Negotiating with the Archetype: Essentialism versus Heteronormativity

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Essentialism: once a 'normal' point of view, even among those who were sexually unusual, at least partly outside most patterns; later an accusation and point of conflict – has anyone ever voluntarily identified themselves as essentialist? It is a word designed to be thrown at others, a missile or dismissal. Heteronormativity – as queer theories developed, another dismissal, a way of (attempting to) reverse the standard binarism between hetero and homo. (Reversing binarisms never quite gets the desired result, though, does it? Which is why we were taught, more abstractly, to deconstruct them – but most conversations cannot keep such an inherently unstable and subtle frame in place, and they go back to the reversed binarism – which over time collapses back into the original one.) And some of these battles suggest why so many people who choose to inhabit various trans identities still have so much trouble establishing their places in theory and culture (perhaps because a flexible intersectionality doesn't really help them create solid places where they can stand in a 'new' gender?) – and why those with bisexual identities, often pushed to the back of the queue in all of these arguments, plaintively continue to feel ignored....

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The Jungian theory of archetypes is originally based on a relatively essentialist point of view. That essentialism, though it is something to which many have been culturally, ideologically or personally opposed, is plausibly rooted in real evolutionary/biological/neurological patterns – though most Jungians, in working with the complexities of contemporary gender identities, agree that it is always possible to generate major psychic structures (such as sexualities, gender identities, behaviour patterns) that differ from the body's neurological roots. This means that although the archetypal, with its at times gender-polarized prefabrications, may indeed operate in everyone at a deep and ineradicable level, the vastness and complexity of our developed human consciousness makes it possible for us to shift from one side of an innate system to the other, or at a more sophisticated level to create flexibly non-binary identities with some freedom – though we will continue to experience the pull of the essential, which we may then follow, fight, or overlay with other orientations. In such a system, powerful structures and modifiable fluidities both exist, as it were, at different levels – the Jungian mind is a vast space, and we don't always stand in the same part of it, or even in any single part of it. So it is not a surprise that the archetypal gets in the way of the structured demands of certain political ideas – because politics and ideology always want universal answers....

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As the archetypally gendered is always erupting into music theatre, into narrative musics, even into the stylistic and structural creation and interpretation of 'abstract' musics, how can we negotiate the vast, messy space between an ideologically Butlerian freedom and an at least partly essentialist reality? If the archetypal is always present, with its underlying gender polarities, is it possible, within our current cultural patterns, for us to hold on to a politicized version of social construction, while at the same time allowing for a certain amount of psychological/genetic essentialism? Is there a space in discussions about cultural (musical) objects where we can step away from an ideologically constructed gender freedom, without extending the unavoidably essentially gendered out to where it becomes oppressive? Do archetypal patterns actually dictate any form of heteronormativity, or can we create and negotiate spaces of freedom between them?

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I am trying to work this out partly because of a conceptual and methodological conflict in my current interests: as someone associated with the rise of gender studies in music since the late 1980s – especially, in later years, with gay male experiences in the time of AIDS – it seems slightly peculiar to some of my long-time colleagues that I am now studying to become a Jungian psychoanalyst. The root causes for both areas of study were experientially linked in a single moment, as I entered Jungian analysis in 1987 – in fact when I tested HIV-positive at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center of Los Angeles, the social worker who gave me my test results was former Radical Faerie turned Jungian analyst-in-training Mitchell Walker. Walker himself has attempted to rework problems and solutions to the status of gay men in an archetypal framework, looking for a different kind of essentialism – a gay identity with archetypal roots that differ from heterosexual ones.[1]

Obviously, musicology's early gender studies overlapped aspects of essentialism and social construction in a relativist framework; Butler's *Gender Trouble* only came out in 1990, and since that time has offered a solid and widely respected base for much cultural theory related to gender. Yet it is also obvious that Butler offers only an ideological solution, and a transitional one at that: at the cultural level, if we prefer to champion many kinds of freedom in gender and sexuality, we must pass through a stage of accepting Butler as 'true.' But that is always a cultural decision, one designed for intellectual discourse and institutional structure, something we can use to open up a space to keep moving forward, developing our ideas – at some point in the future will the need for a structured, abstract relativism seem as old-fashioned as, for example, elaborate and rather desperate discussions of the innate necessity of monarchical structures must have seemed in the eighteenth century?

