

Historical Eras as Alchemical Vessels

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This is a paper about how a period of time can carry and hold psychic energy. My thesis is that various archetypal energies can dominate certain regions of psyche, which are mapped onto our experience as geographical areas during some period of time. I am interested in how that psychic space gathers, holds and transmits energy in that space-time and how that process impacts the overall energy configuration of psyche to change our approach to the future and create nostalgia.

I will use the 1000 years between the time of the biographical Arthur and the end of the middle ages as an example of this psychic activity. I am not referring to the myths, such as those of Arthur, which we associate with that era, but the era itself. First I will frame that period with an alchemical and a heroic mythological motif. I will then propose a psychic structure that explains the period using energy and field theory.

We normally think of alchemy as a process that works to change either the chemical structure of physical materials or the psychological structures of people. Societies, cultures and eras also have structures. Is their process of change an alchemical one? If so, we should be able to observe certain archetypes (alchetypes?) such as the prima materia, the alchemist, various alchemical processes, and the transformation into the philosopher's stone, which in this case I believe is the Arthurian mythology.

We know that "The first step in creating the philosopher's stone was to find the right material, which was called the prima materia. Alchemists would find a substance they thought contained it and subject it to a number of operations to destroy the original form and reduce it to a preformed state, the prima materia" (Raff XX.)

As the preformed state, the prima materia must be archetypal, which is also prior to form. I believe the prima materia of the Middle Ages is the archetypes of Arthur's life. The biographical King Arthur is the original form which was subject to a number of operations until it was reduced to the preformed state, which is the archetypes, the prima materia.

Because “Social and political problems are central to the grail legends,” (Smith) we can add them to the prima materia. If they were initially in the background, we can think of them as having been put in the legends less consciously than the heroic deeds. This placement by the unconscious is something else we associate with the prima materia, because if the conscious placed something it would be a lot easier for us to find it again. Instead, the prima materia stays hidden and we become aware of the social commentary at a later time, when the consciousness of the age is more in tune with certain frequencies of the prima materia.

The alchemist of an age cannot be a single person, but must be a collection operating out of a divinely inspired alchemical impulse that permeates the age and makes the changes from the bottom up through many human actions. If the Arthurian mythology was the philosopher’s stone, then the alchemist could have been the collection of writers, troubadours and bards who were inspired to create the mythology.

Change is accomplished through various alchemical processes, so we should be able to see some of them operating in the era. Lancelot could be Calciniatio, in which "you take an intense heat to heat a solid and dry the water and volatilize the elements" (Gottlieb.) Lancelot’s passion provided the heat, the fellowship of the Roundtable was the solid and Arthur and Guinevere were among the elements that were volatilized.

The Dark Ages are the nigredo. "The black image world is called the nigredo. According to alchemy the nigredo is the initial phase of every process in which a transformation of form takes place" (Bosnak 63.) The initial phase in the transformation of archetypes into mythology starts in our search for the “real” Arthur back in the Dark Ages.

The first coniunctio occurred when the archetypes of the unconscious and the conscious creative impulse engaged each other and created the legends. Layamon added Arthur’s death and mortal wound to the legends because "the coniunctio is very frequently associated with death" (Raff 113.)

The coniunctio itself dies in a way, but we don’t have to start over after each coniunctio. Rather, "All the energy of the self, as it appeared in the first coniunctio, is preserved and embodied in the self as it appears in the second level union...the essence of the self is the same at every level so that its blood or essential core is never

lost, but fed to the center as it emerges at the next level" (Raff 209.) Arthur himself, who represented the first coniunctio, dies and the legend promises that he will return at the next level.

The self, which is the idea under the legends, need form. "A process must occur to fix the self in place. When this is fully accomplished, the process has reached the second coniunctio" (Raff 123.) The essence of Arthur returns for the second coniunctio and is fixed into place by the mythology, which puts it on paper.

"The process by which the third coniunctio comes into being aims at a new union of opposites - the union of the human and the divine" (Raff 139.) The mythology unites human erotic love with the divine possibilities of agape to bring into being the imaginative possibilities of Amor, romantic love.

Alchemy, individuation and the Arthurian mythology are transformative because they bring order into the chaos of pre formed matter, the unmet unconscious and turbulent times respectively.

