

Flirting with re-enchantment: anima and objet petit *a*

**The Psyche in Transformation : Regional Conference
of the International Association for Jungian Studies
The School of Oriental and African Studies, London,
15-16 July, 2010**

When someone comes to analysis they are usually confused and in pain. One way of thinking about this confusion and pain is that they have had an inchoate experience of disenchantment. Something has been lost. A link has been severed. A container is broken. An attachment has withered. A projection has been unconsciously withdrawn.

One response to this is to attempt to cling to the previous state of affairs and deny the loss. Another is to try manically to leap over the debris to an imagined future. It is difficult to dwell in the land of disenchantment, disillusionment and dissolution. Something has drawn the person into this predicament and something is calling them out of it. Today I am using the concepts of anima and objet *a* to think about this something.

This exploration of Jung's concept of anima and Lacan's concept of objet petit *a* will necessarily be rather sketchy because I don't have an in-depth understanding of Lacanian theory, but also because there has been next to no comparative work done by others on the interface between analytical psychology and Lacanian theory and practice. An exception is McGrath's 2010

paper, 'Sexuation in Jung and Lacan'.¹ In addition there is the problem of methodology. Is there a method for comparing psychoanalytic theories? Aside from a paper by Barnett² in 1966 there is little to draw on in this area. I am not making explicit use of Barnett's work here.

My approach is more practical and pedestrian. For the past three years I have been working at the Centre for Psychoanalysis, at Middlesex University in London, which was started by a Lacanian and continues to have a strong Lacanian orientation. Part of my job is to teach some Jungian ideas and history to undergraduates and MA students. I feel that in that setting it is best to begin with the points of convergence between the schools and then move on to clarify the differences. So in this paper I am trying to make a bit of sense for myself of the similarities between anima and objet *a*. One similarity that is immediately apparent is that the concepts carry a wide range of, often incompatible, meanings within each theory.

For our discussion today I am clustering my comparisons under six headings: the empty signifier; desire; trace; bridge; psychosis; and therapy.

¹ McGrath, S.J. (2010), 'Sexuation in Jung and Lacan,' *International Journal of Jungian Studies*, 2(1)

² Barnett, Joseph (1966), 'The Structural Analysis of Theories in Psychoanalysis,' *Psychoanalytic Review*, 53A: 85-98

The empty signifier

Lacan uses the term objet petit *a* (the little a) in relation to objet *A* (the big A). The *a* comes from *autre* (other). So there is a big Other and a little other. He chose this terminology because he did not want to specify the content of the objet *a*. He claims that objet *a* has “the status of an algebraic sign.” Ross describes it as, “Absolutely unattainable... the name we give to that absence that structures signification, subjectivity and desire.”³ This absence, gap or lack acts as the cause of desire. The objet *a* is an answer to the question, “Who is the other?” It is an answer that leaves the question open.

Jung described the anima as X. He wrote in a letter that “X. is undoubtedly the anima, representing the coll.[ective] unc.[onscious].”⁴ He also writes that, “The anima... is a ‘factor’ in the proper sense of the word. Man cannot make it; on the contrary, it is always the *a priori* in his moods, reactions, impulses, and whatever else is spontaneous in psychic life.”⁵

The plethora of anima images should not mislead us, because according to Jung, “When projected, the anima always has a feminine form with definite

³ Ross, Stephen (2002), ‘A Very Brief Introduction to Lacan,’ [www./web.uvic.ca/~saross/lacan.html](http://www.web.uvic.ca/~saross/lacan.html)

⁴ Letter to Count Hermann Keyserling, 24 December 1931,

⁵ CW9i 57

characteristics, This empirical finding does not mean that the archetype is constituted like that *in itself*.”⁶

Lacan’s *a* and Jung’s *X* are the same in that they both refuse to specify content, but provocatively point to a space where something important is happening.

