JUNG'S RECOLLECTION OF THE LIFE-WORLD

Roger Brooke

In his autobiography Jung wrote:

The earthly manifestations of "God's world" began with the realm of plants, as a kind of direct communication from it.... Man and the proper animals, on the other hand, were bits of God that had become independent. That was why they could move about on their own and choose their own abodes. Plants were bound for good and ill to their places. They expressed not only the beauty but the thoughts of God's world, with no intent of their own and without deviation. Trees in particular were mysterious and seemed to me direct embodiments of the incomprehensible meaning of life. For that reason the woods were the place I felt closest to the deepest meaning and to its awe-inspiring workings.

This impression was reinforced when I became acquainted with Gothic cathedrals.... What I dimly felt to be my kinship with stone was the divine nature in both, in the dead and the living matter.

(Jung 1962: 67–68)

Jung is describing here the world of his early school years, in which he bore witness to the consecrated nature of Being. Things were alive with meaning; they were occasions for the presencing of the Holy in all its mystery, promise, and multiplicity. But in the following pages Jung goes on to say that this experience had no adequate cultural articulation, and that by his middle teens it had become "a remote and unreal dream" (p.68). I want this phrase to echo through the following pages, as we trace the path by which experience is doubted into subjectivity and illusion, and the real evaporates into dream. Jung understood clearly that, for him, as for us, this path is an educational process that in certain fundamental ways recapitulates the historical drama of western consciousness, particularly as it unfolded in the renaissance. It repeats a process according to which the ensouled presence of the
medieval world receded behind the veil of Judaeo-Christian iconoclasm and Galilean science. The world, thus God-forsaken, became merely a set of mathematical co-ordinates upon a geometric grid. Instead of trusting the *presentational* quiddity of our experience we are heirs to a *representational* reality, a world as illusory as a dream.

The division of the world into objective and subjective categories (scientific and personal, rational and irrational) is also a self-division. For Jung, this self-division was between his so-called No.1 and No.2 personalities. His No.1 personality was rational, scientific, and public; his No.2 personality was intuitive, spiritual, and private – and he also felt it to be more intimately real. The Renaissance division of the world was thus keenly felt by Jung as a fracture within himself, and when he was nearly forty years old he broke down.

Jung's well-documented journey into his Self was an heroic descent into the Christian underworld and the world of the dream. Because Jung's personal journey was of profound historical significance Jung was a cultural hero. He recollected what our culture had forgotten: a perceptual understanding that the world is a temple and the earth is consecrated ground. In order to amplify this theme there are several aims in this chapter. The first is to recall how Jung's personal experience fell across the cultural and epistemological divide that separated the Renaissance and the Enlightenment from the medieval world; second is to show how Jung's theoretical work has tended to remain trapped in the conceptual parameters laid down by Galileo and Descartes; third is to move through Jung's epistemological difficulties to a recollection of his sense of the meaningfulness of the world and, more precisely, of the world that Husserl (1954/70) called the Lebenswelt, or lifeworld. This is a work of phenomenology. It is an attempt to return our thinking about experience to its own vital ground, so that the integrity of that experience is not violated in our psychology. Further than that, the method here is to bring into critical focus the metaphysical assumptions within which Jung theorised, so that we can be better able to bracket those assumptions and return Jungian thinking to its ground. When Jung called his approach phenomenological he did so primarily as part of his critique of Freud. But just as the phenomenologist Jung saw through the rationalism and materialism of his mentor, and was critical of the violence on experience caused by Freudian metaphysics, so we need to follow through this movement of self-reflection and free Jung's thought from those inhibiting assumptions that tend to remain largely unquestioned, as though they simply reflect matters of fact. Therefore, we need to begin by sketching the highlights of the historical drama in which Jung's significance is situated.

**The evaporation of world into dream**

To begin with we can recall that in the first chapter of Genesis only the human being was made in the image of God and that, more generally, the central Jewish project was the withdrawal of the image of God from His participation in things. This project continued into early Christianity. In a particularly telling passage the fourth-century Christian writer, Lactantius, wrote that obviously the things of the world—trees, plants, mountains and rivers—had no divinity, and he continued:

> Therefore, the world is neither God nor living..., and the world which has been made is wholly distinct from Him who made it.... If, therefore, it has been constructed as an abode, it is neither itself God, nor are the elements which are its parts. ... For a house, made for the purpose of being inhabited, has no sensibility by itself and is subject to the master who built or inhabits it.

