

## Jung and the Story of our time

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When I was in my early twenties I was quite enamored by Jung. In fact he was one of my early heroes. I bought many of his books in English translation edited and published by the Princeton Bollingen series. A fair amount of those I actually read. I had heard of him before. One of the teachers at my high-school was the Swedish expert on Jung. This teacher incidentally taught Christianity, so the religious connection with Jung must have been implicit in my conception of him from the very start. What made me such a fan of his? This is not very hard to guess. He was spiritual taking a definite non-materialistic view on life and personality. The idea of the soul was still very much with me, although I had long since abandoned any religious faith, to the extent I had ever had one as opposed to a merely ritual and superstitious attitude. Psychology as I had encountered it appalled me. It seemed so reductive, just as intelligence tests strike me as superficial to this day. As a teenager I had been terrified by insanity, this struck me as the most horrifying thing I could imagine. Really a disease of the soul, as the old Swedish word of 'sinnessjuk' for me drove home the point. And what was really this supposed connection with genius and mental illness? Were they really connected in an inseparable way? Of genius I had a very romantic notion, but what if it bore within itself the seed of destruction? I was disturbed by the fact that both seemed to run in the same families. In Jung I found a sympathetic way the dilemma was resolved. It pointed at a fascinating connection that stayed free from the fear of contamination that had initially hunted me. With Jung the human psyche is a mighty thing, nothing that can be summarily dismissed and reduced. In fact the soul plays a central role, and it is huge, a universe in itself, a font of inexhaustible riches. It gave hope, as well as a feeling of grandeur.

Jung has the reputation of being a woolly thinker, a mystic, befuddled and unscientific, in spite of his high-minded claims to the contrary and his protestations that all of his findings rested on a firm empirical basis. The author was also very dismissive of him at first until he met him. Surely Jung must have been endowed with a lot of charisma, appearing as a mixture of a gnome and a prophet. They took to each other. What did van der Post see in him? First the spiritual element in his teaching is bound to elicit sympathy. Most people believe that they transcend their bodies and are gratified by finding some authoritative confirmation of their vague beliefs. Or what did Jung see in him? That question may be more appropriate. Jung was a busy man, with many people clamoring for his attention. Patients, collaborators, journalists, idle curiosity seekers. What did they have in common? There is a simple answer to this, namely Africa. Jung had gone to Africa in the twenties, and had been overwhelmed and terrified by the pull to go Native. I recall reading about it, maybe in his memories and reflections, which I must have devoured at the time. Van der Post was an 'Afrikaman', intrigued by the continent, where he grew up and where he had deep roots through his Dutch Afrikaner ancestry, and its aboriginal people (and much to his credit an early opponent to the Apartheid system that had developed after the war).

In Jung, the author must have found much verbalized affirmation of his own inchoate and half-baked ideas and conceptions, and to Jung, van der Post must have been a font of knowledge and information about a continent that fascinated him more than any other non-European. For India he seems to have had nothing but scorn<sup>1</sup>, instinctively repelled by yet another elaborate cultural development whose divergence from his own European tradition only caused bewilderedness and estrangement, while Africa was the real thing, mankind in its unsullied infancy, an inexhaustible source of revelation. No wonder he was delighted by any tidbits he could sample from the Africa hand.

They must have met just after the war, and the relationship lasted some fifteen years until the death of Jung in 1961. This is no chronological catalogue of his relationship with Jung but a gushy approach to trying to paint a portrait of the man, who had gained his seemingly unlimited admiration not to say love. Thus in particular the portrait is uncritical, in the nature of a family reminiscence, and as such unstructured, a veritable stream of consciousness. The important question is there anything I learn which I did not know before? Much of it rings a bell, as Jung's reference to a woman patient that in the end would not tell him her dream, she wanted it for herself. When he learned that he was pleased, he knew that she was on her road to recovery and did not need his guidance anymore. This I surely remember, it made an impression on me then. His troubled relationship with his father, father who had in his own words failed him, I was not that familiar with, but I do remember that Jung's mother had told him that he was lucky that his father died when Jung was still young on the threshold of life, because that meant that his life was to be his own, that there would be no paternal interference. Words that I was reminded of when my own father died when I was young, and which I sought to derive some comfort from. When it comes to Jung's psychology, his theories of the collective unconsciousness, the notion of archetypes, or any other thing which gives some substance, the account is garbled, and one gets the impression that the author has not really understood it (maybe Jung neither?) maybe only taken it in as general wisdom to be dazzled by rather than instructed through. Maybe the one thing I learn is that Jung had so many female followers, not only patients, but one gets the impression that in psycho-analytic circles everyone started out as a patient, but also general admirers and co-workers that spread the gospel. One can thus make a case that Jung is a feminist, that he more than other men stressed the feminine in the male psyche, the anima as well as the animus (both terms coined by Jung), and that the former is tragically undervalued in the contemporary world, whose state of crisis is a prevailing theme of the book. This should make Jung attractive to modern feminist movements, on the other hand there is probably much in him that would give cause for concern, it is always hard to accommodate yourself to the unknowable standards of a yet to arrive future.

