The hermeneutic background of C. G. Jung

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Abstract: Hermeneutics has been central to the practice of Jung’s psychology from the beginning, although he never fully and consistently developed a hermeneutic method of inquiry and the literature addressing this aspect of his psychology is not extensive. In this paper we undertake a critical re-examination of Jung’s relationship to hermeneutic thought, based on his explicit references to hermeneutics in the Collected Works and his theoretical development of the notion of archetypes. Although Jung did not consistently formulate a hermeneutic approach to inquiry, his theoretical development of archetypes is rich in hermeneutic implications. In particular, his notion of the archetype as such can be understood hermeneutically as a form of non-conceptual background understanding. Some implications of this construal of archetypes for Jungian hermeneutics as a form of inquiry are considered.

Key words: aesthetics, archetype, background understanding, C. G. Jung, hermeneutics, symbolic expression

Hermeneutics is a perennial current in Jung’s psychology, insofar as his inquiries were from the outset directed to issues of meaning and its interpretation. In practice, Jung offered a rich and vivid hermeneutics of the symbol, both as a means of inquiry and an approach to therapy. References to hermeneutics continue in commentaries on Jung’s most recently published works. Sonu Shamdasani (2009), critical historian and principal editor of The Red Book, has described Jung’s interpretive effort in that work as ‘a hermeneutic experiment’ (p. 203). Anne Lammers, co-editor of The Jung-White Letters (Lammers & Cunningham 2007) and author of the most extensive study to date of the Jung-White correspondence, has characterized the theological conflict between Jung and Catholic theologian Victor White in essentially hermeneutic terms (Lammers 1994).

Yet Jung never developed a comprehensive theoretical framework for hermeneutic inquiry. His rich, interpretive approach to symbolic meaning in practice did not culminate in a consistent, theoretically articulated hermeneutic methodology. Rather, Jung’s understanding of method remained so strongly gripped by faith in the natural science framework of his intellectual milieu that he failed to consider the full implications of a hermeneutic approach to inquiry.

1 This paper is based in part on a presentation by William E. Smythe at the Canadian Psychological Association Annual Convention, Winnipeg, MB, June 4, 2010.
It is perhaps for this reason that the literature that takes up the hermeneutic aspect of Jung’s work explicitly and in detail is rather sparse. Over the past three decades, only a handful of publications have sought specifically to relate Jung’s psychology to hermeneutic traditions of scholarship. Some have brought hermeneutic conceptions to bear on understanding the conflicting psychologies of Freud versus Jung (Hogenson 1983; Steele 1982); others have brought out parallels between Jung’s ideas and those of the main hermeneutic philosophers such as Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur (Barnaby & D’Acierno 1990; Beebe 2004; Hewison 1995; Rauhala 1984); still others have explored the relevance of Jung’s psychology of religion to biblical hermeneutics (Dourley 1990; Rollins 1987; Stein 1985). Hermeneutics is also integral to Pietikainen’s (1998, 1999) recasting of Jung’s theory of archetypes in terms of Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms.

While the work of these authors leaves no doubt that Jung’s ideas can be construed hermeneutically, how to ground a hermeneutic approach in the substance of Jung’s theorizing is another matter. Smythe and Chan (2009) made a start in this direction by contrasting Jung’s hermeneutics of symbols with the paradigmatic framework of natural science. In this paper we seek to further elaborate Jung’s hermeneutics with close attention to his theoretical writing. This will involve, not merely superimposing a hermeneutic framework on Jung’s ideas but, rather, exploring the kind of hermeneutics that naturally arises from Jung’s theorizing. One immediate difficulty in this undertaking is that, as alluded to earlier, Jung’s own references to hermeneutics in the Collected Works are few and inconsistent. Hewison (1995) claimed that ‘throughout Jung’s writings there are frequent references to his method being that of hermeneutics’ (p. 384); however, a close examination of Jung’s published corpus does not support this claim, as the General Index of the Collected Works shows that the term is mentioned only seven times in three of its 18 volumes.

Thus, it seems appropriate and timely to undertake a critical re-examination of Jung’s relationship to hermeneutic thought. We begin with a brief overview of the hermeneutic tradition in its historical development. Then we critically examine Jung’s actual references to hermeneutics in the Collected Works. Finally, we consider some hermeneutic implications of Jung’s notion of archetypes and their consequences for understanding Jung’s hermeneutics as a form of inquiry.

The hermeneutic tradition

Generally speaking, hermeneutics is the practice and study of interpreting and understanding. It takes its name from the ancient Greek character Hermes, messenger of the gods, the one who protects thieves, travellers, and merchants, and the historical figure of ancient Egypt, Hermes Trismegistus, who was said to have written Hermetic Texts that contained cryptic messages that needed to be deciphered in order to reveal their meaning.
Hermes, an archetypal figure, disrupts what is fixed and petrified (López-Pedraza 2010) by way of making connections and pilfering meaning ‘he gives us a new view… liberated from the reductionism of preconceived theories’ (pp. 8–9). Rather than providing centre and ground, Hermes is concerned with movement and encourages seeing through a text, idea, or situation. ‘Hermes has no need to fight for his center; he does not have one’ (p. 24); like quicksilver, ‘he eludes reduction by scattering himself all over the place’ (p. 35). Moving along the borderlines, he stimulates the imagination rather than secures a definite meaning.