Arthur, his sword Excalibur and the knights also came to bring order. "The knight and his sword have several different meanings in alchemy, all of which are related to the establishment of order" (Raff 102.) Arthur and his sword Excalibur epitomize chivalry, which has different meanings, but "is an ordering principle" (Smith.)

The mythology itself was "a vast chaos of the imagination to which Chrétien, Wolfram and Tennyson brought order" (Smith.) The Arthurian mythology is the philosopher's stone because it can heal a malaise of hopelessness. Arthur and the roundtable changed what they contacted into gold in the sense of what they did, and continue to do, to the human spirit.

The heroic journey is also a good way of looking at the Middle Ages unless we are willing to leave unexamined as odd coincidence the many heroic tales of the Knights of the Roundtable. Since heroic tales are archetypal expressions, any reason for their appearance must be rooted in an archetypal substrate of the period. Let's look at the Middle Ages as a heroic journey which funneled heroic archetypal energy into its manifestations and see if we can observe certain archetypes such as the call to adventure, the hero, the love, the Nekyia and the boon.

Every heroic journey begins with a call to adventure which is essentially a call to the prima materia. The call to adventure succeeds through patience, an alchemical virtue. In both myths and psychology, there are usually many reasons the conscious mind doesn't want to answer the call. Only when the call keeps nudging can it seep through the conscious mind, engage our own inner prima materia and become irresistible.

The prima materia, the archetypes of Arthur's life, responded to the call of adventure. Their heroic journey consisted of adventures in the psyches of the heroes, the alchemists of the age. The Arthurian Mythology is also one of love, which reminds us that Ares and Aphrodite were lovers.

The collective hero of writers, poets and troubadours travel into their own imagination and bring back the legends and myths. These heroes started their journey with their own Nekyia into what we call the Dark Ages. The Nekyia is a trip deep into the material to visit its soul, which is in the initial state the alchemists call the Nigredo. The Nekyia lays the foundation for the process because it occurs when we realize that we cannot see the foundation in the world of light and it is only by visiting what has died that we can find out what was truly happening. "Arthur appeared during that time and laid the foundation for the myth of Camelot"(Smith.)

If the heroic journey is successful, the hero brings back a boon. The boon from the Middle Ages includes the mythological literature, the concept of Amor, and the promise of Arthur's return.

The mythological literature is an alchemical solutio in which we can get absorbed. We slow down and take "inferential walks ...imaginary walks outside the wood: readers, in order to predict how a story is going to go, turn to their own experience of life or their knowledge of other stories" (Eco 50.) These walks in the solutio of mythology become our own heroic journeys during which we discover for ourselves the experience of love, courage, loyalty and the other Arthurian archetypes.

The power of Amor reverberates even today. Neither the ego's erotic pursuits nor the self's disembodied agape is enough for soul. Amor represents the ego-self axis and brings them into a tension of opposites.

The promise of Arthur's return is another boon. It's not just about Arthur himself returning, but also that the legends will return. The legends represent hope and their return will mark a resurgence of hope that the chivalric code will once again bring order to a crazy world.

Although these two models make sense on a poetic level, they leave me wondering how they actually work. I am looking for answers to these questions: Why did the call to adventure succeed when it did? How does psychic energy configure itself to affect the myth of the era? How does change actually happen? Why do we experience nostalgia when a period like the Middle Ages makes a resurgence in modern time?

For this discussion, I will use a mythical method of my own. I will act as Homo Faber and make up a structure which can explain how and why myth can channel energies in a way that affects the present and the future. However, my general tone will be that of Homo Ludens, for I am playing with the boundary between the real and the imaginal. I am not sure whether I am seeking to clarify or obfuscate, for I am playing with that boundary as well, so beware.

I recently [explored](#) the ideas of the Tibetan Book of the Dead by using a mythological field theory for the bardo which connects discrete archetypal experiences.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead describes the bardo as the space between places we feel grounded. It can be between death and rebirth but is found throughout life because we are so infrequently truly grounded. I believe the bardo may be the same as the morphic field described in Michael Conforti's *Fate, Form and Field* and those points of groundedness are the forms in which the morphic field realizes itself (4.) That implies those points of groundedness don't exist in any independent sense, but are the byproduct of the morphic field's need to realize itself.

