Altering with the Spirit of the Times: The Limitations of Jungian Literary Criticism

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Despite numerous apparent limitations compiled by critics in recent years, Jungian theory remains a valuable tool for the student of comparative literature. By applying to literature Jung's theories of the archetypes of the collective unconscious, the compensatory nature of the psyche, personality types, and the like, career Jungian literary critics like Bettina Knapp and Edward Eddinger have successfully articulated age- old problems in comparative studies and have even posed solutions where critics from other schools have been mute. Beyond offering alternative interpretations for political and gendered readings of texts, Jungian critics have endeavored to explain parallel independent development of the same story in two different culture worlds; the connections between myth and dream; the compensatory relationship of the artist to his culture; complex relationships between literary characters; the mysterious phenomenon of an artist's inspiration and choice of genre; the texts, images, & concepts of other cultures and times; even the relationship between traditional tales & contemporary social and psychological problems. As Jung once said, "Eternal truth needs a human language that alters with the spirit of the times." Jungian critical theory continues to be such a language—human and imperfect, but also adaptable and evolving.

Nevertheless, comparatists who wish to make use of Jungian theory would be wise to be mindful of what the critics are saying, for some of their arguments have merit and no theory is without its limitations. Regarding Jungian literary criticism, some critics have questioned the very existence of a Jungian school, not to mention the way Jungian critics apply psychological theory to works of literature. Also in question has been the timeless and universal context in which Jungians analyze literary works and their tendency to apply Jung to Eastern texts and concepts. Finally, critics have recently been most vocal regarding the gender limitations of Jung's anima theory.

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Jung and his followers originally studied literature to explain phenomena of the psyche and not to practice literary criticism. Jung himself did not want to be a critic or a writer, nor did he ever have the intention of consciously founding a particular school of criticism. Literature was primarily a source of corroborating archetypal images and the dynamics of those images. For example, in explaining the concept of the anima, Jungian disciple M.L. Von Franz used Homer's sirens, Faust's Helen, and Dante's Beatrice to explain the development of the anima in her male patients' dreams (193). Jungian readings of myths likewise fail to treat the myth as a literary creation and usually gloss over the literary sources of the myth. A Jungian reading of Ovid's Venus and Adonis, for example, uses Adonis as an illustration of the puer aeternus (eternal child) archetype and the inability of the young male inflated with this archetype to escape the suffocating Great Mother archetype: "To live as a puer, the way Adonis does, is to live as a psychological infant and, ultimately, as a fetus. The life of a puer in myth invariably ends in premature death, which psychologically means the death of the ego and a return to the womblike unconscious" (Segal 106). Though the Jungian critic might mention the specific sources of the myth in Ovid and Apollodorus, these authors are mentioned in passing and the myth is treated as a general example of a psychological theory rather than as a specific literary text. Even James Hillman, the post-Jungian founder of Archetypal Psychology who criticizes Jungians for reducing the gods to abstract psychological concepts, insists on seeing the gods as aspects of the psyche and not as literary creations: "As a corrective [to Jungian abstractionism], Hillman and his followers advocate that psychology be viewed as irreducibly mythological. Myth is still to be interpreted psychologically, but psychology itself is to be interpreted mythologically" (Segal 97). Hillman's uses for literary texts are also for therapeutic ends. The archetypal therapist uses myth and fairy stories to help patients displace their problems onto imaginary characters and events and hopes to lift his patients out of their perception of themselves as objects for the doctor's cold, detached analysis. Hillman also suggests using myth to break the patient out of the ego bound, heroic and "monotheistic" ego perspective by having patients retell fairy stories from the perspective of "secondary" characters; this allows them to break free of the ego's formulations and neuroses and develop a "polytheistic" perspective on what seemed unsolvable problems from the ego's point of view. But playing with narrative perspective for therapeutic ends is as close as Hillman gets to viewing myths and tales as literary texts.

Unlike the Jungian therapists, literary critics have for their primary subject the poem or story and not the analysis and treatment of a patient. As Jung himself noted, depth psychologists have fundamentally different interests from literary critics; the former reads literature to understand the psyche, not to determine its literary value" (In Jacoby 72). Some literary critics object to the intrusion of Jungian psychology into their already established discipline. Although they acknowledge the usefulness of Jungian psychology in honoring and articulating the impulses that underlie an artist's

inspiration and shape his vision, they deny the existence of a Jungian school of criticism, seeing Jung as an "amorphous presence" in criticism and objecting to applying his theories to the texts themselves (Baird 42). One objection to such an application is that there is no literary critical language paralleling Jung's; hence, literary criticism is misread as psychoanalysis (43). Another objection holds that Jung's interpretation of psychic images is only ever analogous to the literary critic's interpretation of literary images: "Intrapsychic imagery is a spontaneous product of the unconscious. Aesthetic imagery, for all the analogies it presents to intrapsychic imagery, is a product of literary tradition and conscious literary elaboration" (Walker 146). A third objection is Jungians' obsession with interpretation, which sets them apart from the literary critic who is frequently content to describe, contextualize, or merely appreciate the aesthetics of a poem or story.

