

# Archetypes of the pandemic

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*Abstract:* This paper attempts to read the psychological and emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic through the archetypal images contained in patients' dreams. In these dreams, symbols related to the power of nature and to extreme danger are paired with feelings of detachment that seem to point to a traumatic dissociation, due to the archetypal experience that erupts in familiar surroundings. Through the humanization of the ineffable experience, dissociation, which in the beginning of the pandemic showed in high levels of anxiety, panic attacks and depersonalization, can be transformed into the overview needed for the search for meaning. The container for this process of transformation is the analyst, the real, virtual or imagined one, and his or her ability to relate and feel.

*Keywords:* archetype, beyond, detachment, dissociation, dreams, feelings, home, nature, pandemic, trauma

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## Introduction

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe, and more particularly in March 2020, the oneiric life of my patients consistently pointed to the difficult collective situation and to the one to come. Dreams presented the theme of overwhelming natural forces and contained archetypal images of extreme danger: plague and death, meteors and tornadoes, floods and other apocalyptic events. The feelings expressed in the dreams pertained to the spectrum of fear and concern, including the fear of losing control. However, the awareness of the danger was often paired with a detached view of the situation. In some cases, the dream ego mobilized all the inner figures in order to counter the risk of being overwhelmed.

In spite of some cultural nuances, these dreams were not determined by the cultural background of the dreamer and only rarely referred to personal complexes. On the contrary, they enacted the universal experience of the ego confronted by archetypal forces and elicited the experience of a radical transformation with the feeling that nothing would ever be the same. The contrasting feelings experienced by the dreamer, such as fascination and fear,

involvement and detachment, show how the overwhelming experience was paired by a form of detached overview and analysis of the event.

In over 20 years of practice, this is the first time that, in a determined space and time lapse, I have experienced such an incursion of archetypal images and collective themes into the oneiric life of my patients and in my own. The exceptionality of the phenomenon seems to me meaningful and helpful to understand the impact that the pandemic has been having on our psyche, together with a possible direction.

In this paper I will revisit four archetypal dreams and try to show how their symbols and feelings point to a form of traumatic dissociation which, in my daily practice, has manifested in high levels of anxiety associated to an unusual capacity for analysis. While dealing with the overwhelming feelings elicited by the pandemic, many of my patients were trying to make sense of their experience through rational analysis. Throughout the months, however, and thanks to the integration of their feelings of distress, fear, and panic, the initial dissociation has been transforming into a search for meaning, which is now leading, in many cases, to a momentous change in perspective. The archetypes that have reached consciousness in these months are often images of chthonic figures, danger and death. I like to think that they invite all of us to a significant process of transformation.

### Three dreams

The coronavirus came into my practice at the end of January 2020 with a dream. My dream.

I am back in my home village, on a hill overlooking the church of St. Dominic. The church, which is small and made of stone, almost bare in its simplicity, is situated on a large field in the countryside, in the beautiful landscape of the Apennine mountains. Suddenly, the sky becomes dark and a storm starts. A thick rain of black and poisonous snakes falls on the surroundings incessantly. Astonished and horrified, I look at the scene and think: How are we going to manage all these snakes? How will we protect the community from their poison? They are too many.

The dream left me puzzled, as I could not connect it to my personal life, which was flowing in a sort of calm routine. Even the variety of shadow interpretations did not seem convincing, so I let it sit with me. Its meaning became clear one month later, when Italy, my home country, started the struggle against the coronavirus. The poisonous snakes, which appeared in the dream in all their numinosity, were in my perception the symbol of something dark and dangerous, too powerful to handle for a human being and even for an entire community. However, researching the origins of the Saint Dominic church, I learned that the saint protected the faithful against

snake poison. Thus, in my dream, the danger and the protection, the snakes and Saint Dominic, came together in the same image.

In the town of Cocullo, not far from where I come from, the celebration of Saint Dominic includes a number of snakes, previously caught by the 'serpari' (snake-catchers), which coil around the statue of the saint while the latter is carried in a procession through the streets of the village. Vestige of an ancient pagan ritual, this tradition seems to point to the coexistence of sacred and profane, spiritual and chthonic. Jung himself underlines the duality of the snake, which can represent both Christ and the devil, light and darkness, the chthonic and the spiritual world. It can affect human health but also heal, as symbolized by the rod of Asclepius (Jung 1951).

The snakes in my dream were a sudden, unexpected apparition, which is in line with what Jung states in *Aion*:

Fishes and snakes are favourite symbols for describing psychic happenings or experiences that suddenly dart out of the unconscious and have a frightening or redeeming effect.