We cannot move beyond our own culture, of course, but a certain relativism, even in relation to our own positions, may keep us from getting ideologically stuck. As I am the kind of person who has never been absolutely certain of any theory I've ever heard – I am not much of a 'believer,' which has generated mild conflicts with colleagues who are more passionately Marxist, Freudian, or wedded to the idea that Kh sets are meaningful – I was pleased to realize that Jung, though often rhetorically linked by others to deep essentialism and a tendency to take the transcendental seriously, was himself something of a relativist. Jung often suggested that he was working with what he found, not certain

from where it came, nor of how he could pin it down – only certain that the unique aspects of his ideas did indeed have distinct existences at some level, and that further insight and study might someday clarify the real bases of what he directly perceived in the minds of his patients.

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Jung was never as clear and definite – or, from another angle, as dogmatic – a writer as Freud; his explanations are contingent and changeable, depending on contemporary situations, remembered experiences, and his endless interest in searching for deeper levels of understanding. Classical definitions of Jungian archetypes explain that they are primal images or patterns which are unreachably deep, and which may be distantly compared to animal instincts – we do not respond to archetypes per se, but we respond to a proliferation of energetic reflections of, or references to, archetypes. Jung's term 'image' is fairly broad – it starts with the pictorial, but freely ranges beyond it – though in his writings, as in the writings of many Jungians, there is a tendency for discussions of the archetype to be grounded in the quasi-pictorial.

Obviously one (as yet unanswerable) concern, which produces a contemptuously scientistic irritation among classical Freudians and others, always remains: *where* is the archetype? Is it deep within the mind, in the evolutionary coding of neurons through millennia of experience – or is it external to any mind, at some transcendent level, as the more religious Jungians prefer to imagine? Interestingly – especially in relation to cultural theory – a recent development among post-Jungians is what is called 'emergent' theory, which posits that archetypes emerge developmentally, though at a much earlier/deeper stage of development than can normally be analysed:

> The evidence from developmental research suggests that archetypes can be equated with image schemas, the spatial models that are formed very early in the process of mental development and encode core information about the spatial relationships of objects in the world around us…. There would therefore seem to be an image-schematic or archetypal quality to almost any experience, and this developmental model of the image schema would thus seem to strengthen the concept of the archetype, enabling us to identify the key image-schematic features of an event, memory, dream or fantasy that justify us in using the term archetypal. The archetypal aspect of any experience lies in the pattern of relationship between the objects or people, a pattern that can be traced back to the underlying image schema.[2]

Knox, and others in the emergent camp, see Jung's attempts to define archetypes as a tangled overlap of "abstract, nonrepresentational organizing psychic structures, and… core representational, symbolic meanings."[3] Though their criticism of classical ideas of the archetype can be taken on board, we are again in the realm of ideology – the emergent theory of archetypes functions within a particular framework of what can be accepted as real or scientific, excluding what is therefore unacceptable. Of course when we draw a hard line between the two, we are merely comforting ourselves by narrowing our view of the universe to allow only the things we are certain we can understand – which may be an

understandable strategy for containing stress, but which is hardly a way to decide what is true and what is not. Jung would have maintained, as he did repeatedly on various topics, that a clearly framed theory would need to ignore various manifestations – which would make it a theory more attentive to its own elegance than to its validity….

