

Jungian archetypes and the discourse of history

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This paper argues that Jung's notion of archetypes can be useful to the theory and practice of history, particularly cultural and intellectual history. It claims that a coherent model of depth psychology is needed to explain how collective states such as identity and memory are internalized by individuals and that Freud's theories, by placing so much emphasis on childhood and the Oedipus complex, do not fill that need. Jung's approach, by focusing on developmental changes that take place during adulthood, is more easily testable in terms of evidence that historians normally use. The distinctiveness of Jung's notion of archetypes and its limitations are presented by comparing his ideas to those of Freud, Levi-Strauss, Chomsky, and Lakoff. Jung sometimes speaks of a fixed repertoire of archetypal figures that reside in the collective unconscious; this notion cannot be sustained. At other times he speaks of archetypes as a more plastic set of dispositions whose specific manifestations are shaped by culture and situation. This is in accord with recent trends in evolutionary psychology. The key contribution of archetypes is to emphasize the importance of unifying, emotionally powerful images in discourse that serve to counteract the disintegrating tendencies of modern thought and society. The final section presents several ways in which Jung's ideas might be applied to the practice of history: by pointing out recurrent archetypal images in a discourse, and by re-examining the relationship between religious and secular thought with an eye to incorporating perspectives from non-western cultures.

Keywords: Karl Jung; Sigmund Freud; archetypes; psychology; history; discourse

'Our fearsome gods have only changed their names: they now rhyme with -ism'
(Jung 1953–1991, vol. 7, par. 326)

I

The purpose of this paper is to argue that certain ideas of Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) can be useful to the theory and practice of history. Specifically,

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I believe that Jung's notion of archetypes contains within it an approach to symbols that is not duplicated by other social thinkers or psychologists and which sheds light on certain so-called irrational aspects of human thought, feeling and action that are under-represented in current views of historical discourse.

The argument is not easy to make for several reasons. For one thing, most historians today hold depth-psychological approaches to history in extremely low repute. Many of the criticisms that are commonly made of psychohistory are addressed to the specific theories of Freud, especially the weight he placed on childhood sexual experiences as causally decisive for a person's adult life. This raises insuperable problems of evidence: the events of childhood, not to mention the child's perception of them, are rarely documented at the time, but only recalled later. There is, in virtually all cases, simply not enough evidence from the past regarding people's unconscious mental states or childhood situations to be able to make a sufficient number of convincing statements about them. More generally, the requirement that historical sources be publicly observable and verifiable tends to marginalize psychological approaches as dealing with private and largely undocumentable processes.

This exclusion of depth psychology leaves, however, an embarrassing lacuna in the logic of historical explanation. Much of history, particularly cultural and intellectual history, operates with concepts that contain irreducible psychological components. These are often difficult to pin down with any precision. Consider, for example, the much-used notions of identity and memory. Both have social and psychological meanings: to speak of collective memory and identity tacitly assumes that such group states are somehow internalized by individuals – and yet the processes by which this takes place are often left unspecified. Moreover, the contemporary cultural context in which historical discourse takes place renders the notion of a stable, conscious subject extremely tenuous. The very proliferation of cultural studies and identity politics that have occurred since the 1960s, and the conflicting claims that these make on individuals, points to the need for a multi-layered analysis of the mind that takes unconscious as well as conscious factors into consideration. As the sociologist Craig Calhoun puts it,

The struggles occasioned by identity politics need to be understood... not as simply between those who claim different identities but *within each subject* as the multiple and contending discourses of our era challenge any of our efforts to attain stable self-recognition or coherent subjectivity. (Calhoun 1994, 20; italics mine)

Why look specifically to Jung for insights on these issues? Once again, the argument is not easy to make. Many academics tend to regard Jung with suspicion, as a figure who is associated with popular mysticism, superstition,

and obscurantism, and whose ideas do not really stand up to rigorous examination. This stigma goes back in some measure to his break with Freud in 1913. According to Jung's memoirs, his refusal to accept the sexual theory as the sole explanation of neuroses seemed to Freud to open the gates to 'the black tide of mud – of occultism' (Jung 1989, 150). In addition, Jung's reputation is tarnished by the unpalatable statements he made on political and social issues (including race and gender) and by his willingness to compromise with National Socialism in 1933 and 1934. This is not the place to rehash Jung's attitudes on National Socialism, which have been hotly and extensively debated since, both among his followers and critics; even his sympathetic biographers do not defend all of his actions in these years (see Maidenbaum and Martin 1991, for a full discussion). Suffice to say that the preoccupation with Jung's politics and the reactions provoked by his language have resulted in highly selective readings of his works. It is easy to find quotations on which to base hostile or dismissive interpretations without bothering to place them in the context of the essay as a whole, much less the extended corpus of Jung's writings. A recent biographer of Jung confesses that she was drawn to the subject precisely by the dearth of positive writing about so important a figure (Bair 2003, xi).

