

The Depth Regression of the Libido in the Individuation Process: Playback of the Film of Life

Johannes Fabricius

Hillerød, Denmark

Keywords: psychoanalysis, pre- and perinatal psychology, developmental psychology

Abstract: This paper proposes that the unconscious undergoes first a progressive phase and then a regressive one and that these two phases correlate with the growth and decline of the biological organism. Biological growth proceeds in a straightforward, progressive line until adulthood is reached at about the age of 20. A similar progressive movement of the unconscious underlies psychic development during that period. After this psychobiological “ascent” of the libido follows a “descent” in line with the natural principle of exhalation and inhalation, diastole and systole, day and night. The reversal of the flow of the unconscious into a regressive one is inaugurated in a dramatic manner by the *Jugendkrise*. After this crisis of one’s youth follows a deep and sustained regression of the libido, which retraces the path of postnatal and prenatal development, step by step, along the line which it had pursued during its forward course. This *Tiefenregression* leads in the second phase of life to a revival of the psychobiological imprints of man’s entire intrauterine development, the symbolic projections of which are to be found in man’s dreams, art and religion. The ultimate aim of this regressive and transpersonal movement is to establish the unity of man and nature, conscious and unconscious, ego and self.

Zusammenfassung: *Die Tiefenregression der Libido im Individuationsprozeß: ein Playback des Lebensfilms.* Dieser Beitrag entwickelt die Hypothese, daß das Unbewußte im Laufe des Lebens zunächst eine progressive Phase durchläuft und dann eine regressive; diese beiden Phasen korrelieren im Wachstum und dem Rückbildungsprozeß des biologischen Organismus im Lebenslauf. Biologisches Wachstum folgt einer vorwärts gerichteten progressiven Linie, bis das Erwachsenenalter ungefähr mit 20 Jahren erreicht ist. Eine ähnliche progressive Bewegung des Unbewußten prägt die seelische Entwicklung während dieser Zeit. Nach diesem psychobiologischen „Anstieg“ der Libido folgt ein „Abstieg“. Diese Linie hat ihre natürliche Entsprechung in den Prozessen der Ausatmung und Einatmung, der Diastole und Systole und von Tag und Nacht. Die Umkehrung im Fluß des Unbewußten in eine regressive Richtung beginnt in dramatischer Weise mit der „Jugendkrise“. Auf diese Krise im Übergang vom Jugendalter zum Erwachsenenalter folgt eine tiefe und anhaltende Regression der Libido, die den Spuren der postnatalen und pränatalen Entwicklung Schritt für Schritt entlang der Linie, den die Libido bei ihrem vorwärts gerichteten Verlauf nahm,

Correspondence to: Johannes Fabricius, Dr. med. et phil., Christian IV’s Vej 8, 3400 Hillerød, Denmark

genau folgt. Diese Tiefenregression führt in der zweiten Lebensphase zu einer Wiederbelebung der psychobiologischen Erlebniseindrücke von der ganzen intrauterinen Entwicklung eines Menschen. Die symbolischen Projektionen hiervon können in Träumen, in Kunstwerken und in der Religion aufgedeckt werden. Das letztendliche Ziel dieser regressiven und überpersönlichen Bewegungsgestalt besteht darin, die Einheit von Mensch und Natur, Bewußtem und Unbewußtem, Ich und Selbst, herzustellen.

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Biological growth proceeds in a straightforward, progressive line until adulthood is reached at about the age of 20. Psychic development proceeds in a similar progressive movement during that period. We know from research into child psychology that during the first twenty years of life – to make a broad estimate – the main thrust of unconscious growth is in building up a strong ego-complex and that much of the early difficulties of youth result from disturbances of this process by negative parental influence or through some traumatic or other hindrance. If you look more closely at this process, you will see from dreams and various transference phenomena that this is a progressive one and that it reflects the dynamics of an unconscious that is moving forward either continuously or in stages. It is true that there are backward movements in every child's normal development where regression may occur to more infantile behavior but these relapses inevitably prove to be strategic moves which are followed by new advances and new achievements. Thus there arises the popular saying that children take two steps forward and one backward.