In the Hebrew tradition reflections on the practice of interpretation and understanding are recorded to have begun as early as 70 C.E. (Scholem 1965). Hermeneutics was concerned with the rules for interpretation and with debate about whether literal and allegorical interpretations distort the author’s original intention (Thiselton 2009). From ancient times until the late Middle Ages, interpreting a text literally and only literally was considered as doing violence to the richness of its intended meaning (Bakan 1958). Literal, moral, allegorical, and eschatological interpretations were seen to form a fabric of meaning for a text.

By the 4th Century theologians began to reflect on the intent of the reader and not just the writer of the text. Rabbinical hermeneutic scholarship recognized how interpretation was not only a matter of understanding the text and mind of the writer, but was also a matter of understanding the situation of the interpreter. Yet, during the Protestant movement of the 16th Century, hermeneutics took on a more stark and severe aspect. The goal of interpretation, at this time, was to ascertain unequivocally the literal sense of the text. Hermeneutic studies developed into the disciplines of philology and exegesis, finding application in theology and jurisprudence (Thiselton 2009).

From ancient times to the 1800s philosophy played a minimal role in defining the concerns of hermeneutic scholarship. It was not until the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher that hermeneutics extended its application to texts in the fields of philosophy and literature. Unlike a biblical hermeneutics, which focused on methods of correct understanding to support interpretations that had already been made, beginning with Schleiermacher (1768–1834) in the early 19th Century, interpretations began to be understood as reflections of historical, psychological and social ways of being in the world (Thiselton 2009).

For Dilthey (1833–1911) hermeneutics shifted even further from what is being said to the person who is saying. Dilthey, even more than Schleiermacher, recognized that hermeneutics is an art, not a science, of understanding. He situated hermeneutics in the Geisteswissenschaften which, in contrast to the natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften), seeks to understand meaningful expressions of life rather than to explain events in terms of causes. Dilthey rejected scientific methods as the way to understand meaningful human expression and, instead, proposed using ordinary experience and self-reflection. The ability to understand a symbol, a text or even a human institution relies
on one’s ability to psychologically access another mind across historical and social differences (Thiselton 2009). Human expressions are understood by way of historical connection from the place in which one exists.

Heidegger (1899–1976) went further yet by proposing that hermeneutics is not a method at all. Understanding for Heidegger is existence itself. Understanding is not the overlay of the psychological, social and historical but the life that we accept as the world. Because our being is constituted by understanding, hermeneutics is ontological and not methodological. It requires, not getting outside of an understanding to understand better, but getting more fully within our understanding in order to fully occupy our hermeneutic situation (Bleicher 1980).

Hermeneutics in Jung’s Collected Works

Jung’s ‘Hermeneutic Method’

Commentators who have attempted to make a case for the hermeneutic nature of Jung’s approach to inquiry (e.g., Barnaby & D’Acierno 1990; Beebe 2004; Clarke 1992; Hewison 1995; Hogenson 1983; Steele 1982) frequently point to a passage in an early essay of Jung’s in which he explicitly characterized his method as ‘hermeneutic’, in contrast to what he considered was Freud’s more ‘semiotic’ approach. The essay, ‘The structure of the unconscious’, was based on a lecture Jung presented at the Zurich School for Analytical Psychology in 1916 that was first published, in French translation, in Archives de Psychologie later that year; it appears as an appendix to Volume 7 of the Collected Works (Jung 1916/1966). Here Jung affirmed the importance of understanding psychological phenomena such as dreams and fantasies hermeneutically as ‘authentic symbols’ rather than merely semiotically as symptoms (para. 491). He then stated that:

The essence of hermeneutics, an art practised in former times, consists in adding further analogies to the one already supplied by the symbol: in the first place subjective analogies produced at random by the patient, then objective analogies provided by the analyst out of his general knowledge. This procedure widens and enriches the initial symbol, and the final outcome is an infinitely complex and variegated picture the elements of which can be reduced to their respective tertia comparationis.

(Jung 1916/1966, para. 493)

Hermeneutic method for Jung, then, meant a personally- and interpersonally-based comparative approach. His work provides endless examples of the accumulation of analogies in the interpretation of various kinds of therapeutic and religious symbols.

This early essay, however, contains the only explicit description of hermeneutics as a method in the entire Collected Works. Furthermore, the passage just quoted was omitted from a later version of the essay and, thereafter, Jung referred to his method as ‘synthetic’, ‘constructive’ or, in one instance, as ‘synthetic-hermeneutic’ (Jung 1935/1966, para. 9) rather than strictly as hermeneutic. Elsewhere in the Collected Works, Jung made a few
scattered references to Biblical hermeneutics (e.g., Jung 1955/1970, para. 474; 1921/1971, para. 22) and to Mercurius (Hermes) as a ‘hermeneut’ (Jung 1943/1967, para. 278) but he never returned to an explicitly hermeneutic characterization of his method of inquiry, even though, as Hewison (1995) has documented, his case histories take on an increasingly ‘hermeneutic’ character over time. Nor is there any reference to the work of hermeneutic philosophers such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey or Heidegger, even though Schleiermacher had a special familial significance for Jung. In a letter to M. Corbin in 1953, Jung described Schleiermacher as ‘one of my spiritual ancestors’, citing the role he had played in the conversion of Jung’s grandfather to Protestantism, he went on to state that ‘The vast, esoteric, and individual spirit of Schleiermacher was part of the intellectual atmosphere of my father’s family’ (Jung 1975, p. 115). Yet there is no mention of Schleiermacher anywhere in the Collected Works. Perhaps, as mentioned earlier, this is because Jung was working in a social-historical context heralding modern, material objectivism.

