Response to Robert A. Segal’s ‘Jung and Lévy-Bruhl’

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It is a great privilege to be asked to respond to Robert Segal’s excellent essay on Jung’s reading of Lévy-Bruhl. After an illuminating introduction to the anthropologist, Segal gives a perceptive analysis of Jung’s indebtedness, concentrating on, although not exclusively drawing from, the text, ‘Archaic man’ (Jung 1931/1933). Segal makes the very important point that it is often in the valuation of so-called primitive psychological traits that Jung differs from figures such as Lévy-Bruhl and Sigmund Freud. Indeed Segal draws on Jung’s formulation of two kinds of thinking, ‘directed’ and ‘fantasy’, to show what was significant for him in ‘primitive’ peoples. Consequently Segal’s scholarship is an important addition to understanding Jung in the history of ideas, and even in tracing the development of western constructs of indigenous peoples. He begins to show just how much psychology has been influenced by the physical encounter with ‘other’ cultures.

Segal’s conclusion (a triumph of directed thinking!) appears to be the following:

For both Jung and Lévy-Bruhl, intellectual progress comes from exposing ‘primitive’ mischaracterizations of the external world...Science properly replaces myth and religion as the explanation of the world. There is no turning back.

(Segal p. 649)

And:

For Jung...[m]odernity is better than primitivism, but it is not the ideal state. It is a stage along the way.

(Segal p. 649)

I’d like to take these ideas as a starting point for my response. First, let me say that I am not going to disagree with Segal’s analysis; I am going to supplement it, to add another view. For my argument is that Segal has admirably analysed the ‘directed thinking’ of ‘Archaic man’. However, this logical edifice is far from the total matter of the text. An analysis of the rationality of ‘Archaic man’, in
my view, could be effectively supplemented by looking at its ‘fantasy thinking’. Put another way, Jung’s essays typically draw on at least as many rhetorical techniques as they do logical methods.

And rhetoric is not an adornment to Jung’s work. Rather it is a way of netting many voices, many aspects of the thinking/dreaming psyche into the debate. These ‘voices’ are deeply implicated in the matter of the writing. After all, at the end of ‘On the nature of the psyche’, Jung concludes of his science:

I fancied I was working along the best scientific lines... only to discover in the end that I had involved myself in a net of reflections which extend far beyond natural science and ramify into the fields of philosophy, theology, comparative religion, and the human sciences in general.

(Jung 1960, para. 421)

Such a description was never more true than of ‘Archaic man’ where Jung (1931/1933, pp. 143–74) generates different ‘points of view’ (a phrase often repeated), to signify perspectives from different parts of the earth and also diverse constructions of reality. Our enculturated question ‘what does Jung really mean by...’ is frequently frustrated by the lens provided by the many languages of science, magic, divination, anecdotes etc. For appealing to authorial intention as the guarantor of logical coherence in a text, is to regard the author as the rational one God of ‘his’ creation. Such a practice, consciously monotheistic, constructs truth as singular and coherent by the very act of casting out all that is ‘other’. Jung is quite capable of adopting ‘other’ authorial personas than the Christian logos.

Here, the text’s circling, repetitive, interwoven comparisons aim at a radical undermining of just that reliance upon logic or ‘directed thinking’ as uniquely valuable. What I am arguing is that ‘Archaic man’ performs its deepest achievement: it places the reader within its ‘net of reflections’ and it does so as an ethical act. I am not saying that the essay is against logic or rationality, or that it devalues it. Rather, I am saying that it works to undermine the sole supremacy of directed thinking in favour of re-placing it, changing its place, into a relationship, a net of reflections with the kind of ‘otherness’ that the term ‘primitive’ comes to represent in ‘Archaic’ man’s rhetoric.

To put it another way, while I can just about accept Segal’s ‘no going back’, to me the essay is about the necessity of ‘looking back’. So the argument is more multi-directional in time as well as in space. Mood, tone, playfulness, characterization are all contributors for, fundamentally, ‘Archaic man’ is dialogical: the reader is the necessary other person in its exchange of ideas and secreting of meaning. It is the reader whom the essay seeks to deconstruct out of a comfortable sense of complete distinction from, and superiority over, ‘primitive, archaic’ man.

