

## **The Return of the Gods – Retrieving the Archetype Concept in Sociological Thinking**

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### **Abstract**

This essay aims to investigate the various meanings of archetype and the criticisms of its use in scientific analysis, putting forward a proposal for its use in the socio-anthropological analysis of social culture.

Keywords: archetype, social imaginary, Jung.

### **1. Introduction**

As we mentioned in the introduction to this collection of essays, the concept of archetype has been neglected by sociological research for years, due to its often casual use but also to the fascination it exudes.

That fascination that encouraged its use and abuse; it is due above all to the prefix “arche” (from the Greek *arkhe*, origin, first principle, with *typos*, imprint, model) which relates it to archaeology, archaic, hinting at a meaning rooted in the dawn of history, in a sort of Saturnine age of myths and heroes; yet such a fascination files it away in a far distant past, still with a dimly perceptible glimmer, but which eliminates it from any analysis of the present.

It is not so.

### **2. Circumscribing the concept**

Archetypes are certainly at the root of myths and ancient narrations, but they are also at the root of contemporary narrations, novels, films, cartoons and videogames (Bartoletti, 2012). The idea that archetypes are “at the root” of many cultural narrations and social actions, above all of religious and ritual acts, should not be taken so much in the historic sense as in the structural sense. The emotional tension that makes social groups and various historical-social

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formations – across both time and space – construct systems of action, rituals, narrations and iconographies connected and stimulated by archetypal tension, is always at work in the depths of the social imaginary, a sort of continuous bass line that accompanies and feeds the construction of a good deal of culture and social action.

In this regard, we point out a divergence from certain statements that frequently occur even in Jung's thinking, statements which, albeit in an individual sense, seem to support the primordial idea of archetypes, also regarding time.

“From the subconscious there emanate determining influences which, independently of how they are transmitted, guarantee in every single individual a similarity and even a sameness of experience and also of its imaginative activity. One of the main proofs of this comes from the so-called universal parallelism of mythological motives which, due their nature of primordial images, I call ‘archetypes’” (Jung, 1980, p. 61).

The tension that we call “archetype” is generated with respect to conditions, questions, that are shared by all human societies across time and space, and towards which every society builds its own response in terms of actions and symbols in an effort to converse, manage, give a sense to phenomena as vital as they are unknown and uncontrollable. The construction of responses, including the precincts of the sacred, is historically and locally determined by the specific social group expressing it, although the question it is trying to answer is transversal in time and space, at least in our opinion.

In speaking of archetype, we need to separate the historical-symbolic system which in the various historical-social formations expresses it and the archetype itself, the ahistoric drive, the “demand”, which crosses time and space and is difficult to identify in itself in that it can be observed solely through its cultural expression within its historical context.

In the words of Jung, albeit always referred to the individual outlook:

“Archetypes are, by definition, emotive factors that order psychic elements in certain images (to be characterised as archetypic) and specifically so as to be recognized always only by the effects they produce”. (Cited in Jacobi, 2004, p. 58).

Yet we will immediately contradict ourselves in attempting to outline a possible definition of archetype.

We are clearly obliged to set out from Jung's reflections (Jung, 1977, 1983), keeping in mind that Jung's elaboration springs from and addresses individual psychoanalytical practice (in spite of his criticism of Freud), while our attempt

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takes as its aim the use of this concept of the analysis of social cultures and not in individual situations.

“A certain superficial level, so to speak, of the subconscious is unquestionably personal: we call it ‘personal subconscious’. Yet it rests on a deeper level that does not come from personal experiences and acquisitions and that is innate. This deeper level is the so-called ‘collective subconscious’ ... The contents of the personal subconscious are mainly the so-called “feeling-toned complexes” that make up the personal intimacy of psychic life. But the contents of the collective subconscious are the so-called ‘archetypes” (Jung 1977, pp. 15-16).

The collective subconscious, connecting all men transversally through time and space, is therefore inhabited by archetypes, whose ahistoric nature has been indicated from the beginning in opposition with the historicity of the personal subconscious. This indication is perhaps one of the most important elements in attempting to define the archetype, i.e., its historic and spatial invariance that leads the various societies to build symbolical-cultural responses that differ yet are all in answer to the same questions; questions through which we can identify the archetype. These questions generate a tension, and in each society this tension has to be resolved; the solution is of the symbolic-cultural type, expressed in symbols, images, rituals and cults. “...It is the sociological context alone, that collaborates ... on the modelling of archetypes in symbols...” (Durand, 1972, p. 394).

The tension, the pressure generated by the archetype in the various cultures is above all emotive. The archetype carries out its action even in societies whose rational aspect is by no means, or very little, developed, such as, for example, the neolithic and palaeolithic societies cited by Gimbutas (Gimbutas, 2005) with regard to the archetype of the Great Mother.

Even in Jung’s approach, in the relation between the collective subconscious and the individual subconscious, the archetype operates above all as a boost or as emotional energy (Jung, 1977).

In highlighting this aspect in his book “*Man and his Symbols*” (Jung, 1983), naturally still on the subject of the mechanisms of the subconscious, Jung underlines how archetypes appear at one and the same time as emotions and as images, even at the collective level, impacting above all as psychic energy, as emotions transmitted by cultural vectors that do not need rational analyses to be understood, as do images or rituals.

And this, therefore, the nature of emotional energy of archetypal tension, may be the first piece in our definition puzzle.

If the archetype works as an emotive tension, why should this pressure be so strong as to create a question imperious enough to force all cultures to furnish some sort of answer?

The reply is found within the contents of the archetypal tension referring to vital yet obscure elements of the human experience, epiphanies connected to the action of forces that are uncontrollable and incomprehensible, yet are of vital importance for the survival of the human group: forces for life but also for death, according to another of the archetype's features, i.e., that of containing within itself all aspects, however contradictory, of the tension it transmits. An example of this could be the archetype linked to the life-death cycle personified within the various cultures by the myths and representations of the Great Mother. The cultural representations of the archetype of the Great Mother contain and express both the beneficent and the terrific aspect of the Great Mother; they represent the Great Mother both as a life-giving and a life-taking force. In this regard, see the great fresco depicted by Erich Neumann (Neumann, 1981).