(Quoted in Roszak 1972: 123)

Lactantius goes on to say that the human being is fundamentally separate from the world and is not a part of nature. Thrown into relief here are the religious roots of functionalism, as things have become “mere” things, emptied of meaning, except for serving human purposes.

The historian, Theodore Roszak (ibid.), has traced this history of western iconoclasm, peaking in the Reformation, and he has noted a fateful irony. The history of the war on idolatry, the worship of dead things, occurred because the Judaeo-Christians alone saw the things of the world as dead and inanimate. As Roszak points out, no pagan ever worshipped “mere things”; things were windows opening upon the sacred. The “idolators” did not worship plants any more than the Christian worships a cross-shaped couple of planks. In other words, the war on idolatry was founded upon a perceptual understanding of the world as already God-forsaken. It was our religious tradition, not the pagan's, that was approaching the theology of the dead God. What was lost in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and especially in the Jung family's Protestantism, was the experience of the sacred within the profane, a sacramental perception of the world, which the child Jung experienced but by his mid-teens could only dream.

Robert Romanyshyn (1984, 1989) and Samuel Edgerton (1975) have discussed in detail the shift in consciousness that occurred with the development of linear perspective in fiveteenth-century Florence. Of the many issues and illustrations discussed by Romanyshyn, I shall present two. The first is the juxtaposition of two pictures of Florence (Figures 1.1 and 1.2), pictures which occur on either side of the renaissance. Figure 1.1, a woodcut from about 1359, is multi-perspectival. On the left-hand side of the picture we see
Figure 1.1 View of Florence, detail from the fresco, “Madonna della Misericordia.” Fourteenth century. Orphanage of the Bigallo, Florence.
Source: Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

Figure 1.2 Map of Florence, copy of the Carta della Catena, 1490. Museo de Firenze com’era, Florence.
Source: Scala/Art Resource, New York.
the city from the left; similarly we can look at the city from the right. Our bodies move around the picture with our eyes. Because the eye does not dominate our embodiment, we are presented with a Florence that appeals to the senses of touch, hearing, and even smell. We have a sense of Florence’s presence and of its bustling movement within its walls. We can also note that value rather than geometric location selects the buildings which are depicted. In Figure 1.2, a “map” drawn in 1480, Florence is presented according to the demands of linear perspective. The eye alone rather than value defines the city’s co-ordinates and determines the placement and measure of things.

The difference between these two presentations of Florence thus reflects more than the development of an artistic technique, as if the movements in art could ever occur in a cultural vacuum. These presentations occur on either side of a transformation in western consciousness, in which, says Romanyshyn, the world became a spectacle for the disincarnate, despotic eye of the spectator. This becomes clearer in Figure 1.3. The visible world is presented in two dimensions upon a screen, and the artist’s task is to record the visible in terms of its graphic co-ordinates. Instead of a world through which we look, we are offered a world at which to look. There is now a distinct boundary between the world as the object of sight and the self as the passive recorder of what is “objectively” seen “outside.”

What was originally a prescription for drawing in linear perspective became a cultural epistemology defining for us the taken-for-granted nature of the “real” and of the self as the corresponding observer. The world as a geometric grid for the artist’s eye became a geometric grid for scientific, and then cultural, understanding.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century Copernicus imagined standing on the sun looking at the earth rotating on its own axis while revolving around the sun. Nearly a hundred years later Galileo referred to Copernicus’s imaginative experiment saying, “I cannot find any bounds for my admiration, how that reason was able . . . to commit such a rape upon the senses” (quoted in Romanyshyn 1982: 20). In this famous sentence Galileo celebrated the triumph of thought over appearance, or more precisely, of mathematical truth over sensuous knowledge. He then proceeded to articulate the significance of this perspective and to set out the epistemological foundations of modern science. I have summarized these (see Edwards 1967: 262–266) as follows:

1. empirical observation forms the primary criterion for truth;
2. only scientific method and discourse are appropriate to the world of things;
3. only the mathematical, physical properties of things are “primary,” i.e., present in the things; all other qualities, meanings, and values are “secondary,” or “subjective;”
4. sensuous experience is illusory.

Therefore, as Husserl (op. cit.) recognized and Romanyshyn put it, Galileo introduced a world in which the “real world” is not the world we experience, and the primary world of experience, the world of Jung’s childhood, is “merely subjective” and illusory. The world of ordinary experience has little more epistemological status than the dream. The irony, systematically demonstrated by Husserl and many other phenomenologists, is that ultimately even the natural scientific world and enterprise are dependent on the
life-world of ordinary experience, but this is forgotten and systematically violated in the assumptions of natural science.  

