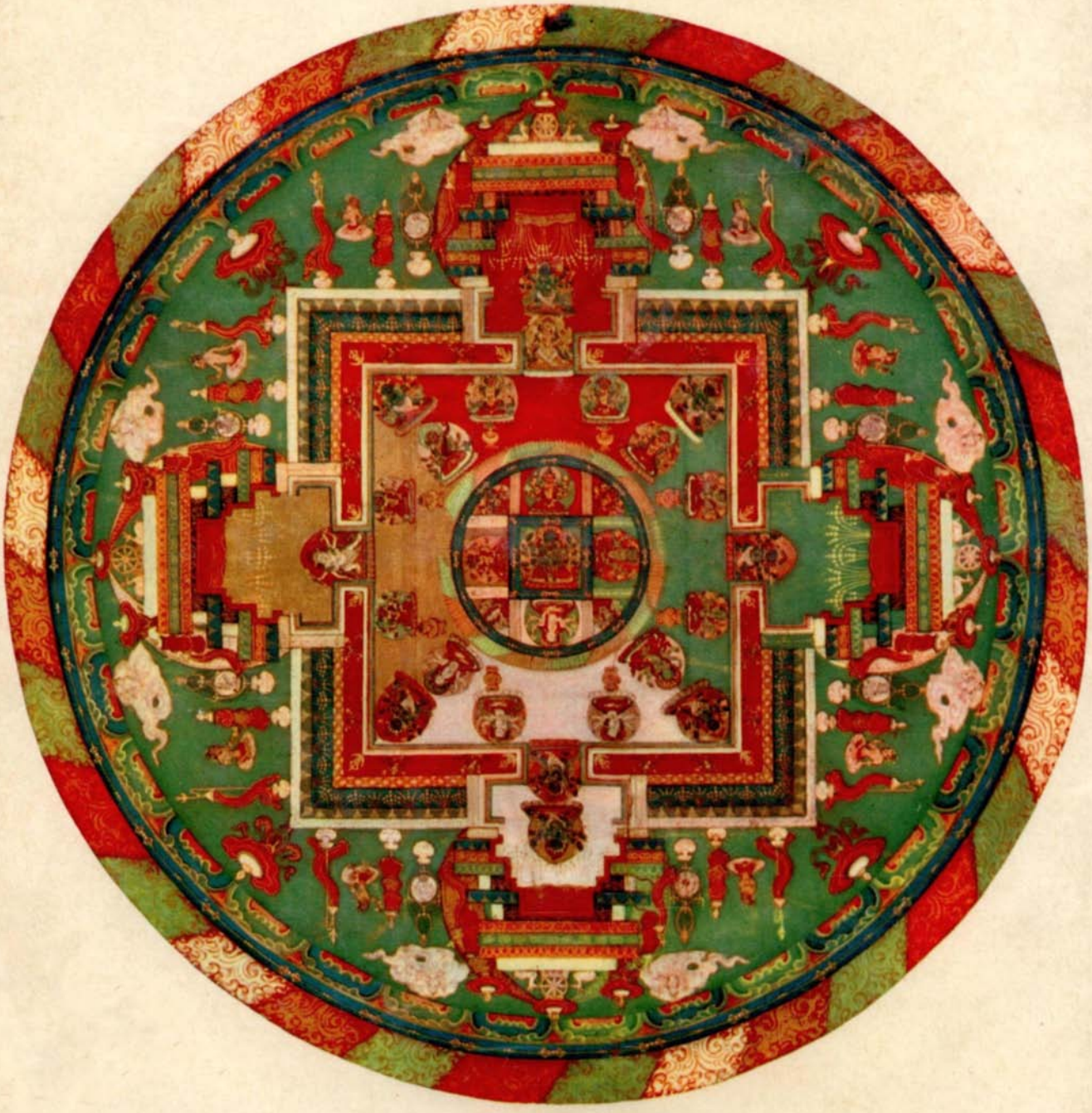
Man and his Symbols

conceived and edited by

Carl G. Jung



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1 Approaching the unconscious

Carl G. Jung

The entrance to the tomb of the Egyptian pharaoh Rameses III

The importance of dreams

Man uses the spoken or written word to express the meaning of what he wants to convey. His language is full of symbols, but he also often employs signs or images that are not strictly descriptive. Some are mere abbreviations or strings of initials, such as UN, UNICEF, or UNESCO; others are familiar trade marks, the names of patent medicines, badges, or insignia. Although these are meaningless in themselves, they have acquired a recognizable meaning through common usage or deliberate intent. Such things are not symbols. They are signs, and they do no more than denote the objects to which they are attached.