This is how it is done.
Looking at ‘Archaic man’

In the opening paragraph, we are told twice that we are ‘apparently’ in a better position to ‘overlook’ archaic man than our ‘civilized’ selves. Of course this will prove to be the fundamental in-direction of the essay because Jung is setting up ‘different’ vantage points to get at his real subject, the modern European! There is also the language of colonial power here in the notion of ‘occupying’ space to ‘overlook’, and the ambiguity of ‘overlooking’ as not seeing, should be borne in mind.

Immediately, the essay begins to diminish the distance between these ‘points of view’. Jung is an artist of space and time. ‘Archaic man’ is a peculiarly lucent demonstration of how his techniques of argument, and the matter itself, turn on constructions of space (now) and time (later). Here Jung introduces Lévy-Bruhl and the ‘primitive’ belief in magic. He quotes (as Segal says without attributing it to LB), the story of the crocodile with two anklets in its stomach. Crucially, he brings in the perspectives of the people themselves: ‘The natives said . . . the natives maintained’ (Jung 1931/1933; also Jung 1964, para. 106). So now we have the viewpoints of the civilized on the natives and that of the natives themselves, to go with the earlier suggestion that civilized man has ‘archaic processes’ too.

So Jung then begins the process of bringing ‘primitive’ and civilized together, a process that he will never complete in the sense that he will not say they are exactly the same. Nor will he value them the same. Rather his aim is to get the reader to acknowledge the historical and archaic in him/herself. So ‘primitive’ man ‘is no more logical or illogical than we are’; ‘he’ merely starts from different assumptions (Jung 1964, para. 107). And the next part of the essay concentrates on the similarities of ‘primitive’ to civilized man in adaptation to his very different environment. True the ‘primitive’ has ‘a smaller area of consciousness than we’ but ‘his psychic functioning is essentially the same’. This illustrates Jung’s method of asserting likeness and unlikeness almost simultaneously in the exchange between rhetorical positions: the process of assimilation and differentiation sets up a dialogical reflective understanding of the civilized. We are taught to see ourselves in the imperfect mirror of the cultural other.

So the device of drawing together yet refusing to assimilate enables the essay to begin to open up the otherness within ‘civilized’ man. We are reminded that our rational belief in causality is a ‘sacred dogma’, that arbitrariness has crept back into modernity in quantum mechanics, and that ‘chance’ is detested because it reminds us of beliefs we thought we had forgotten in ‘Satanic imps or of a caprice of a deus ex machina’ (Jung 1964, para. 113). This rhetorical strategy of introducing the register of religion and the occult gathers apace when ‘chance’ is definitively called a ‘demon’ (ibid., para. 114). We accept chance, while not being able to explain it, a superstitious trait.

By contrast, the ‘primitive’ has ‘intention’ instead of chance. If a crocodile takes one woman out of three from a riverbank then he must have ‘intended’ to
do so (ibid., para. 117). But who told him to do it? Jung argues that ‘primitives’ have a perfectly rational need for religion in order to cope with the violent vagaries of their world. In a couple of paragraphs, the essay presents the ‘point of view’ of the ‘primitive’ as natural and coherent even if blaming a flagstaff for a storm appears illogical to the colonial ‘civilized’ mentality (para. 118). ‘Archaic man’ therefore encourages the reader to imaginatively engage with the ‘primitive’ as ‘other’, but never to totally identify with that perspective, one that is primarily marked ‘other’ by space.