Galileo’s scientific enterprise assumed that human experience was more than fallible, it was fundamentally illusory. Although Descartes never discussed Galileo, it was this radical erring in human experience that he was compelled to address (Straus 1937/66). In the first of his *Meditations* (Descartes 1641/1931: 144–149), radical doubt in the reliability of experience was the premise Descartes conceded. His genius is in part that he elevated this premise into a methodological principle: instead of trying to get around the issue of doubt, he embraced it as a rigorous epistemological procedure. It was this systematic doubt that led him finally to accept that the only thing he could not doubt was that he was doubting, i.e. thinking. In other words, Descartes’ only certainty was that of his own mind; hence his famous phrase, “cogito ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”). As is common knowledge, his solution to the ontological crisis left in Galileo’s wake was to situate all experience, even the body’s senses, in terms of an organization of interior, mental events. Thus, from a Cartesian perspective, one can no longer be certain that one perceives an actual “something” but only that one has a mental idea of something perceived (ibid.: 149–157). For Descartes, only mathematics and physics have, by the grace of God (literally), access to the “real” world.

### Jung as Heir to Galileo and Descartes

Jung seemed unaware of the historical significance of Descartes, who delineated the ontological categories of the modern world (inner–outer, subject–object, mind–body, etc.). In fact, Jung never discusses Descartes at all. Perhaps because of this he is often submerged in Cartesian philosophy — and, with it, Galilean science. Said in another way, Jung’s thought tends to remain largely undifferentiated from the collective consciousness that is Cartesian metaphysics. This is the heart of Jung’s failure to conduct an adequate phenomenological *epoché*. Instead of seeing through the Cartesian categories as contingent and historical, Jung tends to accept them as ontologically immutable descriptions of the way things are. Thus although Jung repeatedly laments the conceptual limitations of categories such as mind and body, he seldom manages to undercut the thinking that insists upon such terms. For instance, the following passage seems to be central to Jung’s conceptual thinking – and note Jung’s scare quotes around the words “experience” and “real”. Jung writes:

> It is my mind, with its store of images, that gives the world colour and sound; and . . . “experience” is, in its most simple form, an exceedingly complicated structure of mental images. Thus there is in a certain sense nothing that is directly experienced except the mind.

(Jung 1926: 327)

In these lines, not only is psychological life encapsulated within the head, but the world, drained of human habitation, is reduced to the *res extensa* of Descartes, that is, the realm of mathematical and physical co-ordinates. The world which had once made aesthetic and meaningful sense to Jung could no longer be thought on its own terms, and with no epistemologically coherent ground that world became the “remote and unreal dream.”

Jung’s fate has also been our own, and in fact he saw this clearly. In India he recognized that people were living in a world which had been lost to Europeans for three hundred years. Jung writes about his experience in India with an unresolved ambivalence between psychological envy and European, colonial contempt that runs through many of his cultural reflections. But even his European contempt cannot obscure his insight that:

> It is quite possible that India is the real world, and that the white man lives in a madhouse of abstractions. . . . Life in India has not yet withdrawn into the capsule of the head. . . . No wonder the European feels dream like: the complete life of India is something of which he merely dreams.

(Jung 1939: 518)

It seems clear that Jung never managed to think through his Galilean–Cartesian epistemology. On the other hand, he did see it as psychologically alienating and dangerous, the heart of the modern malaise, and he saw the significance of analytical psychology as contributing to the recollection of our original and forgotten world.

### Jung’s recollection of the world

There is a sense in which Jung’s awareness of the historical significance of his work can be traced to reflections which predate even his becoming a psychiatrist, when he was still a medical student in Basel in the 1890s (Jung 1993). But this awareness was more profoundly consolidated when, in 1926, he traveled to east Africa. As he later recalled: “My liberated psychic forces poured blissfully back to the primeval expanses,” and, as that happened, he said, “We found a dawning significance in things” (Jung 1931a: 62).

It is important to realize that the calling for a deepened and awakened consciousness, which Jung called individuation, comes from the world itself. Individuation is not a mental process; it does not transpire within the solitary confinement of the Cartesian head. Nor does it have egoic, or personal, aims.
Individuation is a response to the appeal from the things of the world to be brought into the affirmative light of human consciousness (Brooke 1991: 52–52). “All nature seeks this goal,” says Jung. “Every advance, even the smallest, along the path of conscious realization adds that much to the world” (Jung 1938/54: 96). In other words, that human light called consciousness is the capacity to awaken the world into its own being.

