



Mythic and theoretic aspects of the concept of ‘the unconscious’ in popular and psychological discourse

by David Edwards

In Greek mythology, Typhon was the youngest son of Gaea (the Earth) and Tartarus (the underworld). Typhon was not a beautiful baby. He was a grisly monster with a hundred dragons' heads. He was one of the Titans, a group of powerful and dangerous creatures who rebelled against Zeus, the King of the Gods. The rebellion was crushed and Typhon was imprisoned under Mount Etna, the volcano in Sicily which was active in classical times and remains active today. It was said that when Typhon raged, the earth shook and Etna erupted.

Many such tales from mythology from all over world seem to dramatize aspects of our relationship with potent forces of which we have little understanding and over which we have little control. Many of these forces are less concrete than the forces of nature. They arise from our apprehension of our existential predicaments, our interpersonal vulnerability and the intensity of our own psychological pain. In many contemporary discourses this territory is referred to more neutrally as ‘the unconscious;’ but the unconscious will always elude our attempts to capture it in words.

The point is made succinctly in this poem by South African poet Don MacLennan (2002):

Poems are nets of thought
put out to catch
what can be sensed only
in a corner of the mind.
A poem never drains
its ground of silence.
Poems make you
see and touch and smell:
they bring the world closer
so you can live in it again.

MacLennan’s poem also points to the need we have to contact and express what is unconscious and eludes our verbal definitions. So psychotherapists have always turned to metaphor and myth in their attempts to capture and communicate about it.

We see this in the eloquent theoretical chapter written by Freud’s mentor, Josef Breuer, in *Studies on hysteria*, who refers to the Titan myth. How can it be, he asks, that we can at times have an intense and unexpected emotional reactions to an event? It is, he suggests, quoting from Goethe’s *Faust*, that

‘part of the mind [is] thrust into darkness, as the Titans are imprisoned in the crater of Etna. [From there they] can shake the earth but can never emerge into the light of day.’

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It is, he suggests, unconscious ideas' that are responsible for these inexplicable, unreasonable changes of feeling ...

the split-off mind acts like a sounding-board to the note of a tuning fork. Any event that provokes unconscious memories liberates the whole affective force of these ideas ... [which] is then quite out of proportion to any that would have arisen in the conscious mind alone (Breuer 1895: 229, 237).

Robert Langs has argued that the fact of the unconscious is an evolutionary compromise. With the emergence of the hominids, and especially homo sapiens, increased intelligence and the development of language enhanced the capacity for emotional differentiation and sensitivity. The deepening of attachments, which were the basis for ensuring that parents maintained interest in their children through the long years of childhood, intensified experiences of separation and loss. Furthermore, with the development of foresight, the anticipation of one's own death and that of one's loved ones became unbearably painful. In addition, 'a deep unconscious fear-guilt subsystem' (1996: 170) evolved to provide a protective mechanism against the risk of individuals becoming violent and murderous towards their own family and group members. As a result a complex array of difficult 'emotionally charged impingements' (Langs 1996: 134) became a routine part of the life of any human being. For all of this activity of 'the emotion processing mind' to remain conscious would overload the conscious system which was essential for ensuring individual and group survival. Consequently, the 'conscious defensiveness' (1966: 154) which is such a central focus of most psychotherapy, became an evolutionary necessity.

We human beings have a terribly limited awareness of our emotional states, the real motives behind what we do, and even of the broader patterns and finer details of our everyday behaviour. Human consciousness, Jung argued, is

but 'a late-born descendent of the unconscious psyche' (1931a: 350), which had evolved in response to the development of 'civilized life' with its demand for 'concentrated, directed, conscious functioning' (1958b: 71), for an internally consistent view of things and the need to mould oneself into 'an ideal image' (1934: 155). Despite this obvious truth, in much of our everyday discourse, both informal and academic, we treat ourselves as rational goal directed creatures with extensive conscious understanding of our lives (and even more of the lives of other people) and unlimited capacity for consciously directed strategic control over our behaviour. This sad delusion is often referred to as a 'heroic' view of human consciousness, a view that was reinforced by the emergence of science in the seventeenth century and came to be associated with Descartes' (1596-1650) famous phrase 'cogito ergo sum' ('I think, therefore I am'). History has been somewhat unfair to Descartes in this respect. He was well aware of the power of what he called 'the imagination' with its capacity to manifest in dreams and poetry and shape the deeper life of the soul. But the science to whose founding he contributed wanted nothing to do with the uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in these aspects of human life and served to reinforce the view that we could identify with our rational conscious intelligence and so master ourselves and the world.

