

Archetypal Criticism

Archetypal theory and criticism, although often used synonymously with Myth theory and criticism, has a distinct history and process. The term “archetype” can be traced to Plato (arche, “original”; typos, “form”), but the concept gained currency in twentieth-century literary theory and criticism through the work of the Swiss founder of analytical psychology, C. G. Jung (1875-1961). Jung’s *Psychology of the Unconscious* (1916, B. M. Hinkle’s translation of the 1911-12 *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido*) appeared in English one year after publication of the concluding volume with bibliography of the third edition of J. G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (2 vols., 1890, 3d ed., 12 vols., 1911-15). Frazer’s and Jung’s texts formed the basis of two allied but ultimately different courses of influence on literary history.

Jung most frequently used “myth” (or “mythologem”) for the narrative expression, “on the ethnological level” (*Collected* 9, pt. 1: 67), of the “archetypes,”

which he described as patterns of psychic energy originating in the collective unconscious and finding their “most common and most normal” manifestation in dreams (8:287). Thus criticism evolving from his work is more accurately named “archetypal” and is quite distinct from “myth” criticism.

For Jung, “archetype is an explanatory paraphrase of the Platonic eidos” (9, pt. 1: 4), but he distinguishes his concept and use of the term from that of philosophical idealism as being more empirical and less metaphysical, though most of his “empirical” data were dreams. In addition, he modified and extended his concept over the many decades of his professional life, often insisting that “archetype” named a process, a perspective, and not a content, although this flexibility was lost through the codifying, nominalizing tendencies of his followers.

In mid-century, Canadian critic Northrop Frye (1912-91) introduced new distinctions in literary criticism between myth and archetype. For Frye, as William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks put it,

“archetype, borrowed from Jung, means a primordial image, a part of the collective unconscious, the psychic residue of numberless experiences of the same kind, and thus part of the inherited response-pattern of the race” (Literary Criticism 709). Frye frequently acknowledged his debt to Jung, accepted some of Jung’s specifically named archetypes—” persona and anima and counsellor and shadow” —and referred to his theory as Jungian criticism (Anatomy 291), a practice subsequently followed in some hand books of literary terms and histories of literary criticism, including one edited by Frye himself, which obscured crucial differences and contributed to the confusion in terminology reigning today. Frye, however, notably in Anatomy of Criticism, essentially redefined and relocated archetype on grounds that would remove him unequivocally from the ranks of “Jungian” critics by severing the connection between archetype and depth psychology: “This emphasis on impersonal content has been developed by Jung and his school, where the communicability of archetypes is accounted for by a theory of a collective unconscious—an unnecessary hypothesis in literary

criticism, so far as I can judge” (m-12). Frye, then, first misinterprets Jungian theory by insisting on a Lamarckian view of genetic transmission of archetypes, which Jung explicitly rejected, and later settles on a concept of “archetype” as a literary occurrence per se, an exclusively intertextual recurring phenomenon resembling a convention (99).

On a general level, Jung’s and Frye’s theorizations about archetypes, however labeled, overlap, and boundaries are elusive, but in the disciplines of literature the two schools have largely ignored each other’s work. Myth criticism grew in part as a reaction to the formalism of New Criticism, while archetypal criticism based on Jung was never linked with any academic tradition and remained organically bound to its roots in depth psychology: the individual and collective psyche, dreams, and the analytic process. Further, myth critics, aligned with writers in comparative anthropology and philosophy, are said to include Frazer, Jessie Weston, Leslie Fiedler, Ernst Cassirer, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Richard Chase, Joseph Campbell, Philip Wheelwright, and

Francis Fergusson. But Wheelwright, for example, barely mentions Jung (*The Burning Fountain*, 1954), and he, Fergusson, and others often owe more to Sigmund Freud, Ernest Jones, *Oedipus Rex*, and the Oedipus complex than to anything taken from Jung. Indeed, myth criticism seems singularly unaffected by any of the archetypal theorists who have remained faithful to the origins and traditions of depth, especially analytical, psychology—James Hillman, Henri Corbin, Gilbert Durand, Rafael Lopez-Pedraza, Evangelos Christou. This article, then, treats the only form of literary theory and criticism consistent with and derived directly from the psychological principles advanced by Jung. Other forms previously labeled “Jungian” are here subsumed under the term “archetypal” because whatever their immediate specific focus, these forms operate on a set of assumptions derived from Jung and accept the depth-psychological structure posited by Jung. Further, Jung termed his own theory “analytical psychology,” as it is still known especially in Europe, but Jungian thought is more commonly referred to today in all disciplines as “archetypal psychology.”