After occupying the ‘ground’ of the other (no longer ‘overlooking’!), the essay begins to excavate the ‘ground’ of the civilized. It digs back in time to find another way of framing a dialogue between European and indigene. Grandparents were wont to point to the birth of two-headed calves as a harbinger of war (para. 120). We find chances often occur in sequences and here ‘primitive’ belief ‘precedes’ modernity. ‘Magic is the science of the jungle’, quotes Jung and will again (para. 121). Unlike Segal, I do not take the essay as saying that science merely replaces the magic of the jungle. Rather, I think ‘Archaic man’, as writing, is suggesting that magic and science need to relate to each other, in a net of reflections reflecting back their biases to each other.

Here, we are told that astrology and divination are the science of antiquity, so again the ‘other’ in space (‘primitives’ with their magic), reconnects with the other in time (astrology, divination of the European past) without losing distinctiveness from each other. The space-time link is made even more economically when the Pueblo Indian and Ancient Roman stand together as sensible followers of omens: a good reaction to a dangerous world (para. 125). Jung makes a rhetorically powerful move by putting himself on the same argumentative ground as the Indian and the Roman by telling of his dangerous trip to Africa in which his friend nearly died, and they both came to respect omens.

After establishing that primitive magic is ‘expedient’, the essay focuses on the relationship of the psyche with the environment in both primitives and moderns. ‘Primitive man is unpsychological’ because he does not distinguish between self and environment. This Jung claims as psychic projection, saying that Lévy-Bruhl called it participation mystique (para. 130). Segal does a valuable job in pointing out the gaps in argument here: that just assuming others have the same psychic processes is not really projection, and then also that seeing our own evils in others is not really what primitives do.

Yet, Jung’s language here is fascinating! He says we see our own evils as bêtes noires and ‘scapegoats’, which were formerly ‘witches and werewolves’ (para. 130). Previously he has noted how ‘primitives’ have bush-souls in an animal, crocodile, leopard. Now he uses the language of animals and the occult of the European imagination, past and present. Again, I suggest, he is aligning the modern occult and irrational past with the other cultural present, not to wholly identify them, but to develop a real perspective on the past, to make visible what modernity has obscured. Crucially, the language carries our ‘other’
consciousness, symbolized by animals in terms such as *bête noire* or scapegoat, into the modern present.

After all, what Segal does not include is Jung’s admission that ‘primitive’ projection *is* different because they are too ‘naturalistic’ for the moral judgements of modern projection, which is not to say that Jung’s analysis is correct. Elsewhere Jung gives more attention to why modernity’s projections are so dark. He concludes in the ‘Trickster’ essay that loss of myth concentrates the projection into dangerous shadow territories (Jung 1959, paras. 456–88).

However, here, the difference in projection between modern and ‘primitive’ is the source of an important ethical and eco-critical in-sight. The kind of projection that moderns employ is all about power. ‘Primitive’ man does not dream of ruling nature; modern man’s science is designed for little else. Arbitrary forces are resented by moderns because they frustrate the dream of controlling nature. The search for ‘natural causes’ is about attempting to find the ‘key’ that will allow modern man to ‘dominate’ the other as nature (Jung 1964, para. 134). Indeed, Jung says: ‘civilized man must strip nature of all her psychic attributes in order to dominate it’ (para. 135).

After a distinctly ethical and eco-critical realization of modernity’s difference from the ‘primitive’, Jung brings in religion, not science, as the cultural practice making the break from nature. Baptism is a rite marking transcendence of nature (para. 136). However, as the very next paragraph asserts, the spiritual is not securely *detached* from the world in either perspective as the ‘primitive’s ghosts and the modern’s séances demonstrate. This return to likeness between modern and ‘primitive’ is strengthened by another emphasis on the ‘primitive’ ‘point of view’. To primitive man the belief that intentions rule chance and sorcerers contact spirits is ‘perfectly natural’. In fact the ‘primitive’ notion of *mana* or a spiritually powerful person is a sort of very basic theory of energy (paras. 138–39). Science may inhere in myth in such a way that it needs the myth to be fully what it is. The stories of spirits and gods are no pretty addition to the primitive’s science. Rather the myth-story is part of the technology, the action of the science.