(Jung 1951, para 291)

Again, in Jung's words the duality of the symbol also shows in its effect. In the dream, rather than fear, I experienced a sort of detachment: the sentiment of the ineluctable.

At the onset of the pandemic in Europe, several patients shared dreams related to the collective experience. Two of them caught my attention because they seemed to mirror the structure and the feelings of my own. Both came in the beginning of March and both from Italian dreamers. The first one enacted a rat invasion:

I go back to my hometown and pay a visit to a family I was familiar with when I was a child. While we chat, I notice a rat passing by. I am quite surprised, since they have just remodelled the house, which looks quite nice. I mention the rat to the hosts but they do not seem to notice. Then a second rat appears, and then a third one. In a short while, the house is full of rats. I am astonished and horrified: I do not know where they come from and have no idea of how we'll get rid of them.

The dreamer associated the rats surreptitiously appearing and slowly infesting the house to Camus' novel *The Plague*, where the appearance of dead rats in the city of Oran forecasts the onset of the plague, followed by the lockdown of the city, isolation and death. The analogy with the COVID-19 pandemic was self-evident. The dreamer also noticed that, in the dream, she felt more astonished than scared, and she had contrasting feelings: on the one hand, concern about finding a solution to the problem and, on the other, the realization that the solution was hard to find.

The other dream was about the power of natural elements:

I am back in my hometown, in my childhood home. From the window I see a huge tornado. I am not alone in the house and we all feel safe. In order to have a 'live' experience of the tornado, I go towards the main door and find a shelter. I would like to have a closer view and think of going outside. I know, however, that leaving the shelter would mean sure death.

The dreamer associated the tornado to the coronavirus in that they are both untamed forces of nature, which gives them a numinous character, since the tornado elicits attraction and fear at the same time. He insisted on his calmness in the dream and the desire to observe the phenomenon more closely in order to see what it really was about. However, he knew that leaving his shelter would be too dangerous.

### Going back home

My dream and the ones from my patients have a similar and three-folded structure: in the first image the dreamer is or goes back home to the village or town of origin, then an extraordinary natural event happens, and finally the dreamer realizes that the event is too powerful and impossible to manage. However, my dream seems prognostic, while the two others came in the midst of the pandemic.

The theme of going back home is highly symbolic for Italians, and even more so for the ones living abroad. In our cultural unconscious, migration and homesickness mix with the encroachment on the ancestors' land by foreign countries. Italy becomes the object of our longing, as expressed in the iconic line: '*O mia patria, sì bella e perduta*' (O my homeland, so beautiful and lost) from Verdi's *Nabucco*, which has the value of a national anthem in the heart of many Italians. Moreover, the theme of the plague is a core element of the two founding Italian novels: Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Manzoni's *The Betrothed*. Therefore, when the homeland is caught in a collective suffering that evokes the plague, the call of the cultural unconscious to return and contribute is intense, which would explain why, while Italy is fighting the virus, the unconscious takes the dreamers back home and soothes the longing.

The archetypal motive of the return, however, cannot be understood only in terms of the cultural unconscious. In fairy tales and myths, it corresponds to the closure of the circle, where the hero comes back to the world that he knows, after having explored the unknown realm of the beyond (Campbell 1949). Here the return closes the adventure, while in the three dreams above, the return opens it. This could mean that in the dreams the return is the necessary condition for the vision of the beyond, even more so as the two moments are strictly connected. Campbell describes the return as a process of humanization of the archetypal experience. After the adventure in the realm

of the beyond, the hero needs to bring the gift of his experience 'into the kingdom of humanity' (Campbell 1949, p. 193). Referring to the dreams, one may say that the familiar world of origins is needed to ground the vision of the beyond.

During the first lockdown, the motif of being at home or in its immediate surroundings while witnessing an extraordinary natural event also appeared in dreams from non-expatriate dreamers, which expands the field of possible meanings. On an objective level, being at home translates in oneiric language to the factual condition of the lockdown, which has transformed the experience of *home* into a sedentary one, opposite to the postmodern idea of global citizenship. Our houses have become the theatre of most of our activities: family life, smart-work and home-schooling, thus regaining the role of an anchoring and safe place.

In exploring the phenomenology of space, Bachelard describes the house as our corner of the universe, the shelter that protects us from the natural elements, the microcosm that allows us to safely contemplate the universe (Bachelard 1958). John Hill shows how, on a subjective level, home is much more than a physical space: it represents the inner space of relations and 'implies a sense of identity, continuity, and containment' (Hill 2010, p. 39).