In addition, Jung's ideas frequently *are* obscure, and his methodology is anything but rigorous; yet Jung was hardly unique among major twentieth-century European intellectuals in this or other respects. None of the above handicaps have prevented scholars from amassing huge bodies of respectful commentary on more fashionable figures. Exegesis of Jung's texts is surely no more formidable than those of Nietzsche, his political views no more unacceptable than Heidegger's, his obscurity no denser than Derrida's, his excursions into history no more fanciful than Freud's. The test of Jung's stature as a thinker should lie in the quality and heuristic value of his insights, however speculatively they might be presented.

II

I will attempt to elucidate what I find distinctive and valuable about Jung's ideas by comparing and contrasting them to those of other thinkers who utilize similar concepts.

The most obvious figure for such comparisons is Freud himself. As is well known, Jung distanced himself from his former mentor by rejecting the sexual aetiology of neuroses as too narrow. While Freud utilized the Oedipal myth as the pivotal narrative for explaining childhood development and its ramifications for adult life, Jung asserted the need for a much greater variety of mythological resources. Moreover, he maintained that adult life brought its own unique challenges and occasions for neuroses, so that childhood patterns were less important for their interpretation and resolution. Young people and older people required different modes of treatment because they

faced different problems. Because they are not based predominantly on childhood situations, Jung's theories are not as restricted in the types of evidence that might be used to corroborate or refute them. An individual's life-transition that occurs in adulthood is likely to be better documented, and the same kinds of sources that historians use in constructing a biography, relating one's experiences to their surroundings, could be used in testing a Jungian interpretation. If the family was the decisive locus for socialization in childhood, then the broader socio-cultural trends of a person's environment played a decisive role in the later stages such as the mid-life crisis. Thus Jung's psychology of maturity is very much a social psychology. As he put it:

A collective problem, if not recognized as such, always appears as a personal problem, and in individual cases may give the impression that something is out of order in the realm of the personal psyche. The personal sphere is indeed disturbed, but such disturbances need not be primary; they may well be secondary, the consequence of an insupportable change in the social atmosphere. The cause of disturbance is, therefore, not to be sought in the personal surroundings, but rather in the collective situation. Psychotherapy has hitherto taken this matter far too little into account. (Jung 1989, 233-4)

As a consequence, some of the behavior that Jung calls 'unconscious' is close to the surface and is hence observable to others. Thus Jung could write in the eventful year 1918:

As the contemporary world and its newspapers present the spectacle of a gigantic psychiatric clinic, every attentive observer has ample opportunity to see these formulations being enacted before his eyes . . . *that the unconscious of one person is projected upon another person*, so that the first accuses the second of what he overlooks in himself. This principle is of such alarming general validity that everyone would do well, before railing at others, to sit down and consider very carefully whether the brick should not be thrown at his own head . . . This seemingly irrelevant aside brings us to one of the most remarkable features of the unconscious: it is, as it were, *present before our eyes* in all its parts, and *is accessible to observation at any time*. [emphasis in the original German] (Jung 1953-91, vol. 10, par. 39-40)

Jung also wrote about the Cold War in these terms, seeing each side as demonizing the other as a substitute for acknowledging their own demonic instincts (Jung 1953-91, vol. 10, par. 544).

Such passages nevertheless appear to contradict others in which Jung writes about the collective unconscious. He introduces this central concept as follows:

A more or less superficial layer of the unconscious is undoubtedly personal. I call it the *personal unconscious*. But this personal unconscious rests upon a deeper layer, which does not derive from personal experience and is not a

personal acquisition but is inborn. This deeper layer I call the *collective unconscious*. I have chosen the term 'collective' because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behavior that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals. It is, in other words, identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us. (Jung 1953–91, vol. 9, pt 1, par. 3)

In his *Memories, dreams, reflections*, Jung recounts his personal encounter with the collective unconscious through visions of being led into underground caves. In his earlier writings, he maintained that it represented the phylogenetic past of the species (Jung 1989, 179, 181; Jung 1953–91, suppl. vol. B, par. 50).

The notion of a collective unconscious in itself is not as implausible as it might seem at first glance. On the contrary, it seems to me to follow ineluctably from two assumptions, to which I suspect many would subscribe. The first is a belief in the interdependency of mind and body (particularly the brain) and a rejection of a strict Cartesian dualism – however difficult it may be to formulate this interdependency precisely. The second is the principle of natural selection, which states that not all possible body states are equally probable, but certain quite specific ones have evolved over time. It would follow that the same is true of mental states, whether conscious or unconscious. The collective unconscious might thus be viewed as a label for certain inherited aspects of mental life. Certainly, this was one way in which Jung defended it (Jung 1953–91, vol. 10, par. 12; vol. 18, par. 84). His reiteration of the importance of the 'primitive' was a way of formulating the not unreasonable argument that certain kinds of subcortical mental activities were the product of long evolution and are not about to be easily displaced by several thousand-odd years of cerebral development.