Jung was nonetheless clearly aware of 19th Century hermeneutics and the Geisteswissenschaften or human science tradition associated with it (Clark 1992). In a late essay on education, Jung (1926/1954) wrote that: ‘Psychology can also claim to be one of the humane sciences, or, as they are called in German, the Geisteswissenschaften’; but, in apparent contradiction (or, at least, qualification) of this claim, he went on to conclude that psychology ‘is today a natural science and its subject-matter is not a mental product but a natural phenomenon, i.e., the psyche’ (para. 165). In his last major work, Mysterium Coniunctionis, he wrote:

The importance of hermeneutics should not be under-estimated: it has a beneficial effect on the psyche by consciously linking the distant past, the ancestral heritage which is still alive in the unconscious, with the present, thus establishing the vitally important connection between a consciousness oriented to the present moment only and the historical psyche which extends over infinitely long periods of time.

(Jung 1955/1970, para. 474)

It is noteworthy that this statement is buried in a lengthy footnote, as if to reinforce the point that, for Jung, hermeneutic conceptions remained very much on the margins.²

Amplification versus conceptualization

Jung’s interpretive approach to fleshing out symbolic parallels by way of analogy is also referred to as the method of amplification. An early example of the approach can be found in his first major interpretive work, Symbols of

² Lengthy footnotes become increasingly common in Jung’s later writings and often contained important details. So it is also possible to interpret his reference to hermeneutics in this passage more as a ‘buried treasure’ than a merely marginal comment.
Transformation (Jung 1912/1967); the following symbolic amplification of the mythologem of trees and crucifixion set the pattern for much of Jung’s later work:

Trees, as is well known, have played a large part in religion and in mythology from the remotest times... Typical of the trees found in myth is the tree of paradise, or tree of life; most people know of the pine-tree of Attis, the tree or trees of Mithras, and the world-ash Yggdrasill of Nordic mythology, and so on. The hanging of Attis, in effigy, on a pine-tree... the hanging of Marsyas, which became a popular theme for art, the hanging of Odin, the Germanic hanging sacrifices and the whole series of hanged gods—all teach us that the hanging of Christ on the Cross in nothing unique in religious mythology, but belongs to the same circle of ideas. In this world of images the Cross is the Tree of Life and at the same time a Tree of Death—a coffin.

(Cora. 349)

Cumulating these various symbolic parallels both ‘widens and enriches the initial symbol’ without reducing it to a concept or a common essence (Jung 1916/1966, para. 493). Amplification of meaning thus differs fundamentally from a conceptual analysis.

In a later work, Jung conveyed a remarkably clear understanding of the non-conceptual character of amplification as an approach to inquiry when he wrote:

The psychologist has to contend with the same difficulties as the mythologist when an exact definition or clear and concise information is demanded of him. The picture is concrete, clear, and subject to no misunderstandings only when it is seen in its habitual context. In this form it tells us everything it contains. But as soon as one tries to abstract the ‘real essence’ of the picture, the whole thing becomes cloudy and indistinct. In order to understand its living function, we must let it remain an organic thing in all its complexity and not try to examine the anatomy of its corpse in the manner of the scientist, or the archaeology of its ruins in the manner of the historian.

(Jung 1940/1969, para. 307)

Yet, in another work that came out only five years later, Jung seemed to drift back into a more conceptual, abstractive mode of thinking. In a supplement to his essay on ‘The Phenomenology of the Spirit in Fairytales’ intended for the ‘technical’ reader, Jung wrote:

For this purpose most of the data require a certain amplification, that is, they need to be clarified, generalized, and approximated to a more or less general concept in accordance with Cardan’s rule of interpretation... By raising the irrational datum... to the level of a general concept we elicit the universal meaning of this motif and encourage the inquiring mind to tackle the problem seriously.

(Jung 1945/1969, para. 436)

3 Jerome Cardan was an Italian Renaissance mathematician, physician, astrologer and gambler whom Jung cited occasionally as an astrological authority. Jung’s statement of Cardan’s rule of interpretation appears in a later work, where he refers to ‘Cardan’s rule that the object of the work of interpretation is to reduce the dream material to its most general principles’ (Jung 1946/1966, para. 486).
This and the previous passage seem curiously antithetical. The first stresses the importance of context for understanding meaning and cautions against attempting to abstract the ‘real essence’ of a mythologem, whereas the second advocates abstracting universal meanings from the ‘irrational datum’ of their concrete instantiation.

What this analysis shows is that Jung’s apparent ambivalence about hermeneutics as a method stems from more than just a reluctance to use the term. As we have just seen, Jung’s own explicit formulations of his method of interpretation are plainly inconsistent, at least with respect to the issue of conceptual abstraction. We believe the reason is that Jung’s interpretive approach could not finally free itself from a naturalistic conception of the psychological and so his methodological formulations continued to cling to a natural science framework that was inconsistent with his actual hermeneutic practices.

Hermeneutics and the Theory of Archetypes

If Jung’s methodological remarks are too sparse and inconsistent to provide a coherent basis for a hermeneutic approach, his theoretical development of archetypes shows more promise, although here too there are inconsistencies. To appreciate fully the hermeneutic implications of archetypes, it is useful to trace Jung’s development of the notion, which emerged in stages following his break with Freud in 1913.