Thus home, including the home of origins, becomes the secure base from which one can observe the beyond. Withdrawing to home or going back home in moments of turmoil may indicate the psychological need to regress into a safe space and retain the flow of psychic energy in order to adjust to a momentous change.

Regression and grounding became the daily companions of my sessions during the lockdown, which started in Switzerland on March 16<sup>th</sup> 2020. For most of my patients, who were suddenly forced to dwell in the comfort of their homes, regression became an embodied experience for about two weeks. Starting from the end of March, anxiety rose to unprecedented levels and the progress made with the personal process of individuation seemed to vanish. The brutal encounter with the archetypal world required the daily exercise of grounding, first and foremost, through the therapeutic relationship.

### Encountering the beyond

The three dreams previously cited have a second movement, in which the dream ego witnesses a powerful event that exceeds human control. The three events, i.e. a rain of snakes, a rat invasion, and a powerful tornado, have this in common: they happen suddenly, are extraordinary, and are premonitory signs of danger and death. Their archetypal nature and numinosity are confirmed by the feeling reaction of the dreamers who experience the *fascinans* and the *tremendum* that accompany the religious experience and the vision of the beyond (Otto 1923). In the dream from the second patient, the fascination

seems to prevail over the fear when the dream ego tries to go out of the house in order to look more closely at the tornado. Right after, however, the dreamer realizes that leaving his shelter would result in certain death.

The encounter with an archetype, i.e. the encounter with the spirit and the beyond, needs to happen in a mediated form. As Jung states:

In archetypal conceptions and instinctual perceptions, spirit and matter confront one another on the psychic plane. Matter and spirit both appear in the psychic realm as distinctive qualities of conscious contents. The ultimate nature of both is transcendental, that is, irrepresentable, since the psyche and its contents are the only reality which is given to us *without a medium*.

(Jung 1954, para. 420)

The medium is the psyche, in that archetypes can only access consciousness in the form of psychic contents, i.e. in a form that humanizes them. Archetypes need to be, so to say, translated into a language that human consciousness can understand and integrate. The archetypal, archaic and undifferentiated affects can only be differentiated and humanized through meaningful and stable relationships from birth and throughout life; if not, they have the power to overwhelm consciousness as in the case of psychosis. In other words, the encounter with an archetype in its non-mediated form can result in psychic death, as the dream ego realizes in his confrontation with the tornado.

The natural event that exceeds human control, as portrayed in the dreams above, is the premonition of trauma. In a very short lapse of time, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the entire world disrupting human society and causing high levels of trauma, which explains its frequent comparison with war. Trauma is a relational and dissociative phenomenon that scatters the connection to oneself and to others. The danger of self-annihilation experienced by the traumatized person undermines the trust in stable relationships and hinders the capacity to relate. In order to counter the impending danger of inner and outer chaos that follows the overwhelming experience, self-restorative efforts occur in the form of dissociation (Brothers 2007). Kalsched shows how dissociation, which happens when withdrawal from the scattering experience is not possible, splits the unbearable memories of the traumatic event in different compartments of the psyche and casts them off from consciousness, thus allowing psychic life to continue, yet at the price of inner coherence (Kalsched 1996). Jung describes dissociation in terms of split complexes characterized by archaic or archetypal affects, i.e. undifferentiated emotions that need to be integrated in a personal and humanized form through the mediation of a meaningful relationship (Jung 1928).

As mentioned above, my dream and the ones from my patients present the double theme of the encounter both with an archetype and a traumatic event.

The dissociation appears on the feeling level, as the dream-ego does not fully experience the fright that the event would normally trigger. Instead, a rational evaluation takes place, parallel to the realization that the event exceeds the human capacity to manage it. For all these reasons, as early as in March, the oneiric life of my patients was giving me an indication that the integration of feelings through an authentic therapeutic relationship would be crucial to restoring the emotional balance previous to the pandemic.

In his essay 'The therapeutic value of abreaction', referring to the traumatic neurosis that followed the First World War, Jung insists on the importance of relationship and, more particularly, the therapeutic relationship in overcoming the traumatic dissociation. It is not the rehearsal of the traumatic experience or abreaction that heals the dissociation but the relationship to an authentic and empathetic therapist:

But the intervention of the doctor is necessary. One can easily see what it means to the patient when he can confide his experience to an understanding and sympathetic doctor. His conscious mind finds in the doctor a moral support against the unmanageable affect of his traumatic complex. No longer does he stand alone in his battle with these elemental powers, but someone whom he trusts reaches out a hand, lending him moral strength to combat the tyranny of uncontrolled emotion. In this way the integrative powers of his conscious mind are reinforced until he is able once more to bring the rebellious affect under control.