Despite the fact that the term "terrific" has changed signification in today's English, losing the negative and gaining a positive meaning, we have preferred to use it here rather than "terrifying" or anything similar, stressing that we use it in its classical meaning, now rare, as indicated in the Oxford English Dictionary; "causing terror, awe-inspiring, sublime".

The consciousness and the epiphany of an unknown force holding sway over the survival or annihilation both of the single person and of the group generate an enormous emotive tension that implies the need for a response to relieve the anguish generated by the awareness of impotence with respect to a force that is necessary but also obscure and deadly. And seeing that the insemination-birth-life-death cycle is common not only to all human beings but also to all animals and, to a certain extent, to all organic nature, the question, the fear, the anguish brought about by lack of control over such forces generated in human beings is identical throughout all human societies and throughout the historical ages of the development of human societies. In our opinion, this well illustrates what we referred to in indicating ahistoricity and territorial transversality as characteristics of the archetype.

### **3. Invariance**

The birth-death cycle still confronts us with two windows: one at the beginning, the other at the end of Everyman's life. They gape upon the unknown; and no irrelevant unknown since it is the fount of a force as yet unrevealed, of enormous importance for all of us and for all social groups,

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chthonic and hidden; a force that can strike as it pleases, and against which we are all but helpless; in brief, a force that holds us in its grip in spite of ourselves. This is something that undoubtedly generates a strong emotion and that imposes – not only on the individual but on the whole group – the urge to produce some attempt at communication, at speech, at the imaginary management of this force. Management that is activated through the construction of narrations, social acts and rituals often linked to the confines of the sacred which convince the group and the individual of the ability to intervene with, if not to manage, this obscure, vital force that benefits and terrifies at one and the same time.

This is an issue that all historical-social formations throughout time and space have had to reckon with. They have attempted to give some sort of answer, all different yet all related to the same tension, that of the life-death cycle, which is, so to speak, the archetypic motor, the emotional boost, the continuous accompaniment, that leads to the proliferation of multiple socio-cultural responses scattered through time and space.

The key to all this is the emotions; this is the strength of the archetypic tension which happily circumnavigates rationality, perhaps because it comes before rationality (Cerulo, 2018; Jacobi, 2017). And this is why the pull of this tension through the use of the symbols and social actions linked to it by the society in question reawakens the emotive boost and multiplies its impact in the communication and social actions that make use of the symbolic pull, in religion, literature, iconographies, advertising, military parades, in the theatre and cinema and so on.

This is perhaps a good moment to return to the concept of ahistoricity. As we said at the outset, generally the “arche” prefix in the word archetype recalls phenomena and reality issuing from a distant, buried past, while the emotive tension of the archetype and its emotive impact are present in all the societies that have come and gone over time, since the question imposed on human society by the archetype is the same, repeated in every age.

The archetype is no echo from the past but an ongoing bass line accompaniment in every society and culture. It generates its own influence and is used at any moment of the past, of the present and of contemporaneity.

This is because the unresolved tensions generating it remain constant over time and are common to the different societies in space, hence they once existed and they do exist.

Anywhere, at any time, human societies have found themselves facing the epiphany of forces that were vital yet obscure and ambivalent, forces that could manifest themselves vitally but also lethally, and that were completely beyond human control, although the human depended on them utterly. Every society and every culture, therefore, has had to elaborate answers to resolve this fear,

answers attempting to handle these forces symbolically and reassuringly, expressing them through symbols and images, trying to humanise them and insert them into that society's known world through legends, narrations and myths (Freud, 1976), trying to influence them through cults and rites.

The features of ambivalence, mystery and vital necessity, of “*Mysterium Tremendum*” to use Rudolf Otto's words, particularly for those archetypic structures that touch upon the “*Mysterium*” of death and rebirth, do in fact lead the archetype back to the sphere of the numinous (Otto, 1966) and of the sacred, in an overall cultural movement that we could call therapeutic in type, at least in respect of the emotive tension.

As Antonio Camorrino so lucidly points out, this was “The main ‘epistemological obstacle’ that seems to complicate reception of the prospect of the imaginary [and] comes from the assumption that ‘in the depths’ of the individual and collective life archaic instances persist, unmovable legacies of the inheritance of the species. It is therefore the cumbersome presence of the ‘invariant’, the spectre haunting the epistemological edifice of the sociology of the imaginary” (Camorrino, 2024, p. 201).

#### 4. Archetypic images

At this point I believe we need to be clear: not all symbols, images or rituals produced by a certain social group may refer to archetypes; they are not therefore at the root of the whole cultural production of a certain social group, but only of one part of it. We could say that this part is of particular importance, given that it developed in response to deep, vital tensions, to an anguish beyond real human control; however, we are not dealing with the whole cultural production of a certain society. Within this cultural production there are certain symbols, images or narrations that may be linked to the archetypic tension; they may encounter its evocative force and emotional intensity, hence becoming so really strategic as to be the use of choice in communication and in the cultural life of that society, which, as we said, means not in sacred or mythological aspects alone, but also in aspects of political and mass communication (Bartoletti, 2012).

This also explains why, in mentioning an archetype, images or narrations from the past immediately spring to mind. We refer to them as “archetypic images”, taking them as an inspirational model in structuring our present cultural production as well. Moreover, this has tended to strengthen the “arche” prefix as something that sets the archetype in a remote, mythical age. In the cultural productions following one upon another over time, some cultures become the reference point for those following them. The images they have

produced in the wake of the archetype become a typified iconographic reference, later to be defined in brief as “archetypes” by the cultures which refer to them. Thereafter they influence all later cultural production linked to the various different archetypes of the cultures that have affixed references to them. In our case, this happens regarding the cultural representations of Greek and Roman society.

