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The Eye Looks Both Ways: Reflections on Symbolic Expression

We are most influenced by and at the mercy of the invisible world. How, and in service to what agendas, do autonomous images arise from the human psyche, express themselves through symbol, move us, and constitute a compelling alternate to the tangible world seen by the corporeal eye. Jung's articulation of psychic process one hundred years ago provides considerable illumination on not only on how images occur to each of us, but how surrealism soon emerged as a force in modern art.

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"We do not sleep, we do not drink, we do not smoke,
we do not sniff, we do not puncture ourselves: we dream."
La Revolution Surrealiste, n^o. 1, December 1924

The path which leads to the modernist surrealism project may be tracked back to luminous anticipations here and there throughout history, (such moments as the brilliant, apocalyptic visions of Hieronymus Bosch, the expressive fantasies of William Blake, and the eerie, haunted landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich), but it particularly gains traction in the late nineteenth century when the world is "forced to become psychological." This rather peculiar phrase, "*forced to become psychological*," was Jung's recognition that the dual erosion of tribal myth and spiritually insufficiency of cultural surrogates had driven the question of meaning within the individual. If received tribal images no longer effectively linked persons to the transcendent mysteries of *cosmos*, [namely, "why are we here on this planet,"] to *nature*, ["how do we interact with our environment,"] to the *tribe*, ["who are we, as set off from the others,"] and to personal *identity*, then the meaning problem falls into the unconscious psyche of the modern, or is projected onto popular culture.

Additionally, Immanuel Kant's early 19th century demolition of the premises of traditional metaphysics, namely the fantasy that one could stand on the ego's promontory and, through appeal to past authority or reason alone, proclaim ultimate truths. Rather, Kant argued, we internalize and process whatever the external world stimulates and create a subjective experience of it. All knowing, then, is subjective. Given the undeniability of subjective primacy, then depth psychology and modern art, must address not only the strategies and tools of conscious life but must also take into account the ubiquitous activity of the unconscious as well. As we all know, the difficulty with the unconscious is that it is unconscious. We only begin to become aware of its activity when it activates or energizes images which then impose themselves on to conscious life.

It is a conventional assertion that Jung's split from Freud in 1912 arose from differing views of sexuality. While it is true that there were differences of opinion on this matter, the primary split arose from Jung's view that the human psyche, while biologically based, has also a spiritual dimension, expressed most succinctly as an appreciation for the autonomous symbolic process common to each of us.

In 1911, when he was 36, Jung wrote a book titled *Symbols and Transformations of Libido*, rewritten and retitled as *Symbols of Transformation* in 1950. In this book Jung observes "the kinds of thinking: directed thinking, and dreaming or fantasy-thinking. The former operates with speech elements for the purpose of communication, and is difficult and exhausting; the latter is effortless, working as it were spontaneously, with the contents ready to hand, and guided by unconscious motives." [CW 5, para. 20]

Let me give an example. In different decades, on different continents, three eminent men of science, Charles Darwin, Carl Jung, and William James, experienced earthquakes. Each recognized with a part of the brain what they were encountering, yet each found even more compelling the image that they were riding the back of a living animal, a beast that wished to throw them off its back. The primal phenomenon of the earth shifting beneath their feet, produced two kinds of epiphenomenal

thinking. *Direct thinking* analyzed the experience and compared it to acquired information, and reported: "earthquake." Fantasy thinking analogized the image and produced the metaphor of a gigantic, living thing, which we now know the earth to be. As Jung writes, "everything was conceived anthropomorphically or theriomorphically, in the likeness of man or beast." [*Ibid.*, para. 24.]

Freud believed that directed, or discursive thinking was progressive, and dream imagery a regressive withdrawal of libido from adaptation in the world to archaic contents from our past. For Jung, this fantasy thinking is also "progressive" for it serves as our chief modality for expressing what cannot be expressed cognitively, for allowing us to "know" provisionally what cannot be known. He writes, "Everyone who has his eyes and wits about him can see that the world is dead, cold, and unending. Never yet has he beheld a God, or been compelled to require the existence of such a god from the evidence of his senses." [*ibid*, para. 30.] In other words, we populate the material world, embody it imaginatively, and create the possibility of relationship with that which is so wholly transcendent to our limited sense experience or cognitive instruments. "Through fantasy thinking, directed thinking is brought into contact with the oldest layers of the human mind, long buried beneath the threshold of consciousness." [*ibid*, para. 39.]