Even if one can overlook the contrasting objectives of therapists and literary critics and their differing uses for literature, the problem of actually applying Jungian theory to literature must still be dealt with. Indeed, some literary texts seem to resist Jungian criticism. Reducing Elizabeth from Pride and Prejudice to the anima guide and Wickham to the shadow—both of which must be integrated by Darcy—might make for an interesting Jungian exercise. "But the effort is one that directs us away from what is worth knowing about Jane Austin and her art" (Radford & Wilson 318). Moreover, those who find texts more agreeable to Jungian criticism must be wary of reducing them to a collection of archetypal images and of dismissing with a single stroke their literary, aesthetic, and cultural value. Hence, when Joseph Campbell interprets Joyce's Portrait of the Artist in light of the Icarus myth (76), he illumines the archetypal flight of the hero past the provincial values of his hometown, his initiation into the ways of art and his discovery of epiphany, and his eventual return (in Ulysses) and struggle to find a place for those gifts. But he sheds little light on Joyce's revolutionary use of stream of consciousness to capture Stephen's childhood impressions of family & politics, his literary technique of epiphany in the sacred and profane"wading girl" episode, even the oppressive political and religious atmosphere arising from the fall of Parnell and the inheritance of guilt and sin implicit in the Irish Catholicism of Joyce's day. Moreover, such readings depict the artist as a mere vehicle for the archetypes and fail to appreciate his conscious decisions, literary technique, and unique vision.

Along the lines of Campbell's reading, Jungian theory applied to Goethe's The Sorrows of Jung Werther (a work we will analyze later in more detail) might explain Werther's relationship with Lotte in terms of the male protagonist's undeveloped anima and its subsequent constellation and projection. This reading articulates the irrational and obsessive relationship between Werther and Lotte but ignores literary and historical influences. The wonderfully impassioned and rebellious character of Werther is reduced to an immature capacity for feeling and relationship. Viewed from a literary historical perspective, however, Werther is the epitome of Germany's Sturm und Drang movement: "This self-assertive rebelliousness was more than the adolescent defiance of a few gifted young men; it arose directly out of the proud conviction of the limitless rights and powers of the divinely inspired genius...it was his personal experiences and emotions which were to be transformed into art through the creative powers of his unbridled imagination" (Furst 33). The Sturm und Drang movement of the 1770's, an impassioned reaction to all formal, literary, and socio-political restrictions, arose from Germany's need to atone for its lack of a strong native literary tradition in the wake of its feelings of exclusion from the French and English Enlightenment (Furst 33). Hence, while useful in bridging the gap between depth psychology and literature, our Jungian reading neglects the comparative literary history of Goethe's novel. This limitation, however, exists more in practice than in theory. Jung himself noted the compensatory role of the artist in speaking for neglected or undeveloped side of his society's collective psyche. In particular, he noted the "lack of feeling" in Joyce's Ulysses as compensating for excessive emotionalism and nationalism of WWI, but Jungians have been remiss in developing this historical and socio-political aspect of Jungian literary criticism (Walker 148).

Those who study the comparison between Jungian theory and classical Eastern texts have noted other limitations to Jungian theory. Jung wrote psychological commentaries on several Eastern texts, including the Taoist Secret of the Golden Flower, the Tibetan Bardo Thodol, Suzuki's Introduction to Zen Buddhism, and Yogic texts to name a few. Some note, however, that these are primarily psychological commentaries and point out that Jung's primary intent and interest in these texts may have been to seek and find evidence to support his own psychological theories rather than to explain the texts on their own terms (Coward 3). Hence, Jungian theory is at best only analogous to Eastern concepts, which are not only taken to be psychological but metaphysical realities by their practitioners. For example, Jung was interested in Patanjali's notion of samskara or karmic memory as a parallel to his notion of collective memory (i.e. the emergence of archetypal images into consciousness). Yet the parallel only works in so far as both samskara and collective memory arise from sources beyond individual, consciously willed memory. The nature of these sources, however, highlights the difference between Jungian theory and the metaphysics of Patanjali's yoga. Jung's "collective memory" arises from the collective history of mankind while samskara arises from the accumulated memories of an individual's past lives (Coward 105); in short, individuation is not reincarnation. Similarly, Jung's analysis of the Tibetan Bardo Thodol only goes so far. While it is true that analytical psychology is comparable as an initiation process to that of the Bardo Thodol, the two have very different objectives. While the goal of Jungian practice is to reconcile the ego with the individuation process, deal with inflation, and generally cure the individual back into society, the Bardo Thodol's metaphysical goal is to secure liberation from the samsaric illusions of psychic images and life experience. Jung's claim that dealing with the wrathful and bliss-bestowing buddhas and deities of the Chonyid Bardo is equivalent to integrating archetypal images also runs