To conclude: during the long ascent of the ego and of human consciousness, the unconscious acts as a progressive force pushing the ego forward in a slow movement of growth and maturation. A study of unconscious symbols during this process also reveals that the process is driven by the self and that it is the self which builds up the ego. Jung's studies on the structure of the ego-complex – namely, as it is built up by the four psychological functions – led him to the conclusion that it reflects the fourfold structure of the self and that the ego in large part is a mirror image of that mandalian centre of the human mind (Jung 1960). Thus if the centre of the self slowly builds up the ego-complex as a mirror image of itself, the ego often succumbs to the illusion of being that centre. Most people who are not analyzed naturally believe or are emotionally convinced that "I am I" and that "I am the whole thing" – illusions that come from the ego's having been formed from the total centre.

At the peak of the ascent of *homo sapiens*, then, we have the hubris of the autonomous ego, established as a self-existing factor and shining as the sun – a wonderful body endowed with a unique capacity to perceive the surrounding world, to reason and to dream and, most wonderful of all, to transcend itself and perceive itself in the act of perception.

As to the hypothesis that man's psychological world is structured along the ego-self polarity, the autonomy of the ego in adult man or woman represents an imbalance of the system, an aberration from the natural design according to which the ego was not meant to rule the whole psychological set-up but to be an instrument of that set-up. In the ego-self polarity, therefore, there is an inherent

conflict, a clash of wills in which the autonomy of the ego is challenged by the autonomy of the self.

This clash between ego and self forms the structure of what I have termed the *Jugendkrise* – the crisis of one’s youth or the post-adolescent crisis – that unfolds during the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Fabricius 2003). This event is an archetypal one and takes place in the life of every individual, usually in one’s twenties, “*den zwanziger Jahren*.” This conflict underlies problems of a basic, even evolutionary character such as the choice of a sexual partner and choice of a career which will lead to earning a livelihood. Broadly speaking, the *Jugendkrise* includes general problems of adaptation to the demands of adulthood.

The classic form of the *Jugendkrise* is a situation in which the ego is forced to make a choice which it feels unable to make. This crisis forces the ego into a *cul de sac* from which it can see no exit. In this unbearable situation, the ego breaks down because alien forces have manoeuvred it into a situation which is meant to have no acceptable solution. Jung said that to be in a situation where there is no way out or to be in a conflict where there is no solution is the classic beginning of the process of individuation (Jung 1958). As noted earlier, such a situation is meant to have no good end. The unconscious wants the hopeless conflict in order to put the ego-consciousness up against the wall, so that one has to realize that whatever one does is wrong, whichever way one decides will be wrong.

This psychological deadlock is meant to knock out the superiority of the autonomous ego, which always acts from the illusion that it has the responsibility of decision. Thus, because of the insolubility of the conscious situation, the unconscious self manifests itself. At first the spontaneous manifestations of the self are of an alien, dark and repulsive character and they throw the ego into a state of disorganization and bewilderment. Gradually, however, symbolic contents of a healing and liberating character are released by the unconscious, usually in dreams. In short, through the *Jugendkrise*, the ego is driven into a situation in which it is made capable of experiencing the self and through that selfsame intervention of the unconscious, the crisis is finally brought to its resolution, i.e., to a solution which the ego has neither designed nor invented.

In developmental terms, the solution signifies the achievement of *adulthood*, or the synthesis of the personality at a level superior to where the ego was before the *Jugendkrise*. This psychological level is a superior one since it has evolved to include, for the first time, the ego-self polarity – the attempted *coniunctio* or union of the two halves of the adult or mature personality. This first attempt at a union of conscious and unconscious represents the first stage of the individuation process, its first “peak”. The dramatic struggle to reach this “superior level” involves the ego in a painful and critical transformation process, universally described in terms of the process of *death and rebirth*.