Desire

To begin with objet *a* was described as the object of desire, but from 1973 Lacan stated that it was the cause of desire. In Evans’ words: “From this point on, *a* denotes the object which can never be attained, which is really the CAUSE of desire rather than that towards which desire tends... *Objet petit a* is any object which sets desire in motion, especially the partial objects that define the drives. The drives do not seek to attain the *objet petit a*, but rather circle round it.”⁷

Nasio tells us, “Object *a* is the hole [in] the structure if you imagine it as the source of a sucking force that pulls and animates the signifiers, giving the chain consistency.”⁸

According to Jung, “... the soul lures into life the inertness of matter that does not want to live. She makes us believe incredible things, that life may be lived. She is

⁶ CW9i 142

⁷ Evans, D (), *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London: Routledge, p. 125

⁸ Nasio, Juan-David (1998), *Five Lessons on the Psychoanalytic Theory of Jacques Lacan*, Albany: SUNY

full of snares and traps, in order that man should fall, should reach the earth, entangle himself there, and stay caught.”⁹

Hillman argues that, “...her unknowness, ignites the compulsions toward her. She bears in her belly our individualized becoming, we are drawn into soul-making.”¹⁰

Jung ‘s anima is at play in a proliferation of images, all of which have an unknowable quality to them. Hillman observes that, “These lengthy phenomenologies of the notion of soul... do not have markedly erotic traits.”¹¹

The cause of desire, that enflame eros is not in itself erotic.

Trace

The objet *a* is the trace of the lost object discussed by Freud in *Mourning and Melancholia*, Abraham’s partial object, Klein’s part-object and Winnicott’s transitional phenomena. According to Jacobus, “In Lacan’s seminars of the late 1950’s and early 1960s, the evolving concept of the *objet (petit) a* is viewed in the *matheme* of phantasy as the object of desire sought in the other... a deliberate departure from British Object Relations psychoanalysis,”¹² The objet *a* is therefore the unattainable lost body of the mother, in particular the breast.

Jung differentiates between the mother complex and the anima.

⁹ CW9i 56

¹⁰ Hillman, James (1985), *Anima: An Anatomy of a Personified Notion*, Dallas: Spring, p. 15

¹¹ Hillman, p. 21

¹² Jacobus, Mary (2005), *The Poetics of Psychoanalysis*, Oxford: Oxford, p. 26n

In the narrow terms of masculine psychology, “The anima, being psychologically the female counterpart of male consciousness, is based upon the minority of genes in a masculine body.”¹³

In a broader sense anima like any complex carries the trace of earlier experience, trauma and affect.

Bridge

Lacan at first placed the objet *a* close to his category of the Imaginary, over time however the objet *a* became associated with the Real. For Lacan the Real is unrepresentable and unknowable. The objet *a* is between the subject and the Real. It is the “basic fantasy of restoring the lost link to the unsymbolized ‘real.’”¹⁴

Lacan and Jung use subject in different senses. I think that Lacan’s idea of subject is similar to Jung’s concept of self, though this is another area that needs clarification.

While It would not make much sense in a Jungian context to say that the anima lies between the self and the collective unconscious, we can see that objet *a* and anima both perform bridging functions within their respective theories.

¹³ Letter to Canon H.G. England, 8 Jan. 1948

¹⁴ Kirshner, Lewis A. (2005), ‘Rethinking Desire: The *Objet Petit a* in Lacanian Theory,’ *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 53, pp. 82-3

The anima is between the ego and the collective unconscious. As Jung says, “The anima mediates between consciousness and the collective unconscious.”¹⁵ Anima according to Jung, “live[s] and function[s]... especially in that phylogenetic substratum which I have called the collective unconscious... [It] bring[s] into our ephemeral consciousness an unknown psychic life belonging to a remote past. It is the mind of our unknown ancestors.”¹⁶

Psychosis

This relation with the Real and the collective unconscious means that objet *a* and anima are connected to psychosis. While not in itself psychotic, the link with the Real, with primitive part-objects, anxiety, unattainability and loss mean that objet *a* must have a role in the development of psychosis. For example this description by Lacan of what he calls the cut has plenty of fuel for psychotic phantasy:

“The lips, the enclosure formed by the teeth, the rim of the anus, the tip of the penis, the vagina, the slit formed by the eyelids... Observe that this mark of the cut is no less obviously present in the object described by analytic theory: the nipple, faeces, the phallus (imaginary object), the urinary flow... (A list unthinkable without adding as I do, the phoneme, the gaze, the voice, - the nothing). For is it not obvious that this feature, this partial feature, rightly

¹⁵ CW14 498 n381

¹⁶ CW9i 518

emphasized in objects, is applicable not because these objects are part of a total object, the body, but because they represent only partially the function that produces them.”¹⁷