The first systematic application of Jung's ideas to literature was made in 1934 by Maud Bodkin *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*: "An attempt is here made to bring psychological analysis and reflection to bear upon the imaginative experience communicated by great poetry, and to examine those forms or patterns in which the universal forces of our nature there find objectification" (vii). This book established the priority of interest in the archetypal over the mythological.

The next significant development in archetypal theory that affected literary studies grew out of the effort made by U.S.-born, Zurich-trained analyst James Hillman (b. 1924) "to move beyond clinical inquiry within the consulting room of psychotherapy" to formulate archetypal theory as a multidisciplinary field (*Archetypal 1*). Hillman invokes Henri Corbin (1903-78), French scholar, philosopher, and mystic known for his work on Islam, as the "second father" of archetypal psychology. As Hillman puts it, Corbin's insight that Jung's "mundus archetypalis" is also the "mundus imaginalis" that corresponds to the

Islamic “alam al-mithl” (3) was an early move toward “a reappraisal of psychology itself as an activity of poesis” (24). Hillman also discovers archetypal precursors in Neoplatonism, Heraclitus, Plotinus, Proclus, Marsilio Ficino, and Giambattista Vico. In *Re-Visioning Psychology*, the published text of his 1972 Yale Terry Lectures (the same lecture series Jung gave in 1937), Hillman locates the archetypal neither “in the physiology of the brain, the structure of language, the organization of society, nor the analysis of behavior, but in the processes of imagination” (xi).

Archetypal theory then took shape principally in the multidisciplinary journal refounded by Hillman in 1970 in Zurich, *Spring: An Annual of Archetypal Psychology and Jungian Thought*. According to Hillman, that discourse was anticipated by Evangelos Christou’s *Logos of the Soul* (1963) and extended in religion (David L. Miller’s *New Polytheism*, 1974), philosophy (Edward Casey’s *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study*, 1976), mythology (Rafael Lopez-Pedraza’s *Hermes and His Children*, 1977), psycholinguistics (Paul Kugler’s

Alchemy of Discourse: An Archetypal Approach to Language, 1982), and the theory of analysis (Patricia Berry's *Echo's Subtle Body*, 1982).

These archetype lists, focusing on the imaginal and making central the concept that in English they call "soul," assert their kinship with Semiotics and Structuralism but maintain an insistent focus on psychoid phenomena, which they characterize as meaningful. Their discourse is conducted in poetic language; that is, their notions of "soul-making" come from the Romantics, especially William Blake and John Keats. "By speaking of soul as a primary metaphor, rather than defining soul substantively and attempting to derive its ontological status from empirical demonstration or theological (metaphysical) argument, archetypal psychology recognizes that psychic reality is inextricably involved with rhetoric" (Hillman, *Archetypal* 19).

This burgeoning theoretical movement and the generally unsatisfying nature of so much early "Jungian literary criticism" are both linked to the problematic nature of Jung's own writing on

literature, which comprises a handful of essays: “The Type Problem in Poetry,” “On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry,” “Psychology and Literature,” “Ulysses: A Monologue,” and “Is There a Freudian Type of Poetry?” These essays reveal Jung’s lack of awareness as a reader despite his sense that they “may show how ideas that play a considerable role in my work can be applied to literary material” (Collected 15:109[^]). They also attest to his self-confessed lack of interest in literature: “I feel not naturally drawn to what one calls literature, but I am strangely attracted by genuine fiction, i.e., fantastical invention” (Letters 1:509). This explains his fascination with a text like Rider Haggard’s novel *She: The History of an Adventure* (1886-87), with its unmediated representation of the “anima.” As Jung himself noted: “Literary products of highly dubious merit are often of the greatest interest to the psychologist” (Collected 15:87-88). Jung was also more preoccupied with dreams and fantasies, because he saw them as exclusively (purely) products of the unconscious, in contrast to literature, which he oddly believed, citing Joyce’s *Ulysses* as

an example, was created “in the full light of consciousness” (15:123).

