

The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature

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As a young man I was very charmed by Jung. I bought a fair amount of books by him in English translation published in the Bollingen series by the Princeton University Press. He may have appealed to my narcissistic tendencies from which few young people are fully exempt, and what intrigued me was the depth of the human soul (thus in particular that of the reader) he assigned to it. While Freud really was about reduction of the human psycho to 'nothing but', Jung seemed to enlarge it, and I was in particular quite intrigued by his interpretation of artistic creations, as being something mystical. But maybe Jung became too mystical and I soon tired and distanced myself from his style, yet he never entirely lost his hold on my imagination, and I still think that concepts such as collective unconsciousness has a lot of potential, be it only metaphorical.

Now this is not a book but a collection of articles sampled and translated from a variety of sources. Those which are written as eulogies tend to be boring, such as the old doctor and alchemist Paracelsus of the 15th century. a fellow Swiss mystic, or that of Richard Wilhelm who was instrumental for trying to bring traditional Chinese thought to Western audiences (in particular Swiss such?). His two pieces on Sigmund Freud are not that interesting either; initially an admirer and a disciple he inevitably had a fall-out with his ertwhile mentor, after all someone like Jung could not in the long run subordinate himself to someone like Freud. The criticism as well as the appreciations are predictable. Freud was a pioneer and an eye-opener, and his book on the interpretation of dreams revolutionary. He was driven by a passion to rage against the false and turgid sentiments of the 19th century. But basically he was too reductive and mechanical in his psychological explanations, no appreciation of the spirit. Of course this neglect of spiritual matter may have in his time earned Freud the acclaim of being more scientific, on the other hand, as his reputation has faded his claims on being scientific has consequently faded as well, so this no longer carries much point.

Much more interesting are Jung's thoughts on Art and literature, in particular about poetry and its connection to the kind of deep psychology that is Jung's signum and overall concern, or as some would say, conceit as well.

The symbol plays a central role in Jung's psychology and hence thought. He makes a clear distinction between why a work of art may grip us, and why it may appeal to us aesthetically. A work of art which is not symbolic, or at least not with any symbolic manifestations, tends to be complete in itself and hence appeals to our aesthetic sensibilities. In a sense, one is tempted to conclude, aesthetics is the highest ideal to which pure craftsmanship may aspire. As to psychology being able to explain the phenomenon of creativity, he takes a modest view. It can only go that far, just as science itself can only go that far in elucidating the mysteries of life and existence. In fact cognitive understanding involving the finding of 'meaning' is actually anathema to the creative process. It is only in retrospect we can connect a phenomenon with other phenomena and thus attach 'mean-

ing' to it. At the psychological heart of an artistic creation there is what Jung terms an autonomous complex, which goes beyond the will and control of the consciousness which can only perceive it, not suppress it nor bring it forth. A work of art cannot be explained by the psychology of the artists, certain aspects of it admittedly, but not as a whole. If it would be possible to do so it would cease to be a work of art and reduce to a mere symptom. In fact if a psychologist would be able to exhibit definite causalities in a work of art, he would completely undercut aesthetics and make it a sub-discipline of psychology. True both can instruct each other, but never replace each other. Interestingly he notes that the so called psychological novel, in which the author explicitly tries to explain the psychology of his characters, is of no interest at all to the professional psychologist. On the other hand novels without any psychological intentions on the part of the authors are those of greatest interest to the psychologist who then is provided with the challenge to elucidate them. Thus further confirming the theory that true works of fictions contain autonomous psychic complexes, which in a sense, are not made up. In fact I recall a statement by Tolstoy of a certain author merely presenting made-up characters. In short Jung emphasizes the impersonal and the objective in art and sees anything personal as a detraction and a defect¹. Once again a work of art is not a disease, it goes deeper than the mere personal, and is not specific but universally human, as being part of the collective unconsciousness. The true artist has haplessly come into contact with something totally apart from his own self-seeking ambitions, instead he allows himself to be its instrument. To do so is fraught with dangers, usurping all your energies for one thing, leaving little left for a fulfilling personal life. Furthermore Jung likens a great work of art to a dream dreamed by the artist, reducing him to a spectator deprived of any conscious control. All what he can do is to try and report his dream; and that, one presumes, is but a faded copy of the dream². And as all dreams, a work of art is not clear-cut but ambiguous and thus open to many interpretations. Thus a work of art, and to Jung only the great works of art do truly count, is impersonal, yet personally moving, and the actual personality of the artist is ultimately irrelevant and any pursuit of it an hindrance.

Maybe, in many ways, the most interesting essay in the collection is that on Ulysses. Not that Jung has many interesting things to say about it, he really does not, but as it reveals the personal struggle the repeated attempts to read it constitute. Ulysses made an impact at the time it was published which would be impossible for a book to make nowadays. In fact as a psychiatrist Jung was asked for his opinion on 'Ulysses' by a publisher, and Jung accepted to form one, and thus to read the book. It was not easy going for him, in fact the dominant impression that the book made on him was one of boredom. He made several attempts to read it but was repulsed every time by the sheer boredom of the task (as he writes you: you begin to expect nothing from it, and after a while it dawns on you that this is just on the mark). In fact he had problems staying awake. Thus his first impressions when put down in his essay were rather harsh, then he felt obliged to modify his negative reactions and to try and find extenuating aspects of the writing, still the basic judgment was one of boredom. Joyce became privy to the first negative reviews by Jung, and his reaction was the defiant 'Niedrigerhängen' referring to

¹ If you replace Art with mathematics it all makes perfect sense.