Nevertheless, there is a huge leap between this postulation of a collective unconscious per se and the specific menagerie of archetypes – the anima, animus, shadow, trickster, wise old man, etc. – that Jung often claims to comprise its contents. This leap is indeed one of the major obstacles to taking Jung seriously, since the claim that such figures reside buried in the collective unconscious seems to ignore completely the role of culture. This causes many serious scholars (such as Carlo Ginzburg, who pursues quite similar empirical investigations into cross-cultural mythical beliefs) to draw back from him (Ginzburg 1989, 154; Ginzburg 1990, 18).

In fact, Jung's use of the term 'archetype' is most imprecise. Andrew Samuels distinguishes three stages in Jung's development of the notion between 1912 and 1919, but this is too neat (Samuels 1997, 9). His first label, which he used in his *Transformations and symbols of the libido* (1912), was 'primordial image', which he attributed to Jakob Burkhardt, and which remained the preferred term in *Psychological types* of 1921 (Jung 1953–91, suppl. vol. B, par. 56, n42; vol. 6, pars. 684n, 746–54). His choice of the term

'archetype', however, was an attempt to get away from the concreteness implied by the term 'image'. He referred to archetypes variously as Kantian categories, Platonic ideas, *représentations collectives*, 'motifs', 'modes of apprehension', 'instinct's perception of itself', 'unconscious core of meaning', and 'patterns of behavior' (Jung 1953–91, vol. 10, par. 14; vol. 9 pt 1, pars 75, 130, 309; vol. 8, par. 280, 277; vol. 9, pt 1, par. 266; vol. 8, par. 841). In all these formulations, he was reaching for a notion of form. Thus, by 1938, he could write:

Again and again I encounter the mistaken notion that an archetype is determined in regard to its content, in other words, that it is a kind of unconscious idea [*Vorstellung*] . . . It is necessary to point out once more that archetypes are not determined as regards their content, but only as regards their form and then only to a very limited degree. A primordial image is determined as to its content only when it has become conscious and is therefore filled out with the material of conscious experience. Its form, however . . . might be compared to the axial system of a crystal, which, as it were, preforms the crystalline structure in the mother liquid, although it has no material existence of its own. (Jung 1953–91, vol. 9, pt 1, par. 155)

Nevertheless, this notion of form remained quite vague, perhaps for the reason that Jung was unwilling to give up completely the specific imaginal aspect of the archetypes. He tended to resolve this dilemma by treating the archetype as a disposition to a specific activity. On several occasions he drew the comparison with the yucca moth, which is programmed to fertilize only on the yucca plant and therefore must have some specific means for recognizing it. That recognition would correspond to the archetypal image (Jung 1953–91, vol. 10, par. 547; vol. 8, par. 277; vol. 9, pt 1, par. 152; vol. 11, par. 165). He reiterated that only through such situations can we know the archetypes; they are not accessible directly, and their ultimate nature must remain unclear. It is noteworthy that Jung never offered a taxonomy of archetypes, as he did for personality types. Certain ones – the anima, animus, the wise old man, the self, the mother, the child, the trickster-shadow – recur in his work. On the question of an exhaustive list, Jung simply admitted, 'there are as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life' (Jung 1953–91, vol. 9, pt 1, par. 99).

All this leaves Jung open to the criticism that he never in fact succeeds in establishing the existence of unconscious archetypes, and that the similarities among images across cultures can be adequately explained by diffusion or simple coincidence (Palmer 1997, 172–81) . . . Skepticism of Jung's 'unconscious core' has been reinforced by a school of Jungians themselves who find affinities with postmodernism. Founded by James Hillman in the 1960s and 70s and calling itself the 'archetypal school', it retains the primacy of images while rejecting the unconscious substrate (Adams 1997, 103, 115; Kugler 1997, 71–85; Barnaby and D'Acerno 1990, xxiii).