For three hundred years, philosophers and poets, and later psychologists and psychotherapists would point to the contradictions inherent in this misguided perspective. Although there were attempts to incorporate the imagination as a creative element into science, these were quickly marginalized (Keller 1985). Science mistrusted imagination as the thin end of a large wedge that would legitimize superstition, and hence undermine its goals. Whyte (1962) argues that this simplistic and idealized elevation of the conscious life led, over the next decades, to the term 'unconscious' being used with increasing frequency. In France, in 1675, Malebranche

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(1638-1715), an exponent of Descartes' ideas, observed that 'the awareness we have of ourselves does not perhaps reveal to us more than the smaller part of our being.' In England, in 1690, Malebranche's follower, Norris (1657-1711) observed 'we may have ideas of which we are not conscious.' (Whyte 1962: 96-97). The romantic poets continued to use the traditional language that Descartes had drawn on: that of the life of imagination and the workings of the soul. In due course, however, the language of imagination began to converge with the language of unconscious processes. The poet, Coleridge (1772-1834) spoke of the 'twilight realms of consciousness' and articulated the 'subtle interplay between conscious and unconscious in artistic creation' (Whyte, 1962: 134). In 1860, the Swiss writer Amiel (1821-1881) was the first person to use the equivalent of 'unconscious' in French, when he wrote of how dreams serve as a 'reflection of the waves of the unconscious life in the floor of the imagination' (Whyte 1962: 156).

The concept of 'the unconscious' emerged in Germany. Goethe (1749-1832), spoke of how the Romantic imagination arises from 'the unconscious' which is where a person's 'root lives'. 'Poetry sets out from the unconscious', wrote Goethe's friend, the poet Schiller (1759-1805), who, a century before Freud, 'advised a friend to release his imagination from the restraint of critical reason by employing a flow of free associations' (Whyte 1962: 128, 129, 134). Carus' (1789-1869) influential book, *Psyche*, was published in 1846. This distinguished between different levels of the unconscious and was a significant source for a nineteenth century best-seller, von Hartmann's (1842-1906) *Philosophy of the Unconscious*. This discussed an absolute unconscious, a physiological unconscious and a psychological unconscious and went through nine editions between 1869 and 1884 and the twelfth edition was published posthumously as late in 1923 (Ellenberger 1970; Klein 1977; Schultz and Schultz 2000).

The paradoxes inherent in the limited conscious knowledge we have of ourselves are captured as effectively today by metaphors and images as they were over a century ago. Back then, Josef Breuer handed down to us another famous metaphor. His patient, Anna O. used the metaphor of "chimney sweeping" to refer to her recovery during psychotherapy of traumatic memories and her expression of the associated emotions. Freud, too, drew extensively on metaphors. He discussed tales of mediaeval nuns, who suddenly uttered "violent blasphemies and unbridled erotic language." They must have suppressed these unacceptable ideas, he speculated, but, rather than being annihilated, these ideas

enjoy an unsuspected existence in a sort of shadow kingdom, till they emerge like bad spirits and take control of the body, which is as a rule under the orders of the predominant ego-consciousness (1893: 126-127).

Freud frequently used the metaphor of depth. In the psychotherapy of Elizabeth von R., he speaks of how he developed an approach "which we liked to compare ... with the technique of excavating a buried city." This involved "clearing away the pathogenic psychological material layer by layer" (1895b: 139). Elsewhere, he refers to "ideas which are derived from the greatest depth" (1895c: 300), and speaks of how, by approaching "the material in the deeper layers" he hoped to "discover ... the connecting threads" (1895c: 293). Eugene Bleuler would use this metaphor when he coined the phrase "depth psychology" to refer to Freud's psychoanalytic approach (Freud, 1914: 41).

All this suggests that the split between conscious and unconscious is not just the consequence of the development of science and cannot just be blamed on Descartes. Robert Langs, whose evolutionary theory of the unconscious we referred to earlier, argues that language-based thought developed two distinctive modes so that some limited provision was made for the

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expression of the split-off contents of the emotion-processing mind. The one mode is 'paradigmatic/scientific'. This mode deals with everyday formulation of experience and problem-solving. As such, it 'served science and our search for logical truths and led to the emergence of a theoretic culture.' Alongside there evolved a narrative mode, which provided the basis for a 'mythic culture' (1996: 132). In this mode, 'shared anxieties and adaptive issues were dealt with by collective story-telling and myths of origin, death, warfare, kinship, and much more.' These narratives indirectly express, and provide a vehicle for processing, the emotional conflicts and dilemmas which are not addressed directly in everyday conversation. Myth and metaphor, story-telling and poetry are not just interesting cultural embellishments which emerge when primates have time on their hands. They are the central means, indeed the only means, through which individuals can process the repressed emotions evoked by the existential conditions and interpersonal conflicts inherent in human life.