Cultural products, images especially, representing the archetype in a certain society often take on a *motu proprio*, a sort of *Mana*. They are representations of the inexpressible, hence they transmit the force of the inexpressible that they express which could otherwise not be experienced. In this case it is the “arche” of the image that guarantees its expressive efficacy through the choice, perhaps across centuries, of similar images that have evaporated with changing history, bringing it closer to the supposed archaic nature of the force it transmits and represents. In the Byzantine world, there were images believed to have been impressed directly on the canvas by the saint, untouched by human hand; they were, therefore, like a “direct” reproduction, infused with a power little less than the original, “miraculous” images (Eliade, 1986).

## 5. One example: the “Mother” archetype

It is time to clarify these conjectures with a concrete example. In the wake of the most recent research that has used the concept of archetype, we will attempt to exemplify with the aid of the Great Mother archetype.

The Great Mother archetype is set by human societies within their management of the birth-death cycle. I cannot tell you whether it is the only one or the most ancient one, but it is certainly one of the pivots supporting the cultural constructions used by human societies in their attempt to manage the “mysterious and terrific” issue of life and death. The Great Mother comes above all from the need to give meaning and socially manageable sense to the mystery of life and birth, something which concerns not only humans but the biological in its entirety. But as we were saying, the archetypic boost springs from awareness of an unknown force, vital yet tremendous in its ability to give but also to take, whether life or death, within its dominion. This is well shown by the studies on the cultural representations of this archetype (Neumann, 1981).

To go back to the example we propose in a (hopefully) enlightening key, we wish to talk briefly of the symbolic aspects of the debate on gestational mothers (surrogate motherhood) and their recognition as mothers. This issue has distressed the consolidated figures involved in third-party reproduction contracts, i.e., the biological mother and father, donors of gametes but often

unknown and forgotten; the purchasing mother. Obviously only the biological parents have concrete genetic relations with the newborn, but the figures to hit the headlines have been those having little to do with this new birth: the purchasing mother and the gestational mother; not a single cell holding their DNA becomes part of the future child. And so? The purchasing mother is a legal, or we might say a commercial party, who exists thanks to the dominance of contractualization and the merchandise form in our society; she therefore has a concrete, recognized role. The surrogate mother should have less “weight” in the issue, whereas it is her role that has triggered ethical and juridical debate (see my preface to P. Di Nicola’s book, 2024, for further details).

So why have things gone differently and it is the surrogate mother who is often picked out as the “real” mother? We believe that it is because, among the various personages involved in the issue, she is the one who mainly recalls the archetype of the mother, so it is she who enjoys the most emotional impact and the greatest social legitimacy.

In the biological cycle from the falling-in-love moment to the new birth (including in this phase early breast-feeding), the only unmistakable, macroscopic evidence of the start of the travail leading to the new life are the changes in the future mother’s body. At least in our imaginary, the falling-in-love phase has no particular links with the new life thanks to contraception, and even conception, in spite of being clearly indicated by nature in the changed hormonal cycle of the woman, does not bring any obvious changes to the woman’s body; indeed in many cases it is possible to hide it if, for various reasons, the woman does not want it known. The strong, unmistakable change comes when with gestation progressing, the new life demands growing space within the body of she who, from the moment of birth, will be the mother.

The link between gestation, the change in the woman’s body and motherhood has always been strong, evident and unmistakable. I would say it is so in all mammals (humans and otherwise), and it is this archaic invariance among the world’s societies and human groups that is at the root of its enormous imaginal importance. A series of characteristics make it the perfect example of the birth of an archetype, in this particular case, the archetype at the root of the symbolisation of maternity and motherhood. It is a natural event that is evidently and unmistakably linked to the growth and birth of a new life, common to all groups and human societies, and not to them alone, but also to the entire animal world of mammals. It is therefore an experience that no human group can escape; whether the outcome is a human being or animal, it enriches and permanently modifies the group.

It is an evident example of the action of unknown, potent forces. They are powerful, unknown and not devoid of threat, like any chthonic force, hence they have – as we said – one foot, if not both, within the sacred precinct;

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chthonic sacrality, nocturnal, ambivalent fusion of opposites (Durand, 1972), thus possessed of that mixture of magic and menace that pushes the social imaginary towards the sacred in an attempt to safeguard itself against such a threat, or else to manage it. A bodily change in the woman that foreshadows the clear-cut change in social status, respect and the fear typical of whoever is within the sacred precinct.

We should not forget that the woman's birth cycle represents one of the central rites of passage in her life (van Gennep, 2012), since it includes both a change in life and a risk of death; like all rites of passage, this is why it also sets the demarcation of sacrality around itself that is obviously centred on the changed and changing body of the woman.

It should be noted that this feature of sacrality can be seen not only in the positive behaviour towards pregnant women but also in the negative, since both are expressions of the same fear and indeed of the ambivalent aspect of the force acting on life. This is typical of sacralising forces, since we are basically talking about a force that generates life; yet in governing life, it can also remove it and lead to death, thus showing how it holds life in its hands, being capable of both generating and removing it (Neumann, 1981).

The life-death ambivalence aspect of the vital force, epiphany of pregnancy and birth from the mother's body, and the ambivalence of the maternal archetype, are one of the roots of autonomous sacrality of the maternal archetype itself. It is therefore no coincidence that narrations springing from the religions of the Book, clearly misogynous and in the hands of male, monosexual priestly castes, in reconstructing a symbology within their own religious narration to express the mother archetype, have sterilised the aspect of the creative, and therefore destructive, force, basically sterilising the maternal symbology to approach the more reassuring aspects of care and feeding, preferring the aspect of *pietas* and breast-feeding to that of gestation. Even the *Ave Maria*, in the Italian version of the prayer, has over time passed from "the fruit of thy womb, Jesus" to "the fruit of thy breast, Jesus". But here we stress that the Italian term "*seno*", literally "breast", has a much wider, more forceful extension that goes far beyond the English "breast", including the sense of something "welcoming, nutritive". In our opinion, this is a good example of the definition of archetype, since we are dealing with something touching upon all human experience, something effectively set within the collective subconscious, yet something having an enormously important impact on the communities which experience it. It cannot be ignored, and it requires the construction of a refined symbolic-cultural apparatus for its management. It permanently alters the social structure of the communities in which it occurs. Women become mothers and change their status. Men become fathers, albeit with rituals that are clearly socially engineered seeing that there is no evident change in the man's

body to testify to his participation in the new life (hence the weaker archetypic force of the father figure, supported by narrations and social rituals but with no evident natural epiphanies). Other group members see their relationships change: other men and other women become brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings of the mother, etc.; they see their status change and they acquire new relationships and new duties, very frequently imposed not only by common use and expectation but also by law.