What we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us. Many Cretan monuments, for instance, are marked with the design of the double adze. This is an object that we know, but we do not know its symbolic implications. For another example, take the case of the Indian who, after a visit to England, told his friends at home that the English worship animals, because he had found eagles, lions, and oxen in old churches. He was not aware (nor are many Christians) that these animals are symbols of the Evangelists and are derived from the vision of Ezekiel, and that this in turn has an analogy to the Egyptian sun god Horus and his four sons. There are, moreover, such objects as the wheel and the cross that are known all over the world, yet that have a symbolic significance under certain conditions. Precisely what they symbolize is still a matter for controversial speculation.

Thus a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider "unconscious" aspect that is never precisely defined or

fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason. The wheel may lead our thoughts toward the concept of a "divine" sun, but at this point reason must admit its incompetence; man is unable to define a "divine" being. When, with all our intellectual limitations, we call something "divine," we have merely given it a name, which may be based on a creed, but never on factual evidence.

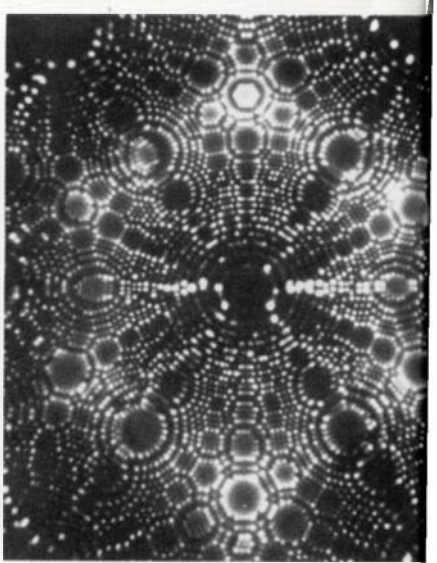
Because there are innumerable things beyond the range of human understanding, we constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully comprehend. This is one reason why all religions employ symbolic language or images. But this conscious use of symbols is only one aspect of a psychological fact of great importance: Man also produces symbols unconsciously and spontaneously, in the form of dreams.

It is not easy to grasp this point. But the point must be grasped if we are to know more about the ways in which the human mind works. Man, as we realize if we reflect for a moment, never perceives anything fully or comprehends anything completely. He can see, hear, touch, and taste; but how far he sees, how well he hears, what his touch tells him, and what he tastes depend upon the number and quality of his senses. These limit his perception of the world around him. By using scientific instruments he can partly compensate for the deficiencies of his senses. For example, he can extend the range of his vision by binoculars or of his hearing by electrical amplification. But the most elaborate apparatus cannot do more than bring distant or small objects within range of his eyes, or make faint sounds more audible. No matter what instruments he uses, at some point he reaches the edge of certainty beyond which conscious knowledge cannot pass.

Left, three of the four Evangelists (in a relief on Chartres Cathedral) appear as animals: The lion is Mark, the ox Luke, the eagle John. Also animals are three of the sons of the Egyptian god Horus (above, *c.* 1250 B.C.). Animals, and groups of four, are universal religious symbols.

In many societies, representations of the sun express man's indefinable religious experience. Above, a decoration on the back of a throne belonging to the 14th-century B.C. Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamen is dominated by a sun disk; the hands at the end of the rays symbolize the sun's life-giving power. Left, a monk in 20th-century Japan prays before a mirror that represents the divine Sun in the Shinto religion.