Another way of putting this is to suggest that what we call *consciousness* is a thin wafer floating atop a tumultuous, tenebrous sea. We create the fragile artifacts of categories, grammars, syntax, denominations, and other instruments, and are often bewitched into the literalization of what we have created. But we operate over a vast abyss of archaic energies, what Jung called the archetypal field, which organizes the raw, chaotic data of transient time and matter into images, patterns, and organizing forms. When we see the geese migrating we explain this phenomenon as "*instinct*." Those species which have "it" survive, and those who do not perish. But what is "*instinct*" other than our word to account for organizing energies which enable the species to live in harmony with their frequently hostile environment. Our organizing energies include not only biological processes but symbol formation also, creating not only a somatic engagement with the world, but a spiritual one as well.

What we can say of our species is, in addition to being biological creatures who are born, transform, and die, we are the symbol making animal. Why do we bury our dead with ceremony, marry, play football, watch movies except for our symbolic participation in the more than the merely biological fact of existence? Why do we dream? Freud believed also that dreams are regressive manifestations of neurotic fixations, that is, where the libido available for progressive adaptation to life is stuck, blocked, it regresses into symbolic images, and siphons energy away from the task of consciousness. So, art might be a compelling, aesthetically arresting, sublimating moment, but it also represents a misappropriation of libido from the task of developmental adaptation to the demands of life.

For Jung, art is not a misdirection of libido but a powerful form of psychological balancing and healing, "since the relation of the unconscious to the conscious mind is not merely mechanical or complementary, but rather *compensatory*, taking its cue from the anfractuosities of the conscious attitude, the intelligent character of this unconscious activity can hardly be denied." [*ibid*, para. 98.]

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This assertion regarding the *compensatory* role of the unconscious is very powerful, and is worth our reflection. Most psychologies and philosophies privilege the ego's position, for it is through the lens of ego that we see the world. *But the eye points both ways. Just we see, we are being seen as well.* If Jung is correct, and I believe he is, then The ego world, another region of "knowing," which transcends the "knowing" of the ego. As we consider these words, what is digesting our meal, adjusting our body to the changing environmental conditions, producing affect and cognition?

Why and what will we dream tonight? All of these operations lie outside our conscious direction and yet they are surely more expressive of who we are than our limit ego perceptions and understandings.

To those of us who work with the elusive world of dreams, who seek to interpret "the invisible hand" which sets our patterns in motion, who attempt to read the world of autonomous symptoms, the presence of the unconscious, compensatory will is a daily fact. Jung called this presence a result of "the transcendent function," namely, an autonomous activity of the psyche which seeks healing and wholeness through transcending the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious worlds. (Today, when we know so much more about psychosomatic medicine, for example, such witness to the transcendent function is not as challenging to ego sovereignty as it would have been in 1912). For those of us who track dreams, we are no longer surprised when a clip from a newscast, our third grade teacher, and an imaginary figure all show up in that nightly phantasmagoria we call dreaming. We also know that if we attend this process faithfully, over time, seeking to amplify the symbols from both a personal, a cultural, and an archetypal field of reference, that we will enter into the realm of the symbol making function which is our biological heritage and the source of our spiritual capacity as well.

Jung further observed, "Symbols are not allegories and not signs; they are images of contents which for the most part transcend consciousness." [*ibid.*, para. 114.] In other words, the limited range of what we can know is served by directive thinking, and by the concepts we employ as their referents. The most important things, grief, love, yearning, are not accessible to directive thinking in other than the most limited, literal descriptions. When we wish to speak of that of which we cannot speak, the profundities of our own nature, the yearning for the transcendent, the inexplicable, fractious character of this journey, we turn to metaphor and symbol. Accordingly, the erosion of tribal myth and the concomitant decline in our culture's confidence in naming the deepest coursing energies, obliged artists, as they always have, to turn to the resource of symbolism. Whether one agrees with the precepts of one theorist or another or none of them, the modernist climate of opinion, to use W. H. Auden's phrase, perforce became psychological. Not only did we see what I would call "the death of the capital letter," namely, an irreversible erosion of metaphysical confidence by which one can proclaim *Truth*, or *Beauty*, or *Virtue*, or any other compelling idea, but that the ego itself was fractionated into complexes, drives, unconscious motives and agendas, and thereby only approachable by way of the psychological.