So with the possibilities that ‘primitives’ have a viable, yet culturally different science, Jung has acquired the standpoint, the *ground*, on which he can challenge the premises of his own scientific and philosophical tradition. As an intellectual descendant of Descartes, Jung habitually assumes a subject/object distinction. So the psyche is projected from ‘inside’ onto another. But he has noticed (*pace* Segal) that ‘primitives’ do not behave like this. To them it appears that the psyche is outside as well as inside. Might this in fact be the case and account for those ethereal ghosts, spirits and powers (para. 140)?

In a bold move, the archaic and modern materialist perspectives are brought together in each holding man to be the accidental product of the environment (para. 142). This is a clever rhetorical strategy in that it links the ‘primitive’ and modern viewpoints, without homogenizing them and without the argument’s persona, the ‘Jung’ adopting the position wholly. This new factor ‘materialism’,
comes in as another wedge to simultaneously connect and distance positions in the mind of the reader.

The last few paragraphs of ‘Archaic man’ are rich in human voices and cultural traditions. After noting the inconsistencies of both ‘primitive’ and moderns, Jung depicts his struggles to find a religious ceremony amongst the Elgongyi. A very similar argument is then imagined with a native of Zürich, who was found to observe a weird Easter egg ritual (para. 145). Although Jung says that archaic man does and modern man is aware of what he does, his example of the unsophisticated Zürich citizen does not bear this out. Sometimes the group distinctions are frustrated by the human variances within the categories ‘modern’ and ‘primitive’.

‘Archaic man’ ends typically as open to the reader’s preferences. Jung interprets the Elgongyi sun ceremony as sounding very like a prayer that may be said by any of the monotheisms: “Lord, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (para. 146). So he ends with the mystery marking a boundary in both sets of cultures: do our religions reflect a pre-existing teleological truth or are they merely artefacts of culture? By ending, ‘I must leave this question unanswered’, Jung’s rhetorical mode of argument is underlined (para. 147). The reader who has been exposed to the multifaceted (literally here many faced!) points of view of ‘Archaic man’ has come to see that ‘grounds’ for building an argument upon are multiple, and that plurality is part of the argument itself. ‘Archaic man’ is an argument about science and culture in the form of a web, a multi-directional dialogue between different positions. It is in effect a peculiarly lucent study of how space and time figure our ideas, our reason, and in particular, our perceptions of the ‘other’.

Segal’s brilliant essay links this topic of the ‘primitives’ in Jung to intellectual history. My reading of ‘Archaic man’ suggests that Jung is not simply embracing a science that rejects all magic. Rather, Jung’s web-like writing resurrects the many voices of the whole psyche who speak here through forms of otherness that include a number of indigenous cultures, the language of the occult (werewolves, seances), homely European folklore (grandparents and their two-headed calf), sorcerers, the naive citizens of Zürich, the crocodile who had intentions, ghosts, the missionary with the flagstaff etc. Put theoretically, the aim of such an essay would seem to be to deconstruct European (colonial) superiority by unpicking the simple division of people into modern or ‘primitive’. ‘Archaic man’ shows that the two groups are distinct yet similar, and in particular, moral superiority cannot be attributed to the moderns. The linking of modern science with the desire to dominate nature is a fascinating insight in this work of 1931. Making such a point in such a context is prescient.

Jung, as always, is building a science that can contain the openness to mystery that he finishes on here. The writing performs the model of knowledge that is the foundation of his science that includes the other (as magic, occult, other culture), not just rationally describes it. So Jung’s science takes magic seriously, which is not to say he takes it on its own terms as magic. On the one hand, ‘Archaic man’
is a powerful lens for future post-colonial and eco-critical preoccupations. On the other hand, the equation of indigenous present as ‘primitive’ and as similar to the European past is a colonial hierarchy of cultural value. Beyond all this is the rhetorical writing that draws the reader into a dialogue with otherness and many voices. To read this writing is to be inside the theatre of Jungian science. It is to experience magic in the science and the science of magic.

References

—— (1959). ‘On the psychology of the trickster figure’. CW 9i.