aground on the metaphysical claims of the latter. In the Tibetan system, these deities have the very real and literal power to secure rebirths in heavens, in hells, or back on earth in human or even animal form. Jung located the limits of his analysis in the fact that the Tibetans can merge the psychological and the metaphysical while the European has long since divided the two. The Tibetan deities are taken both as projections of the dying man's mind AND as literal and objective forces of nature and the supernatural.

Nevertheless, Jung himself was sometimes ambiguous on this particular limitation to his theory and often muddied the distinction between the psychological and the metaphysical. In the same commentary on the Bardo Thodol, Jung claims that "Metaphysical assertions, however, are statements of the psyche and are therefore psychological" (Jung 61). This has led some critics to claim that some of Jung's basic assumptions, the way he describes his data, and his intuitive method of explanation suggest his analysis was more theological and metaphysical than empirical in nature (Coward 182). As a result, students of comparative literature must be careful not to confuse Jungian psychological concepts with Eastern metaphysical ones. The unwary might unintentionally reduce Indian classics such as the Bhagavad Gita to psychological allegory with Arjuna as ego and Krishna as the Self. Such a reading ignores the essential elements of karma, rebirth, and yoga all essential to Krishna's teaching. This danger prompted Joseph Campbell to warn his students not to confuse the notion of Atman which he defined as the manifestation of universal Brahman in the individual with Jung's archetypal Self or the totality of an individual psyche (Campbell).

Jung himself was wary of such comparisons and only gradually came to overcome self-imposed limitations concerning the East. In his early commentaries on Eastern texts, Jung was critical of the yogi's claims of dissolving the ego and attaining a superconscious state; he refused to believe in a consciousness without the ego. Yoga for westerners would be pure poison since it would only reinforce our split between the "natural man" (i.e. body, instincts, spirit) and the scientific mind, our difficulty and unwillingness in dealing with the unconscious, and our tendency to allow the scientific mind to dominate the natural mind (Henderson lecture). In the late thirties and early forties, however, Jung began to move past these self-imposed limitations. He advised his audience to read the Bardo Thodol backwards, knowing and integrating the unconscious they wished to leap over. To this end, he also recommended patient understanding of the unconscious via active imagination, which valued the ego as mediator between external experiences and constellated archetypes. Through such an approach Jung had in effect posited analytical psychology as a form of western yoga (Walker, Yoga 263). He further stressed dealing first with the personal unconscious in the same way the yogi becomes aware first of the kleshas (passions) before progressing in his practice, and he searched for Eastern religious concepts closer to his own. In Zen meditation and satori he found a parallel to his practice of active imagination in which the ego transfers libido to the archetypes allowing them to emerge and to be integrated into consciousness. Finally, in Sri Ramakrishna's writings he found a practical and profound quote in which the master stressed that in practice ego dissolution was impossible and that the ego should therefore be utilized as a servant of God. Here, Jung had found a profession of faith that paralleled his own faith in the unconscious and recognized the role of the ego as mediator of divinity (325). Jung's own visions during a near death experience and his later claim that he "knew" God, however, show that he had acted on this faith and had united psychology and metaphysics (327). To argue then that Jung was interested mostly in finding confirmation for his own theories in the forms of these Eastern symbols and concepts rather than in content (Coward 5) might be true only for the Jung up to 1936 or so. After this, it is clear Jung went beyond seeking analogies in Eastern systems and found meaningful ways to unite analytical psychology with religious meditative practices.