So the event is no small thing. It rests on the magic epiphany of an unknown force which, through the woman and her gestation, has produced a new life, a new member of the community. “Out of nothing” it has created something that previously did not exist.

Hence, the birth cycle carries within it all the elements needful to generate that archetypic spur that leads all cultures to produce symbolical narrations starting from that same event which thus becomes an “archetype” and moreover also has the elements needful to access, still on the imaginal level, the precinct of the sacred. When the force that supports the life cycle lays hands on the community of humans, when through the change in the female body the gestation of a new life is evident, then the action of this force from which we were all generated, humans and animals, is also evident. Knowledge regarding birth is now infinitely more detailed than in previous centuries. In spite of this, we believe this is why even in our imaginary the female body, altered by gestation and so by a generative force, yet retains the symbolic - archetypic aspect on which is rooted the apparel of motherhood, sacrality and the social status accorded to her. Mother is she who fabricates within her own body and gives birth to a new life, since this is the visible epiphany of the (sacred and unknown) force that governs life; a mother yet more sacred since in this process, pervaded by the life-force, she puts her own life at risk, for the vital chthonic force is ambivalent, as are all the sacred forces involved in life; they can give life, they can take life. The Spartan women who died giving birth were awarded the same honours as the warriors killed in battle.

At a more personal level, as my aunt used to tell her children when they infuriated her, “just as I made you, I can unmake you”.

So it should be no surprise, despite the biological reality we now know, that it is the visible epiphany of the cycle of new life to identify the apparel of motherhood, therefore the womb as gestation and birth, while all the other figures involved, whether biologically or commercially, appear decidedly colourless in comparison.

Hence the symbolic primacy of gestation and birth, therefore the womb as the seat and epiphany of the vital force; being rooted in this transversal biological reality with all mammals is what triggers the force of the maternal

archetype. It is the basis of the recognition of the expectant mother, the woman in labour, as the “real” mother of the new life.

## 6. Classes and types of archetypes

When we move on from the archetype as a general object of reflection to archetypes as observable objects, i.e., to archetypes in their symbolical, historical-social representation in stories, myths and iconographies, we find ourselves confronted by different types of cultural objects and probably different archetypic ramifications. This has led us to hypothesize a possible typology of archetypes using the many representations, widely diverse one from the other, that they generate in the various cultures. Essentially, the first division we consider appropriate is that between archetypic tensions rooted in the relationship between man and the natural world, such as for example the archetypes of the Great Mother and those essentially triggered from man’s social organization. What we mean is that not only in the relationship between men and nature are there vital, uncontrollable forces, but also in what we may call the protosocial organisation there are functions essential for the life of the society itself, fairly close to a natural emanation, which need cultural expression in order to be managed by that society.

As we spoke of natural archetypes in the first case, so in this second case we hypothesize the existence of protosocial archetypes, i.e., archetypes necessary for the fundamental survival of any social group.

One example might be that of the hero, a figure we find in all cultures and always within a scenario requiring sacrifice for the survival of the group, rewarded by living on as a “hero” in the memory of the group itself. We hypothesize that behind this cultural depiction found transversally across all cultures and in all societies, there may be a similar tension to that archetypic tension linked to the danger of death for the social group, which could in this case be simplified to the lowest common denominator as the “pack”. We observe yet again that this archetype too seems to have a root connecting it to the life-death cycle, on the side of life as a sacrifice guaranteeing the life of the group, on the side of death as the death of the hero and the death brought about by the hero.

Here we briefly propose a topic for thought. Even the protosocial archetypes and their representations have in any case one foot within the life-death tension, being social and not natural, particularly on the side of death. Just as the hero is mantled in death, so too is the king mantled in death, both his own but above all the death he, as king, can deal out. Being unable to generate life, protosocial archetypes frequently depend on their death-giving capacity,

thus approaching the numinous aspect of the life-death cycle, albeit on the side of death rather than life, being able to extinguish life but not to generate it. In spite of this, claiming for himself one part of the life cycle, in our opinion, leads to the acknowledgement of his archetypic root, and this furthermore is the aspect that brings the protosocial archetypes close to the numinous.

Heroes, warriors, sovereigns, high priests and assassins can socially deal out death and extinguish life, and in this they support one another, they possess a small root connecting them to the numinosity of the life-death cycle. This seems to be one of the dominant archetypes endowed with the greatest strength. Being unable to grant life without having direct access to the epiphany of the vital force, they can yet snuff it out; this is why they come close to it. I believe that this is unfortunately also why killers fascinate us so much, far outrunning their victims in collective consideration.

Killing in defence of the pack, of the group, whether “spontaneously” or legally or religiously is a vital protosocial function. It defends the order of the group from the chaos that might lead to its destruction, it takes control of life, albeit in the negative, it feels the reverberation of the archetypic life-death tension and its numinous cloak. Of this tension, as we said, they can but choose the terrific side; yet this marks a strong dissimilarity to the figures that express both faces of the life-death archetype. The Great Mothers in their terrific aspect are lethal too, yet they express both prongs of the archetype, while heroes and kings express only the negative one. In the wake of the paternal image, the protective aspect that they manage to express is of little value, since it is not directly linked to life, it does not generate in them natural epiphanies, and therefore it does not have the emotive impact of the figures which are in effect directly linked to it, in its creation or in its extinction.