Jung married rich, Emma his wife, was one of the very richest heiresses in Switzerland at the time. This is not touched upon in van der Post, but something I just learned from other readily available sources (as far those can be trusted). This must have had a significant effect on his life. She too was a psycho-analyst but of course over-shadowed by her husband. The menage a trois, with the younger Toni Wolff is hinted at without being openly acknowledged. The effect is on the verge of being comical, with the author

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<sup>1</sup> This is of course a huge simplification, but nevertheless one induced by the reading of the book.

running around the table pretending not to see what is in full view. Out of respect naturally, although at the time of writing, almost fifteen years have passed since Jung's death. There are also expected rebuttals of the charges of being a Nazi sympathizer that have been levied against Jung, Such charges are of course empathetically denied, yet at the same time tamely so based on nothing more than that Jung being such a good guy could not been guilty of such a heinous crime. For good measure some anecdotal evidence is marshaled, pointing to various occasions when Jung made a stand. Yet there is a reference to Jung initially having looked upon the movement with some sympathy, but of course soon becoming disillusioned, but without going into detail at what stage this occurred, what possible forms it took, and finally how long it took him to reevaluate, as far as there was anything to reevaluate. Such a discussion would not necessarily be unsympathetic and in the nature of a trial, but more to the point instructive, showing the dangers we all are privy to. After all the theories of Jung, necessarily vague as they are, lend themselves to a wide spectrum of applications, and obviously there is much in his attitude that would appeal to that movement, in particular the references to elemental forces couched in Wagnerian mysticism.

What is Jung all about? As already indicated the book does not give much illumination. What is there to really point to? Of course there is the collective unconscious, that huge ocean of common humanity out of which every individual strives to reach the surface through a process called by Jung individuation. No one interested in Jung can overlook it, in particular not the author, yet he does not do it full justice in his account. While Freud thought about the unconscious in personal terms, almost as a defect harboring all kinds of repressions interfering with the normal healthy functioning, to Jung the unconscious was paramount, the dominant component of the 'Self'. To Jungians the Freudian view would rather encourage some process of amputation, not to say lobotomy, relegating the unconscious to the dustbin of individual history. For Jung on the other hand such a view would be absurd, it would be like emptying the ocean by swallowing it<sup>2</sup>. The unconscious in Freud is a hypothesis to account for dreams while Jung claims that he has empirical evidence for the existence of the collective unconscious, a claim that must be dismissed as rather naive. Of course the collective unconscious makes very much sense as a general concept. It is what humanity is all about, and while Freud limits himself to personal dreams, Jung encompasses the whole dream of mankind as such, its myths, its various symbols, some of which are singled out for special study and designed as archetypes. In that quest Jung becomes not only an anthropologist and collector but also an archeologist<sup>3</sup>, trying not only to interpret individual dreams, but also the huge dreamt by mankind itself. Symbols are not interesting for what they are, that is just accidental, but for what they mean. Such a quest may seem quixotic, which it no doubt is, yet is eminently respectable, what makes it suspect is to call it a research project, such a concession to contemporary modes only serve to diminish it and render it ridiculous.

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<sup>2</sup> In a sense this is a bit unfair to Freud, who after all prided himself as being in the line of such revolutionaries as Copernicus and Darwin. Copernicus had shown that the Earth is not in the center of the universe, Darwin that man is not in the center of the living world, while Freud had shown that man himself is not even in the center of his own being!