To my mind, the validity of Jung's conception of archetypes does not lie in his positing a common repertoire of mythical-religious images – for this his methodology was too shoddy and his selection too arbitrary. Neither does it lie in his attempt to establish a theory of universal mental forms – for this his philosophical training was too unsophisticated. It lies rather in the claim *that* people think in terms of images much of the time, however culture-bound these might be. 'A hunger for images characterizes all history, and comes close to defining the human condition', writes Robert Jay Lifton, the psychologist who has done the most to argue for the centrality of images in history (1979, 284). By 'image', I mean not simply something necessarily visualisable, but more generally an *emotionally charged unit-idea that synthesizes multiple and disparate contents into a single powerful mental entity*. Writing in the 1920s from a neo-Kantian perspective, Ernst Cassirer characterized mythical thought in this way: 'For mythical thinking all contents crowd together into a single plane of reality; everything perceived possesses as such a character of reality; the image like the word is endowed with real forces' (Cassirer 1955–7, vol. 2, 42). Logical distinctions such as whole and part, thing and relation, or substance and attribute, are leveled and melted together (Cassirer 1955–7, vol. 2, ch. 2). The importance of such activity has also been recognized by the sociobiologists Charles Lumsden and Edward O. Wilson, who call it 'reification': 'the strong mental propensity to transform complex patterns and processes, including those arising in group organization, into real objects' (Lumsden and Wilson 1981, 5–6, 94–5, 107). I have previously referred to this type of thinking in historical situations as thinking via embodiment (Lindenfeld 1988, 38–42).

The distinctiveness of this claim may be contrasted to that of the structuralists such as Claude Levi-Strauss, who also posits a universal collective unconscious; but Levi-Strauss finds these universals at the level of forms that are independent of content (he is therefore critical of Jung's version). In a similar move, Noam Chomsky posits an innate linguistic competence that generates grammatical rules. Jung's claim, however, is that there also exists a universal disposition to generate symbolic images. In Jungian language, symbols are the conduits, so to speak, by which the archetypes of the collective unconscious become manifest in consciousness and projected onto objects. He emphasized that they represented a different kind of cognition from rational thought: their purpose was not so much to provide the means of differentiating objects into distinct classes (such as Levi-Strauss's binary categories), or words into sentences (such as Chomsky's syntactic structures) but on the contrary, to override such distinctions by telescoping opposites into one. This is what gives these symbols their power. Jung writes:

Opposites are not to be united rationally: *tertium non datur* – that is precisely why they are called opposites . . . In practice, opposites can be united only in

the form of a compromise, or *irrationally*, some new thing arising from them which, although different from both, yet has the power to take up their energies in equal measure as an expression of both and of neither. (Jung 1953–91, vol. 6, par. 169)

Religious symbols obviously fit this definition, combining the natural and the supernatural or the human and the superhuman. Jung viewed alchemy as performing the same function. His book *Mysterium Coniunctionis* was subtitled *An inquiry into the separation and synthesis of psychic opposites in alchemy*. On the opening page he listed the variety of opposites to be joined: moist–dry, hot–cold, upper–lower, spirit–body, heaven–earth, fire–water, active–passive, volatile–solid, dear–cheap, good–evil, open–occult, east–west, living–dead, masculine–feminine, sun–moon (Jung 1953–91, vol. 14, par. 1).

This brings us to the Jungian notion of structure, for he, no less than the structuralists, was concerned with complex patterns and interrelationships among symbols which could come to represent a total world-view. This became a dominant theme of his later writings. At first, Jung found little material in his study of western thought on which to base his theories; but in 1928 the orientalist scholar Richard Wilhelm sent him a Taoist text, *The secret of the golden flower*, and this provided the stimulus for Jung's exploration of symbolic structure. It pointed him in the direction of alchemy, which is where he found the links between Western scientific and archetypal thought that had since been suppressed (Jung 1953–91, vol. 13, pars. 3–4). The principle for ordering a potentially chaotic multiplicity of symbols was one of *symmetry*, of finding a proper balance among elements. This immediately also raised a question of economy of thought: what was the minimum number of symbols needed to represent a comprehensive world-picture? Jung's alchemical writings are filled with discussions of whether three or four elements are optimal – a trinity or quaternity; he eventually settled on the latter (Jung 1953–91, vol. 12, pars. 209–10, 327). Symmetry was assured by the elements being contained within the form of a circle, the mandala, which Jung found in the *Secret of the golden flower*, the *Tibetan book of the dead*, and the sand paintings of the Navajo, to name but a few sources. Jung employed drawing as a therapeutic device, enabling the subject to depict – and thereby to enact – a balance among the different sectors of the psyche (Jung 1953–91, vol. 13, pars 31–6; vol. 9, pt 1, par. 710). It was this process of doing justice to all the elements that Jung held up as a model of psychic health; he chose the term 'self' to designate this wholeness. Jung conceived his therapy – and his writings in general – as an attempt to redress the imbalance between different types of mental functioning by calling attention to the intuitive aspects and by bringing the archetypes into consciousness. By so doing, one could reduce the over- or underestimation of reality that occurs when they are not recognized.

In other words, the pathological hold of archetypes occurred, in Jung's view, when the subject identified too closely with them without being aware of their status *as* archetypes (Jung 1953–91, vol. 9, pt 1, par. 621). Jung called the process of bringing the archetypes into consciousness the 'withdrawal of projections' (Jung 1953–91, vol. 14, pars. 696–7; vol. 16, par. 212).