Here we must observe that the aspect of being able to extinguish life as the link with the life-death cycle recalls the concept of violence, the violence necessary to commit this act. In the case of the figures we have repeatedly mentioned, violence is used in favour of the pack, to defend it, whether from an external threat to its safety such as an enemy or a natural catastrophe (the hero, in general), or from an internal threat undermining its safety by violating the established order and social life (the judge or the high priest). Violence (the social modulation of the most essential force) is therefore the instrument extinguishing life, it is what enables the link with the life-death cycle on the side of “death” and hence the sacred, numinous aspect. Violence, therefore, as the root granting these “protosocial” figures the link with the life-death cycle and hence with a certain numinosity, although – like this line of thought – it certainly is a hint for further investigation, not to be taken as proven in these few pages.

At the phenomenological level, obviously the impact of he who sacrifices himself for the group by his own hand is different from he who routinely,

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bureaucratically, defends it, perhaps relying on machines to kill, far different from the hero whose reward is fame and who, if he does die, has a double link with death. Here death, distanced from the hand of whoever deals it out, is tamed and disenchanting bit by bit when imposed by bureaucracy, even though a sacred aura remains in he who takes the decision. In this regard, it may be enlightening to think about the figures of the judge and the executioner.

The figure of the murderer, however, is special; he uses violence not to benefit the group/pack but for his own socially comprehensible yet incomprehensible purposes. In this case there is no connection to reinstating order and defeating any chaos that would endanger the social life of the group. Indeed, it is frequently the murderer's act that endangers this social order and introduces chaos. So, in the case of murder, violence is not tamed, so to speak, by logic or imperatives that infer the social, as in the case of many forms of deviance; it remains "wild", we might even say pre-social, and in this *sui generis* epiphany it is perhaps more natural and closer to the life-death archetype. The latter, in its chthonic mystery, cannot be domesticated for social and earthly reasons, paradoxically producing a greater impact and emotive fascination in the classic fear-fascination cypher.

At this point we wish to add a short reflection on two figures of heroes: as usual in our culture, Homeric heroes: Hector and Achilles.

We believe that these two figures may well illustrate the idea of the sacred nature of force itself, asocial and uncontrolled. In these two figures, the more "social" one is undoubtedly Hector. His commitment in war, his use of force against the Achaeans comes within the profile of the social hero who defends the group with glory as his reward. Yet for Hector this reward is paltry, both because those who would remember him succumb, and because his sacrifice is cast into shadow by the glow of the asocial "animal" force of Achilles. Achilles violates all social rules, including his pitiless treatment of Hector's body; yet his figure is aglow with fascination. If we interpret force as an archetypic expression, a sort of destructive side of the vital energy of nature, as blind and unfair as nature, yet with one foot in the numinous sphere, then the apparent contradiction is easily explained. In his inhumanity in the *Iliad*, Achilles is associated with the lion, with the violence of nature, pre-social and asocial, the force that delights in itself and in its beauty. From the human point of view, a force that is manifest in excess and in abuse. This is the figure of Achilles, humanly wretched but splendid in strength and vital violence (Bespaloff, 2018: 17).

From the archetypic point of view, it would therefore be more correct to speak of force rather than violence, as we may think of violence as one of the two prongs, the negative one, of force; we may hypothesize that the positive one is the idea of energy (Secondulfo, 2009). Furthermore, while violence is a

socially defined state of force, a force that is protective and lethal, creative and destructive as in Kali, it transfers into the social group the force that protects harmony from chaos and from the destructive force that leads to chaos. In both cases this force may extinguish life, yet in the case of the murderer it is less domesticated and socially justified, hence more muted than in the case of the judge, the high priest or the hero.

Also regarding the figure of the murderer, in the background we often see figures linked to arcane representations of incomprehensible, archetypic forces, such as the image of the devil or that of some divinity that guides the arm. In the case of the hero or the avenger, this is less strong, in our opinion, through the taming of the captured force domesticated within the rules of the social group.

It would appear that to be able to fully express its archetypic fascination, force must express itself without social domestications that nullify the numinous aura, it must be “natural”, pre-social, beyond right and wrong; blind, we may say, in its non-human and hence archetypically fascinating nature, in the positive (vital energy) and in the negative (lethal violence): a type of force that we find, not coincidentally, in a number of ancient divinities that were probably the symbolic expression of this type of blind natural force. For example, regarding a warrior there was talk of his blood lust which removes him momentarily from humanity and absolutizes him as an epiphany.

Such considerations are not without a certain fascination; we point to them here as traces that might well be further investigated, since we are well aware that we have merely scratched the surface of the issue.

We recall here that, from the female point of view, the epiphany of archetypic tension passes through the body that changes and that generates a new body; likewise, on the death-side of the life-death cycle, the archetypic link becomes ever stronger while remaining connected to the body of the actor instead of moving away through a long technological lever. We recall how, in many stories and narrations from the past, he who used bow or gun was considered a coward by he who used sword or lance.

From the point of view of the archetypic tension we find behind such figures, they appear in any case partial from the sacred point of view and cannot compete with the fascination and sacred impact of the figures which entirely express the life-death archetype. A comparison between Antigone and Creon I think gives the correct idea of what we mean. The mother’s words are sacred even when they lead to death, the father’s, less so.

It may seem a contradiction to say that certain cultural manifestations of an archetype are more or less strong, but in the case of protosocial manifestations, in our view, it becomes impossible to give a global representation of the archetype on the part of historical-symbolical products;

hence some representations are perforce more intense than others, particularly at the numinous level.

## 7. The Great Mother in Christianity

And it is precisely regarding the full or partial expression of an archetypic tension on the part of cultural products of different archetypic “intensity” that we can apply our reasoning to the Catholic evolution of the Great Mother.