**Jung’s development of archetypes**

In the same 1916 lecture in which Jung first characterized his method as hermeneutic, he also distinguished for the first time between the personal and the impersonal unconscious or collective psyche. The contents of the personal unconscious were said to consist of psychological material derived from individual experience or otherwise capable of becoming conscious, whereas the contents of the collective psyche were described as ‘primordial ideas’ that were inherited and so more profoundly unconscious than the contents of the personal unconscious. In a later addendum to this essay, Jung introduced the term collective unconscious, which he identified as the unconscious part of the collective psyche; its basic contents were now described as ‘primordial images’, which consisted of unconscious collective ideas and instincts. Jung immediately recognized the importance of these primordial contents to the study of religion as they were seen to comprise the most common mythological and religious motifs among the world’s religions (Jung 1916/1966).

Jung first used the term archetype in 1919 in a contribution to a symposium on ‘Instinct and the Unconscious’ published the same year in the British Journal of Psychology (Jung 1919/1969). Here the archetypes were characterized as ‘inborn forms of “intuition” . . . of perception and apprehension’ that constitute
the essential correlates of the instincts (para. 270). The instincts and the archetypes together were seen to comprise the collective unconscious. Jung traced precursors of archetypal thinking in the philosophical writings of Plato, Kant and Schopenhauer, among others, but also noted how archetypal ideas had worn threadbare in this tradition through being assimilated to rational concepts. Perhaps as a corrective to this rationalizing trend, Jung characterized archetypes from the outset both in metaphysical terms, as a priori forms of intuition, and in biological terms, as ‘inherited’ or ‘inborn’ dispositions. The metaphysical part of this formulation owes a great deal to Kant’s categories of understanding, whereas the biological part is derived from 19th Century organic memory theory as Shamdasani (2003) has shown.

Jung’s attempt to merge a form of Kantian metaphysics with biological concepts has attracted much philosophical criticism (Bishop 2000; Hayman 1999; de Voogd, 1984). However, it remains an open question to what extent Jung’s alleged ‘misreadings’ of Kant were actual ‘intentional assimilations’ (Shamdasani 2003, p. 237). Jung sought an account of the forms of the mythic imagination in terms analogous, but not reducible, to Kant’s categories of understanding. As even his philosophical critics acknowledge, Jung’s epistemological framework was more post-Kantian than Kantian (Bishop 2000; de Voogd 1984). In any case, Jung persisted in characterizing the archetypes and the collective unconscious in both metaphysical and biological terms in his subsequent writings. In a 1928 essay, for example, he wrote: ‘The collective unconscious contains the whole spiritual heritage of mankind’s evolution, born anew in the brain structure of every individual’ (Jung 1928/1969, para. 342).

In 1946, Jung presented his final significant reformulation of the idea of archetypes in a paper at the Eranos conference that year (Jung 1947/1969). In this complex and wide-ranging essay, he made an explicit distinction between archetypal expressions (images and ideas) and the archetype as such, which he described as something ‘irrepresentable’ and fundamentally inaccessible to articulate knowledge (para. 417). Adapting a term of Hans Driesch and Eugen Bleuler, he further characterized the archetype as such as a psychoid factor—a kind of intermediary between matter and psyche. Using the analogy of the visual spectrum, Jung likened the scope of consciousness to the range of the visible colours, placing the dynamism of instinct in the ‘infra-red’ region and its meaning and numinosity in the ‘ultra-violet’. The archetype as such was thus located in the ultra-violet end of the spectrum. Moreover, it is by virtue of the psychoid character of the archetype as such that spirit and matter are linked, according to Jung. Consistent with its psychoid character, the archetype as such was said to constitute ‘a background not previously suspected, a true matrix of all conscious phenomena, a preconsciousness and a postconsciousness, a superconsciousness and a subconsciousness’ (para. 356). In his subsequent writing, Jung frequently returned to the portrayal of the archetypal realm as a kind of ‘background’.
Archetypes as background understanding

Jung’s characterization of the archetype as such as ‘background’ has important implications for a hermeneutic understanding of archetypes (Smythe & Chan 2009). The notion of background understanding as an essential precondition of meaningful human activity has figured prominently in hermeneutic philosophy, where it is often construed as pre-understanding, and also in the work of a number of contemporary philosophers from other traditions who have taken their main inspiration from the works of Heidegger and Wittgenstein (Dreyfus 1991; Searle 1983, 1992, 1995; Taylor 1995, 2004).

The basic thesis of the background is that human meaning-making presupposes and rests upon a tacit background of shared practices, capacities, dispositions, and forms of life that constitute a fundamental condition of their intelligibility. Background understanding is constituted by irrevocably contingent features of our embodied being in the world, as embedded in the concrete particulars of our situated and engaged agency. Although we can to a limited degree reflect upon and spell out our background understanding, the background is not, itself, a form of articulation or conceptual structure. It cannot, for instance, consist of a set of rules of interpretation because no such rules can be self-interpreting; background understanding, formulated as rules, would only presuppose yet further background for their interpretation, and so on indefinitely (Searle 1983, 1995, 2002). In the limit, articulation of background understanding breaks down completely, as we have no natural vocabulary to express what is presupposed by most of our concepts (Dreyfus 1991; Searle 1983). Rather than being something described or represented, the background is something enacted or, in Heidegger’s idiom, something we ‘dwell in’ (Dreyfus 1991); as such, it is fundamentally pre-articulate and pre-conceptual or, in Pietikainen’s (1998, 1999) terms, non-discursive and non-cognitive. The background thus constitutes both the basis for and an essential limitation on the articulation of meaning.