The notion of archetypes and their structure has undergone a certain rehabilitation in the past several decades thanks to evolutionary psychology, which provides a more sophisticated formulation of instinctual behavior than was available in Freud's or Jung's day. It is noteworthy that the *Encyclopedia of psychology*, published in 2000 under the auspices of the American Psychological Association, contains no entry for 'instinct' but does contain one for 'archetypes' (Feinstein 2000). Jung insisted that instincts had a cognitive aspect: archetypal images served as their representation in consciousness. The problem with instinct theory, however, was precisely the same as with the conventional view of Jung's archetypes: the impossibility of establishing a definite repertoire of instincts. Evolutionary psychology has re-framed the problem as one of adaptive function rather than specific content: instinctive behaviors are those which have evolved over long periods of time and which clearly contribute to the reproduction and survival of the species. A disposition to produce synthetic images of types can clearly be seen as such an adaptive mechanism, especially in dangerous situations where quick reactions are called for – no less than the opposite need, in other situations, to differentiate and classify which linguistic deep structures provide. The specific manifestations of those behaviors are subject to a certain amount of cultural and environmental variation – thus transcending the 'nature–nurture' debate (Buss 2005; Lifton 1979, 36–44; Stevens 1982, 49–54, 69–70).

Jung's theories bear further comparison to the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, whose book *Philosophy in the flesh. the embodied mind and its challenge to western thought* attempts to summarize the work of recent cognitive science and its implications for philosophy. Their findings are clearly closer to the Jungian model of a collective unconscious than to the structuralist one. Their depiction of reason resembles Jung's depiction of the irrational in a number of respects. They write:

Reason is not disembodied, as the tradition has largely held, but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experience . . .

Reason is evolutionary, in that abstract reason builds on and makes use of forms of perceptual and motor inference present in "lower" animals. The result is a Darwinism of reason . . .

Reason is not 'universal' in the transcendent sense; that is, it is not part of the structure of the universe. It is universal, however, in that it is a capacity shared universally by all human beings . . .

Reason is not completely conscious, but mostly unconscious.

Reason is not purely literal, but largely metaphorical and imaginative.

Reason is not dispassionate, but emotionally engaged. (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 4)

Because they reject mind–body dualism, Lakoff and Johnson call on us to jettison many of the main tenets of modern western philosophy, including the Cartesian *cogito* and its phenomenological descendents; the Kantian autonomous subject; the utilitarian rational-choice model; the Fregean correspondence theory of language and the world; the computational model of the mind; the Chomskyan syntactic structures; and post-structuralist relativism (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 5–6).

Lakoff and Johnson do not discuss Jung (or Freud, for that matter); yet it is clear that their model resembles his in important respects, while differing in others. In one way, cognitive science has further undermined the theory of a primordial repertoire of unconscious images by showing that for humans, unlike most animals, much neural development occurs after birth, making it extraordinarily difficult to distinguish nature from nurture. This means also that many neural connections existing at birth are extinguished through disuse (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 507).

At the same time, Jung's use of symbol is quite distinct from Lakoff's and Johnson's use of metaphor. The latter's use of the term refers largely to mental derivations of body sensations and orientations in space as experienced in sensory-motor schema. These become the basis of primary metaphors that inform much of everyday thinking and language. Here are some examples:

affection is warmth ('They greeted me *warmly*') ... more is up ('Prices are *high*') ... similarity is closeness ('These colors aren't quite the same, but they're *close*') ... change is motion ('My car has *gone from* bad to worse lately.') ... control is up ('Don't worry! I'm *on top of* the situation.'). (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 50–3)

The very ubiquity of these metaphors contrasts with the extraordinariness of Jung's archetypal symbols, and with the intensity and emotional power which these symbols have the capacity to convey. Jung repeatedly talks of their numinosity, of their being larger than ourselves, beyond our control. Here, for example, is his definition of religion:

a careful consideration and observation of certain dynamic factors that are conceived as 'powers': spirits, demons, gods, laws, ideas, ideals, or whatever name man has given to such factors in his world as he has found powerful, dangerous, or helpful enough to be taken into careful consideration, or grand, beautiful, and meaningful enough to be devoutly worshipped and loved. (Jung 1953–91, vol. 11, par. 8)

We are likely to encounter archetypes in dreams, and most extremely in hallucinations, trances, and other 'altered states of consciousness' that exist

in most societies in the world (Bourguignon 1973, 9–10). Jung distinguished symbols from mere referential signs by their ‘living’ quality. ‘A symbol really lives’, Jung writes, ‘only when it is the best and highest expression for something divined but not yet known to the observer’ (Jung 1953–91, vol. 6, par. 819).