But of all the limitations to Jungian theory, critics have recently focused most on Jung's problematic and ambivalent descriptions of the anima as a great source of male power on the one hand and his associations of the anima and the feminine with "weakness, passivity, and lack of creativity" on the other (156). They further note Jung's more simplified and mostly negative descriptions of the animus (157). Some of Jung's own disciples noted early on the predominance of masculine concerns in Jung's theories. M.L. Von Franz, for example, noted that fairy tales and legends typically dramatize the male individuation from puer to hero (Brien 1). Today's Jungians continue to struggle with this reduction of the feminine in applying Jung's theories to literature. For example, they see women of the Parzival legend including Herzeloyde, Bellefleurs, Condwiramurs, and the Grail maiden as nothing more than projections of the male psyche, anima guides on the path of the hero's individuation: "This pattern of individuation...is essentially a construct of masculine psychology [and each female character] remains and must remain as she was, in order that the hero may fulfill his destiny" (1). Some of these women, like the Maiden of the Tent whom Parzival assaults and robs or Condwiramurs whom Parzival leaves, appear to be mistreated as part of the hero's individuation, and all seem to exist solely for the hero's salvation (4).

Recent developments, however, show Jungian and archetypal critics adapting to gender criticism. Some assert that true Jungian criticism views all the characters in a story (like those in a dream) as personages of the psyche (6). Hence, the reader should identify with both the female characters and with Parzival. To further emphasize the psychological aspects and avoid gender stereotyping, others have described anima and animus in terms that avoid masculine and feminine contexts, such as "eros" and "logos" (Toub, 10). Critics like Annis V. Pratt have gone some way toward correcting for

Jung's "subtle misogyny" (Walker 157) by suggesting that feminist archetypal critics can abandon their allegiance to the "absolute transcendence of archetypes," identify uniquely feminine archetypal patterns in literature, and redefine Jung's concepts in accord with women's experiences (Pratt 158). For Pratt, Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights would be an example of a female individuation. Catherine's path seems to correspond to that of the hero of the rebirth quest, but her return has uniquely feminine consequences. In both male and female versions of the rebirth quest, the protagonist integrates his/her internal opposite gender, yet as Bronte makes clear this integration is valued differently by society. While Dante integrates his anima (Beatrice), and goes to heaven, Catherine integrates her animus (Heathcliff) but is driven to her death by a socially "correct" marriage to Edgar (160). By identifying examples of such feminine archetypes, Pratt may have taken "an essential step toward making Jung's the holistic psychology and spirituality women need it to be" (Wehr In Walker, 157).

Jung's theory of the anima has been altered by gender considerations in yet another way. In his "Notions of Gender: Jung's Views and Beyond," Jungian analyst Peter Mudd draws on Jung's earliest notions of the anima in a brief 1916 presentation and reimagines it as psychological function devoid of any gender specific content: "This first notion of the anima which stresses its functional interfacing or mediating role in the psyche, I believe, is the correct and most clinically useful one" (4). Mudd suggests that uniform cultural notions of gender in the early twentieth century, Jung's own experience with women, evidence primarily from male patients' dreams, and even Jung's failure to recognize the role of evolution in fixing gender roles for the preservation of the species all contributed to his attributing gender-specific content to the anima. But, Mudd contends, cultural definitions of gender change, dreams also present same-sex images of the soul, and gender roles are redefined as a species approaches overpopulation. Jung himself seemed to intuit the lack of specific gender content in the anima when he asserted that when the patient opens an active dialogue with the anima, the personified image of the anima will disappear. Since the archetypal, by definition, never disappears, Mudd wonders, how can anima traits be archetypal? Mudd reasons that "the anima carries or conveys those [feminine] capacities rather than being identical with them; that is, they function as messengers who are not themselves the message!" (8). Essentially, Mudd argues for substituting Jung's concept of transcendent function for his theory of anima/animus (10). In literary texts, then, we would look for guides and messengers and analyze characters based on their function rather than preconceived notions of gender content.

Mudd, however, goes too far. The sirens are after all uniquely feminine forces as is Goethe's Gretchen; they have no direct masculine parallels. And isn't biological evolution an acceptable and authoritative enough source for these gender specific images? Furthermore, Mudd cites Jung's study of world literature as evidence of his contaminating the anima theory with gender specific characteristics. But this seems to contradict Mudd's simultaneous claim that this contamination came from the uniquely misoginystic influences of early twentieth century Europe. Moreover, Jung studied world literature from ancient myth to modern fiction. As Foucault made clear in his History of Sexuality ancient cultures had widely differing notions of gender, yet Jung's description of anima traits holds up across time and space. Perhaps objections to Jung's gendered descriptions of anima and animus lies in the fact that in our technologically progressive society we continue to unconsciously conspire with masculine reason and spirit and undervalue feminine feeling and soul.