(Jung 1928, para. 269)

Jung's view seems even more accurate in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic where the collective trauma cannot be mediated by relationships, since relationship itself can trigger the trauma. Here, the non-mediated archetypal affects have the power to overwhelm and seize entire groups of people and become manifest in the form of collective binary reasoning, rage, fear and paranoia, as we can ascertain today, nine months after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In my private practice, the traumatizing effect and the archetypal dimension of the pandemic rapidly appeared in increased levels of anxiety and panic attacks, particularly in patients who had suffered from early trauma and felt retraumatized by the lockdown, the impending danger of death, and the loss of coherence of the world as they knew it. For some, I was the projection holder of their integrity and the assurance that they were not becoming insane, as shown in their transference dreams. Since then, my therapeutic role has been, more than ever, one of mediation and containment through relationship, listening, mirroring and empathy. Moreover, the consulting room being in the background because of the online sessions, the grounding has mainly happened through my presence: the real, the imagined and the introjected presence. Needless to say, the work has been difficult and emotionally challenging because, as my dream shows, I was experiencing the

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same sort of trauma as my patients, which has made me fully understand, integrate and embrace the role of the wounded healer.

*A view from above and a temporary conclusion*

At the end of each of the three archetypal dreams, the dreamer experiences a form of detachment in contrast with the fear of annihilation. Interestingly, the dream ego is an observer who, at the same time, is aware of the gravity of the situation and feels safe; on the one hand he experiences the danger and on the other he sees himself experience the danger.

Edinger shows how the capacity to see oneself objectively from above represents dissociation and pertains to the alchemical operation of *sublimatio*. This operation of ascent and detachment from bodily and earthly contingencies can also represent the ability to distance oneself from a situation in order to get an overview (Edinger 1985).

The encounter with an archetype requires distancing and an indirect vision. When confronted by overwhelming feelings, detachment can be a needed form of dissociation that allows the ego to have an overview and gain insight.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, I have observed in my patients an increased need to remove themselves from the situation in order to understand it. Dissociation has manifested, so far, its dual side: the negative but protective detachment from overwhelming feelings has gone as far as depersonalization; on the other hand, the positive effects of detachment are visible in the quest for meaning and the sense of life. In several cases I have observed the questioning of life decisions taken before the pandemic together with the desire to make life more meaningful.

The theme of detaching from the Earth in order to shift perspective is contained in the following dream that a patient shared with me at the end of March:

I am with some other people near my house. Suddenly, a giant meteorite, as big as a planet, approaches the Earth and remains about ten metres away from the ground. The meteorite takes away gravity from the earth. People start floating in the air, and so do I. I feel overwhelmed but I am not terrified. It feels like an element is turning over the coordinates of life.

I consider this dream as a synthesis of our collective experience and an invitation to shift viewpoint. The pandemic has made us encounter the power of nature and the archetype of death, which sheds a new light on the meaning of life. Death is the great transformer, which invites or forces us to make radical changes. As a patient recently told me, 'We cannot go through this and then pretend that nothing happened'. While the Western world is dealing with a second wave, a view from above is much needed to endure the suffering and look for a new direction.



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## TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

Cet article propose une lecture de l'impact psychologique et émotionnel de la pandémie de COVID-19 à travers les images archétypales contenues dans les rêves des patients. Dans ces rêves, des symboles en lien avec la puissance de la nature et le danger extrême sont accompagnés de sentiments de détachement qui semblent indiquer une dissociation traumatique, due à l'expérience archétypale qui fait irruption dans des lieux familiers. Par l'humanisation de cette expérience ineffable, la dissociation – qui se montrait au début de la pandémie par de hauts niveaux d'anxiété, des attaques de panique et de la dépersonnalisation – peut se transformer en capacité à avoir une vue d'ensemble, qui est nécessaire à la quête de sens. Le contenant pour ce processus de transformation est l'analyste, réel, virtuel ou imaginé, et sa capacité à être en lien et à ressentir.