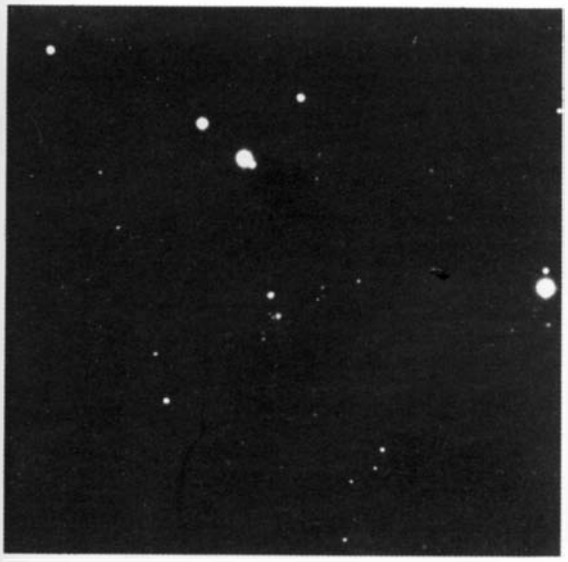
Right, tungsten atoms seen with a microscope that magnifies 2,000,000 times. Far right, the spots in center of picture are the farthest visible galaxies. No matter how far man extends his senses, limits to his conscious perception remain.



There are, moreover, unconscious aspects of our perception of reality. The first is the fact that even when our senses react to real phenomena, sights, and sounds, they are somehow translated from the realm of reality into that of the mind. Within the mind they become psychic events, whose ultimate nature is unknowable (for the psyche cannot know its own psychical substance). Thus every experience contains an indefinite number of unknown factors, not to speak of the fact that every concrete object is always unknown in certain respects, because we cannot know the ultimate nature of matter itself.

Then there are certain events of which we have not consciously taken note; they have remained, so to speak, below the threshold of consciousness. They have happened, but they have been absorbed subliminally, without our conscious knowledge. We can become aware of such happenings only in a moment of intuition or by a process of profound thought that leads to a later realization that they must have happened; and though we may have originally ignored their emotional and vital importance, it later wells up from the unconscious as a sort of afterthought.

It may appear, for instance, in the form of a dream. As a general rule, the unconscious aspect of any event is revealed to us in dreams, where it appears not as a rational thought but as a symbolic image. As a matter of history, it was the study of dreams that first enabled psychologists to investigate the unconscious aspect of conscious psychic events.



It is on such evidence that psychologists assume the existence of an unconscious psyche —though many scientists and philosophers deny its existence. They argue naïvely that such an assumption implies the existence of two "subjects," or (to put it in a common phrase) two personalities within the same individual. But this is exactly what it does imply quite correctly. And it is one of the curses of modern man that many people suffer from this divided personality. It is by no means a pathological symptom; it is a normal fact that can be observed at any time and everywhere. It is not merely the neurotic whose right hand does not know what the left hand is doing. This predicament is a symptom of a general unconsciousness that is the undeniable common inheritance of all mankind.

Man has developed consciousness slowly and laboriously, in a process that took untold ages to reach the civilized state (which is arbitrarily dated from the invention of script in about 4000 B.C.). And this evolution is far from complete, for large areas of the human mind are still shrouded in darkness. What we call the "psyche" is by no means identical with our consciousness and its contents.

Whoever denies the existence of the unconscious is in fact assuming that our present knowledge of the psyche is total. And this belief is clearly just as false as the assumption that we know all there is to be known about the natural universe. Our psyche is part of nature, and its enigma is as limitless. Thus we cannot define either the psyche or nature. We can merely state what we believe them to be and describe, as best we can, how they function. Quite apart, therefore, from the evidence that medical research has accumulated, there are strong grounds of logic for rejecting statements like "There is no unconscious." Those who say such things merely express an age-old "misoneism" —a fear of the new and the unknown.

There are historical reasons for this resistance to the idea of an unknown part of the human psyche. Consciousness is a very recent acquisition of nature, and it is still in an "experimental" state. It is frail, menaced by specific dangers, and easily injured. As anthropologists have noted, one of the most common mental derangements that occur among primitive people is what they call "the loss of a soul"—which means, as the name indicates, a noticeable disruption (or, more technically, a dissociation) of consciousness.

