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# PSYCHE AND THE UNCONSCIOUS IN SYSTEMS THEORY

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*HJEAS*

The existence of the unconscious has always been one of the more controversial tenets of psychoanalysis, and is still treated with suspicion in some areas of psychology and, wider, the humanist inquiry. Psychoanalysis is still often perceived as a kind of cult and quasi-religion rather than a legitimate scholarly discipline, and the notion of the unconscious in particular is regarded more as an article of faith than as an empirical fact that can be studied with scientific rigor.

In my view the main reason for this scepticism is that the particular contentions of psychoanalysis are mostly based on rather loose interpretations of certain manifestations of psychological behaviour such as dreams, fantasies, hallucinations and the symbolic forms found in art and religion, rather than on a solid theoretical framework existing independently from that evidence. In other words, classical psychoanalysis, either of the Freudian or the Jungian variety, is an inductive discipline that infers its statements from often elusive and obscure psychological evidence; and as a result its contentions about the nature of the psyche often lack persuasion, especially if the same psychological evidence can be reasonably interpreted without recourse to such "vague" notions as the unconscious.

## Systems Theory

In the present paper I offer an introduction to the theoretical model of the psyche built on the tenets of systems theory as formulated by Marian Mazur, Ludvig von Bertalanffy, and Ervin Laszlo. In particular I will build on Mazur's concept of the autonomous system provided with a homeostat designed to withstand and counteract external pressures threatening its functional equilibrium (86-113). In brief, the theory of autonomous systems describes how systems such as living organisms, including humans, maintain their internal equilibrium by resisting changes in the environment that pose a potential threat to their existence and successful adaptation.

Self-regulation of the system as defined above can also be referred to the literary process, understood here as the coding of information by authors in linguistic texts, oral or written (Sadowski, "Interpretation" 78-82), in the sense that the information coded in literary texts should be relevant from the point of view of human adaptation to the natural and social environments (Carroll 4-8). This would imply that despite the great variety of literary forms, themes, genres and styles literature is not about anything and everything, but that it expresses contents that are important for human collective and individual self-regulation, and as such these contents

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fall into limited and to a large extent predictable functional types and categories. Which is another way of saying that literature as part of culture must have a homeostatic, adaptive function, in that it must help humans maintain functional equilibrium with regard to information about themselves, about other people, about the society, humanity in the general sense, and about the non-human, natural and cosmic environment (Sadowski, "What is Literature?").

## **Human Phylogenesis: Natural Environment**

In view of the above assumptions regarding human adaptation let me now propose a reconstruction of the possible structure and functional complexes of the psyche as an instrument of exchanging information with the environment. For reasons of self-regulation psyche should register traces of stimuli of high adaptive value, associated homeostatically with relevant emotions to prompt appropriate reactions. Generally speaking, situations relevant to adaptation are of two kinds: those involving emergency and threat and causing a disturbance of functional equilibrium, and those involving satisfaction of needs and relaxation that characterize the restoration of functional equilibrium. Considering certain typical and most universal features of the natural environment in which humans have evolved in the course of their phylogenetic history (Barrow 26-67), it is possible to talk about the following experiential complexes of the psyche, together with the associated emotions.

1) The observable elements of the cosmic environment, including the sky with the stars and the planets, the sun and the moon as the main heavenly bodies whose perceptible revolutions determine the cyclical passage of time. The regularity and predictability of the movements of the heavenly bodies will tend to inspire feelings of peace, tranquility, awe, and safety in the recognition of the dependence of processes of life on earth on the grand rhythms of the cosmos. On the other hand, astronomical irregularities and sporadic disturbances such as solar and lunar eclipses, rare conjunctions of planets, appearances of comets and so on will be expected to inspire negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, and panic. Due to the extremely long exposure of humans to the cosmic environment in terms of evolutionary time, both the positive and negative responses to relevant astronomical phenomena will be expected to feature prominently in the earliest forms of spiritual culture, as exemplified by the widely-attested cosmogonic myths and religious cosmologies of early religions.

2) The alternation of day and night and of the seasons determined by the daily and yearly movements of the sun and the moon. Positive responses in the form of feelings of security, relaxation, and general optimism will be connected with the exploration of natural environment and with normal life activity, especially the search for food, at daylight and during the warm seasons. On the other hand, night-time and the dark, cold seasons will be characterized by reduced activity (sleep), shortage of food, lack of warmth, danger from predators, all accompanied by a sense of

insecurity and fear. Both kinds of emotive responses to the temporal features of the environment, including especially the associations of daylight with "good" and of darkness with "evil," will be present in early myths, nature poetry, the pastoral genre, and romantic fiction.