Issues of genre, period, and language were ignored or subjected to gross generalization as Jung searched for universals in texts as disparate as the fourth-century Shepherd of Hermas, the Divine Comedy, Francesco Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), E. T. A. Hoffman’s tales, Pierre Benoit’s *L’Atlantide* (1919-20), and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “*Hiawatha*,” as well as works by Carl Spitteler and William Blake. But the great literary text for Jung’s life and work was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust*, not because of its literary qualities but because he sensed that the drama expressed his own personal myth (Letters 1:309-10). Further, the text offered confirmation (and poetic representation) of the only direct contribution Jung made to literary theory: a distinction between “psychological” and “visionary” texts (Collected 15:89-90). This heuristic distinction was formed, however, solely on psychobiographical grounds: Did the text originate in, and remain principally shaped by, the author’s experience of consciousness and

the personal unconscious or his or her experience at the level of the archetypal collective unconscious? And concomitantly, on which of these levels was the reader affected? Confirmation of this theory was Jung's reading of Faust: part 1 was "psychological"; part 2, "visionary."

Thus Jungian theory provided no clear avenue of access for those outside of psychology, and orthodox Jungians were left with little in the way of models for the psychological analysis of literature. Many fell prey to Jung's idiosyncrasies as a reader, ranging widely and naively over genres, periods, and languages in search of the universal archetypes, while sweeping aside culture and text-specific problems, ignoring their own role in the act of reading and basing critical evaluation solely on a text's contribution to the advancement of the reader's individuation process, a kind of literature-as-therapy standard. This way of proceeding had the effect of putting, and keeping, archetypal criticism on the margins of academic discourse and outside the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines and departments.

Bettina Knapp's 1984 effort at an authoritative demonstration of archetypal literary criticism exemplified this pattern. Her Jungian Approach to Literature attempts to cover the Finnish epic The Kalevala, the Persian Atar's The Conference of the Birds, and texts by Euripides, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Michel de Montaigne, Pierre Corneille, Goethe, Novalis, Rabbi ben Simhah Nachman, and W. B. Yeats. And despite frequently perceptive readings, the work is marred by the characteristic limitless expansionism and psychological utilitarianism of her interpretive scheme.

Given this background, it is not surprising to find in a 1976 essay entitled "Jungian Psychology in Criticism: Theoretical Problems" the statement that "no purely Jungian criticism of literature has yet appeared" (Baird 22). But Jos van Meurs's critically annotated 1988 bibliography, Jungian Literary Criticism, 1920-1980, effectively challenges this claim. Despite his deliberately selective focus on critical works written in English on literary texts that are, for the most part, also written in English, van

Meurs, with the early assistance of John Kidd, has collected 902 entries, of which he identifies slightly over 80 as valid and valuable literary criticism.

While acknowledging the grave weaknesses of much Jungian writing on literature as “unsubtle and rigid application of preconceived psychological notions and schemes” resulting in “particularly ill-judged or distorted readings,” van Meurs still finds that “sensitively, flexibly and cautiously used, Jungian psychological theory may stimulate illuminating literary interpretations” (14-15). The critical annotations are astute and, given their brevity, surprisingly thorough and suggestive. Van Meurs also does a service by resurrecting successful but neglected early studies, such as Elizabeth Drew’s of T. S. Eliot (1949), and discovering value even in reductionist and impressionistic studies, such as June Singer’s of Blake. He notes that Singer’s *Unholy Bible: A Psychological Interpretation of William Blake* (1970), though oversimplified in its psychobiographical approach and its treatment of characters as psychological projections of the author, does make

original use in a literary context of such Jungian techniques of dream interpretation as “amplification” and of such fantasy-evoking procedures as “active imagination.”