And here we can already point to a first heuristic possibility of sociological analysis that uses the concept of archetype. If each social group constructs a different answer that comes from its own equilibrium and from its own socio-cultural set-up, then we can obtain information on diverse social groups by analysing how they have modulated and constructed their own response to the archetypic tension held in common with others, both directly and comparatively.

In re-interpreting the Great Mother archetype in the Christian religion, perforce with a male God in apex position, the problem of generating life, unequivocally assigned to the female, is transliterated into the eternal life granted by God, as we see in all representations of the Final Judgement. The female figure is deprived of the terrific part which becomes an attribute of the male God, leaving to her the caring, nutritional and accommodating role, as we said previously, which was only one of the two prongs of the archetypic representations of the Great Mother of the past who was, indeed, beneficent and terrific. The male representations, with a noticeable bias towards the terrific, of course lacked the beneficent representation connected to the giving of life; this is shifted into the narration of eternal life and final judgement, and in effect eternal life is granted by the male figures.

For example, as already said, we might offer a suggestion regarding the Great Mother archetype. We have seen the shift in the Madonna’s image within our own culture ever more towards the protective and nutritional aspects of the Great Mother of other cultures and away from her terrific, ambivalent aspects. There has been a distancing, Elias-style, from the carnal, for example with the shift from the Italian “*fruit of your womb*” to “*fruit of your breast*”, as we explained above, and this may be related to the passage towards the narcissistic, seductive and maternal-nutritive aspect of post-material society, yet countered with the dark side of nutrition as represented by drugs.

Perhaps a banal choice of example, yet I trust it will give the idea of the heuristic potential of this concept: an in-depth reading of social actions and the symbolic narrations socially shared and constructed, with the advantage of

regarding a tension, an issue that is deep and strong, urgent and common to all societies, with its corresponding comparative advantages.

This was what we meant in the preface to the volume that was the start of our thinking on the imaginary (Secondulfo, 2019) in speaking of “depth sociology”, of the structures that are not immediately evident but that have an unescapable generative force; to use a space metaphor, behind or below the observable socio-cultural phenomenology.

## **8. The main criticism on the concept of archetype**

Not only recently, and despite its attraction (or perhaps because of it), the concept of archetype has aroused doubts and criticism, maybe through its overly casual use, even when it ventured onto the scientific scene of psychology. Many have not greeted it with open arms. We refer here to Jung’s concept and its use in the psychoanalytical field, although some criticism touching on the overall concept or on its more sensitive parts can also be applied to the “sociological” version.

Over time, criticism has concentrated above all on three main areas of the concept: lack of empirical evidence, its ambiguity and vagueness, and the difficulty in practical application.

With regard to the lack of empirical evidence (Eysenck, 1961), we are still speaking of the concept in its psychoanalytic use. Criticism was concentrated on the lack of scientific proof supporting the existence of the collective subconscious and on the interpretations of myths and symbols considered too subjective, as well as the aspect of the theory of archetypes in general being too mystic and cult-related (Noll, 2000). From the viewpoint of its use as a socio-anthropological key, a number of authors have applied the archetype concept on the basis of ample scientific evidence, for example in archaeology, such as Gimbutas (2005), or on the basis of solid historical analyses of mythologies and iconographic representations layered through time, such as Neumann (1981).

Concerning the ambiguity of the archetype concept, criticism has focused on the fact that it is too amply and flexibly defined, which poses problems in distinguishing between the archetype and a simple cultural symbol. It also concentrates on the basic lack of a clear, univocal definition of the archetype concept; this makes its practical application difficult in research and above all in therapy (we recall that we are still speaking of the debate regarding the use of Jung’s concept within psychoanalysis) (Noll, 1999; Hillman, 1975, 2021). This criticism effectively touches upon a somewhat sensitive aspect of the problem, also from the socio-anthropological outlook. The archetype in itself is not directly observable; yet the cultural products, symbols and narrations whose

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production it stimulates are observable. It is, however, possible to distinguish between the type of archetypic tension and the differing cultural products that respond to it, as we hope we have shown in these few pages, and as we believe the authors cited above have shown. The tendential univocity of archetypic tension compared to the enormous cultural variety of responses produced by the various societies enables an easy distinction of the cultural product from tension, from the question, which stimulated its production. We hold that from this point of view Neumann's work (Neumann, 1981) is especially meaningful.

The last group of criticism on the difficulties of practical application (Hillman, 1975), in the way it was postulated at the time, does not directly concern the use of this concept in sociology and anthropology, since it was linked to the excessive universalism of the archetype concept and therefore to its problematic application in individual analyses, with the particularities and specificities pertaining to each one. This is certainly a problem also found in the use of the archetype concept in sociological and anthropological analysis; indeed, we may say that it is the key challenge in the use of this concept in such disciplines. Recalling the features of the archetype concept, in this case also the individual, specific differences of its expression in diverse cultures and societies become evidence of its worth rather than reason for its rebuttal in our view, being an intrinsic part of this concept together with its impermanence and the infinite variety of expressions it may present within diverse cultures. These pages attempt to propose the promising likelihood of being able to trace a problematic common tension from this infinite variety of expressions. In this case too, Neumann's analysis of the Great Mother seems to me to be highly useful to dispel this type of doubt.

Yet as well as such objections, laid out here to complete the discussion on the archetype concept, I find certain philosophical criticism of greater interest: that linked to the essentialism and the innatism of archetypes, contrasting strongly with the constructivist prospects developing within sociological thinking in the twentieth century.

In respect of the use of the archetype suggested by us in these pages, it is easy enough to answer such criticism, above all as regards contention with the constructivist conception of society and culture. The archetype incentive, the archetypic tension, in a certain manner is found outside the cultural reaction it stimulates in the various societies and cultures. It is this narration, historically and culturally determined, that is of the constructivist type, since it develops in singular, particular and often unforeseeable ways according to the socio-historical conditions of the various societies involved. The fact certainly remains that these multiple, self-generated cultural reactions seek to answer the very same question; in this lies the invariance problem of which we have already spoken. But this by no means calls into question anything regarding the

essentiality of the concept, since it simply concerns conditions linked to the common evolution of humanity. Humanity which, albeit in its various and multiple socio-cultural forms taken by this evolution, has been obliged to furnish an answer to a common packet of imperative and alarming queries, while doing so in totally different ways in each socio-historical context. That packet of queries is connected to certain common experiences, important and vital, as we have tried to show so far in our thinking, but which the various authors we have repeatedly mentioned have demonstrated more effectively.