3) Atmospheric phenomena related to the daily and seasonal alternations. Congenial atmospheric features such as moderate and soothing winds, warm temperature, gentle and refreshing rain, quiet and clear sky and so on will produce positive responses of peace, relaxation, and security, while elements such as strong winds (or still air in hot climates), extremities of temperature, excessive rain, snow, hail, fog, thunder storms with lightning, droughts, bush fires and so on, as dangerous to safety and survival will meet with negative emotional responses. One will accordingly expect these important atmospheric elements to be prominent in early mythical accounts in the form of deified personifications, of both negative and positive kinds, with the relevant atmospheric elements as their personal attributes (Zephyr, Zeus with a thunderbolt, etc.).

4) The elements and features of the natural terrain. Accordingly, feelings of safety and relaxation will be enhanced by such features as level ground with undulations for good views and rapid orientation, grassy meadows, small and quiet rivers and lakes, groves offering shade and shelter, and so on. On the other hand, such features as steep and rocky mountains, dry and barren deserts, thick jungles and deep forests, fast-flowing and turbulent rivers, swamps and marshes, subterranean and mountain labyrinthine caves, floods and earthquakes—generally, elements and phenomena dangerous and unfriendly to human life and habitation—will be accompanied by feelings of fear, insecurity, and vital threat. One will accordingly expect the positive features of the terrain to be found in such genres as the myth of earthly paradise or the pastoral, while the negative features will dominate the end-of-the-world mythical narratives, "scary" fairy tales, and romantic and Gothic fiction.

5) The vegetable world, in which green, lush vegetation promising abundant food and shelter will naturally be associated with positive feelings of safety and satisfaction, while lack of green vegetation in winter, or in cold and hot climates, and barren, lifeless landscapes will be consequently accompanied by negative responses. The two types of landscape will be used respectively as settings in the accounts describing the Garden of Eden as the optimal environment for human habitation and in the narratives illustrating the myth of the Waste Land.

6) The animal world, in which the positive responses will be related to harmless species used as sources of food (especially the hoofed animals, small mammals, birds, and small fish), while the negative emotions (fear, repulsion, aggression) will be directed at potential predators such as large cats and the poisonous and noxious species such as reptiles and insects. Personified representations of these animals in both positive and negative aspects will feature dominantly in early mythical accounts and in zoomorphic religious symbolism (e. g., the serpent and the lamb in Christian imagery).

7) Manifold environmental sensory stimuli including the auditory, visual, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory sensations. On the side of positive stimuli, producing feelings of relaxation, relief, security, and peace one can list such elements as bright daylight, fresh greenness, blue colour of clear sky, quiet and soothing sound of rustling wind, the singing of birds, sweet smells and tastes, warm and soft touch, and so on. Analogously, the negative emotional responses including feelings of fear, anxiety, and repulsion will be associated with darkness; dark or bright colours, especially red (blood!); low, thundering noises or high-pitched, piercing sounds; nauseating smell of putrefaction; sour and bitter tastes; cold and slimy (non-human) touch, and so on.

Considering the age and universality of the above environmental features, it is possible to say that innate human responses to them should constitute the oldest, most archaic registers in the brain, inherited by our species from pre-human, animal ancestors.

### **Human Phylogenesis: Social Environment**

From the same phylogenetic perspective one can also argue that the growing complication and intensification of social life, especially within the basic family, so vital for a harmonious development of personality, has likewise occurred over a sufficiently long stretch of evolutionary time to bring about an acquisition of appropriate and adaptively important permanent registers in the psyche through natural selection. These registers should correspond to human figures in their most typical socio-biological roles, including first of all the mother, the father, the sexual partner, the friend (member of the same group), and the enemy (member of another group). Because of the importance of the right kind of social responses for survival and harmonious existence of an individual within the group, one would expect the psyche to contain standardized images of these human types and their roles, coupled homeostatically with appropriate emotions. Such innate psychic representations will underlie and predetermine actual responses to fellow humans in typical life situations, beginning with the family, allowing one to take full adaptive advantage of reciprocal help and protection offered by living in a group. By a recourse to available knowledge about the basic structure of the family and social life, it is possible to talk about at least the following anthropomorphic complexes of the psyche.