It was especially at the moment of dawn, just as the sun lifted over the horizon, that Jung felt “overwhelmed” with a sense of the sacred, and he recalled, “I drank in this glory with insatiable delight, or rather, in a timeless ecstasy” (Jung 1962: 268). Jung goes on to say that at the moment of dawn the baboons too would sit motionless, facing east, like carved baboons in an Egyptian temple, performing the “gesture of adoration.” He suggests that the world’s revelation as a temple in which the drama of the Egyptian sky-god, Horus, is daily enacted is older than human consciousness. Consciousness has evolved as witness to the endlessly repetitive, sacred drama given at dawn, which is the primordial occasion for the coming of light in the darkness. At night the baboons huddle along the cliffs, hiding in fear of their greatest enemy, the leopard. They do not have the Promethean gift of fire, which could open a field of light and relative safety. The baboons are almost, but not quite yet, human. In their experience of the night’s darkness as a fearful and alien realm, and in their pleasure at the sun’s reassuring return, the baboons share with us a common reality. We can imagine, as Jung does, that over millions of years we humans have emerged out of this common ground. We have the logos of culture and language, which means that this primordial experience can be held in ritual and symbol, and its significance can echo through the transformative occasions of human life. But it is this common sense of the sacred that is the foundation of consciousness and makes it possible. The world as a temple, the earth as consecrated, maternal ground, and the dawn as the triumph of the spirit are primordial realities. It is to this world that we as conscious beings are most fundamentally indebted and called to bear witness. Jung’s recovery of the life-world is thus the remembrance of our consecrated ground, borne in the traditions, rituals, and language of culture.

Finally, a note on the language of analytical psychology. Jung’s language – shadow, anima, soul, spirit, puer, the great mother, trickster, and hero – and his use of alchemical and mythic imagery are explicitly (Jung 1931b) an attempt to speak a psychological language not yet torn from its prerenaissance experiential roots. Analytical psychology, says Jung, “will certainly not be a modern psychology” (ibid.: 344). Most of its language is not a theoretical language, or at least not primarily so, and Jung continually reminds us that even our theoretical formulations are ultimately metaphors whose roots recede into the unknown. Nor is Jung’s language a pretentious attempt to dress up his insights in colorful academic regalia. Rather, the language of analytical psychology is one with cultural-therapeutic intent. If language is, as Heidegger says, “the house of Being,” that is, the templum in which the beings of the world can dwell (Heidegger 1971: 132), then Jung’s language provides a contemporary home for the root metaphors of the human soul. The fact that this language can also be used to trivialize and foreclose experience by giving it silly labels (“That was his puer that felt suicidal”) is true enough, but is a different issue. For Jung personally the language of analytical psychology reconnected him, in his mature years (circa. 1928 onwards), to the child Jung, whose world had not yet fallen into dream.

Notes

1 See the editor’s introduction for a discussion of this term. “Bracketing” in this context does not mean bypassing all assumptions, as though we can achieve an ideal clarity (meaning “clear and distinct ideas”). Indeed, it means critically interrogating some of Jung’s assumptions with the aim of seeing through them as horizons of meaning within which Jung thought. Because we are heirs to the same tradition, it means seeing through those same horizons which have constituted, or formed, our world and the structures through which we understand it.

2 The paradigmatic earth tremors in physics are interesting and have generated a considerable amount of excitement in the Jungian literature. If, however, the excitement is that we can now look to (“the New”) physics to “validate scientifically” Jungian intuitions, then it seems to me thoroughly misplaced. The systemic epistemology that is emerging through physics still has no access to the human questions of meaning and value, which are the defining determinants of the life-world (see Fuller: 1990). Furthermore, trying to integrate conceptually this physics into a psychology of our relatedness is a terribly complicated way of accounting for a relationality that is obvious and available phenomenologically for immediate, concrete description.

3 It is tempting, given our habit of thought, to write “think about” in this context instead of “think.” The unusual form, “to think the world,” rather than “to think about the world,” is a recognition of the primordially presentational (rather than representational) nature of thinking. Thinking reveals the world in the manner of thought, but it is still the world that is brought into being. We do not think “about” the world any more than we see “about” it (see Heidegger 1971).

References

ROGER BROOKE


—— (1931b) “Basic postulates of analytical psychology,” CW 8.

—— (1938/54) “Psychological aspects of the mother archetype,” CW 9, i.