As regards the archetype and its psychoanalytical use, a number of points on which Jung insisted in answer to criticism linked to the essentialism (Jung, 1980, 1987) of this concept may be interesting for our reflection here. Jung's answers underline how each archetype is filled with content from individual, cultural experience; however much it may supply a basic structure for human experience, the way in which it is manifested varies according to the context and the personal particularities of the subject analysed. Every subject, and we might add every society, expresses archetypes uniquely. Furthermore, from the moment when the archetypic expression or tension is manifested especially through symbols, the interpretation may prove difficult and evasive. We would add that however true this may be at the level of individual intrapsychic experience, it is much less true at the level of cultural and social constructions.

Certain criticism deserves a brief mention, criticism indirect yet precise, developed by Lévi Strauss (1967, 1970, 2008). This concerns his opinion that the excessive simplification brought by the archetype concept to the analysis of myths and symbols clashes with the idea that myths and symbols could spring from fixed, universal forms, but that they were the outcome of specific cultural and linguistic processes, variable from one society to another, therefore that the idea of essentialist archetypes was inadequate to explain the rich diversity of cultural expressions.

We first point out that both Jung and Lévi Strauss choose to investigate the topic of the existence of the deep roots of human culture, finding them one in archetypes (Jung, 1980), the other in elementary narrative structures (Lévi Strauss, 1967), in the wake of structural linguistics (Greimas, 1971). We can firstly observe that, albeit with different analytical approaches, one psychoanalytical and the other anthropological in type, we feel we see the same heuristic aim in the analytical work of the two authors. There is an important difference: Lévi Strauss finds abstract latent structures while Jung finds latent elements immediately expressed by cultural representations, therefore in some way personified with a decidedly stronger influx on the later cultural expressions that are the outcome, while the latent structures only form an unvaried canvas on which cultures weave their own designs. We believe, however, that this feature of the archetype does not limit cultural freedom of expression at the

historical-social level; it simply orientates one part of it and leaves the latent structures identified by structural anthropology free to condition the means of expression of such cultural expressions.

## 9. Conclusions

Lastly, we believe that the concept of archetype or archetypic tension emerging from the thinking of Jung, in an approach of adaptation to analysing phenomena that are social rather than individual – as is the vocation of Sociology – may be a useful aid in the analysis of the culture of a social group and in the comparative analysis between different cultures. In these few pages we have tried to suggest a number of “adaptations”, but above all we have attempted to show the most interesting features of the concept, in supporting its usefulness in sociology, particularly in that “depth” sociology that our proposal attempts to outline.

From our *excursus*, certain elements emerge that render the archetype concept interesting:

- Its transverse nature regarding the societies that unfold over time and space, a delicate affirmation, frequently found at the root of difficulties in accepting this concept within sociological thinking. Yet it must be recalled that specificity and cultural variability persist in any case, seeing that every society and culture reacts to archetypic tensions in its own peculiar way.

- Its nature that is above all emotive (Jacobi, 2017, p. 62).

- Its ambivalence; the tension expressed by the archetype is always ambivalent. As a “vital” and “uncontrollable or unknowable” force, it has a beneficent, positive aspect as well as the terrific, negative aspect. In its power, it can give and it can take, at will. Thus, in itself the archetypic stimulus is always two-pronged, beneficent and terrific, and this should be interpreted from the symbolic-cultural objects produced by the various societies. As we suggested in reference to the Great Mother, this production in the differing historical periods may exalt or else tone down either one or the other of the aspects of the archetypic stimulus, with a “partial” cultural expression of the archetypic tension. Furthermore, the ambivalence may be expressed as a feature of a single symbolical representation or else it may be spread across different representations, and these representations may even conflict with one another.

- Its link with the epiphany or the suspicion of forces and elements vital for individual life but above all for social life: vital, essential yet unknown forces, beyond human management but also beyond human comprehension. Vital yet unpredictable, unfathomable forces in their double nature, beneficent and

terrific, just like the frequently mentioned life-death cycle; hence its great link with the numinous.

- Its being expressed by cultural products (the only ones that can be observed), different in time and space yet sharing the queries to which they seek answers. Each historical-social formation constructs different answers, naturally deriving from the specific features of that specific social group constructing the answer, whatever that response may be: a magic ritual, a religious rite, a narration, a myth, an advertisement, a cartoon or a videogame.

- That the connection with the archetypic tension gives certain cultural products a greater communicative impact with respect to others, acting with special force on personal and collective emotions.

- That certain cultural products (images, narrations) have kept their symbolic impact over time. Produced by societies that have become a reference point for other societies following them historically and which have interpreted an archetypic tension in a particularly effective way, they have for this very reason remained alive over time and are thus indicated simply as “archetypes” precisely because the archetype can be observed and can develop its capacity only through the symbols that interpret it in each culture. And certain symbols work better than others.

- Not all symbols and cultural products are archetypes, only a few among the thousands that each culture produces; but probably these “work” better than the others.

Perhaps the moment has come to add this concept to the toolbox of sociology; this is why, in calling this research approach “sociology of the imaginary”, we added “and of depth”.