Langs points out the serious disadvantages of this arrangement and concludes that 'the design of the emotion-processing mind is ... fundamentally flawed' (1996: 109). Unconscious emotions give rise to projection and distorted perceptions so that

an enormous number of behaviours ... are unwittingly dislocated from their true origins and therefore misapplied and maladaptive. We are remarkably unaware of the deep motives related to much of our emotional lives (1996: 170).

Thus, as a result of an evolutionary compromise, which secured advantages to the species only at great cost, it is our human predicament to suffer from 'the inherited disease of a dysfunctional emotion-processing mind' (1996: 194).

Mythology, then, is more than a set of old stories; it dramatizes the fundamental struggles of the

human condition. This was central to Freud's genius. On his first visit to Paris in 1885, he was impressed by the antique statues he saw in the Louvre, and, later, acquired a collection of his own (Gay, 1989). He keenly followed archaeological discoveries, and frequently drew attention to the way in which myth and drama revealed the nature of the unconscious. 'Here are my masters,' he said in 1926, as he showed a visitor the works of Shakespeare and the Greek tragedians on his shelves (Ellenberger 1970, p. 460). He was particularly pleased when his work was honoured with the Goethe Prize and wrote that the award letter recognized with unusual clarity 'the secret, personal intentions' behind his work (Freud 1930: 207).

Let us look at the ingredients of a famous mythic tale, which fascinated Freud, in which many of humanity's worst fears take on the power of self-fulfilling prophecies, and the protagonists, despite their best efforts, do the very things which are most appalling to them. A mother and father feel they have no choice but to abandon their newborn child, and leave him to die; a young man feels he has no choice but to leave his beloved parents, never to return; a father dreads his son's growing up, as he fears his son will become stronger than him and may even kill him; that son does indeed grow up and kill him; that same son breaks the incest taboo and has sexual relations with his mother; his mother, consumed by horror and guilt, hangs herself.

This, of course, is the ancient Greek story of Oedipus. A man who was raised by foster parents in a foreign land returns to Thebes, the land of his birth. On his arrival he gets into a fight with a local man over who will pass first at a narrow stretch of road and kills him. He does not know that the local man is Laius, the king of Thebes. He travels on to the city and finds its inhabitants are oppressed by a monster, the Sphinx, who ruthlessly controls it. Oedipus subdues this creature and the grateful citizens, whose king has, of course, just been killed, invite him to marry

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the queen, Jocasta, and become king himself. Oedipus agrees. Now he is at his heroic zenith, physically strong, intellectually gifted, a born leader, admired by all. Yet he is poised on the brink of catastrophe. Filled with righteous indignation that the former king has been murdered by a stranger, he orders a full investigation into who was responsible. As pieces of information are uncovered, a terrible tale unfolds as Oedipus learns a series of unbearable truths. At his birth, a prophecy had foretold that he would kill his father, so his parents decided to kill the infant and left him to die on a mountain side. He had been found by a shepherd and adopted and raised by the King of Corinth. When he grows up, a prophet warns him that he is destined to kill his father, so he leaves Corinth and vows never to return. Now he learns the awful truth — his real father was Laius, the king he has replaced. Worse still, this was the man he had killed on his arrival at Thebes. Added to this, he has married and had sexual relations with his own mother, Jocasta. Beneath the mask of the admired hero is a seething cauldron of violence, lust and greed and of emotional pain too unbearable to contemplate in the clear light of consciousness. The family is destroyed. Laius is already dead. Jocasta hangs herself rather than face the horror and shame, and Oedipus symbolically blinds himself by plunging a long pin into each eye. This terrible story helps us understand why in many ways we are happier if we are not aware of the truth, if much of our psychological life is relegated to the realms of the unconscious.

