Mark Harris: C.G. Jung and Picasso

In 1932, Carl Gustav Jung wrote a perceptive analysis of Picasso's psychology after seeing an exhibition of his paintings at the Zürich Kunsthauo. The analysis was published in the Neue Züricher Zeitung. The article offended many of Picasso's admirers in the artworld. In it Jung referred to Picasso as a Schizophrenic; which caused such a vociferous reaction that he later felt it necessary to publish an explanation. If his artworld critics had spent a more time appraising the article they would have seen that Jung's observations were made on the basis of clinical research. He believed that Picasso's paintings were interpretable from a psychological perspective in the same way that his patients pictures were. Picasso's use of disturbed and fantastic imagery indicated that such imagery was arising from his subconscious. From it's characteristics, it could be identified as being schizoid, as far as Jung was concerned. This pronouncement was not a condemnation because Jung saw in Picasso's imagery an important process taking place which he referred to as Nekyia - the descent into...
hell. To Jung this was very important, for only by undertaking such a journey could an individual ever hope to come to terms with himself spiritually and psychologically. Picasso liked Jung, had a great interest in symbols and it was from this use of symbols that Jung recognised Picasso's Nekyia, an experience that Jung also appears to have undertaken*. It was this that allowed him to speak with such authority about Picasso, although he was careful not to predict the outcome. Both Jung and Picasso practised forms of Alchemy. As far as Picasso is concerned this has been almost wholly overlooked by his biographers. Jung on the other hand openly introduced Alchemical principals to human psychology, much of which has since been embraced by psychologists around the world. With a similar intention Picasso concealed Alchemical meanings in his paintings, in the hope that one day his work might be better understood.

Carl Jung, in Neue Züricher Zeitung, 1932

"As a psychiatrist, I almost feel like apologising to the reader for becoming involved in the excitement over Picasso. Had it not been suggested to me from an authoritative quarter, I should probably never have taken up my pen on the subject. It is not that this painter and his strange art seem to me too slight a theme - I have, after all, seriously concerned myself with his literary brother, James Joyce. On the contrary, his problem has my undivided interest, only it appears too wide, too difficult, and too involved for me to hope that I could come anywhere near to covering it fully in a short article. If I venture to voice an opinion on the subject at all, it is with the express reservation that I have nothing to say on the question of Picasso's 'art' but only on its psychology. I shall therefore leave the aesthetic problem to the art critics, and shall restrict myself to the psychology underlying this kind of artistic creativeness. For almost twenty years, I have occupied myself with the psychology of the pictorial representation of psychic processes, and I am therefore in a position to look at Picasso's pictures from a professional point of view. On the basis of my experience, I can assure the reader that Picasso's psychic problems, so far as they find expression in his work, are strictly analogous to those of my patients. Unfortunately, I cannot offer proof on this point, as the comparative material is known only to a few specialists. My further observations will therefore appear unsupported, and require the reader's good will and imagination. Non-objective art draws its contents essentially from 'inside.' This 'inside' cannot correspond to consciousness, since consciousness contains images of objects as they are generally seen, and whose appearance must therefore necessarily conform to general expectations. Picasso's object, however, appears different from what is generally expected - so different that it no longer seems to refer to any object of outer experience at all. Taken chronologically, his works show a growing tendency to withdraw from the empirical objects, and an increase in those elements which do not correspond to any outer experience but come from an 'inside' situated behind consciousness - or at least behind that consciousness which, like a universal organ of perception set over and above the five senses, is orientated towards the outer world. Behind consciousness there lies not the absolute void but the unconscious psyche, which affects consciousness from behind and from inside, just as much as the outer world affects it from in front and from outside. Hence those pictorial elements which do not correspond to any 'outside' must originate from 'inside.' As this 'inside' is invisible and cannot be imagined, even though it can affect consciousness in the most
