" (83) in its capacity to "discover what it is that would meet the unconscious needs of his age" (83).