Among such people, whose consciousness is at a different level of development from ours, the "soul" (or psyche) is not felt to be a unit. Many primitives assume that a man has a "bush soul" as well as his own, and that this bush soul is incarnate in a wild animal or a tree, with which the human individual has some kind of psychic identity. This is what the distinguished French ethnologist Lucien Lévy-Brühl called a "mystical participation." He later retracted this term under pressure of adverse criticism, but I believe that his critics were wrong. It is a well-known psychological fact that an individual may have such an unconscious identity with some other person or object.

This identity takes a variety of forms among primitives. If the bush soul is that of an animal, the animal itself is considered as some sort of brother to the man. A man whose brother is a crocodile, for instance, is supposed to be safe when swimming a crocodile-infested river. If the bush soul is a tree, the tree is presumed to have something like parental authority over the individual concerned. In both cases an injury to the bush soul is interpreted as an injury to the man.

In some tribes, it is assumed that a man has a number of souls; this belief expresses the feeling of some primitive individuals that they each consist of several linked but distinct units. This means that the individual's psyche is far from being safely synthesized; on the contrary, it threatens to fragment only too easily under the onslaught of unchecked emotions.

While this situation is familiar to us from the studies of anthropologists, it is not so irrelevant to our own advanced civilization as it might seem. We too can become dissociated and lose

"Dissociation" means a splitting in the psyche, causing a neurosis. A famous fictional example of this state is *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) by the Scots author R. L. Stevenson. In the story Jekyll's "split" took the form of a physical change, rather than (as in reality) an inner, psychic state. Left, Mr. Hyde (from the 1932 film of the story)—Jekyll's "other half."

Primitive people call dissociation "loss of a soul"; they believe that a man has a "bush soul" as well as his own. Right, a Nyanga tribesman of west central Africa wearing a mask of the hornbill—the bird that he identifies with his bush soul.

Far right, telephonists on a busy switchboard handle many calls at once. In such jobs people "split off" parts of their conscious minds to concentrate. But this split is controlled and temporary, not a spontaneous, abnormal dissociation.

our identity. We can be possessed and altered by moods, or become unreasonable and unable to recall important facts about ourselves or others, so that people ask: "What the devil has got into you?" We talk about being able "to control ourselves," but self-control is a rare and remarkable virtue. We may think we have ourselves under control; yet a friend can easily tell us things about ourselves of which we have no knowledge.

Beyond doubt, even in what we call a high level of civilization, human consciousness has not yet achieved a reasonable degree of continuity. It is still vulnerable and liable to fragmentation. This capacity to isolate part of one's mind, indeed, is a valuable characteristic. It enables us to concentrate upon one thing at a time, excluding everything else that may claim our attention. But there is a world of difference between a conscious decision to split off and temporarily suppress a part of one's psyche, and a condition in which this happens spontaneously, without one's knowledge or consent and even against one's intention. The former is a civilized achievement, the latter a primitive "loss of a soul," or even the pathological cause of a neurosis.

Thus, even in our day the unity of consciousness is still a doubtful affair; it can too easily be disrupted. An ability to control one's emotions that may be very desirable from one point of view would be a questionable accomplishment from another, for it would deprive social intercourse of variety, color, and warmth.

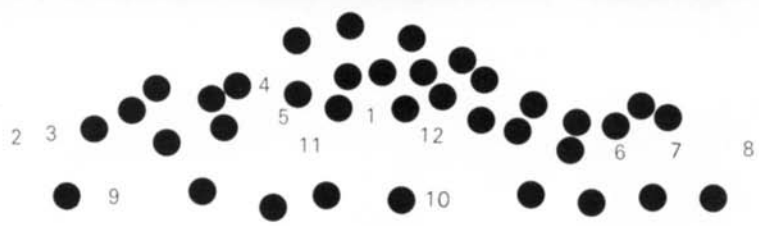
It is against this background that we must review the importance of dreams—those flimsy, evasive, unreliable, vague, and uncertain fantasies. To explain my point of view, I should like to describe how it developed over a period of years, and how I was led to conclude that dreams are the most frequent and universally accessible source for the investigation of man's symbolizing faculty.