1) The mother as the child-bearer, nourisher and protector of the infants, responsible for raising children, preparing food, and for the emotional stability of the family unit. The mother figure will normally evoke highly positive emotional responses associated with safety, protection, and satisfaction of basic needs, especially in children, while the negative responses will be caused by maternal overprotectiveness and domineering attitude towards adolescents or the sexual partner, as well as by the unloving, "selfish" or sexually promiscuous mother causing emotional instability and dysfunctions within the family.



2) The father as the chief provider of food for the family, mainly through hunting, and as the family's main link with the outside social world with its hierarchy and power structure. The "good" father figure will represent responsibility and reliability in providing secure and positive relations between the family and the wider social environment, as well as respect for law and rules of social conduct, especially for adolescents. The "bad" father figure, on the other hand, will have a destabilizing effect on the family through oppressive authoritarianism, or else through irresponsible, unsupportive behaviour.

3) The sexual partner (in the heterosexual sense) will evoke highly positive responses associated with full emotional and sexual fulfillment (love as "perfect homeostasis"), or highly negative responses connected with the lack of the above and the accompanying feeling of emotional insecurity and disharmony (sexual jealousy and hatred as "homeostatic hell").

4) The social partner, whose "positive" variant will include the figure of the friend, usually a member of the same group (other than the nearest family), to whom one is linked by reciprocal help, mutual trust and protection. The "negative" variant of the social partner will be represented correspondingly by the figure of the enemy, usually a member of another social, ethnic, or racial group, who will evoke responses characterized by distrust, indifference, or aggression.

It is also possible to talk about the more specific configurations between the main human types, likewise significant from the point of view of survival and self-regulation within the group: configurations such as mother-son, mother-daughter, brother-sister, father-son and so on. Such configurations and the accompanying emotions ensuring the most advantageous social relations should be present in the psyche as an innate foundation of family and social life, and can consequently be expected to underlie the depiction of interpersonal relations in literary texts.

Since the benefits of living in a group in a highly competitive and potentially life-threatening natural environment are enormous in comparison to solitary life, it is clear that the above-outlined human representations in their typical socio-biological roles should be permanently deposited in the psyche as a result of natural selection. The inherited associations of generalized human types with the right kind of emotional responses will enable the individual to react adequately to certain typical social situations involving reciprocal help and protection, cooperation with fellow members of the group, obedience to social superiors, sexual fidelity, as well as the necessary aggression towards the enemy. Individuals provided by natural selection with this "social instinct" will be favoured and reciprocally protected by other members of the group, while individuals without the right social responses will be ostracized and alienated as a threat to the group's stability.

A good example of social instinct from an early stage of personal development is the innate mother-image, enabling a new-born child to take full advantage of the mother's protective and nourishing behaviour, and in effect to stand a better chance of survival in frequent situations of sibling

rivalry. In a similar way, a highly positive, spontaneous (that is, inborn) attitude of love and protection of the mother towards the weak, helpless but demanding child will enable her to perform her maternal duties to the child's advantage, even despite the extremely tiring and often highly irritating behaviour of the infant.

## The Conscious Psyche

The model of the autonomous system with its mechanism of self-regulation can generate further useful statements concerning the functioning of the psyche. For example, if the psyche is to react in its interest, it must activate its registers appropriately to situation, that is, selectively. The correlative power needed to activate these registers has to obey the laws of physics, here the preservation of energy, which means that if a certain amount of energy is in one place, it cannot at the same time be in another. Considering this let me introduce the following definitions:

- the area in the psyche activated by the correlative power will be called *consciousness*, and consequently
- the area in the psyche remaining beyond the spread of the correlative power will be called *the unconscious*;
- for consciousness and the unconscious to form two distinct psychic components they must be related to one another through *negative feedback*, which will ensure a state of tension and a tendency towards maintaining a dynamic equilibrium within the psyche.

Thus defined consciousness will contain information needed for the current self-regulation of the system, while information not needed in normal circumstances of relative functional equilibrium will be relegated beyond the conscious psyche into the "mute" area of the unconscious. The reason why the psyche can and indeed must register stimuli not needed for current adaptation is that information useless at one time can prove crucial when the external circumstances suddenly change. A system with latent (that is, unconscious) information of a particular kind will react to its greater advantage when a change of situation demands the utilization of that information. Especially in times of emergency a quick adaptive reaction based on normally unconscious registers can often decide about survival, and so more flexible organisms, provided by evolution with a wide range of possible responses, will regulate their behaviour and satisfy their needs with greater success. The psyche divided into consciousness and the unconscious offers therefore greater adaptive flexibility, and for this reason must have been favoured by natural selection in early humans.