<sup>3</sup> Archeology was a metaphor Freud to was found of, repeatedly returning to it

Jung may pride himself as being a trained medical man, a hard-nosed scientist, when he should be viewed as a poet dealing in metaphors. It is from this point of view that his interest in astrology and alchemy makes sense. He is obviously not concerned about their literal quests, but their psychological meaning as quests<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore language itself is an excellent example of a collective unconsciousness. Our uses of our Native tongues are not only automatic but instinctive, we do not consciously know how we do it, we just do it. A language is not privately owned but collectively, a common source out of which we in our specific utterances individuate. We dispense with grammar, which after all is but a retroactive rationalization, and a partial one at that, but trust our ears instead. And in a sense we are born into it, a view propagated by Chomsky among others. In modern scientific terms this, and also many other manifestations of the collective unconsciousness, are natural to explain. It is just a question of a common evolved mental architecture. While the so called scientific outlook is unabashedly materialistic, a bottom-up approach, Jung, however, as an idealist and humanist, takes a top-down approach. What about mathematics? Is that also part of the collective unconsciousness? As well as the scientific spirit? Or more generally human rational reason as such? With a too precise and materialistic interpretation of the collective unconsciousness we fall into logical contradictions, contradictions a woolier and vaguer approach saves us from, as they cannot be formulated with the required precision. In other words we are talking about natural languages as opposed to artificial and formal ones. In the case of the latter you are forced to make distinctions between languages and metalanguages, while in natural language that distinction does not really arise, as such languages are imbued with meaning. In short the collective unconsciousness can be thought of as a beautiful metaphor. Such belong to poetry, and should never, as I never tire of pointing out, be taken too literally, then they merely become silly. And it is here, in the desperate attempts to find an empirical basis, that Jung is bound to founder and become a silly old man.

The idea of the collective unconsciousness brings up the idea of God. If not a personal God, at least a God intimately connected with humanity as such, the only kind of God with which religion has ever been concerned, As long as Man was considered to have a special place in the universe, in fact even the 'raison d'être' for the latter, there were no such qualification to be made, but with Man thrust into a completely indifferent environment (one is reminded of Steven Weinberg's pronouncement to the effect that the more the universe is understandable [to us humans], the more pointless it appears [to us humans?]). Religious people, be they professional or merely practicing, should find much inspiration in Jung, van der Post writes, and he is frustrated that they seem not to. After all what more apt conception of a human God than the collective unconsciousness, out of which we individuals are born and struggle to stay afloat in, and that fertile source of all human emotions and concerns. As I already noted initially, Jungianism is intimately concerned with religion, and the author quotes with awed approval of how Jung once got the question during a lecture whether he believed in God. 'I do not believe in God' he started, and then there was a long pause keeping the audience in suspense, concluding with 'I know'

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<sup>4</sup> I point out to my students that genetics nowadays serve the same psychological purpose as astrology once did. To the proverbial man in the street, there really is not that much difference, both are equally incomprehensible, and both are accepted on prevailing authority

to the great relief of the many, including the author. (One should not forget that Jung took a rather unsentimental view of God, an entity as likely to kill you as to love you, and thus something to be feared, containing evil as well as the good.) The religious connection must likewise have furnished Jung with inspiration, and in addition provided the kind of strength and security only true faith can bestow. The psychology of religion is a more or less established discipline, on one hand investigating the psychological need for religion, and as such dismissive of the latter, in fact treating religious need as a mental aberration to be treated, on the other hand seeking in psychology a source of religion, as in William James 'Varieties of Religious Experience'. The latter ties up with Jung's attitude towards mental illness. Rather than seeing it as a defect he thought of it as a source of instruction, in fact as it would turn out in his case, as a window into the collective unconsciousness. While his colleagues had no interest in the confused manifestations of illness in their patients, Jung was inspired to find some meaning, to see some sense in their confusion. In short to try and decode them. This naturally leads to an open mind as to dreams, going back to old discredited ideas about dream carrying meaning and thus to be subjected to interpretations which would connect him to Freud. Before turning to that topic, one may dwell on the fact that Jung had clinical experience as a healer of psyches, or as he would prefer to put it, healer of souls. At he started out there was no science of psychiatry only a tradition of. It has been fashionable to see this tradition as one of merely exercising power, an view that Jung should have been liable to endorse. Now scientific psychiatry has become more or less synonymous with drug therapy, cheaper and simpler than conversational therapy, the latter considered more suitable for the mildly affected neurotic with the necessary resources of time and money, to indulge in an extended exploration of his own psyche; and above all more effective judged by more unsentimental criteria. At Jung's time there was more of a freedom to experiment. His medical degree gave him the necessary authority and scientific credentials to pursue those experiments courtesy of the establishment. He might very well have had a good track record as a healer, after all his personality should have caused a marked placebo effect to take a more cynical view. Also with the insane, failure is default and only successes are found worthy of note.