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*(A great deal of information that stimulated and accompanied these brief reflections benefited from comparison with material found on line through search engines or artificial intelligence, as well as with printed material).*

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### Post scriptum

In reading both Jung's works and those of other authors, there are various factual indications that come under the umbrella of the archetype idea. Naturally these are thematized elements, semantic areas of the cultural expression of archetype/archetypes; it could not be otherwise, seeing that archetypes can be

observed only through their cultural and symbolical historicization. Besides those already mentioned in these pages – the Great Mother, the Hero, the King, the High Priest, the Murderer – narrations are crowded with others. At times they are organized cyclically, such as the Hero (Vogler, 2010). Vogler identifies twelve stages presided over by as many archetypes (archetypic iconographies), but also the journey of the Hero is in itself an archetypic iconography linked to the archetypic iconography of the journey in itself and of the “road”. In such archetypic iconographies (hereafter briefly termed “archetypes”) the narrative advantage is both the emotive impact deriving from the archetype that they express and the fact that they immediately enable the audience to recognize the relational dynamics and universal challenges to which the protagonists are called to respond, bringing into play the ability of the archetypes to transcend cultural and historical specificities and speaking directly to the emotions. A reassuring effect, to the extent that the audience is aware of the overall development of the story it is invited to join.

From the Jungian point of view, we believe the archetypes mainly relevant among the many he proposes are essentially the following:

The Self: representing the integration and totality of the psyche. It is the high point of the individuation process, in which a person achieves a sense of completion and inner realization.

The Shadow: incorporating the dark, repressed sides of the personality. It is composed of traits and impulses that the individual denies or hides but that may emerge at times of crisis or conflict.

The Anima/Animus: these are the representations of the female in the man (Anima) and the male in the woman (Animus). These archetypes influence relations and the way in which a person relates to the other sex.

The Wise Old Man: symbolizing wisdom and the inner guide. Often emerging in the figures of mentors, philosophers or spiritual masters who assist the Hero in his journey, a sort of benevolent father.

The Great Mother: the incarnation of motherhood, protection and fertility. She may have the benevolent aspect of a loving mother, or else the destructive aspect of the stepmother in fairy tales.

The Hero: the central figure in many mythological tales, the Hero represents courage, determination and the struggle against adversity on behalf of the group. His journey is the road to growth and personal transformation.

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The Trickster: an ambiguous, unpredictable archetype who challenges conventions and introduces chaos and change. He is seen in mythical figures such as Loki or Hermes.

The Father: representing authority, discipline, the law. He may take on positive forms such as the wise guide, or else negative forms such as an oppressive figure, his negative side. A figure akin to the Mentor.

The Divine Child: symbolizing innocence, hope and the potential for transformation. Often present in narrations regarding rebirth and renewal.

We could think of them as “ideal types” of archetype, together with a number of others already mentioned, such as the Hero. Indeed, the journey itself may be considered an archetype; in this case, an archetype of transformation related to the Road, rooted in the life-death cycle archetype as an existential road between two opposing poles, perhaps with rebirth as often happens in the cycle of the Hero, but also in the hagiographic biographies of the saints. As we proposed, some may be put down to the man-nature relationship, others to the man-group or the society relationship (those that I referred to above as “protosocial”).

A further list of archetypes (archetypic representations) that is interesting and frequently used in narratives is that of the journey of the Hero (Vogler, 2010; Campbell, 2016). We consider it may be useful to give a short list of them here, seeing that they are clearly and frequently also Jungian versions or a combination of such versions.

In Campbell and then Vogler, although with some differences, the archetypes are organized in the “stages” of the “Hero’s Journey”.

The call to adventure: the hero is invited to leave the ordinary world and enter an extraordinary reality. This passage is frequently accompanied by the Messenger archetype who bears the invitation to change.

The refusal of the call: the Hero may initially hesitate or refuse the adventure through fear or uncertainty, reflecting the Shadow archetype that represents inner doubts and conflicts.

The meeting with the Mentor: the Hero receives guidance and wisdom from an expert figure, embodied by the archetype of the Wise Old Man or the Great Mother.

Crossing the first threshold: the Hero enters the extraordinary world where he encounters challenges and allies. Here archetypes emerge such as the Guardian of the Threshold who puts the Hero's determination to the test.

Ordeals, allies and enemies: the Hero faces hurdles and makes alliances. The Shadow is manifest in opposing forces, while the Anima/Animus may appear as the love interest or the travelling companion.

The abyss and the supreme trial: the Hero faces the greatest conflict, often with the Trickster or an antagonist who puts him to the test in some unforeseen way.

The return with the elixir: Having come through the ordeal successfully, the Hero returns to the ordinary world with a new wisdom or gift, completing the individuation associated with the Self archetype.

Some of these interpretations are clearly identifiable as archetypes, others a little less so, in our opinion. However, the archetypic cogency of both the overall journey and of the transformation stages remains valid.

As regards this preliminary outline we are developing, the most interesting ideal-typological distinction is, in our view, that between the man-nature archetypic representations and the protosocial representations, as we have indicated several times.

However incompletely and hypothetically, we can group the listed archetypes in these two ideal-typical categories.

Within the *man-nature* relation we set these archetypes (by which we still mean archetypic representations):

- The Great Mother, the Shadow, the Force, the Transformation, the life-death cycle, the Road or the Journey (with the connected image of the Searcher).

The following are *protosocial*:

- The Hero, the Self, the Father or the Mentor, the Guardian of the Threshold (albeit, according to how it is severally structured, this may also possess aspects of the "natural" archetypes).

For the moment, we are not sure of the placement of the others since they are lists which are as yet incomplete and inexact. We have set them down to provoke debate regarding the classification that ought to be the first step in an archetypic analysis of the various figures in order to identify them, as we did

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above, with, for example, the Murderer, the vital and lethal “forces”, beneficent and terrific, that are behind such representations. We are, indeed, convinced that such an analysis may bring to light both their working and the latent, deep features of which they are the epiphenomenon. This commitment is not easy; in carrying it forward one sees that many representations are intertwined and rest upon differing “tensions”. The impression emerging from this analytic commitment – we will spare our patient reader the details – is that, in the end, all or most of them are rooted in the life-death cycle, perhaps the mysterious, numinous force *par excellence* on which the whole archetypic structure must rest, wholly or in part. That, at least, is our idea...