² once again one is reminded of mathematics.

Fredrick the Great who upon seeing a placard on the wall depicting his reign critically, ordered it to be hung lower down, so everyone could read it.

The book eludes him. The admittedly versatile style of Joyce has a merely hypnotic effect, nothing comes to meet the reader, everything is turning away from him, and he is left gaping after it. As a matter of fact you can as well read the book backwards as forwards, it does not make any difference, Jung claims in exasperation. Every sentence is a gag, he writes, but taken together they amount to nothing. As we would say in mathematics, everything may make sense locally, but there is no global picture. As Jung admits; he is naive enough to expect that a book wants to tell us something, to be understood in some sense. Not 'Ulysses', the reader is simply made a fool of. Joyce does not want to represent anything at all, he just makes fools of his readers, and Jung for one has his ill will aroused against the author. He likens the book to a tapeworm, every part is self-contained. Cut it out and the rest will not be worse off, and the cut-off can generate the book by itself. Jung throws up his hands in despair. In the book there is nothing at all which refreshes or pleases, or anything which gives any hopes, everything is gray, grisly, gruesome, or morally pathetic, tragic and ironic. But Jung nevertheless persists in reading and plodding along. Maybe after all he has an open mind?

He started reading it in 1922, he confesses, and he left it aside for some time, only to pick it up again. And still he is bored. Bored stiff, bored to tears. So why does he do it? He has an obligation he admits, he has promised his views on it, and because of that he feels compelled to read through the whole thing lest he misses something. And after all, there is another compelling reason, namely to a psychologist the phenomenon of Joyce and the book cannot be ignored. Had it not been for that he would never have persisted as it annoyed him thoroughly and amused him but a little. After all what is put at the center of the book is the paltry life of the average man, the tribulations of whom constitute his daily bread. He sees it everywhere, his working days are filled with it, why should he savor it in book-form?

If you should characterize the book as a neurotic maybe even psychotic symptom, you need not be an expert, any informed layman can put it on line, Jung remarks. It is clearly the schizophrenic mentality that permeates it. Its fragmentary nature, its coldness to any human emotions, the overflow of neologisms, abrupt transitions and hiatuses of thoughts. All of that are characteristic schizophrenic behavior. Yet, and this is a very important point, there is a notable absence of stereotyped expressions, which you normally associates with the schizophrenic. Thus in a sense it is art, or at least it has the potential of art. Maybe this is what makes him reading it in spite of himself, and also what may make him eventually to modify his initial dismissive views. After all the presentation is consistent and flowing, he admits, everything is in motion and nothing is fixed. The mental functions are in fact kept under severe control, they do not manifest themselves in spontaneous and erratic ways. Clearly the book is not the work of a clinically certified madman. Jung seems to have found some bearings and makes repeated points that the work is not a symptom, it is no more a pathology than modern art as a whole, and he likes it to cubist paintings, Joyce follows the spirit of the time not any individual impulses, he continues. In fact, you got it, Joyce is in touch with the collective unconscious! The distortion of beauty and meaning through grotesque forms of objectivity, is in the insane merely a symptom of the

general destruction of the personality. In the artist, on the other hand, it is exploited for creative purposes. Jung is slowly coming around. 'Ulysses' accomplishes wonders. What previously has aroused the ill will of Jung as a reader, such as insulting the reader and disappointing his expectations of sense and meaning are now thought of as commendable, because what is insulted is not so much the reader *per se*, only his conventional feelings, among which, one surmises, his sense of meaning belongs. Only the unmodern man would resent it, and I guess Jung does not want to be seen as unmodern. In short 'Ulysses' is a kind of a purgatory and this is why there will never be any books written in the style of 'Ulysses', the author has seen to it that there is no need for that.

Jung seems to find more and more to praise in the book, without necessarily repudiating his view that it is 'unreadable' at least in the basic sense of not being entertaining. Even the unmodern reader must acknowledge that Joyce is an artist, that he knows his trade, which he adds acrimoniously, is more than can be said of most modern artists.

However unreadable the book may be, Jung reflects, it certainly has attracted a wide readership, as testified by the ten editions that its printing has gone through. 'The cap must fit'. It must mean something to quite a few people, numerous enough to make up at least a small community, he concludes. They must have learned something from it. If not, nothing, except black hatred, would induce people to go through all the seven hundred odd pages of it. Even if the book is bleak indeed, the evil in the book, by being genuine one surmises, is preferable to the false goodness that prevails in so many conventional works. Sentimentality, of which the 19th century was ripe according to Jung, is the superstructure imposed on brutality. But even its counterpoint suffers from the same defects, whatever is meant by that. Prophets are generally disagreeable and usually have bad manners, Jung comments, but occasionally they 'hit the nail on the head'. Jung is surely coming around, be it slowly and reluctantly. The book is by no means a dream, thus it is hard to look for hidden meanings in it, he points out. Nietzsche's 'Zarathustra' and Goethe's 'Faust II' are clearly deep dreams, but 'Ulysses' is far too purposeful and directed for that. Joyce's impressively rich language unfolds itself in passages that creep along as tapeworms and become terribly monotonous and boring, but that is actually virtue of the book which deserves praise and reaches even epic proportions.

In the end Joyce and Jung met and Joyce wrote a dedication to Jung on the flyleaf of his copy. Some kind of truce and mutual respect if not actually understanding was reached. After this his essay on Picasso is anti-climactic and hardly worth commenting upon.

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