Sigmund Freud was the pioneer who first tried to explore empirically the unconscious background of consciousness. He worked on the general assumption that dreams are not a matter of chance but are associated with conscious thoughts and problems. This assumption was not in the least arbitrary. It was based upon the

conclusion of eminent neurologists (for instance, Pierre Janet) that neurotic symptoms are related to some conscious experience. They even appear to be split-off areas of the conscious mind, which, at another time and under different conditions, can be conscious.

Before the beginning of this century, Freud and Josef Breuer had recognized that neurotic symptoms—hysteria, certain types of pain, and abnormal behavior—are in fact symbolically meaningful. They are one way in which the unconscious mind expresses itself, just as it may in dreams; and they are equally symbolic. A patient, for instance, who is confronted with an intolerable situation may develop a spasm whenever he tries to swallow: He "can't swallow it." Under similar conditions of psychological stress, another patient has an attack of asthma: He "can't breathe the atmosphere at home." A third suffers from a peculiar paralysis of the legs: He can't walk, i.e. "he can't go on any more." A fourth, who vomits when he eats, "cannot digest" some unpleasant fact. I could cite many examples of this kind, but such physical reactions are only one form in which the problems that trouble us unconsciously may express themselves. They more often find expression in our dreams.

Any psychologist who has listened to numbers of people describing their dreams knows that dream symbols have much greater variety than the physical symptoms of neurosis. They often consist of elaborate and picturesque fantasies. But if the analyst who is confronted by this dream material uses Freud's original technique of "free association," he finds that dreams



1 Sigmund Freud (Vienna)
2 Otto Rank (Vienna)
3 Ludwig Binswanger (Kreuzlingen)
4 A. A. Brill
5 Max Eitingon (Berlin)
6 James J. Putnam (Boston)
7 Ernest Jones (Toronto)
8 Wilhelm Stekel (Vienna)
9 Eugen Bleuler (Zürich)
10 Emma Jung (Küsnacht)
11 Sandor Ferenczi (Budapest)
12 C. G. Jung (Küsnacht)

can eventually be reduced to certain basic patterns. This technique played an important part in the development of psychoanalysis, for it enabled Freud to use dreams as the starting point from which the unconscious problem of the patient might be explored.

Freud made the simple but penetrating observation that if a dreamer is encouraged to go on talking about his dream images and the thoughts that these prompt in his mind, he will give himself away and reveal the unconscious background of his ailments, in both what he says and what he deliberately omits saying. His ideas may seem irrational and irrelevant, but after a time it becomes relatively easy to see what it is that he is trying to avoid, what unpleasant thought or experience he is suppressing. No matter how he tries to camouflage it, everything he says points to the core of his predicament. A doctor sees so many things from the seamy side of life that he is seldom far from the truth when he interprets the hints that his patient produces as signs of an uneasy conscience. What he eventually discovers, unfortunately, confirms his expectations. Thus far, nobody can say anything against Freud's theory of repression and wish fulfillment as apparent causes of dream symbolism.

Freud attached particular importance to dreams as the point of departure for a process of "free association." But after a time I began to feel that this was a misleading and inadequate use of the rich fantasies that the unconscious produces in sleep. My doubts really began when a colleague told me of an experience he had during the course of a long train journey in Russia. Though he did not know the language and could not even decipher the Cyrillic script, he found himself musing over the strange letters in which the railway notices were written, and he fell into a reverie in which he imagined all sorts of meanings for them.

One idea led to another, and in his relaxed mood he found that this "free association" had stirred up many old memories. Among them he was annoyed to find some long-buried disagreeable topics -- things he had wished to forget and had forgotten *consciously*. He had in fact arrived at what psychologists would call his "complexes"—that is, repressed emotional themes that can cause constant psychological disturbances or even, in many cases, the symptoms of neurosis.