Even though the political world split into Marxist and fascist ideologies, and most ego-driven psychologies pursued behavioral modification and pharmacology, artists

and depth psychologists understood that the chief study of our time is the human psyche itself. What we call *surrealism* speaks, after all, of what lies beneath conventional reality and is more really "real." As Jung once observed, all psychologies are really subjective confessions. (He did not add, and so are theologies and political theories and public fashions, but he could have). Or, we may say, *the eye looks both ways*. We see outwardly to the corporeal, sensate world, but we also experience that world as processed from within, according to principles and dynamics which are essentially unconscious and autonomous.

It is no wonder, then, that artists turned to the mysterious operations of the unconscious at the beginning of the last century. They did so on the conscious level because the ideas of Freud, Jung, and other pioneers were beginning to seep into public awareness, but they also explore this inner world because the artist always lives in the limnal space between conscious and unconscious reality, and the erosion of metaphysical confidence urgently drives them to that meeting place anew. Specifically, Andre Breton, studied depth psychology and affirmed that both art and personal life could be informed by and renewed by engaging the unconscious world. The explosion of isms, expressionism, Dadaism, vorticism, and many others represented the presence of the unconscious at work, as well as a deliberate effort to repudiate and go beyond conventional formalism and realism.

For this reason, many artists began soliciting the expression of the unconscious by painting dream images which had come to them, undertaking automatic writing, and what practicing Jung called "active imagination." (Active imagination involves a deliberate attempt to contain the ego, invite responses from the unconscious, and then to respectfully honor those emergent images by painting them, writing them, dancing them, sculpting them).

By the first surrealist exhibit in 1925 it was clear that the movement was charged with exciting energies, aberrant and challenging images, and no central philosophy other than turning to the unconscious for inspiration and considering the inner life just as real as the artifacts by which we presume we construct our conscious life.

While surrealism rose from a highly intellectualized group of thinkers and artists, they brought a new democratic value to art since the unconscious is common to all of us. Indeed, Jung's idea of the archetype is precisely based on its universality, a manifestation of psyche's patterning process in service not to the ego agenda but to the natural wisdom of the human organism.

Partially influenced by the Italian Giorgio de Chirico who placed familiar objects in recognizable but discrepant backgrounds in order to achieve ego dislocation, the implicit questions raised by surrealism are: What is art? How do I make sense of this discrepancy between conventional expectation and altered contexts? Such art deliberately obliges the observer to reconsider his or her sense of conventional reality. (Rene Magritte and Salvador Dali are perhaps best known for this shifting of the ordinary objective world into the strangely unfamiliar).

Perhaps the most telling of the descriptions of this shift may be found in the observation of poet Paul Eluard that, "there is another world, and it is this one." What the

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ego renders as stable, predictable, familiar is in fact its own construction, in service to its understandable need for predictability and order--all in service to the fantasy of control. As we know from quantum physics, even stable matter is energy in constant transformation of itself, and similarly what we learn from the powers of the unconscious is that the known world is continuously being undermined by the unknown world within us. Surrealism, as the name suggests, depicts dramatically charged aspects of the world beneath the ostensibly "realistic" picture the ego constructs. Therefore such art will replicate our encounters with the unconscious. As Jung observed once, encounters with the unconscious are typically felt as defeats for the ego. The gift of surrealism, as well as depth psychology, is to progressively enable a conversation with the unconscious, and with the psychodynamics which generate the reality beneath our presumptive "realities."

When Magritte titles a painting of a pipe, "This is Not a Pipe," he is not only reminding us of the fact that there is a world of daily three dimensional objects, *and* a world in which such objects are reconstrued by a two dimensional "trick of the eye," (*trompe d'oeil*) but even more, that the world we see from the corporeal eye floats atop the essential mysteries of evanescent matter, subjective perception, arbitrary configuration, and assigned, provisional meanings. In short, the world is dematerialized and returned to the province of the human psyche. Whatever may be real or unreal in the world, is always experienced intra-psychically and thereby rendered ours. The convergence of surrealism and depth psychology are, again, both recognitions of the power of the unconscious *and* the insubstantiality of the world we once presumed. If we seem to have lost the comforts of the objective world, the great gift of this vertiginous, profoundly ambiguous engagement with these archaic, elusive energies is that it recovers for us the essential mystery which is our journey. 🌀