But Freud was caught in a cultural trap. Science was not content with metaphor. Although the central concepts of science such as energy, force and field were metaphors, in the domain of science they could be measured and mapped and became real entities. Freud wanted the same for the unconscious. This was the basis of his famous topographical model in which the human psyche was divided into the conscious, the preconscious and the unconscious, and his theories of the

vicissitudes to the transformation of the flow of energy or libido within and between these systems. This is where Freud became increasingly dogmatic and where many prominent colleagues could not accompany him. Adler and Jung were each profoundly stimulated by their conversations with Freud, but neither ever used the language of Freud's formal models. Janet whose expertise in hypnotherapy can still teach us much today, and who often used the language of the unconscious, alienated Freud by remarking that the idea of 'the unconscious' is useful as a metaphor (*façon de parler*), but should not be made into an entity in its own right, as Freud had done (Watson: 1968).

Adler's quarrel with Freud was totally different. He did not share Freud's view of a rigid divide between conscious and unconscious life, and rejected the concept of repression. He argued that individuals would escape from underlying feelings of insecurity by seeking to establish a delusional superiority, what he called a "guiding fiction". Since the guiding fiction is selfishly motivated and antisocial it "must early become unrecognizable, must assume a disguise, or it destroys itself." As a result, people fail to recognize the "circuitous ways comparable to secret paths" which are the source of their unhappiness, despite the fact that they are of their own construction. Adler's brilliant insights are deeply embedded within most of today's theories of psychotherapy, but Freud saw Adler's position as a complete rejection of his dynamic view of the unconscious. In ejecting Adler from the Psychoanalytic Society, he criticized Adler's work as no more than

ego psychology deepened by knowledge of the psychology of the unconscious ... Adler has tried to bring us, who gathered together to investigate the vicissitudes of the libido, nearer to surface psychology. (Colby, 1958: 71, 73)

Of all contemporary formulations, Langs' perspective seems particularly close to the spirit

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of Freud. Cognitive therapists echo Adler's approach. It is negative attitudes and beliefs about the self, which lie hidden behind intricate patterns of avoidance and compensation, which constitute the unconscious or tacit source of much of our unhappiness. This converges with the perspective of object relations therapists who see the root of our problems in fixated or damaged interpersonal schemas laid down in the early months of life, and the unconscious attempts individuals make to make sense of a life founded on such a 'basic fault', to use Balint's famous phrase. In all this, Langs argues, what has got lost is those aspects of psychological life that seem to call forth most clearly the metaphor of depth, and which Freud championed in his conflicts with Adler. He criticizes contemporary psychoanalysts in a manner that echoes Freud's rejection of Adler a little less than a century ago:

the fundamentals of the emotion-processing mind have gone virtually unrecognized Indeed the entire realm of deep unconscious experience has been neglected (1996: 200).

For this reason, Langs might not be comfortable with Teasdale's (1996) fundamentally cognitive stance. However, Teasdale agrees with him that there are two parallel and distinct cognitive modes of encoding meaning into language, which he calls the propositional and implicational. These coincide exactly with Lang's theoretic and mythic. Because the systems are functionally separate, changes in one system do not necessarily generalize to the other. This means that evolution also lies behind the familiar dilemma for psychotherapists: that apparently helpful insights turn out to be hollow in terms of promoting meaningful change. Making something conscious in the sense that it is rendered in propositional code, may not address meaning at the implicit or implicational level. Teasdale also points out that, by their very nature, propositional formulations never fully capture the subtleties and nuances that can be conveyed by implicational expression. This why

poetry can often convey something that cannot be easily explained in propositional code. This is explored in the movie *Il Postino*. Mario befriends a famous poet, Pablo Neruda, and gradually becomes intrigued by his encounter with poetry. On one occasion, Mario tells Neruda how a line in his poem has expressed an aspect of his experience which he could not himself have put into words: 'I liked it too when you wrote, "I'm tired of being a man." That's happened to me too, but I never knew how to say it. I really liked it when I read it.'

Then he asks Neruda to explain another line, 'the smell of barber shops makes me sob out loud.' But Neruda refuses. 'I can't tell you in words different from those I've used. When you explain it, poetry becomes banal' (*Il Postino* soundtrack). This simple observation points to the limits of relying on insight in psychotherapy and points to the value of techniques which use expressive methods involving poetry, dramatization, imagery and metaphor (Bolton 2001; Edwards 1990; Lyddon and Alford 2000). These work directly with mythic or implicational language. They not only capture the richness of implicational meaning, but can also contribute to changing it, without having to explain it. Langs' use of clients' narratives of everyday events as communications that automatically encode deep unconscious meanings is another way of working directly at the implicational level.