What about the specific contents and structure of consciousness and the unconscious? Let me start with the former. If by definition the conscious area of the psyche is active in normal adaptive situations it could be inferred that it contains registers specific to the system, that is, information that distinguishes the system from other systems by defining what is individual and unique about it. To be truly autonomous the system must possess properties and needs specific to itself, and must be able to

choose reactions that satisfy these needs to its best advantage. Let me therefore introduce another definition whereby a part of consciousness containing registers most specific to the system will be called *Ego*. Accordingly, *Ego* will determine the properties of the system as distinct from the properties of other systems: that is, *Ego* will define the system's self-identity.

But consciousness not only determines the system's individual character; it first of all participates in interactions with the outside world. Let me therefore introduce another definition: an element of consciousness containing registers that enable the system to adapt to the environment, in the case of humans mainly to the social environment, will be called *Persona*. In other words, *Persona* is the main instrument of psychic adaptation to the socio-cultural world. Unlike *Ego* which includes the most specific and individual information about the system, independent from the environment, *Persona* contains information pertaining to the various roles played by an individual within the group: the family, the ethnic group, professional groups and so on. As different and often mutually opposed components of the conscious psyche, *Ego* and *Persona* will be related to one another through the mechanism of negative feedback.

*Persona* (or *Personas* as multiple roles) thus determines the nature of relations between an individual and the group, between the private and the public spheres, including the socio-cultural norms that hold the group together. *Persona* is a person's only conscious connection with collective norms and demands, and as such is not part of one's individual character, and it can even effectively hide one's real character as defined by *Ego*. This is because living in a group requires playing many different roles, while there can be only one individual *Ego*. The presence of *Persona*(s) in consciousness explains why many people with different and unrepeatable psychic characteristics (*Egos*) can join the same profession, can communicate and understand one another in a defined social context, despite differences in individual personalities. Since the two components of the conscious psyche are of necessity always there, coupled negatively with one another to ensure a state of near-balance between the system's individual needs and the collective norms and demands, it can be argued that they will likewise feature prominently in literary texts describing the relations between the individual and the group. Indeed, from the earliest mythical narratives, ancient tragedy, through the heroic epic, early modern drama and novel to contemporary fiction, the plots universally focus on tensions and difficulties of social adaptation, on the relations between individual needs and aspirations and the collective demands.

## The Unconscious Psyche

Let me now turn to the possible content and structure of the unconscious as the area of the psyche remaining normally outside the spread of correlative power. If consciousness contains for the most part information needed for socio-cultural adaptation, consequently the



unconscious should include the necessary information about the wider, natural and cosmic environment, as discussed earlier. That is to say, while consciousness, especially in *Persona*, consists mostly of information acquired during one's lifetime, the unconscious must rely on inherited responses to certain environmental stimuli that evolution deemed necessary to be retained permanently in our brains. In addition to the relevant facts about the natural environment, the unconscious should include certain ready-made responses to human types in their standard socio-biological roles, as discussed previously. This is probably as much as can be reasonably claimed for the unconscious as the repository of phylogenetic memory in humans, if we allow for the mechanism of natural selection and homeostatic self-regulation of living systems in the environment.

Let me sum up the above by introducing a definition whereby the area of the unconscious containing inborn registers of information will be called *the collective unconscious*. The term is borrowed from Carl Gustav Jung and is used here similarly as referring to "the psychic life of our ancestors right back to the earliest beginnings," and to "the sum total of the instincts" (Jung 226-27). The adjective "collective" means that inborn phylogenetic experience is common to all people as members of the same species, regardless of racial, cultural, regional, linguistic or psychological differences.

However, I argued earlier that the psyche should also register stimuli acquired during one's lifetime but not needed in normal situations characterized by relative functional equilibrium. These non-essential, unneeded, or disturbing stimuli are relegated beyond the conscious mind into the unconscious, to be utilized should the adaptive context demand it. To distinguish this kind of stimuli from those constituting the collective unconscious, let me propose another definition: the area of the unconscious containing ontogenetically acquired registers of information will be called *the individual unconscious*.