Jung links anima and psychosis. The anima’s “irruption into consciousness often amounts to a psychosis.” “Unlike other contents, the [anima and animus] always remain strangers to the world of consciousness, unwelcome intruders saturating the atmosphere with uncanny forebodings or even with the fear of madness.” “They [anima and animus] undoubtedly belong to the material that comes to light in schizophrenia” (CW9i 517-20)

Hillman observes that, “it is precisely this psychic unconsciousness, beyond the reach of insight and knowledge, that the anima mediates. She makes us unconscious. As she is the very craziness of life, she drives us crazy... Union with anima also means union with my psychosis, my fear of madness, my suicide.”¹⁸

Therapy

Returning to the disenchanting person who has appeared in the consulting room. The psyche is being animated by something outside of consciousness that is in turns maddening and enlivening. It is normal that through transference this

¹⁷ Lacan, Jacques (), *Ecrits*, p. 315

¹⁸ Hillman, p. 135

something is located in the analyst. The flirtations with disenchantment and re-enchantment can be simultaneously resistances to analysis and spurs to analysis.

For Jung the anima “sums up everything that a man can never get the better of and never finishes coping with.” The encounter with the anima is the “masterpiece” of individual development. For some Lacanians the object *petit a* is *the* analytic object.

Schneiderman observes that within Lacanian analysis, “If the analyst during the analysis will come to be this object, he will also at the end of analysis not be it. He will submit himself to the fate of any object that stand in for *a*, and that is to be discarded.”¹⁹ The analyst is experienced as “the cause of the analysand’s desire.”²⁰

It seems to me that therapy offers neither cure nor re-enchantment. In a sense it doesn’t offer disenchantment either. Therapy is not about disenchantment and re-enchantment. It is about hearing and receiving the next word, the next thought, the next breath, the next transference. The analyst is not there to play the disenchantment/re-enchantment game, but to pay attention.

Disenchantment and re-enchantment happen. The client comes and goes. With any luck the analyst has, in Winnicott’s words, been alive and awake throughout.

¹⁹ Schneiderman, Stuart (1980), *Returning to Freud*, New York:--, p. 8

²⁰ Evans, D (), *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Analysis*, London: Routledge

Jung says of the anima, “She represents the longing that has always to be sacrificed.”²¹ Every thought, dream, gesture is an expression of longing. Free association, active imagination involve taking up one desire at a time only to relinquish it when time is up or, perhaps, being taken up ourselves by one desire at a time until the wave has passed.

Conclusion

Having sifted through my little baskets: the empty signifier, desire, trace, bridge, psychosis and therapy, there are a few things I can take from this exercise.

The first is that all archetypal images can be characterised as versions of *objet a*. While there are some striking resonances between anima, specifically, and object *a*, every archetypal image can be said to function as a cause of desire, as an attractor, because it has at its core the unknowable trace of an archetype.

Secondly, the concept of *objet a*, with its focus on the unattainable provides a corrective to tendencies to be overly concrete when thinking of anima images.

Thirdly, *objet a* and anima are both sites of anxiety and pathology.

Fourthly, it is good to remember Kirshner words: “It should be obvious that actual loving relationships between partners cannot be explained by an abstract concept like the *objet petit a*, any more than by the Freudian notion of libido.

²¹ CW16 438

Both terms are basically metapsychological constructs attempting to bridge the impossible gap between biological and psychological (subjective) existence.”²²

We can add the notion of the anima to his list. This touches again on the issue of how to compare and evaluate metapsychological constructs.

C.P. Cavafy’s poem Ithaca consists of advice for how to comport oneself on the journey from Troy to Ithaca. At the end of the poem he address the question of expectations, or, in modern terms, outcomes. He has a rather cryptic, unsatisfactory answer. Speaking of the journey he says:

It is better to let it last for long years;
and even to anchor at the isle when you are old
rich with all that you have gained on the way,
not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.

Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.
Without her you would never have taken the road.
But she has nothing more to give you.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not defrauded you.
With the great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience,
You must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean.

Or – we *might* say:

With the great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience,
You must surely have understood by then what animas mean...
what objet *a*’s mean.

²² Kirshner, Lewis A. (2005), ‘Rethinking Desire: The *Objet Petit a* in Lacanian Theory,’ *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 53, p. 85