Hermeneutically, archetypes can be understood as an aspect of the deep background, in Searle’s (1983, 1992) sense, which includes embodied human capacities that are considered to be ‘common to all normal human beings’ (Searle 1983, pp. 143–144). This Searle distinguished from the local background of specific culturally situated practices that vary from time to time and place to place. As anthropologists have long understood, differences in the local background can lead to profound misunderstandings between cultures, whereas a shared deep ‘plainly human background’ of meaning provides an essential context for intercultural understanding to occur at all (Brown 1991, p. 2). The deep background constitutes what phenomenological psychologist Frederick Wertz (1999) has called the ‘universal horizons of human existence’, which include features such as ‘corporality, practical instrumentality, emotionality, spatiality, discourses, sociality, and temporality’ (p. 144). These broad horizons of meaning function, said Wertz, not as theoretical constructs but, rather,
as intuitively grasped conditions of human life. Archetypes can be construed as an aspect of this deep background of shared horizons of meaning that is keyed specifically to perennial, existential concerns of human life everywhere, including issues of mortality, aggression, affiliation, love, stages of life, cooperation, competition, and communication, to name a few.

Whereas the local background underlies the activities of ‘everyday coping’ in Heidegger’s sense (Dreyfus 1991), the deep archetypal background spontaneously comes to expression when everyday coping is interrupted or suspended, as in dreaming, fantasy, creative imagination and psychopathology, each of which can yield a rich harvest of material for archetypal inquiry. By virtue of its lack of conceptual articulation, the archetypal background finds its most natural expression in the non-conceptual, non-literal modalities of ritual, visual symbolism, metaphor, myth and narrative fiction. What cannot be captured adequately in concepts can nonetheless be hinted at, alluded to, or suggested through exemplifying, symbolizing, myth making, and storytelling. We suggest that what makes a symbol, image or story archetypal is that it is fundamentally impenetrable to articulation; its meaning eludes any attempt at conceptual articulation, although it can be expressed in non-conceptual ways.

One way to understand these non-conceptual modes of archetypal symbolization is in terms of the contrast between the expressive function of symbols and the denotative function of signs. Conceptual language is based on the literal, denotative use of terms, whereby a field of reference is organized according to some system of representation. Symbolic expression, in contrast, involves metaphorically displaying or showing rather than literally describing or defining. Goodman (1976) analysed expression as a species of metaphorical exemplification and gave the following appropriately metaphorical characterization of it:

The expressive symbol, with its metaphorical reach, not only partakes of the greenness of neighboring pastures and the exotic atmospheres of further shores, but often in consequence uncovers unnoticed affinities and antipathies among symbols of its own kind. From the nature of metaphor derives some of the characteristic capacity of expression for suggestive allusion, elusive suggestion, and intrepid transcendence of basic boundaries.

(p. 93)

For Goodman symbols are not metaphors, rather it is the expressive function of symbols that is metaphorical. For example, the term ‘cross’, in one of its more common denotative meanings, refers to an upright post with a transverse bar, as used in antiquity for crucifixion. As a religious symbolic expression, however, the cross expresses spiritual suffering, sacrifice, redemption, and transcendence, among a host of related metaphorically exemplified themes. Whereas the denotation of the symbol is literal and relatively self-contained, its expression is metaphorical and open-ended—a feature that Goodman called repleteness.
Thus, archetypal meanings are not wholly beyond the reach of language and other modes of symbolization but they rest upon expression rather than on denotation. It is in this sense that archetypal meanings are non-conceptual or, in Jung’s terms, ‘irrepresentable’. As we see it, this is the main difference between a hermeneutic amplification of meaning and a conceptual analysis. Whereas conceptual analysis aims at abstracting a common essence of meaning, amplification attempts to exemplify, elaborate and embellish meaning without ever exhausting or explaining it. Moreover, the fact that symbolic expression is an aesthetic category has important implications for an understanding of archetypal inquiry as more of an art form than a natural science, a point to which we return below.

The limits of the archetypal background

Conceived hermeneutically, archetypes represent limits to understanding rather than theoretical or metaphysical constructs. This circumvents the well-known difficulties of construing the archetype as such as a Kantian ‘thing-in-itself’ (Bishop 2000; Hayman 1999; de Voogd 1984). Hence, it is important to appreciate the limits of the archetypal as compared with the conceptual.

First, by virtue of their non-conceptual structure, archetypes lack the most basic logical properties of well-defined concepts. Archetypes as such are known only through their symbolic expressions, by which they are metaphorically exemplified rather than conceptually defined. Hence the usual logical operations on symbols such as enumeration and comparison for sameness and difference are unavailable. Jung’s writing on archetypes tends to focus on a limited collection of mythological motifs such as the shadow, anima/animus, wise old man, mother, maiden, and Self, giving the misleading impression that the archetypes comprise a small and finite set. However, the full range of archetypal meanings is, in principle, unlimited and indeterminate; as Jung (1936/1969) stated, ‘there are as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life’ (para. 99). Moreover, since the archetypes lack the clearly defined boundaries of logical concepts, there is no way to decide conclusively whether any two archetypal expressions are of the ‘same’ or of ‘different’ archetypes. The most that can be said is that specific archetypal expressions bear certain thematic affinities to one another.