*Mots clés:* archétype, au-delà, détachement, dissociation, rêves, sentiments, chez-soi, nature, pandémie, traumatisme

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In diesem Artikel wird versucht, die psychologischen und emotionalen Auswirkungen der COVID-19-Pandemie anhand der archetypischen Bilder zu erfassen, die in den Träumen der Patienten enthalten sind. In diesen Träumen werden Symbole, die sich auf die Kraft der Natur und auf extreme Gefahren beziehen mit Gefühlen der Distanzierung verbunden, die aufgrund der archetypischen Erfahrung, die in einer vertrauten Umgebung ausbricht, auf eine traumatische Dissoziation hinweisen. Durch die Humanisierung der unbeschreiblichen Erfahrung kann die Dissoziation, die sich zu Beginn der Pandemie in einem hohen Maß an Angst, Panikattacken und Depersonalisierung zeigte, in eine Übersichtlichkeit überführt werden, die für die Suche nach Bedeutung erforderlich ist. Der Container für diesen Transformationsprozeß ist der Analytiker, der reale, virtuelle oder imaginierte, und seine Fähigkeit, in Beziehung zu gehen und zu fühlen.

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*Schlüsselwörter:* Archetyp, Distanzierung, Dissoziation, Träume, Gefühle, Heimat, Natur, Pandemie, Trauma

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Questo articolo propone una lettura dell'impatto psicologico ed emozionale della pandemia da COVID-19 attraverso le immagini archetipiche contenute nei sogni dei pazienti. In questi sogni, i simboli correlati alle forze della natura e a situazioni di estremo pericolo sono accompagnati da un senso di distacco che sembra indicare una dissociazione traumatica, dovuta all'esperienza archetipica che fa irruzione in luoghi e ambienti familiari. Attraverso l'umanizzazione dell'esperienza ineffabile, la dissociazione, che all'inizio della pandemia si è manifestata con alti livelli di ansia, attacchi di panico e depersonalizzazione, può essere trasformata nella visione d'insieme necessaria alla ricerca di senso. Il "recipiente" di questo processo di trasformazione è l'analista, quello reale, virtuale o immaginario, con la sua capacità di mettersi in relazione e di sentire.

*Parole chiave:* archetipo, oltre, distacco, dissociazione, sogni, sentimenti, casa, natura, pandemia, trauma

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В статье представлена попытка определить психологическое и эмоциональное влияние пандемии коронавируса через призму архетипических образов в сновидениях пациентов. Символы, относящиеся к силе природы и экстремальной опасности, сопоставлялись с чувствами отрешенности, которые указывают на травматическую диссоциацию в силу переживания архетипического уровня, которое врывается в знакомую повседневную жизнь. Через очеловечивание невыразимого опыта диссоциация, которая в начале пандемии проявлялась в высоких уровнях тревоги, панических атаках и деперсонализации, может быть трансформирована в поиск смысла. Контейнером для этого процесса трансформации является аналитик, реальный, виртуальный или воображаемый, а также его или ее способность чувствовать и быть в отношениях.

*Ключевые слова:* архетип, за пределами, отчужденность, диссоциация, сновидения, чувства, дом, природа, пандемия, травма

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El presente trabajo intenta dar cuenta del impacto emocional y psicológico de la pandemia del COVID-19 a través de las imágenes arquetípicas contenidas en los sueños de los pacientes. En estos sueños, símbolos relacionados al poder de la naturaleza y al peligro extremo se combinan con sentimientos de desapego que parecieran indicar una disociación traumática, debido a la experiencia arquetípica que irrumpe en un contexto familiar. A través de la humanización de la experiencia de lo inefable, la disociación, que en el comienzo de la pandemia se expresó a través de altos grados de ansiedad, ataques de pánico y despersonalización, puede ser transformada en la necesidad de una nueva perspectiva en la búsqueda de sentido. El contenedor para este proceso de transformación es el o la analista, real, virtual o imaginado/a, y su habilidad para relacionarse o sentir.

*Palabras clave:* arquetipo, más-allá-de, desapego, disociación, sueños, sentimientos, casa, naturaleza, pandemia, trauma

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### 疫情的原型

这篇文章尝试通过病人梦境中的原型意象来理解新冠疫情所带来的心理与情感影响。在这些梦中，由于那些在日常环境中爆发出的原型性的经验，那些与自然和特大危险相关的象征伴随着一种似乎指向创伤性分裂的剥离性的感觉，一起出现。通过这一难以言喻的人性化经验，那些疫情初期，以高焦虑呈现的分裂、惊恐发作和人格解体，可以转化为整体上对意义感探寻对需求。这一转化过程的容器是分析师，是真实中的，虚拟的或是想象中的他或她的联结与感受的能力。

关键词：原型、超越、剥离、解离、梦、感受、家、自然、疫情、创伤

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