I have also postulated that the [bardo is the home of myth](#) (Roan 4,) which links myth to the morphic field which creates the world. How might myth, operating collectively as the morphic field, create a grounded moment?

I have previously suggested that our experiences of groundedness are oscillations from the current sense experience to any other sense experience that can be part of a myth that includes the current sense experience. In other words, myths are the pathways from one experience to another (Roan 4.)

Let's call the smallest unit of a myth a mythic element. The same mythic element could appear in many myths. For example, a myth about a hero will have elements that also appear in a myth about father or a myth of death. These mythic elements are connected in a flexible mythic matrix by various themes.

Imagine a situation where psyche's ordering impulse starts to orient various myths so that one of their common mythic elements comes into alignment (Conforti 14.) Aligned items can be packed denser, so the mythic space/morphic field could get so dense with that one element that it becomes solid and we have a grounded moment. The call to adventure for an era could be the activation of psyche's ordering impulse and the resulting alignment of the archetypal energies in the vicinity of the activating impulse.

The ability to hear anything is based on the volume of the source and the sensitivity of the receptor. Volume can be thought of as the intensity of the signal and sensitivity is frequently related to the number of receptors. Therefore, the call to adventure could be activated if a mythic field of sufficient intensity interacts with an area that is sufficiently dense with the right type of archetypes.

For a field to align elements, it must be of like composition. For example, a magnetic field aligns magnets. Therefore, a heroic field is probably required to align heroic elements, bring them into a denser state and yield the sense perceptions that permeate the psyche of the age.

A magnetic field is caused by the motion of electrons. A heroic field could be caused by the motion of something as well and the magnetic model suggests that it would not have to be heroism itself. The relationship of Ares and Aphrodite suggests the intriguing possibility that psychic motion of love could be related to the activation of the heroic field.

The creation of the heroic field could occur if this field creating substance, which is probably a form of psychic energy, oscillates in certain patterns or frequencies between the conscious world and the unconscious.

If the oscillations are random, then there is no field that dominates. But if the oscillations prefer certain patterns, then the field becomes strong enough to align the compatible archetypes in psyche. These archetypes then influence the mythic field in the bardo and make it more nourishing for certain kinds of myths, such as the heroic.

It also makes sense that a strong boundary between the conscious and unconscious worlds would damp those oscillations. If so, an unconscious period, such as the dark ages, could soften the boundary between experience and psyche and let those archetypal energies flow more easily.

Permanent change could occur if those newly aligned archetypes in psyche start to draw energy to themselves in a way similar to complexes, which have archetypes at their center and are also charged with psychic energy. The psychic energies oscillating between these archetypes in psyche and the mythic field could act as strange attractors in the psychic chaos, influencing future ordering processes as well as memory. This could be how the past influences the future.

Imagine human experience as a thread weaving through psyche. Since psyche is not uniform and homogenous, the concentrations of various archetypes varies, so the thread is sometimes substantially closer to one archetype than others, thus immersing the trajectory of human experience in a specific archetypal energy, such as heroism.

If this thread loops back over itself, there could be a cross over of energies between the two periods. This could be experienced as nostalgia.

This theory answers the four questions I posed. It also expands my paper on the bardo, which suggested that chaotic dynamics are related to the movement along the mythological pathways between the grounded places. I have now extended those dynamics into the unconscious as well with my willingness to consider the bardo to be neither consciousness nor unconsciousness. If I were to develop this idea further, I would focus on the idea of the bardo as a new distinct realm because this has the most potential to conflict with the generally accepted wisdom about psyche being everything.

My more traditional approach, using the heroic journey, has made me wonder what the catalyst is for the Nekyia. I'd like to see if there is something that can be considered accepting the call to the Nekyia.

I've also become interested in the adoption pattern for the Arthurian legends. Did the aristocracy or the commoners embrace it first? How were the first stories transmitted? What stage was the mythology in when the

troubadours, bards and writers were each operative? When was that what did they do for the developing mythology?

I really enjoyed applying mythical models to a historical period. It expanded my experience of myth. I have been speculating for a while that our basic element of cognition is mythical and now I am beginning to see that the scale of mythic organization is cosmic as well.

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