A second limitation of archetypes has to do with the question of universals. Jung repeatedly referred to archetypes as universals, consistent with Wertz’s previously quoted remarks about the ‘universal horizons of human existence’. However, the non-conceptual character of the archetypal background is not consistent with truly universal claims. In the philosophical literature, universals are considered to ground relations of qualitative identity and difference among particulars, with which they are paradigmatically contrasted. Whereas particulars or individuals (e.g., a particular chair) are uniquely localizable in space and time, universals (e.g., the property of redness) are general and repeatable across
individuals. The traditional philosophical debates about universals concern their ontological status, specifically, whether they exist as mind-independent entities (realism), as general concepts (conceptualism), or merely as an artefact of the use of general terms in language (nominalism) (MacLeod & Rubenstein 2010). Although universals are not always identified with concepts, they nonetheless require conceptual language for their articulation and in this way contrast sharply with the particularity of the archetypal background as it is embodied and situated in the concrete conditions of human life. Unlike philosophical universals, the deep archetypal background cannot be abstracted from the concrete particularity of embodied human life.

More pertinent to the present discussion are human universals, defined in Brown’s (1991) classic work as traits or collections of traits that are ‘present in all individuals . . . all societies, all cultures, or all languages’ (p. 42). Brown discussed a number of types of universals of interest to the human sciences. The most basic distinction he drew was between etic and emic universals, the former deriving from cross-culturally applicable scientific frameworks, the latter being embedded in the implicit conceptual systems that govern everyday practices in a particular culture. Again, the non-conceptual archetypal background is inconsistent with the conceptual nature of both etic and emic universals. Brown went on to point out that universals could never be demonstrated by merely enumerating instances. Exhaustive enumeration is a practical impossibility in most cases and, moreover, is limited to actual instances of a universal; whereas, fully universal claims (e.g., claims about the human genome) must also entail possible instances, which often requires substantial conceptual and theoretical abstraction. Jung’s hermeneutic approach of accumulating symbolic analogies is therefore a nonstarter for establishing universal claims. This approach also tends to occlude the cultural context of symbols, a point to which we return below.

Finally, the archetypal background does not have a stable and determinate ontology. From the present hermeneutic perspective, it is pointless to speculate about the possible location of the archetype as such in brain processes or in social, cultural or linguistic practices; so long as they remain submerged in the background, archetypes are not yet determined as any of these. Jung’s own abstruse speculations about the ‘psychoid’ nature of the archetype as such illustrate the inherent difficulties in an ontological treatment of archetypes. Jung was seeking middle ground ontology somewhere between psyche and the physical world. On Jung’s view, the archetype as such is an ontologically intermediate entity; on our view, it is ontologically indeterminate.

Archetypal inquiry

We have argued that, notwithstanding Jung’s inconsistent formulation of hermeneutic method in the Collected Works, his theoretical development of archetypes is nonetheless rich in hermeneutic implications. In particular, Jung’s notion of the archetype as such can be understood hermeneutically as a form of
non-conceptual background understanding. This deep archetypal background
is keyed to perennial, existential concerns of human life and, although
impenetrable to conceptual articulation, it can nonetheless be metaphorically
exemplified through expressive symbols. Archetypes, conceived in this way,
do not represent theoretical or metaphysical constructs but, rather, limits to
understanding. As such, they cannot be logically, ontologically or universally
defined and are known only through their symbolic expressions.

In this final section, we consider briefly some implications of our under-
standing of archetypes for psychological inquiry. Given their impenetrability
to articulation, to what extent is critical, empirical inquiry even possible in
the realm of the archetypal? Beebe (2004) raised the question explicitly in
an article entitled ‘Can there be a science of the symbolic?’ In so far as
science aims at framing general theoretical claims and testable hypotheses, its
language rests on unambiguous denotative assertions. Archetypal expressions,
contrast, do not assert anything but, rather, metaphorically exemplify an
ambiguous and indeterminate range of possible meanings. As such, they are
not the kinds of entities that can be taken up into the conceptual frameworks
of nomothetic science; since they make no statements, they lack truth-value or
testable implications. In their expressive function, archetypal symbols are more
the stuff of art than of science.

It could be argued that, while archetypal expressions themselves make no
determinate statements, it is nonetheless possible to make such statements
about them. Thus, while archetypal expressions do not instantiate scientific
claims, one might still aspire to a science that makes claims about archetypal
expressions, which as concrete phenomena, have tangible properties. While
there is some merit in this view, it overlooks the fact that the statements we are
inclined to make about archetypal expressions are, in the main, interpretations;
and interpretation, like expression, is more art than science. In so far as
they open up a range of possible meanings, effective interpretations function
like expressions rather than assertions. What, then, is to prevent archetypal
inquiry from devolving into an unconstrained free-for-all of expression and
interpretation that would seem to forestall any possibility of critical inquiry?