An explanation for the ubiquity of such ‘larger-than-life’ experiences may be less far removed from evolutionary psychology than one might think. Robert Jay Lifton has argued persuasively that the ‘experience of transcendence’ is necessary to survival because it enables us to face death by symbolizing immortality. Numinous symbols contribute to a sense of centeredness, integrity, and vitality that is needed to offset the threats to stability both from society and from our own complex psyches (Lifton 1979, 26, 101, 179, 285). Erik Erikson makes a similar point in terms of the need for personal identity as characterized by ‘centrality, wholeness, and initiative’ and which can be undermined by a sense of uprootedness or discontinuity (Erikson 1964, 86–96; on the possible influence of Jung on Erikson, see Niethammer 2000, 279–301). It matters little whether or not Jung’s ‘typical situations in life’ that give rise to archetypes can be reduced to any one formula such as Lifton’s or Erikson’s. The point they are making is the same: the ego needs a means of magnification, of feeling connected to a meaningful whole beyond the individual to compensate for situations of life-threatening instability. Jung, like Lifton and Erikson, pointed to the dissociative tendencies of modern western thought and the impoverishment of many of its former symbols. They emphasized that in eras of political, social, and spiritual disintegration, people were likely to compensate for this by turning to charismatic leaders and totalitarian ideologies as embodiments of ‘larger-than-life’ archetypes.

Jung’s writings on symbolic images are bound up with his critique of modernity, in particular the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Jung viewed modernization as drastically narrowing the range of symbolic expression. He referred to this at times as the ‘impoverishment of symbols’, at others as the ‘withdrawal of projections’ (a phrase which paradoxically had a negative connotation for Jung when applied to culture in contrast to the positive role it played in individual therapy) (Jung 1953–91, vol. 9, pt 1, par. 28; vol. 11, par. 140).¹ He viewed the Protestant Reformation as a key event in this process: the destruction of Catholic images, the rejection of worship of the saints as mere superstition left the individual relatively defenseless by removing multiple channeling mechanisms for the primordial instincts, which thereby lost their contact with consciousness. Jung writes:

After it became impossible for the demons to inhabit the rocks, woods, mountains, and rivers, they used human beings as much more dangerous

dwelling places . . . A man does not notice it when he is governed by a demon; he puts all his skill and cunning at the service of his unconscious master, thereby heightening its power a thousandfold. (Jung 1953–91, vol. 16, par. 1365)

One might add that fewer available symbols meant that the remaining ones had to bear the burden of increased psychic energy – hence one might talk also of a *concentration of projections* as a by-product of this narrowing. This fits rather well the process of concentration on and intensification of belief in the devil and witchcraft that occurred during the Reformation, when devil-worship became identified with heresy and idolatry by both Catholics and Protestants (Levack 1995, 34; Cohn 1975, 233). The concomitant withdrawal and concentration of projections is seen in the many campaigns against idolatry (Thoden van Velzen and van Beek 1988), 12–13). Needless to say, the Enlightenment brought with it a further stripping away of images in the name of reason and a concomitant increase in fanaticism in the French Revolution – a fanaticism that has been continued and reinforced by modern nationalism. In short, to use Max Weber’s terminology, the disenchantment which modernity brought with it was bound to fail (Lindenfeld 2004, 296).

Jung’s critique of modernity has led some writers to discern affinities between Jung and postmodernism (Barnaby and D’Acerno 1990, xx–xxvii; Kugler 1997, 307–41; Hauke 2000). They not only point to Jung’s anti-‘logocentric’ views, but also to the ambiguity of his formulations, his distrust of systematization, and the indefiniteness of the archetypes themselves as examples of these affinities. They find mirrored in Jung’s writings the post-structuralists’ distrust of absolutes, of neat dichotomies, of the referential quality of language, and the autonomy of the ego-subject. Likewise, they find the ‘classical’ or ‘essentialist’ Jungian interpretations, which hold to a fixed repertoire of archetypal images, to be outmoded. Not unreasonably, they point out that the unconscious is by definition unknowable; thus any attempt to represent it in language will have a fictive quality to it. Thus it is best not to become too attached to names and categories, even if one cannot completely avoid them (Kugler 1997, 307, 316).

Nevertheless, if my reading of Jung is correct, the postmodern interpretation leaves out a lot, particularly when it comes to rendering Jung useful for historians. Even if one discards the notion of a common stock of archetypal symbols, it is harder to deny the existence of a common process of symbolization – a process that tends to join together rather than differentiate, to telescope diverse material into single images. Thus, the tendency to ‘essentialize’ through projections may not be so easy to get rid of – particularly in times of crisis or upheaval which threaten collective stability.