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Using such theoretical constructs, it may be possible to look again at musical works to recover the impact of an archetypal art – which can thus be linked to dreams, to ritual, to active imagination, to the deep roots of myth and fairy tale. This process reconnects our experiences at different levels: our days, our work, our celebrations, connect with our nights, our reveries – our imaginative lives become more charged, we become more whole, and musical understanding helps us continue along a path to individuation. 9

It seems clear that opera, singing, amplified sound, ensembles of various kinds, staged and generically extended works – any musical work that tends to occur with an expanded level of emotion, volume, complexity, social involvement and/or visionary projection – will tend to build on archetypal roots: power creates power, volume creates intensity, emotional and cognitive involvement pulls us into aspects of ourselves that are more charged than the trivial, the predictable, the everyday. And nearness to archetypal forces (or, as Knox might prefer, nearness to an image schema) would both increase the power experienced and tend to reshape images and stories in archetypal terms – instinctively, as it were. This is simple enough, and accounts for the status of music in emotional and meaningful communication, as well as in the grander philosophical discussions of the nineteenth century. It also accounts for the peculiarly charged adulation, the identifications, projections and passions, that are generated by such musics – which are somewhat different than the identifications and projections generated around painting, literature, theatre: music often draws strong feelings that may be expressed in slightly incoherent, clichéd or vaguely transcendent language, which suggests a certain difficulty in translating its impact into the linear precision of language. (This partly accounts for the endlessly anxious self-discipline of the discipline – of musicology that is, as much as does the usually cited nineteenth-century pedagogical training in theory – it is partly *because* it is harder to make linguistic sense of the emotional/existential/archetypal impact of music that we so often divert ourselves toward structured theory and meticulous historical detail.) 10

The construction, then, of so much musical discourse: structured symbolic maps of feelings, sensations, attitudes that are more than, bigger than, the experiences of any actual person… which also accounts for the disconnected allusiveness of so many song lyrics: if the archetypal charge is strong, the story or image or thought process doesn't particularly need to function along rational lines. Archetypal structures hold feelings and perceptions in a constellation of meanings, opening up a cluster of possible paths and pushing us strongly into or along one of them…. 11

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For examples of archetypal ideas, it is worth looking at musicians who have been fascinated by Jung's ideas, as well as musicians whose approaches to essential and 12

constructed genders and sexualities suggest archetypal elements. (Shuffle three times and deal.)

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An examination of certain tropes in Michael Tippett's operas, from the neo-traditional patterns of *The Midsummer Marriage* (1955) to the fragmented world of *The Knot Garden* (1970), suggests sequential attempts to work through essentialist models to reach out to an equally charged but less stable reality. *The Midsummer Marriage* presents the union of male and female through a complex and often difficult process that leads to a symbolic marriage (*coniunctio*), a Jungian trope of personal development that is often expanded to reflect the nature of relationships. Such a clear pattern leads to reading the transformative imagery of *The Vision of St. Augustine* (1965) as a higher, more abstract level of *coniunctio* with the transcendence of opposites. The fragmented, aggressive collapse of the relationship between the two gay characters in *The Knot Garden* might then be seen as tragic – in personal and in symbolic terms. A Jungian might ask: as we descend from the idealized symbolic world of the archetype to the time-bound incompletions of the real world, does the integration of shadows of frustration and loss pull us further along the journey – is this fall from Eden as necessary, as ultimately productive, as it is unavoidable?

Clarke lucidly acknowledges concerns about archetypal theory, but also sees its connection with the music Tippett chooses to create:

> It remains questionable whether a historically mediated product such as music is able to attain the putatively archaic, trans-cultural character which Jung associates with archetypes. What can be said, however, is that Tippett developed a skill for rhetorically evoking a sense of the primordial which Jung associates with the archetype, through the often strongly somatic properties of his musical images.[4]

Clarke reflects a basic problem with locating archetypes in artistic works – self-fulfilling prophecy, tautological analysis? – but the charge of the materials suggests (though does not prove) some existence before culture; and there is a sense that Tippett was always in search of something before culture.