We suggest that critical inquiry is, indeed, possible in a hermeneutics of
archetypes but that it is governed by understanding rather than epistemology.
Two aspects of such understanding are the aesthetic and the moral. Although
archetypal expressions cannot generally be considered works of art, like
expressive art, they convey meanings by showing rather than by describing.
As such, they cannot be evaluated for truth but, rather, are subject to a
more general criterion that Goodman (1978) called ‘rightness of rendering’.
Rightness, according to Goodman, is a matter of ‘fit’ to the whole context in
which a symbol is produced: ‘fit to what is referred to in one way or another,
or to other renderings, or to modes and manners of organization’ (p. 138).
Rightness is relative to tradition and to what is considered acceptable in a
given tradition. Great art, which often seems to fly in the face of traditional
standards, nonetheless recognizes those standards implicitly through violating them, thus paving the way for the ongoing modification of tradition. Goodman thus characterized rightness as ‘ultimate acceptability’ relative to a tradition or system of interpretation.

While we cannot evaluate archetypal symbols or their interpretations for truth-value, we can nonetheless inquire about their fit—to the personal context of the life of an individual or to the collective context of a particular culture. These two contexts of fit—the personal and the collective—constitute the basic evaluative framework for assessing the rightness of archetypal expressions and their interpretations. Beebe (2004) gave a telling example of the first of these contexts in his account of a seminar he presented on the theory of psychological types. Beebe noted how his own theory-laden interpretations of two of his students’ dreams did not resonate well with the students themselves. It eventually became clear that his attempt to assimilate the contents of their dreams to a preconceived theoretical system had prevented him understanding either dream adequately. Only through dialogue with the students in question was a ‘genuine understanding’ of their dreams possible (p. 187). Jung (1926/1954) was well aware of the personal context of such meaning when he wrote:

Each ‘case’ is individual and not derivable from any preconceived formula. Each individual is a new experiment of life in her ever-changing moods, and an attempt at a new solution or new adaptation. We miss the meaning of the individual psyche if we interpret it on the basis of any fixed theory, however fond of it we may be.

(Para. 173)

With respect to the collective or cultural context of fit, Jung’s interpretive approach has engendered considerable criticism. Jung’s comparative approach tends to extract various mythological motifs from their historical embedding in a wide range of diverse cultural and religious traditions, from Egyptian, Greek and Nordic mythology to Christianity, alchemy and yoga, among others. His attempt to draw out parallels in the symbolism of these various traditions often reveals more about the underlying assumptions of Jung’s archetypal psychology than about the meaning of the symbols within the traditions themselves. Pietikainen (1999, pp. 67–68) observed:

The question of the historical or cultural context of each myth is not even touched upon, and in its stead he brings forth parallel after parallel, justifying this ‘comparative approach’ by insisting on the significance of the common psychological theme (archetypal ‘motif’) that connects different myths or certain symbols of these myths . . . . Jung revolves the ‘hermeneutical circle’ as if it were a wheel of fortune: if you win, you win (another telling parallel!), and if you lose (you fail to find a parallel), you can always try again.

Jung’s earlier quoted passage on the mythologem of trees is an example of this interpretive approach and, while it might not be altogether as arbitrary as Pietikainen portrays it, the approach clearly has its limitations. Not only does it fail to establish universals for the reasons we pointed out earlier, it also
The hermeneutic background of C. G. Jung

occludes any meaningful consideration of the historical context of the symbols in question.

The way to achieve better fit to both personal and cultural contexts of meaning is, as Beebe (2004) discovered, through dialogue. The notion of dialogue was not systematically developed in Jung’s theorizing; however, it was clearly central to his therapeutic approach. In an essay on ‘Principles of practical psychotherapy’, Jung (1935/1966) explicitly portrayed psychotherapy as ‘a dialogue or discussion between two persons’ such that they mutually influence each other as psychic systems (para. 1). The dialogical practice of therapy requires the therapist to abandon any preconceptions or pretentions to authoritative knowledge and to yield to an essentially unpredictable outcome. Jung contrasted this open-ended approach with the ‘analytical-reductive’ approach of traditional psychoanalysis. The same dialogical approach is evident as a pedagogical strategy in his seminars on Kundalini Yoga (Jung 1996) and Nietzsche’s Zarathustra (Jung 1998).

Moreover, as Jung’s technique of active imagination illustrates, dialogue can be an intra-personal as well as an inter-personal modality. That is, figures that emerge from the unconscious may be engaged in dialogue as if they were actual, autonomous others, as is so richly illustrated in Jung’s own psychological explorations as documented in The Red Book. Although Jung wrote relatively little about active imagination, he discussed it extensively with his colleagues. Jung (1936/37/1969) described active imagination as ‘a sequence of fantasies produced by deliberate concentration’ such that images arise spontaneously and cannot be influenced (para. 101). The intention, then, is to relate to these fantasies consciously by entering into dialogue with them, not only verbally, but also by painting or sculpting them or, more rarely, through dance. Furthermore, von Franz (1993) wrote of a final phase of active imagination involving ‘ethical decisions’ and ‘moral confrontation’, which is essential because ‘a constructive aspect of the unconscious is only constellated when it is face to face with an individual ego as partner’ (p. 172). In this way, background understanding is integrated into consciousness through the ego’s moral response.