III

I turn now to what I see as the application of the Jungian notion of archetypes to modern historical discourse. Jung emphasized repeatedly that the preference of western thought for written and verbal expression did not eliminate the role of numinous symbols; they rather took the form of abstract concepts:

Far too little attention has been paid to the fact that, for all our irreligiousness, the distinguishing mark of the Christian epoch, its highest achievement, has become the congenital vice of our age: *the supremacy of the word*, of the Logos, which stands for the central figure of our Christian faith. The word has literally become our God and so it has remained Words like 'Society' and 'State' are so concretized that they are almost personified. (Jung, 1953–91, vol. 10, par. 554)

One of Jung's earliest examples of an archetype at work was the physicist Robert Mayer with his discovery of the conservation of energy. He cites a letter by Mayer describing the intuitive stroke whereby he arrived at this insight while on a voyage in the South Seas (Jung, 1953–91, vol. 7, pars 106–9). Jung interpreted Mayer's inspiration as a variation of the idea that the universe is governed by a primordial force or power, a notion that is found in a wide variety of religions and mythologies throughout the world.

Thus, it is not out of place to look for numinous symbols in the books, essays, and debates that comprise the discourse of history. Doing so, however, involves counteracting a certain drift within this discourse during the last half-century, namely from synthesis to analysis, from simplicity to complexity. If one thinks of the various ways in which history is theorized, most of them are couched in images of diffuseness: the study of texts and contexts, language as the articulation of differences, intellectual fields, culture as webs of significance, not to mention the preferences of post-structuralism for ambiguity and contradiction. What is lost in the process is the role of synthetic unit-ideas. One need not return to Arthur Lovejoy's notion of the history of such ideas as splendidly isolated from social, economic, or political realities in order to recognize their psychological importance as numinous symbols. To draw attention to these is not to denigrate or bypass the complexities of discourses, but on the contrary to locate such symbols as important elements within them. Thus the words ending in '-ism' which the West is so fertile in inventing can denote at one and the same time a set of dense constellations of issues, debates, institutions, media, political parties *as well as* a shared image that helps to give its believers a sense of personal self-magnification, stability, and collective identity. This can happen either through an identification with a larger-than-life projection of the self, or through repulsion from a projection of the 'other'. These images can be spotted in a discourse by the frequent recurrence of the words used to express them and by the multitude of

associations and connotations which they conjure up. They serve, so to speak, as points of concentration within a discourse. To appropriate the imagery of Pierre Bourdieu and Fritz Ringer, an intellectual field is like a gravitational field – not only through the leading figures which dominate it, but also through its recurring unit-ideas (Bourdieu 1987, 167–77; Ringer 1992, 1–25).

Examples of such archetypal symbols within discourses would include what might be called *dominant metaphors*. These are words that have a widespread or popular use but would also find their place in more specialized discourses. They can be thought of as a subset of what Raymond Williams called keywords, distinguished by their power to arouse emotions and/or energize people to action. Let me give two instances.

One is the notion of *struggle*, familiar to students of Social Darwinism and a recurring term in many ideological discourses in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Darwin's 'scientific' introduction of the term in *On the origin of species* is overtly metaphorical and contradictory:

I should premise that I use the term Struggle for Existence in a large and metaphorical sense, including dependence of one being on another, and including (which is more important) not only the life of the individual, but success in leaving progeny. Two canine animals in a time of dearth, may be truly said to struggle with each other which shall get food and live. But a plant at the edge of a desert is said to struggle for life against the drought, though more properly it should be said to be dependent on the moisture. A plant which annually produces a thousand seeds, of which on an average only one comes to maturity, may be more truly said to struggle with the plants of the same and other kinds which already clothe the ground. The mistletoe is dependent on the apple and a few other trees, but can only in a far-fetched sense be said to struggle with these trees, for if too many of these parasites grow on the same tree, it will languish and die. But several seedling mistletoes, growing close together on the same branch, may more truly be said to struggle with each other. As the mistletoe is disseminated by birds, its existence depends on birds; and it may metaphorically be said to struggle with other fruit-bearing plants, in order to tempt birds to devour and thus disseminate its seed rather than those of other plants. In these several senses, which pass into each other, I use for convenience sake the general term of struggle for existence. (Darwin 1964, 62–3)

Given such a variety of meanings, it is hardly surprising that Social Darwinists could draw many and contradictory conclusions: Spencer could interpret Darwin as justifying laissez-faire capitalism, while Marx and Engels could view him as supporting class struggle, and the anarchist Kropotkin could emphasize interdependence and cooperation in his book *Mutual aid*. The appearance of the term 'struggle' in such incongruous places as the title of Hitler's major publication and the American civil rights movement is symptomatic of the broad appeal of this metaphor as an expression of self-preservation and advancement.