At its most reductionistic, for cognitive therapists, tacit knowledge and implicational meaning are simply those aspects of procedural knowledge which aren't connected to the language system. Although most object relations theorists might eschew this laboratory-based language, their position is much the same. However, many cognitive therapists, including Teasdale, have a secret life as transpersonal theorists. From a transpersonal perspective, expressive media such as poetry, drama, painting, sculpture and dance do more than express the unformulated experiences of pre-verbal and often

infantile cognitive structures. The unconscious is not a hidden programme inside us, it is a shared spiritual field that is all around us and in which we all inevitably participate. Jung was the first clear exponent of this perspective within twentieth century psychotherapy. He argued that beyond the unconscious material that could be linked directly to an individual's biography, lay a 'deeper layer of the unconscious where the primordial images common to humanity lie sleeping' (1942: 64). This was 'the collective unconscious' — he also called it 'an impersonal or transpersonal unconscious' —the site of 'ancient thought-forms ... as much feelings as thoughts' which were 'deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity' (1958b: 68), which had 'taken aeons to form' (1948, 93) and which are the inheritance of all, whatever their race or culture. This was more than a memory bank; it was a separate reality with its own autonomous existence. Thus he refers to it as 'an internal spiritual world whose existence we never suspected' (1942: 76). It is a source of 'an endless and self-replenishing abundance of living creatures, a wealth beyond our fathoming' (Jung 1946: 177). Furthermore, these 'living entities ... exert an attractive force upon the conscious mind' (1934: 142). These 'archetypes' or 'dominants' were powerful spiritual forces with 'their own independent life' (1942: 65). 'There is some justification,' he observed, 'for the old view of the soul as an objective reality' (1931a: 347).

This transpersonal view gained further impetus from the cultural impact of the widespread experimentation, especially since the early 1960s, with psychedelic substances and intensive spiritual practices such as meditation and trance dancing. Such experimentation was not confined to individuals of low IQ, hippies and dropouts. Many significant figures within the medical, psychiatric and psychological community were involved in personal experiential practices and with coming to terms with the implications of their experiences for psychological theory. One

of the most articulate contemporary exponents of this position is Stan Grof, whose book, *The Cosmic game*, presents a bold synthesis of transpersonal insights from psychotherapy with spiritual truths articulated by the classic spiritual traditions. He argues that psychedelic experiences disclose the fundamentally spiritual nature of existence:

The psyche in each of us is essentially commensurate with all existence and ultimately identical with the cosmic creative principle itself ... spirituality is affirmed as ... a critical dimension of the human psyche and of the universal scheme of things. (1998: 3)

It has, of course, been unfashionable for over a century to found psychology on spiritual principles. Such a bold exposition of the transpersonal perspective challenges the fundamental ideological presuppositions which our training has unconsciously equipped us with. Yet unless we can take it seriously, we will never understand the world of African traditional healers whose perspective is similar. For example, Credo Mutwa, a Zulu healer, writes,

behind life there is something fantastic ... things that are just as wonderful — if not more so — than those things that we do see. We ... delude ourselves ... that we are masters of our own destiny ... there are forces guiding us about which we know nothing (1996, 202)

For transpersonal practitioners, whether they are traditional shamanistic healers in Africa or elsewhere, or western trained psychotherapists influenced by contemporary transpersonal psychology, the fact that we can experience mythic worlds with great intensity does not simply mean that mind can imaginatively translate everyday human dilemmas into vivid narratives that include superhuman figures and ghoulish monsters. These worlds have their own existence independent of the narrow band take on reality which passes for consciousness in the mundane world. The challenge the transpersonal

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perspective presents is that ultimately, unless we reckon with these, our psychological understanding will never be complete.

So far, I have been reviewing some of the prominent perspectives on the unconscious within contemporary psychology. Now let me turn to something different: the way in which the term 'the unconscious' itself functions like a mythic entity both for psychologists and within the culture at large. If myths provide images and ideas which point beyond the surface of consensual public reality to other realities which are equally important but less easily rendered in words, then phrases of the form 'the ***** unconscious' often serve the function of myth. Such phrases first became popular in nineteenth century Germany. But they have lost nothing of their fascination and power and, still today, serve as a tool for discourse in a variety of ways. The psychotherapy literature is garnished liberally with terms like these. For Jung, 'the collective unconscious' points to an underlying spiritual matrix within which the individual experience of all of us is embedded. Contemporary psychoanalysts use the term 'the dynamic unconscious' to point to the same territory which Breuer addressed with his images of the Titans under the volcanic Etna or of tuning fork resonating to unseen vibrations. Ken Wilber uses the term 'emergent unconscious' to refer to what romantic poets had called the power of the imagination: the creative and transformational forces which may reveal themselves in dreams, images, art and mythic narrative. The feminist psychoanalyst, Lynne Layton speaks of 'the heterosexist unconscious' and 'the normative unconscious' to refer to the familial and cultural norms that automatically mould our attitudes and behaviour towards gender roles and to the wider socio-cultural matrix which is permeated by a complex network of ideological control mechanisms which maintain the values of what she calls 'hegemonic masculinity and femininity' (1998: 45).