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Meredith Monk's work stands on a ground of multifaceted, expansive, empathetic explorations of identity. *Education of the Girlchild* (1973) opens with six women around a table who struggle to create identities in the face of cultural restrictions; they suggest a progression from repression to multiplicity, a social fellowship with overtones of liberation, but also a gendered way of relating – while working through their separate paths and conflicts, they remain in relationship more than a similar group of men might do. The final section of the work, the 'Biography', fuses these images of women into a crone who moves, slowly and with great intensity, backwards through her life. The temporal reversal takes us out of chronological time, out of human time, into an archetypal image of woman. The revelation that the elderly, dying woman at the beginning of this section is also a (merely) older woman – is also a mature woman, a mother – is also

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a young woman – is also, and finally, a young girl spinning, arms flung wide in the sunshine, for the sheer pleasure of it – emphasizes her trans-temporal, transpersonal aspect, forcing us to see her as simultaneously embodied, personal, and eternal.

Archetypal images often appear in Monk's works – another memorable example is the ‘woman at the door’ section of *mercy* (2002). Since her opera *Atlas* (1991), Monk has become more comfortable with both notation and trained singers – several have become devoted members of her group of performers, notably soprano Katie Geiringer. Geiringer sometimes seems to stand in as a younger Monk, or perhaps as a different Monk, one never alienated from the world of notation and traditional rehearsals. Monk casts Geiringer as a woman in 1930s dress who receives a host of dark figures at her door – sad people in coats and hats and scarves, anxious displaced persons, exiles – we would now say: refugees. At the end of the section, Geiringer uses words for the first time – “Come in. Come in”. There is a sense that, at that moment, she becomes Monk, and others, and also whoever welcomed – or, of course, whoever *should* have welcomed – Jewish refugees during times of trouble.

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Diamanda Galás seems a perfect example of a musician who engages with archetypes – but archetypes experienced from very dark angles, filled with massive nightmare energies, unmistakable but deadly in their intensity. For the *Plague Mass* (1990), which integrated earlier material into a public performance at St. John the Divine in New York, she pulled together an extraordinarily energetic rage, invoking horrific fears of the ravaging of the body that ends in a death of darkness and ash. Such death images are intensely charged, and go far beyond the merely human – they suggest a *mysterium tremendum*, which cannot be experienced rationally.[5] As Herzog points out,[6] the *mysterium tremendum* can be connected to that strange Grimm fairy tale, ‘The Boy who Learned to Shudder’ (Grimm no. 4) – the one that insists that we must be capable of experiencing the fear of death if we wish to become fully human. He links this to the archetypal memories of those ancient tribes who fled from dead bodies, who needed to move away from any area where someone had died – and though we have developed burial and other rites of care and disposal, our civilized structures still tend to creak and splinter when archetypes of death come too close. Such an image of death has a kind of power, one that can be connected to the abject loss of parental love experienced by so many LGBTQ people: the power of standing at the nadir, of being possessed by it, a power which enables us to turn and savagely tear at the trivia of the unaware life.

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John Grant seems to have battled through a dark forest of alienation in the past few years (somewhat like Jane Siberry, who showed a few of her wounds in *Maria* [1995]). Grant's ‘Marz’ (2010)[7] is both beautiful and disastrous – its retreat to a childish candy land, referencing a shop in Grant's home town, represents a disconnection from awareness and a nadir of personal agency or hope. The video invokes a developmental nightmare of young suicide and regret, as the candy land fantasy disintegrates into sick and dead bodies, finally fused in misery – the fear and loneliness of adolescence felt as a hell of loss. A few

years later, 'Ernest Borgnine' (2013) revived the actor's image to act as an archetypally dependable father, one strong enough to protect even someone newly diagnosed as HIV-positive. In the process of developing more resiliency, Grant created 'Disappointing' (2015), where an intricate series of lists of things are summarily rejected, but also entangled with a peculiarly ironic joy. The video evokes the ambiguous emotions of a gay sauna – excitement and anomie, heat and disconnection – to invoke a world of sex that is alternately pleasure and loss, one he has left behind for a real relationship. Men rise through Grant's songs as archetypal father/brother/lovers, defeating or encouraging his attempts at self-validation as he has travelled through gender ambiguity to his currently assertive bear image.