As contemporary dialogical theory makes clear, one can dialogue not only with individuals but, also, with entire cultural traditions and in this context as well, the dialogical dimension of human life is inseparable from its moral dimension (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka 2010). Pietikainen’s (1998, 1999) approach of tracing the cultural transmission of archetypal expressions as collective symbolic forms illustrates this form of collective dialogue. But whether it takes place in the personal context described by Beebe or the collective context advocated by Pietikainen, the mark of true dialogue is openness to mutual influence and the abandonment of any authoritative, foundational stance. Thus, the criterion of fit that we considered earlier should be understood in the sense of mutual fit—fit of archetypal expressions to their personal and cultural contexts and of those contexts to the archetypal expressions that issue from them, in a way that transforms our understanding of both. Our main purpose in this paper has been to foster dialogue between the traditions of Jungian psychology
and modern hermeneutics. The intention is not to appropriate or assimilate the
former to the terms of the latter but rather, in true dialogical fashion, to open
up lines of mutual influence that can potentially transform both.

**Translations of Abstract**

Pour Jung, l’hérméneutique a été centrale dès le début de sa pratique de la psy-
chologie, bien qu’il n’ait jamais pleinement et régulièrement développé une méthode
hérméneutique de recherche, et la littérature concernant cet aspect de sa psychologie n’est
pas extensive. Dans cet article, nous entreprenons un réexamen critique de la relation de
Jung à la pensée hérméneutique, basé sur ses références explicites à l’hérméneutique dans
les *Collected Works* ainsi que sur son développement théorique de la notion d’archétypes.
Bien que Jung n’ait pas formulé clairement une approche hérméneutique de recherche,
son développement de la théorie des archétypes est riche d’implications hérméneutiques.
En particulier, sa notion de l’archétype en tant que tel peut être compris sur le plan
hérméneutique comme une sorte de fondement présupposé non conceptuel. Certaines
implications de cette analyse des archétypes dans l’hérméneutique jungienne comme
forme de recherche sont évaluées.

Von Anfang an bildete die Hermeneutik ein zentrales Element für die Praxis von Jungs
Psychologie, obgleich er nie in vollem Umfang und konsistent eine hermeneutische
Untersuchungsmethode entwickelte. Folglich ist auch die Literatur, die sich mit diesem
Aspekt seiner Psychologie befaßt, nicht eben umfangreich. In diesem Beitrag unternehmen
wir eine kritische Neubewertung von Jungs Beziehung zum hermeneutischen Denken.
Dabei beziehen wir uns auf seine expliziten Verweise auf die Hermeneutik in den *Gesam-
melten Werken* und bei der theoretischen Entwicklung des Begriffes des Archetypischen.
Obwohl Jung keinen konsistenten Ansatz zur hermeneutischen Untersuchung formuliert
hat, ist seine theoretische Entwicklung des Archetypischen reich an hermeneutischen
Implikationen. Im besonderen kann sein Begriff des *Archetypo an* sich hermeneutisch
als eine Form von nichtkonzeptualisiertem Hintergrundverständnis aufgefaßt werden.
Einige Implikationen dieses Konstruktes des Archetypischen für eine jungianische
Hermeneutik als Untersuchungsmethode werden näher betrachtet.

Fin dagli inizi l’ermeneutica è stata centrale per la pratica della psicologia junghiana,
sebbene Jung non sviluppò mai completamente e coerentemente un metodo ermeneutico
di ricerca e la letteratura relativa a questo aspetto della sua psicologia non è ampi.
In questo lavoro iniziamo un riesame del rapporto di Jung con il pensiero ermeneutico
basato sui riferimenti espliciti all’ermeneutica nei *Collected Works* e sullo sviluppo
teorico del concetto di archetipo. Sebbene Jung non formulò un approccio ermeneutico
di ricerca, tuttavia il suo sviluppo teorico della nozione di archetipo è ricco di
implicazioni ermeneutiche. In particolare la sua nozione dell’ *archetypo in quanto tale*
può essere compresa ermeneuticamente come una forma di comprensione da una base
non concettuale. Vengono considerate come una forma di ricerca alcune implicazioni di
questa costruzione degli archetipi.
The hermeneutic background of C. G. Jung

Герменевтика была в центре практики юнгийской психологии изначально, хотя он сам так никогда полностью и последовательно не разрабатывал герменевтический метод исследований, а литература, обращающаяся к этому аспекту его психологии, не столь уж обильна. В той статье мы предприняли попытку критической переоценки отношений Юнга с герменевтической мыслью, базирующуюся на его явных ссылках на герменевтику в «Собрании сочинений» и на его теоретическое развитие понятия архетипов. Хотя Юнг не сформулировал последовательно герменевтического подхода к исследованиям, его теория архетипов богата герменевтическими следствиями. В частности, его понятие «архетипа как такового» можно понимать герменевтически как форму не-концептуального фоноового разума. Рассматриваются некоторые приложения такого толкования архетипов для юнгийской герменевтики как формы исследования.

La Hermenéutica ha sido central para el inicio del conocimiento de la psicología de Jung, aun cuando él nunca desarrollara un método hermenéutico coherente y completo de indagación y la literatura que estudia este aspecto de su psicología no es extensa. En este trabajo emprendemos una revisión critica de la relación de Jung con el pensamiento hermenéutico, basado en sus referencias explícitas a la hermenéutica en sus Obras Completas y el desarrollo teórico de la noción de arquetipos. Aunque Jung no formulara concistente un enfoque hermenéutico a la investigación, su desarrollo teórico de arquetipos es rico en implicaciones hermenéuticas. En particular, en su noción del ‘arquetipo per se’, el mismo puede ser comprendido hermenéuticamente como el trasfondo de una forma de comprensión no-conceptual. Se consideran algunas implicaciones de este constructo de arquetipos como una forma de indagación para la hermenéutica Jungiana.

References

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