The individual unconscious will include first of all traces of stimuli registered by the sensory organs (vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch) that were too weak to be noticed consciously but which nonetheless left their trace in the psyche (sub-threshold stimuli). The individual unconscious should also deposit traces of strong stimuli originally registered by consciousness but subsequently repressed as either useless or else traumatic, that is, causing a serious disturbance of the psychic equilibrium. To this last category will belong the extremely powerful experiences related to one's biological birth (the perinatal memory) as described by Stanislav Grof and his research on LSD (126-74). As is understandable from the point of view of psychic growth of the new-born infant, these highly traumatic experiences are removed from consciousness after birth due to their potentially disturbing impact on psychic development and conscious adaptation to life.

Among the registers of the individual unconscious acquired in later ontogenetic phases are also elements of *Persona* rejected in the socio-cultural environment: anti-social, aggressive behaviour relegated from consciousness in the process of socialization and adaptation to collective

norms. One can even postulate that the elements of socially unacceptable behaviour will form a separate complex of registers and the associated negative emotions in the unconscious, a kind of Anti-Persona (the Jungian "shadow"). Anti-Persona will continue to grow during one's lifetime as a result of further repressions of socially undesirable behaviour, posing a constant threat to Persona as its negative double (*Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*). When coupled positively with Ego (permission, endorsement) Anti-Persona can give rise to violent, selfish, anti-social behaviour, on both individual and collective levels. Normally, however, the negative feedback between Ego and Anti-Persona (self-control, repression) will ensure that these disruptive and destructive tendencies are suppressed and held in check by the psyche. In literary narratives the positive feedback between Ego and Anti-Persona will produce "bad" and "evil" characters, while the negative feedback will generate "good" and "positive" heroes.

It can also be postulated that just as elements of the natural and social environments do not appear in isolation but represent integrated and interrelated systems, so the corresponding registers of the unconscious are likely to form interconnected functional wholes. It is logical to assume that rather than having different registers randomly distributed in the brain we are dealing with interconnected clusters grouped around certain adaptively important images or themes. These inherited unconscious clusters will be supplemented continuously by new stimuli of the same kind received by the system during its lifetime. For instance, all erotic experiences of one's lifetime will form around a single thematic cluster ultimately rooted in the inherited unconscious image of the sexual partner and the mother/father figure. Each individual psyche as a whole should thus contain many constellations of thematically-related registers in the collective unconscious, associated with relevant emotions and additionally linked with similar experiences deposited in the individual unconscious, and ultimately connected with the corresponding conscious memories. Those thematically-related and emotionally charged inherited clusters of registers deposited in the collective unconscious will be called *archetypes*, much in the understanding of Jung's "primordial images" (112).

Chronologically speaking, archetypes are the most archaic and deepest-lying registers of the psyche, inherited in the structure of the brain and common to all members of the human species. In their entirety archetypes form a wide-ranging and interrelated complex psychic reflection of the outside world in the form of a distilled and condensed residua of countless individual experiences of a particular type, gathered by our species in the process of adaptation to the environment. The ultimate extent of information about the world deposited in the collective unconscious is impossible to ascertain, but the sheer number of correlative elements (neurons) in the brain (c. 100 billion) and the synaptic connections can offer some estimate about the order of magnitude in the amount of facts about the world that we all carry around within us.

The systems model of the psyche makes it clear that consciousness represents only a small part of human psychic activity, and that an enormous repository of both ontogenetic and phylogenetic experience

normally lies hidden from conscious penetration. It would follow that conscious memory and consciousness-based mental faculties such as rational, discursive thinking and the verbal language offer only a fragmentary view of one's life history and the particular psychological and existential problems posed by it, to say nothing of the genetic memory and our evolutionary experience. Due to the necessary negative feedback (repression) between consciousness and the unconscious, most of the unconscious material will either be totally inaccessible to conscious penetration or will affect the conscious mind only indirectly, through dreams, moods, inklings, or elusive experiences of the *déjà-vu* type. By and large, however, the unconscious will always represent the unknown, the inaccessible, the mysterious and the magical.

Once the psyche as the source of all human creativity and imagination, including that expressed in literary texts, is considered in its adaptive function as determined by evolution, literature appears first of all as a psychic activity rather than a play of "signifiers" and "discourses" perceived apart from the human mind and experience that generate them. With its "freedom" of expression significantly constrained both by psychological and evolutionary factors, literature—if it is to participate in human self-regulation within the environment—appears to include a repertoire of forms and contents largely determined both by the character of environment in which humans have lived for hundreds of thousands of years and by our biological and genetic makeup resulting from adaptation to that environment.

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