According to van der Post, Freud's book on the interpretation of dreams did not make too much of an impression on Jung when he first read it, but eventually he would see common ground. Both men took instantly to each other, despite the great differences in personalities, which would later come to the fore. Both had deep need of each other. To Freud it must have been a godsend to get this gentile medical doctor as a supporter, and for many years Jung was treated as the Crown Prince of the psychoanalytic movement, while Jung no doubt was seeking a father figure. Their joint attendance at a psychoanalytic meeting at Clark University 1909 initiated strains which would in 1913 lead to an open rupture and a final break, that would lead to Jung's expulsion from the psychoanalytic movement. In retrospect, as noted, it seemed inevitable. Jung in his talks to van der Post gave some tantalizing hints involving the mutual interpretations of each others dreams as he and Freud travelled across the Atlantic, but refused to be more specific on grounds of professional integrity. It seems clear that the older man felt threatened by the younger, who was about to find his own path<sup>5</sup>. The break caused Jung a lot of pain, but we do not

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<sup>5</sup> The first account of it and the neurotic behavior of Freud, involving fainting spells, I encountered in

know how it affected Freud. The two men would never meet again.

Another interesting connection treated in the book, but only at the very end, is his meeting with William James, whom he much admired, and whose interest in spiritualism and religious experience, must have struck a deep chord. To most admirers of James, those particular interests are seen as marginal, and as to spiritualism down-right embarrassing, but not to Jung. He chooses to retell an anecdote on how James and a friend of his made a pact to the effect that the one who died first should make a concerted effort to make sure to the survivor his own survival after death, would that occur, in order to once and for all settle the question of life after death. James died in 1910 (at the comparatively early age of 68) and his friend heard nothing from him for a long time (which by itself of course means little, if James would have survived past his death he might have had more important things on his mind, or be in a position unable to honor his promise.). Then he got a message from some strangers in Ireland who during a spiritualistic seance had been told to contact him, and after some considerable trouble had managed to find his address (how much easier for everyone involved, including James himself, had there been Internet available). The message they were asked to convey was a 'red pajamas'. At first the friend was utterly puzzled and understood nothing, than gradually an old memory dawned upon him. Once in their youth they had travelled to Paris together but their luggage had not arrived with them and they had been forced to buy new clothes (an experience many modern travelers having the airlines lose their luggage can recognize) and the friend had found nothing better than a red pajamas. Jung was delighted by the story and gave a plausible explanation why James had chosen this particular trivial incident. As a reader one cannot deny disappointment of having such a silly thing represent Jung's relation to James.

Jung died before his death, meaning that many years before it actually happened, he felt that his time was up and that he had no real desire left to live, yet of course he lingered on, working, reading, drawing and carving stones at his beloved retreat at Bollingen outside Zürich. Van der Post had a last interview with him with no intimation that it would be the last. A few weeks later the author was traveling East by ship, for a few nights he had trouble sleeping deeply distraught by the appalling racial conditions of his home country. Alone in the cabin descending into a slumber, he had suddenly a remarkable vision, while imagining himself caught in a deep dark valley, of an impending disaster, a vision in which Jung himself appeared briefly, telling him 'I'll be seeing you'. Instantly, he fell asleep and slept for a very long time. When he woke up refreshed he saw an albatross through the porthole of his cabin, its wing set on fire by the rising sun. As it slowly glided by it turned its head looking straight at him steadily, then to vanish. The author realized that the day that came would be utterly different from any other day he had experienced. Later in the morning the steward brought the radio news of the ship. As van der Post casually opened the envelope he discovered that its first item announced the death of Jung.

I myself have had dreams of the kind so strongly portending the death of a close relative that upon awakening I had wondered whether the person had died. Most recently it happened involving my maternal uncle, with whom relations had been so strained in recent years that it had led to a rupture. A few days later I learned that he was dead.

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the unlikely place of Martin Gardner's math columns in the Scientific American

What to make of it? It would be silly to take it literally in any sense, and it would likewise be pointless to dismiss it as pure coincidence (how many times has death not ensued and as a result been forgotten?). In a way I cherish it feeling that life is more mysterious than we give it credit for, without, as noted, trying to draw any practical consequences of it. I just accept that there may be more levels to existence than we acknowledge and that this should induce a humble attitude of ignorance. Likewise I also recognize that the experience may serve some deep psychological needs, and I am content with having those satisfied without any deliberate intervention. Maybe this is deep down also the attitude of the author, confessing that he was initially reluctant to reveal the experience. Anyway it may serve as a fitting conclusion of the book, which nevertheless has kindled my curiosity to reacquaint myself with my erstwhile idol, now with the hindsight of an old man.

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