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We are accustomed to looking for archetypal intensity in the clearly defined, the focused: but there is also archetypal power in the ambiguous, in the multiply determined. RuPaul as power figure: the drag queen who authoritatively teaches authentic presentation of the self – image imposed on reality, psychological choice imposed on biological apparatus… It is a strange thing, to teach the broken to love themselves as a public spectacle – but the *Drag Race* is more like an arena of transformation than one of reduction, as happens in most reality television. It succeeds partly because the drag queen *knows* – she knows underlying structures and secrets ignored or avoided by most people because she has been both things, and neither. She recalls the image of Tiresias, who knows being a man and being a woman – and who suffers for it, but is also the one who can answer the crucial questions; it is no accident that the hermaphrodite is a central alchemical image related to individuation, the creative union of opposites. Drag queens can rule us all, at times; Alicia Keyes' validation of women's power in 'Girl on Fire' (2012)[8] is parodied in William Belli's 'Boy is a Bottom' (2013)[9], which appropriates woman's empowerment to mock gay men. But the video has a quality of mocking generosity, a holding of our own tensions. Because drag queens are never, of course, women: they are endlessly transformed objects – and when they enter fully into their power they can command man, woman, straight, gay, lesbian – as a kind of supercharged meta-humanity….

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(Collect the cards into a pile, face down; fold hands and consider what was dealt, what was played.)

Interpreting artistic materials as archetypal is generally not difficult; it is much easier, for instance, than the excavations of Freudian or Lacanian analysis, where interpretation assumes that the unconscious is infinitely canny in its endless attempts to conceal ourselves from ourselves.[10] One looks for charged materials, for patterns – and admittedly it is difficult to decide where there are boundaries between that which is archetypal and that which isn't. But it often seems that, as long as we are noticing charged materials and energetic patterns, these problems are not terribly important – they are in the class of problems around all the things that we don't know for certain; and for those of us who aren't anxious about limiting our experience and understanding to the proven, that is not a major concern.

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We often fall into the power or archetypes: or we search for that power, or are drawn to it. But an important aspect of individuation is going into an archetype, but then coming out on the other side – to acknowledge its power and impact on our lives, but to learn to stand independent of it – which isn't unlike what LGBTQ people do with the sexualities of their parents and cultures. So this can also be seen as another turn of the wheel of identity: finding ourselves in, and then against / beyond a given system. Fortunately, we are already expert in this approach to self-awareness – it means our freedom is always somewhat fluid, somewhat contingent – but perhaps we wouldn't have it any other way.

Notes

[1] Mitchell Walker, 'The Double: an Archetypal Configuration', *Institute for Uranian Psychoanalysis* 1976,
http://uranianpsych.org/pages/UranianPsychoanalysisArticles.html (28 September 2018).

[2] Jean Knox, *Archetype, Attachment, Analysis: Jungian Psychology and the Emergent Mind* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 64-65.

[3] Ibid. 30.

[4] David Clarke, *The Music and Thought of Michael Tippett: Modern Times and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 28.

[5] Edgar Herzog, *Psyche and Death: Death-Demons in Folklore, Myths and Modern Dreams* (Woodstock, CN: Spring, 1983), 17.

[6] Ibid. 14.

[7] John Grant, 'Marz', *Youtube,* 2010,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcRCp4EpVtk (28 September 2018).

[8] Alicia Keys, 'Girl on Fire', *Youtube,* 2012,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J91ti_MpdHA (28 September 2018).

[9] Willam, Detox and Vicky Vox, 'Boy Is a Bottom', *Youtube,* 2013,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0kqobQRcUo&list=PL4FFD8A874411E455&index=67 (28 September 2018).

[10] This suggests Kosofsky Sedgwick's approach to 'strong' theories: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in Eve Kosofky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51.

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