Such phrases do not usually indicate that a precise map is being offered of a specific 'domain' or 'part of the mind'. They function, rather, as discourse markers indicating that unconscious influences on experience and/or behaviour are being addressed which share some broad commonality. The '*****' in these phrases points in the direction of the nature of that commonality. These phrases also imply that what is being referred to affects everyone in a similar way. Thus a term like 'the heterosexist unconscious' suggests that we are all influenced by a hidden matrix of the same kind of gendered assumptions. This is why Reid (1999: 58), who warns of the effect of 'unconscious cultural values' on the perspectives and feelings of clients, does not speak of a 'cultural unconscious'. His emphasis is on the diversity of the 'hidden cultures' (1999: 64) within which clients and therapists are inevitably embedded. Apparent 'resistance' from clients and failures of empathy by therapists often stem from the 'culture blindness' (1999: 78) unwittingly instilled by psychotherapy training which fails to alert trainees to the subtle impacts of the multiplicity of cultural perspectives.

These phrases, together with others such as 'the unconscious mind' or 'the subconscious mind' also exercise a strong fascination since they imply something powerful, mysterious and beyond our control. This is why, in hypnotherapy, suggestions may be given that the client is allowing his or her unconscious mind to assume control. Dowd (2000: 124), who is a cognitive therapist, avoids speaking of the unconscious when he is talking psychological theory. Here his choice is a propositional language that employs terms like 'tacit knowledge' and 'implicit learning', which come from contemporary cognitive science. However, when using hypnosis, he is quite willing to use the phrase 'unconscious mind' as a metaphor which will appeal to the client. For example, he might say, 'So your conscious mind, which you

use to pay attention, can take a vacation, can step aside and let your unconscious mind take over...’.

Discourses with an advocacy agenda draw on this fascination when they use phrases like ‘the heterosexist unconscious’. The message is, ‘Here are hidden forces which deeply affect us and which we ignore at our peril.’ Roszak (1993, 1994) uses ‘the ecological unconscious’ and Aizenstat (1995: 95) the ‘world unconscious’, in this way, in warning of the dangers posed by threats to the environment. This is also a transpersonal concept, since these authors see it as an aspect of the collective unconscious which ‘shelters the compacted ecological intelligence of our species’ (Roszak 1993: 306). Like the ancient concept of *anima mundi* (world soul) it refers to an underlying holistic field within which ‘all creatures and things of the world are interrelated and connected’ (Aizenstat 1995: 95-6). Through attuning to this field, individuals can experience the world not, as they normally do, in terms of the values of human material comfort and the single-minded promotion of economic growth, but in terms of the needs of all species on the planet. This presents a new perspective on the struggles and suffering of other life forms resulting from human activities which are systematically damaging the ecosystems on which they depend, and causing an accelerating extinction of species.

The ecological unconscious is generally part of the shadow (in Jung’s terms). We keep it unconscious because it is painful to recognize our alienation from nature and the harm our species is perpetrating. However, this alienation creates its own pain. ‘The voice of the earth is that close by,’ writes Roszak (1993: 305), ‘if we are, as the Romantic poets believed, born with the gift of hearing that voice, then turning a deaf ear to her appeal ... must be painful.’ Ecopsychologists point to several ways of creating dialogue with the ecological unconscious. Wilderness retreats provide a means of fostering empathic attunement to the natural world. When we ‘step

into the looking glass of nature and contact wilderness,’ writes Harper (1995: 185), ‘we uncover a wisdom much larger than our small everyday selves.’ They also promote confrontation with the unacknowledged pain either on the retreat itself or when individuals return to the everyday world and see afresh the ecological insensitivity which characterizes the way we mostly live (Greenway 1995). Dreams (Aizenstat 1995) and psychotherapy methods which induce altered states of consciousness (Grof 1998) can also give rise to encounters with the ecological unconscious, and integration of these experiences can significantly enhance individuals’ awareness and concern regarding ecological issues.