Still another way of adapting Jung's theory of the anima to recent gender criticism is to go beyond it or beneath it by drawing on connections to the physical sciences. Recent studies on archetypal fields show that they are autonomous organizing forces, existing and operating independently of the individuals involved: "Entire cultures and individual lives respond to the presence and influence of these archetypal fields—even to the extent that we may speak of destiny as a response to them" (Conforti 1). Hence, once the anima is constellated, both the man who projects her image and the woman who receives it are swept into the archetype's orbit, its sphere of influence or field. From this perspective we may perceive the role of the female as distinct from that of the anima. The character of Lotte from Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther becomes more than the hero's anima projection and assumes her role as a complex, female protagonist tragically drawn into the anima field along with Werther. Toward novel's end, she begins to realize the depths of Werther's passions and the extent to which they have determined both her and Werther's destinies. She approaches the reflection and awareness necessary to deal with archetypal fields when she admits she has been trying to keep Werther to herself as a kind of soul mate while maintaining her commitments to Albert and enjoying the stability he offers. But she stops short of any deeper reflection and overidentifies with the persona of the reasonable mother and wife which blinds her to the influence of the anima field. Lotte, then, also gets caught in the anima field, unconsciously playing the role of anima in all her guises for Werther throughout the novel. When he meets and falls in love with her, he associates her with nature and the maternal as well as with literature and art (spirit) via his anima projection. Werther's passion for natural beauty and his artistic ability are now consumed by his obsession with this fantastic mother figure. He stops painting scenes of natural beauty, loses his ability to engage in active imagination and dialogue with his anima, and thereby falls deeper into the anima's influence. Werther's anima now shifts from "a dream of love, happiness, and maternal warmth" to "the death demon" (Von Franz 190) pursuing him into desperate thoughts of suicide. He complains of his hopeless love for Lotte to his friend William and his view of nature alters to images of floods, storms, and drowning. Lotte, as we have noted, is drawn into the field of the constellated anima archetype and unconsciously acts out the role of Werther's negative anima by first allowing herself to be drawn into his obsessive passion for her and kissing him, and then by

unconsciously providing the pistols he will use to commit suicide. Hence, archetypal field theory allows us to go beyond what might be considered a patriarchal reading of Lotte as "nothing but" Werther's anima projection and offers us a deeper objective perspective. While we do see Lotte in this role, we also see the more complex and tragic heroine beneath the projection. The novel becomes her story as much as his.

Jung's theory of the anima is also useful in the way it can open up purely social or political readings of texts and reintroduce the psyche back into the text. In his The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality vol. 2, Michel Foucault identifies the pederastic relationship as the primary problematization which preoccupied Greek ethics, morality, economics, and even the arts. Conspicuously absent from his study, however, is the abundance of imaginative literature and art dealing with heterosexual love. Theocritus' account of the Hylas myth (Idyll 13) formulates the problematization of anima possession which dramatizes the male's dilemmas of "giving in" to desire, of passivity, and of freedom of choice, dilemmas which Foucault ascribes primarily to the pederastic relationship. The idyll begins by highlighting the primary characteristics of the pederastic relationship: Heracles (the ideal mature lover, accomplished, brave, skilled in warfare—heroic) gains pleasure from the relationship while Hylas (young, innocent and naïve) gains an education. But Foucault is of little help in explaining what happens next while Jung's theory of the anima takes us further. Seeking water deep in an island wood, Hylas comes with his "empty vessel" suggesting his innocence and also perhaps his empty soul. The fact that he fills the vessel by forcing it beneath the surface and the fact that he himself is then overwhelmed and submerged by the nymphs suggests that in the pederastic relationship has been denied or even repressed, something far away from male civilization and society. Jung believed that the anima denied could erupt and overwhelm the ego. The Hylas myth, then, may function as a compensatory myth for the pederastic relationship and patriarchal Greek society. Hylas' struggle is quieted by the nymphs' whispers as he lays stretched across their knees. In effect, he has been reduced to an infant by these negative animas, the pederastic nightmare of being returned to a completely dependent state, completely passive and stripped of free will. The myth also suggests that the victim of anima possession is beyond rescue by the adult male hero.

In short, Jung's theory of the anima, problematic though it still is, remains valid for literary criticism. Recent gender theory and feminist objections have spurred Jungian and archetypal critics to transform it, and it now provides an alternative to and in some cases a necessary supplement to limited political and gendered readings.

By being mindful of all the aforementioned limitations as well as recent Jungian adaptations to these criticisms, students of comparative literature will be equipped to apply Jungian theory in a reasonable manner without forcing it to exceed its limits. Even more important, they will come to realize that using any critical theory involves a self conscious process of defining that theory in their own terms, justifying its usefulness and applicability, and constantly checking its validity for contemporary thought with the conviction to defend it and the honesty to admit its shortcomings. In short, to paraphrase Jung, the application of Jungian literary theory involves finding a human language for Eternal Truth and altering it with the spirit of the times.

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