This episode opened my eyes to the fact that it was not necessary to use a dream as the point of departure for the process of "free association" if one wished to discover the complexes of a patient. It showed me that one can reach the center directly from any point of the compass. One could begin from Cyrillic letters, from

Left, many of the great pioneers of modern psychoanalysis, photographed at a Congress of Psychoanalysis in 1911 at Weimar, Germany. The key, below left, identifies some of the major figures.

Right, the "inkblot" test devised by the Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach. The shape of the blot can serve as a stimulus for free association; in fact, almost any irregular free shape can spark off the associative process. Leonardo da Vinci wrote in his *Notebooks*: "It should not be hard for you to stop sometimes and look into the stains of walls, or ashes of a fire, or clouds, or mud or like places, in which . . . you may find really marvelous ideas."

meditations upon a crystal ball, a prayer wheel, or a modern painting, or even from casual conversation about some quite trivial event. The dream was no more and no less useful in this respect than any other possible starting point. Nevertheless, dreams have a particular significance, even though they often arise from an emotional upset in which the habitual complexes are also involved. (The habitual complexes are the tender spots of the psyche, which react most quickly to an external stimulus or disturbance.) That is why free association can lead one from any dream to the critical secret thoughts.

At this point, however, it occurred to me that (if I was right so far) it might reasonably follow that dreams have some special and more significant function of their own. Very often dreams have a definite, evidently purposeful structure, indicating an underlying idea or intention—though, as a rule, the latter is not immediately comprehensible. I therefore began to consider whether one should pay more attention to the actual form and content of a dream, rather than allowing "free" association to lead one off through a train of ideas to complexes that could as easily be reached by other means.

This new thought was a turning point in the development of my psychology. It meant that I gradually gave up following associations that led far away from the text of a dream. I chose to concentrate rather on the associations to the dream itself, believing that the latter expressed something specific that the unconscious was trying to say.

The change in my attitude toward dreams involved a change of method; the new technique was one that could take account of all the various wider aspects of a dream. A story told by the conscious mind has a beginning, a development, and an end, but the same is not true of a dream. Its dimensions in time and space are quite different; to understand it you must examine it from every aspect—just as you may take an unknown object in your hands and turn it over and over until you are familiar with every detail of its shape.

Perhaps I have now said enough to show how I came increasingly to disagree with "free" association as Freud first employed it: I wanted to keep as close as possible to the dream itself, and to exclude all the irrelevant ideas and associations that it might evoke. True, these could lead one toward the complexes of a patient, but I had a more far-reaching purpose in mind than the discovery of complexes that cause neurotic disturbances. There are many other means by which these can be identified: The psychologist, for instance, can get all the hints he needs by using word-association tests (by asking the patient what he associates to a given set of words, and by studying his responses). But to know and understand the psychic life-

Two different possible stimuli of free association: the whirling prayer wheel of a Tibetan beggar (left), or a fortune teller's crystal ball (right, a modern crystal gazer at a British fair).

process of an individual's whole personality, it is important to realize that his dreams and their symbolic images have a much more important role to play.

Almost everyone knows, for example, that there is an enormous variety of images by which the sexual act can be symbolized (or, one might say, represented in the form of an allegory). Each of these images can lead, by a process of association, to the idea of sexual intercourse and to specific complexes that any individual may have about his own sexual attitudes. But one could just as well unearth such complexes by day-dreaming on a set of indecipherable Russian letters. I was thus led to the assumption that a dream can contain some message other than the sexual allegory, and that it does so for definite reasons. To illustrate this point:

A man may dream of inserting a key in a lock, of wielding a heavy stick, or of breaking down a door with a battering ram. Each of these can be regarded as a sexual allegory. But the fact that his unconscious for its own purposes has chosen one of these specific images—it may be the key, the stick, or the battering ram—is also of major significance. The real task is to understand *why* the key has been preferred to the stick, or the stick to the ram. And sometimes this might even lead one to discover that it is not the sexual act at all that is represented, but some quite different psychological point.