Finally I will look at the work of Bynum (1999) who advances the concept of ‘the African unconscious.’ He summarizes palaeontological and genetic research which have provided major advances in the understanding of the evolution of our species, We now know without a doubt that our species evolved in Africa: 4 million years ago, the australopithecines began walking upright; 2 million years ago, *homo habilis*, with a markedly larger brain, made use of tools; some 1.7 million years ago, the more advanced *homo erectus* could use fire and was the first hominid species to venture outside Africa. Our own species, *homo sapiens*, evolved in East Africa some 300 000 years ago; perhaps only 90 000 years ago, a small number made it out of Africa, where they consolidated a genetic heritage which would serve as the basis for the species in the rest of the world: there is evidence of *homo sapiens* in Malaysia 75 000 years ago, and in Australia shortly after that. By 30 000 years ago they had spread to South America, Western Europe, Northern Russia and Japan (Caird 1994). The separation of races with their distinctive hair, skin colour, and facial and bodily features, has been underway for less than 100 000 years and perhaps as little as 30 000. ‘Before that, Bynum (1999: 11) suggests, ‘all humankind was dark-skinned and Africoid.’ Consequently, he

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concludes, all of us 'are interwoven on the loom of a primordial African unconscious' (1999: xxv).

However, Bynum spreads the net even wider as he tells us that 'African unconscious' also connotes the personal and spiritual qualities which mark a distinctively African mode of experience. From this perspective, all things are experienced as interconnected and energized by an underlying life force; an affinity for rhythm, both bodily and musically, finds spontaneous expression in healing rituals, and consciousness is communally oriented rather than individualistic. Paradoxically, it can be thought of both as unconscious, in that it is experienced without being reflected on, and as a distinctive mode of shared consciousness. While this may be the lived experience of black (African) people, for Europeans it is part of the shadow, in Jung's sense. For centuries, Europeans have culturally repressed dimensions of psychological experience associated with their African roots and despised Africans and other blacks as primitive, emotionally uninhibited and lacking in intelligence. For Westerners to reconnect with their repressed African unconscious, argues Bynum, would offer a much needed correction to the materialistic and driven modes of consciousness which dominate their culture.

Bynum's African unconscious has yet another facet: The ancient Egyptians believed that a spiritual world underlies the world of appearances, and that individuals can become profoundly transformed if they engage in the right kinds of spiritual practice. These ideas, argues Bynum, were essentially an African discovery which developed within the first human civilisation, which began to establish itself in Nubia and Egypt in the Nile Valley, some 15 000 years ago. The African unconscious thus provides the basis for the potential for human spiritual transformation. It has other transpersonal aspects: the values and perspectives associated with it are, he believes, transmitted not

only genetically and culturally, but also through an interactive field which functions 'like a conscious and living world Internet' (1999: 100).

Bynum's arguments could throw light on a famous dream of Jung's. He was deeply affected by the silence and spaciousness of Africa as well as by the natural dignity of the Africans themselves. During his 1925 visit, he dreamed of an American Negro barber who was making his hair black and curly. The image frightened Jung and he interpreted it as a warning that he must not to allow himself to be swept away from his European roots: 'the primitive was a danger to me. At that time I was obviously all too close to "going back"' (1977: 302), he wrote. Jung's life was lived in dialogue with the deep spiritual heritage which Bynum subsumes under 'the African unconscious' and we have seen the affinities between his approach to psychotherapy and the practices of shamans. That he could so strongly recoil from whatever it was that he experienced as 'primitive' might indeed indicate an alienation from some ancient roots that is deeply embedded in European civilization.

Those who have no identification with Africa or being African might feel that Bynum has somehow hijacked the unconscious for his own political ends. Many of Bynum's concerns and perspectives coincide with those of other writers. Metzner (1994), for example, has pointed out how shamanic practices have been suppressed in the West for some 2000 years and points to the history of persecution of so-called 'witches' and practitioners of natural healing. He shares with Bynum the view that contemporary interest in ancient spiritual practices can be understood as a 'return of the repressed' at a collective level. While Bynum uses these ideas to promote a consciousness (or an unconscious) that is specifically black or African, Metzner (1993) offers them as a focus for revisioning the nature of 'European consciousness.' Grof and Harner (1995) have shown how rituals of spiritual transformation are found worldwide in the

shamanic traditions. In the myth of the journey of the hero or heroine, an ordinary man or woman leaves his/her simple home, ventures to a strange land, encounters obstacles in the form of natural hazards, monstrous creatures and fierce enemies, undergoes some form of serious illness, dissolution or death, is miraculously restored to life, and eventually returns to his/her simple town or village, with gifts of healing and wisdom which are offered to the people. Campbell (1956) showed how this underlying structure is found again and again in the myths of culturally different peoples all around the world and points to the fact that the potential for spiritual transformation has been encountered and realized time and time again throughout history and across the world. Can Bynum legitimately claim this as distinctively African?