pronounced manner, I induce those of my patients who suffer mainly from the effects of this 'inside' to set them down in pictorial form as best they can. The aim of this method of expression is to make the unconscious contents accessible and so bring them closer to the patient's understanding. The therapeutic effect of this is to prevent a dangerous splitting-off of the unconscious processes from consciousness. In contrast to objective or 'conscious' representations, all pictorial representations of processes and effects in the psychic background are symbolic. They point, in a rough and approximate way, to a meaning that for the time being is unknown. It is, accordingly, altogether impossible to determine anything with any degree of certainty in a single, isolated instance. One only has the feeling of strangeness and of a confusing, incomprehensible jumble. One does not know what is actually meant or what is being represented. The possibility of understanding comes only from a comparative study of many such pictures. Because of their lack of artistic imagination, the pictures of patients are generally clearer and simpler, and therefore easier to understand, than those of modern artists. Among patients, two groups may be distinguished: the neurotics and the schizophrenics. The first group produces pictures of a synthetic character, with a pervasive and unified feeling. When they are completely abstract, and therefore lacking the element of feeling, they are at least definitely symmetrical or convey an unmistakable meaning. The second group, on the other hand, produces pictures which immediately reveal their alienation from feeling. At any rate they communicate no unified, harmonious feeling-tone but, rather, contradictory feelings or even a complete lack of feeling. From a purely formal point of view, the main characteristic is one of fragmentation, which expresses itself in the so called 'lines of fracture' - that is, a series of psychic 'faults' (in the geological sense) which run right through the picture. The picture leaves one cold, or disturbs one by its paradoxical, unfeeling, and grotesque unconcern for the beholder. This is the group to which Picasso belongs*. In spite of the obvious differences between the two groups, their productions have one thing in common: their symbolic content. In both cases the meaning is an implied one, but the neurotic searches for the meaning and for the feeling that corresponds to it, and takes pains to communicate it to the beholder. The schizophrenic hardly ever shows any such inclination; rather, it seems as though he were the victim of this meaning. It is as though he had been overwhelmed and swallowed up by it, and had been dissolved into all those elements which the neurotic at least tries to master. What I said about Joyce holds good for schizophrenic forms of expression too: nothing comes to meet the beholder, everything turns away from him; even an occasional touch of beauty seems only like an inexcusable delay in withdrawal. It is the ugly, the sick, the grotesque, the incomprehensible, the banal that are sought out - not for the purpose of expressing anything, but only in order to obscure; an obscurity, however, which has nothing to conceal, but spreads like a cold fog over desolate moors; the whole thing quite pointless, like a spectacle that can do without a spectator. With the first group, one can divine what they are trying to express; with the second, what they are unable to express. In both cases, the content is full of secret meaning. A series of images of either kind, whether in drawn or written form, begins as a rule with the symbol of the Nekyia - the journey to Hades, the descent into the unconscious, and the leave-taking from the upper world. What happens afterwards, though it may still be expressed in the forms and figures of the
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day-world, gives intimations of a hidden meaning and is therefore symbolic in character. Thus Picasso starts with the still objective pictures of the Blue Period - the blue of night, of moonlight and water, the Tuat-blue of the Egyptian underworld. He dies, and his soul rides on horseback into the beyond. The day-life clings to him, and a woman with a child steps up to him warningly. As the day is woman to him, so is the night; psychologically speaking, they are the light and the dark soul (anima). The dark one sits waiting, expecting him in the blue twilight, and stirring up morbid presentiments. With the change of colour, we enter the underworld. The world of objects is deathstruck, as the horrifying masterpiece of the syphilitic, tubercular, adolescent prostitute makes plain. The motif of the prostitute begins with the entry into the beyond, where he, as a departed soul, encounters a number of others of his kind. When I say 'he,' I mean that personality in Picasso which suffers the underworld fate - the man in him who does not turn towards the day-world, but is fatefully drawn into the dark; who follows not the accepted ideals of goodness and beauty, but the demoniacal attraction of ugliness and evil. It is these antichristian and Luciferian forces that well up in modern man and engender an all-pervading sense of doom, veiling the bright world of day with the mists of Hades, infecting it with deadly decay, and finally, like an earthquake, dissolving it into fragments, fractures, discarded remnants, debris, shreds, and disorganised units. Picasso and his exhibition are a sign of the times, just as much as the twenty-eight thousand people who came to look at his pictures. When such a fate befalls a man who belongs to the neurotic, he usually encounters the unconscious in the form of the 'Dark One,' a Kundry of horribly grotesque, primeval ugliness or else of infernal beauty. In Faust's metamorphosis, Gretchen, Helen, Mary, and the abstract 'Eternal Feminine' correspond to the four female figures of the Gnostic underworld, Eve, Helen, Mary, and Sophia. And just as