From this line of reasoning, I concluded that only the material that is clearly and visibly part of a dream should be used in interpreting it. The dream has its own limitation. Its specific form itself tells us what belongs to it and what leads away from it. While "free" association lures one away from that material in a kind of zigzag line, the method I evolved is more like a circumambulation whose center is the dream picture. I work all around the dream picture and disregard every attempt that the dreamer makes to break away from it. Time and time again, in my professional work, I have had to repeat the words: "Let's get back to your dream. What does the *dream* say?"

For instance, a patient of mine dreamed of a drunken and disheveled vulgar woman. In the dream, it seemed that this woman was his wife, though in real life his wife was totally different. On the surface, therefore, the dream was shockingly untrue, and the patient immediately rejected it as dream nonsense. If I, as his doctor, had let him start a process of association, he would inevitably have tried to get as far away as possible from the unpleasant suggestion of his dream. In that case, he would have ended with one of his staple complexes—a complex, possibly, that had nothing to do with his wife—and we should have learned nothing about the special meaning of this particular dream.

One of the countless symbolic or allegorical images of the sexual act is a deer hunt: Right, a detail from a painting by the 16th-century German artist Cranach. The sexual implication of the deer hunt is underlined by a medieval English folk song called "The Keeper":
The first doe that he shot at he missed,
And the second doe he trimmed he kissed,
And the third ran away in a young man's heart,
She's amongst the leaves of the green O.

A key in a lock *may* be a sexual symbol—but not invariably. Left, a section of an altarpiece by the 15th-century Flemish artist Campin. The door was intended to symbolize hope, the lock to symbolize charity, and the key to symbolize the desire for God. Below, a British bishop during the consecration of a church carries out a traditional ceremony by knocking on the church door with a staff—which is obviously not a phallic symbol but a symbol of authority and the shepherd's crook. No individual symbolic image can be said to have a dogmatically fixed, generalized meaning.

The "anima" is the female element in the male unconscious. (It and the "animus" in the female unconscious are discussed in Chapter 3.) This inner duality is often symbolized by a hermaphroditic figure, like the crowned hermaphrodite, above right, from a 17th-century alchemical manuscript. Right, a physical image of man's psychic "bisexuality": a human cell with its chromosomes. All organisms have two sets of chromosomes—one from each parent.

What, then, was his unconscious trying to convey by such an obviously untrue statement? Clearly, it somehow expressed the idea of a degenerate female who was closely connected with the dreamer's life; but since the projection of this image on to his wife was unjustified and factually untrue, I had to look elsewhere before I found out what this repulsive image represented.

In the Middle Ages, long before the physiologists demonstrated that by reason of our glandular structure there are both male and female elements in all of us, it was said that "every man carries a woman within himself." It is this female element in every male that I have called the "anima." This "feminine" aspect is essentially a certain inferior kind of relatedness to the surroundings, and particularly to women, which is kept carefully concealed from others as well as from oneself. In other words, though an individual's visible personality may seem quite normal, he may well be concealing from others—or even from himself—the deplorable condition of "the woman within."

That was the case with this particular patient: His female side was not nice. His dream was actually saying to him: "You are in some respects behaving like a degenerate female," and thus gave him an appropriate shock. (An example of this kind, of course, must not be taken as evidence that the unconscious is concerned with "moral" injunctions. The dream was not telling the patient to "behave better," but was simply trying to balance the lopsided nature of his conscious mind, which was maintaining the fiction that he was a perfect gentleman throughout.)

It is easy to understand why dreamers tend to ignore and even deny the message of their dreams. Consciousness naturally resists anything unconscious and unknown. I have already pointed out the existence among primitive peoples of what anthropologists call "misoneism," a deep and superstitious fear of novelty. The primitives manifest all the reactions of the wild animal against untoward events. But "civilized" man reacts to new ideas in much the same way, erecting psychological barriers to protect himself from the shock of facing something new. This can easily be observed in any individual's reaction to his own dreams when obliged to admit a surprising thought. Many pioneers in philosophy, science, and even literature have been victims of the innate conservatism of their contemporaries. Psychology is one of the youngest of the sciences; because it attempts to deal with the working of the unconscious, it has inevitably encountered misoneism in an extreme form.