Let me warn you that this is not the right question because it will lead us into futile turf wars which will be anything but transformational. A discourse analytic approach allows us to see Bynum's interweaving of so many diverse themes under the rubric of 'the African unconscious' as the imaginative forging of a contemporary myth of origin for Africans and those of African descent, a myth which could serve to enhance the dignity, integrity and spiritual purpose of contemporary black people. Myths of origin, stories of how a particular people came to inhabit a particular land and developed their unique culture, are a central mechanism for developing a sense of cultural unity and solidarity. Bynum's use of the concept of 'the African unconscious' is part of a political discourse of advocacy which serves to shake up Western stereotypes of 'Black' and 'African' and offers an imaginative foundation for the dignity of black people all over the world. As such he appropriates the mythic term 'the unconscious' and uses it to offer a much needed cultural corrective to the degrading and disempowering images and narratives which unconsciously influence all of us, both black and white, in our perceptions of racial differences.

To conclude, let me summarize some of the points made in this paper. First, so pervasive are the unconscious factors that shape our lives both individually and collectively that it is inevitable that myths and metaphors will abound in our attempts to bring these factors to awareness. These myths and metaphors may in part render our scientific understanding more palatable, but they also point to the limitations of the ideological assumptions associated with science in dealing with the scope of human experience. Second, if we follow Langs, we have evolved in such a way that repression is an inevitable part of our coping ability in a world that is complex and inevitably painful. The dialectic between conscious and unconscious aspects of our experience is a part of human existence, and myth and metaphor will always play a central role within that dialectic. Finally, a phrase like 'the ***** unconscious' is a tool of human discourse which helps us embrace the complexity that can lie hidden below the surface of culturally constructed consensual experience. As such it operates much more like a mythic symbol than a scientific concept.

To conclude then, I think I have shown that 'the unconscious' is a slippery term, with multiple meanings. Yet it points to profound existential truths about the nature of human life. So let me end with another mythic figure from Greek mythology: Proteus was the prophetic old man of the sea, who was believed to live on the island of Pharos, near the mouth of the Nile. People wanted to consult him because he knew all things, past, present and future. However he did not freely provide information and you had to catch him while he had his siesta at lunch time and tie him up. This task was complicated by the fact that he was a shapeshifter — he could change into a range of different shapes which often allowed him to escape. However, if one could hold him fast, he would at last return to his proper shape, and provide the information that was sought. Then he would plunge into the sea and disappear.

I began with the myth of Typhon which dramatizes an intuition about the roots of much destructive and self-defeating behaviour, a territory often referred to as the dynamic unconscious. By contrast, Proteus portrays a different and positive side of the unconscious, as a source of creativity, understanding and healing power. These powerful images remind us of the dilemmas and predicaments that confront us today as psychotherapists. The monstrous figures that lurk in the unconscious are not easily confronted and tamed, and the priceless gifts that the unconscious conceals are not easily tracked down or lightly bestowed. We have our own brand of mythic terms in which to talk to each other and to those clients whom we serve. The unconscious with its thoroughly Protean face, is surely one of the most prominent of these.

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David Edwards was born in Britain and studied psychology at Oxford. He moved to South Africa, where he has taught at Rhodes University since 1971. He completed his PhD in 1977 and in 1978, he completed his clinical internship in England at the University of Surrey. During 1984/5, spent a year as a post-doctoral fellow at the Centre for Cognitive Therapy at the University of Pennsylvania.

He has a longstanding interest in humanistic and transpersonal approaches to psychotherapy and has done experiential training with Stanislav Grof and Roger Woolger. He is co-editor of a South African introductory psychology textbook, which was based on a classical international introductory syllabus, extensively illustrated with Southern African research and contextual examples. He has published several papers and book chapters which are case studies or which examine case study research methodology, and others on aspects of cognitive therapy, including the treatment of social phobia and chronic pain, the use of guided imagery and the complementarity between cognitive-behavioural therapy and existential-phenomenological therapy. His book, *Conscious and unconscious*, in the series, "Core concepts in therapy", with Michael Jacobs, the series editor, as co-author, is about to be published by Open University Press.

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