Van Meurs’s bibliography conveys the great variety of Jungian writings on literature even within one language, the increasingly recognized potential for further development and use of Jung’s ideas, and the growth in numbers of literary scholars falling under the influence of Jung. A few names form a core of writers in English (including many Canadians)—Martin Bickman, Albert Gelpi, Elliott Gose, Evelyn Hinz, Henry Murray, Barton L. St. Armand, Harold Schechter, and William Stein—though no single figure has attracted the attention of academic literary specialists, and no persistent commonalities fuse into a recognizable school critics who draw on Jung’s theories. To date, the *British Journal of Analytical Psychology* and the retitled *American Spring: A Journal of Archetype and Culture* are the best resources for archetypal criticism of literature and the arts even though only a

small percentage of their published articles treat such topics.

Thus, with the archetypal theorists multiplying across disciplines on the one hand and the clinically practicing followers serving as (generally inadequate) critics on the other, archetypal literary theory and criticism flourished in two independent streams in the 1960s and 1970s. From the theorists, dissertations, articles, and books, often traditionally academic in orientation, appeared; the productions of the practitioners are chronicled and critiqued in van Meurs's bibliography. And the 1980s saw a new, suggestive, and controversial direction in archetypal studies of literature: the feminist. With some of its advocates supported through early publication of their work in the journal *Spring*, feminist archetypal theory and criticism of literature and the arts emerged fullblown in three texts: Annis Pratt's *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (1981), which self-consciously evoked and critiqued Maud Bodkin's 1934 text; Estella Lauter's *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth Century Women* (1984); and Estella Lauter and

Carol Schreier Rupprecht's *Feminist Archetypal Theory: Interdisciplinary Re-Visions of Jungian Thought* (1985). This last text explicitly named the movement and demonstrated its appropriation of archetypal theory for feminist ends in aesthetics, analysis, art, and religion, as well as in literature.

Feminist archetypal theory, proceeding inductively, restored Jung's original emphasis on the fluid, dynamic nature of the archetype, drawing on earlier feminist theory as well as the work of Jungian Erich Neumann to reject absolutist, ahistorical, essentialist, and transcendentalist misinterpretations. Thus "archetype" is recognized as the "tendency to form and reform images in relation to certain kinds of repeated experience," which may vary in individual cultures, authors, and readers (Lauter and Rupprecht 13-14). Considered according to this definition, the concept becomes a useful tool for literary analysis that explores the synthesis of the universal and the particular, seeks to define the parameters of social construction of gender, and attempts to construct theories of

language, of the imaginal, and of meaning that take gender into account.

Ironically, as in the feminist revisioning of explicitly male-biased Jungian theory, the rise in the 1980s of Reader-response theory and criticism and the impetus for canon revision have begun to contribute to a reevaluation of Jung as a source of literary study. New theoretical approaches appear to legitimize orthodox Jungian ways of reading, sanction Jung's range of literary preferences from *She* to *Faust*, and support his highly affective reaction to *Ulysses*, which he himself identified (positively) as a "subjective confession" (15:109n). And new theories increasingly give credence to the requirement, historically asserted by Jungian readers, that each text elicit a personal, affective, and not "merely intellectual" response. Even French feminist Julia Kristeva has been brought to praise a Jungian contribution to feminist discourse on the maternal: recognition that the Catholic church's change of signification in the assumption of the Virgin Mary to include her human body represented a major shift in attitude toward female corporality (113). In addition,

many powerfully heuristic Jungian concepts, such as “synchronicity,” have yet to be tested in literary contexts.

Archetypal criticism, then, construed as that derived from Jung’s theory and practice of archetypal (analytical) psychology, is a fledgling and much misconstrued field of inquiry with significant but still unrealized potential for the study of literature and of aesthetics in general. Two publishing events at the beginning of the 1990s in the United States may signal the coming of age of this kind of archetypal criticism through its convergence with postmodern critical thought, along with a commensurate insistence on its roots in the depth psychology of Jung: the reissue of Morris Philipson’s 1963 *Outline of a Jungian Aesthetic* and the appearance of Karin Barnaby and Pellegrino D’Acerino’s multidisciplinary, multicultural collection of essays, *C. G. Jung and the Humanities: Toward a Hermeneutics of Culture*.