In the past quarter-century, the metaphor of struggle has been joined by the metaphor of *power*, whose meanings likewise have been extended to a wide variety of situations. No longer solely or primarily about politics in the sense of governing a territory, power is now found coursing through day-to-day social relations, in the uniformization of bodily movements, in the classificatory schemes of language, and in truth itself. Much of this is of course the work of Michel Foucault who, aside from his pathbreaking depictions of specific sites of power, has given the term an almost pantheistic scope. Power is everywhere, writes Foucault, 'not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere' (Foucault 1980, 93; 1977b). It is 'at once visible and invisible, present and hidden, ubiquitous' (Foucault 1977a, 213). Like Darwin, Foucault acknowledged the heterogeneous meanings of his term; his choice of a single word to encompass such diverse meanings is nevertheless significant. The pervasiveness and looseness of its usage is evident from passages like the following, in an introduction to a reader in contemporary social theory:

If historical actors sometimes embody what appears to be a Nietzschean will to power, it is equally true that any historical actor will also embody a wide range of other feelings and desires, including desires precisely antithetical to power – for love, for tenderness, for communion – although nowadays such terms can hardly be spoken with innocence, but on the contrary are also always partially implicated in power themselves. (Dirks et al. 1994, 7)

Finally, Jungian archetypes can contribute to enlarging the sphere of historical discourse so as better to encompass the mentalities of non-western cultures, which typically have very different epistemologies and world-views. Jung clearly saw himself as such a cross-cultural mediator, claiming that individuation on a cultural level requires an awareness of how we are viewed from the perspective of the other (Jung 1989, 246–7). While the question of how one might do so today according to Jungian precepts is a vast one, I will conclude by offering a few general guidelines.

One is to re-examine the relationship between secular and religious thought with an eye to overcoming the sharp dichotomy between the two that western intellectuals tend to fall into. This was part of Jung's critique of western rationalism; he viewed the decline of religious faith as leaving people dangerously vulnerable in times of suffering and crisis. He also saw it as an aberration from 'conceptions that had accompanied human life since prehistoric times' (Jung 1968, 76; Stevens 1982, 284–5). The Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, who likewise sees himself as mediating between European and Indian cultures, agrees:

One empirically knows of no society in which humans have existed without gods and spirits accompanying them. Although the god of monotheism may have taken a few knocks – if not actually 'died' – in the

nineteenth-century European story of 'the disenchantment of the world,' the gods and other agents inhibiting practices of so-called 'superstition' have never died anywhere. I take gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human, and think from the assumption that the question of being human involves the question of being with gods and spirits. (Chakrabarty 2000, 16)

Chakrabarty is critical of the tendency among social scientists to explain away spiritual experiences in terms of other more 'rational' factors (such as economic discontent, political oppression). He notes, for example, that in over 100 known cases of peasant rebellions in India between 1783 and 1900, both sides called on intervention by divinities (Chakrabarty 2000, 14). Certainly if the historian is to remain true to the experiences of actors in the past, then religious motives, beliefs, and practices must be accorded their proper role.

Another cue that historians might take from Jung is to expand the range of sources of intellectual activity to include non-verbal structures. This means paying greater attention to dreams and visions in cases where these are culturally accepted ways of conveying knowledge and insight. Contrary to the western view that dreams are subjective and idiosyncratic, gaining meaning only as symptoms of unconscious desires, many societies view them as objective messages from the spirit world. Their content is culturally determined, and there are standards which can be applied to test whether they are valid revelations or not. For example, the leader of the Taiping Rebellion in China, Hong Xiuquan, found his vision of a meeting with a heavenly father confirmed when he began reading a Christian missionary tract some years later. This external confirmation removed his doubts about the meaning of his vision (Wagner 1982, 24, 28–9). In Hong's case, as in many others, his visions included prophecies and instructions for action. Thus people who are recognized as gifted visionaries typically incur certain obligations to assume leadership roles in society by virtue of their special powers.

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Jung developed his notion of archetypes primarily out of his therapeutic practice. He viewed possession by archetypal images as a stage to be overcome in the process of attaining psychic health and stability. At the same time, he viewed such stability as conditioned by the surrounding culture, and he sought to point out how cultures could be bewitched by archetypes to the extent that they were unaware of how these functioned. By showing how archetypal images insinuate themselves into discourses, I hope to have shown how Jung's notion can be useful to historians, and how it can add to our knowledge of how the self, individual or collective, is constructed in our world.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following colleagues for their helpful readings of earlier versions of this paper: Ann Taylor Allen, John Henderson, Thomas Kohut, Chris Lorenz, Suzanne Marchand, and Jörn Rösen.

Note

1. Even in therapy, Jung viewed the withdrawal process as potentially dangerous, because there is always the risk that it could lead to a sense of meaninglessness (Jung, 1953–91, vol. 16, par. 21).

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