Faust is embroiled in murderous happenings and reappears in changed form, so Picasso changes shape and reappears in the underworld form of the tragic Harlequin - a motif that runs through numerous paintings. It may be remarked in passing that Harlequin is an ancient chthonic god. The descent into ancient times has been associated ever since Homer's day with the Nekyia. Faust turns back to the crazy primitive world of the witches' sabbath and to a chimerical vision of classical antiquity. Picasso conjures up crude, earthy shapes, grotesque and primitive, and resurrects the soullessness of ancient Pompeii in a cold, glittering light - even Giulio Romano could not have done worse! Seldom or never have I had a patient who did not go back to neolithic art forms or revel in evocations of Dionysian orgies. Harlequin wanders like Faust through all these forms, though sometimes nothing betrays his presence but his wine, his lute, or the bright lozenges of his jester's costume. And what does he learn on his wild journey through man's millennial history? What quintessence will he distil from this accumulation of rubbish and decay, from these half-born or aborted possibilities of form and colour? What symbol will appear as the final cause and meaning of all this. In view of the dazzling versatility of Picasso, one hardly dares to hazard a guess, so for the present I would rather speak of what I have found in my patients' material. The Nekyia is no aimless and purely destructive fall into the abyss, but a meaningful katabasis eis antron, a descent into the cave of initiation and secret knowledge. The journey through the psychic history of mankind has as its object the restoration of the whole man, by awakening the memories in the blood. The descent to the Mothers...
enabled Faust to raise up the sinfully whole human being - Paris united with Helen - that homo totus who was forgotten when contemporary man lost himself in one-sidedness. It is he who at all times of upheaval has caused the tremor of the upper world, and always will. This man stands opposed to the man of the present, because he is the one who ever is as he was, whereas the other is what he is only for the moment. With my patients, accordingly, the katabasis and katalysis are followed by a recognition of the bipolarity of human nature and of the necessity of conflicting pairs of opposites. After the symbols of madness experienced during the period of disintegration there follow images which represent the coming together of the opposites: light/dark, above/below, white/black, male/female, etc. In Picasso's latest paintings, the motif of the union of opposites is seen very clearly in their direct juxtaposition. One painting (although traversed by numerous lines of fracture) even contains the conjunction of the light and dark anima. The strident, uncompromising, even brutal colours of the latest period reflect the tendency of the unconscious to master the conflict by violence (colour = feeling). This state of things in the psychic development of a patient is neither the end nor the goal. It represents only a broadening of his outlook, which now embraces the whole of man's moral, bestial, and spiritual nature without as yet shaping it into a living unity. Picasso's drame interieur has developed up to this last point before the denouement. As to the future Picasso, I would rather not try my hand at prophecy, for this inner adventure is a hazardous affair and can lead at any moment to a standstill or to a catastrophic bursting asunder of the conjoined opposites. Harlequin is a tragically ambiguous figure, even though - as the initiated may discern - he already bears on his costume the symbols of the next stage of development. He is indeed the hero who must pass through the perils of Hades, but will he succeed? That is a question I cannot answer. Harlequin gives me the creeps - he is too reminiscent of that 'motley fellow, like a buffoon' in Zarathustra, who jumped over the unsuspecting rope-dancer (another Pagliacci) and thereby brought about his death. Zarathustra then spoke the words that were to prove so horrifyingly true of Nietzsche himself: "Your soul will be dead even sooner than your body: fear nothing more!" Who the buffoon is, is made plain as he cries out to the rope-dancer, his weaker alter ego: 'To one better than yourself you bar the way' He is the greater personality who bursts the shell, and this shell is sometimes - the brain."

*(Jung added the following note in a 1934 version.) "By this I do not mean that anyone who belongs to these two groups suffers from either neurosis or schizophrenia. Such a classification merely means that in the one case a psychic disturbance will probably result in ordinary neurotic symptoms, while in the other it will produce schizoid symptoms. In the case under discussion, the designation 'schizophrenic' does not, therefore, signify a diagnosis of the mental illness schizophrenia, but merely refers to a disposition or habitus on the basis of which a serious psychological disturbance could produce schizophrenia. Hence I regard neither Picasso nor Joyce as psychotics, but count them among a large number of people whose habitus it is to react to a profound psychic disturbance not with an ordinary psychoneurosis but with a schizoid syndrome. As the above statement has given rise to some misunderstanding, I have considered it necessary to add this psychiatric explanation. *(Source)*