A study of the psychological and symbolic patterns of this transformation process reveals them to represent a revival and projection of unconscious patterns or memory traces of the *birth trauma*. From this fact we are able to draw an important conclusion: The *Jugendkrise* appears to trigger a *Tiefenregression*, or regression-in-depth, on the part of the unconscious. Whereas the unconscious up to this point has represented a progressive force, it now turns around to assume the character of a regressive force. This switch seems to represent one of the really basic designs

of nature – that of exhalation and inhalation, diastole and systole, day and night. Significantly, the psychological switch correlates with a similar switch in the biological sphere. Postnatal growth ceases completely after the juvenile period because of inherent genetic limitations, and biologists sometimes describe the reversal of biological growth into one of decline as that of a “regressive development” on the part of the human organism.

This joint turning of man’s hourglass in his twenties means a reversal of the energies of the libido, which now run from the top of the glass to its bottom. Biologically, this “regressive development” means a decline of the human organism, the entelechy or goal-directed intent of which is that of leading man through the process of aging towards his death. Psychologically, a similar “regressive development” means the involvement of the ego in a *Tiefenregression*, the entelechy or goal-directed intent of which is that of leading the ego back to its roots, or back to its self.

In so doing, a regressing unconscious forces the ego to retrace the path of its prenatal and postnatal development, step by step, along the same line nature followed during its forward course of creation.

This *Tiefenregression* leads in the second phase of life to a revival of the psychobiological imprints of man’s entire intrauterine development, the symbolic projections of which are to be found in man’s dreams, art and religion. A unique imprint of that psychological process – the process of individuation – appears in the alchemical work, the *opus alchymicum*. I have interpreted the various stages of transformation in this work as symbolic projections of crucial intrauterine processes of transformation, the unconscious memory traces of which are revived by that backward-running flow of the libido (Fabricius 1976/1989).

Another avenue for the study of this transformation process in the depths of the human psyche is to be found in the fantasies released by LSD-induced regressions. Experts in this field such as R.E.L. Masters and Jean Houston, Timothy Leary and Stanislav Grof agree that these fantasies reflect a revival of unconscious patterns that retrace man’s intrauterine development – right back to his original, primordial germ cell.

A third avenue for the study of this selfsame process can be found in the fantasies projected by great artists into their art during their life-long creative process. In my philosophical dissertation on “Shakespeare’s Hidden World: A Study of His Unconscious” (Fabricius 1989) I have analyzed the development of Shakespeare’s works as a sustained regression into the poet’s unconscious, during which developmental patterns of his past are represented in symbolic form.

The artistic opus of the German composer and poet Richard Wagner provides yet another interesting demonstration of a similar developmental process, which here has been given musical-poetic expression (Fabricius 2003).

An analysis of the process of individuation in the great artists reveals that the beginning of the process exhibits all of the hallmarks of the *Jugendkrise*, above all the onset of a *Tiefenregression* on the part of the unconscious. In psychological terms, this regressive pull leads to a painful tumbling of the ego into a whirlpool, in which it is made to pass through the stages of its adolescence and childhood in order to finally be sucked by the forces of the birth trauma and involved in an overwhelming experience of death and rebirth. If 30 years are added to the

year of birth of any artist and the years immediately before and after this date are searched, one finds in the works of the mature artist a conglomeration of fantasies which can easily be interpreted in terms of a revival and projection of the unconscious patterns of the birth trauma.

The distinguishing or hallmark characteristics of this pattern are: (1) love will assume an incestuous character; (2) its consummation will be that of a *Liebestod* or "love-in-death"; (3) hermaphroditic symbols will express the union of mother and child or the union of the sexes; (4) the overall symbolic pattern will be that of a reunion of all opposites, a *coniunctio oppositorum* or Yin-Yang pattern expressive of a feeling of existential wholeness. Psychologically this "oceanic" feeling of wholeness expresses the *foetus in utero* stage or a prenatal state of union in which conscious and unconscious have not yet been clearly differentiated. However, before the regressing ego reaches this bottom of the ocean, it will pass through a narrow and dangerous well or through the jaws of some monstrous dragon in a traumatic experience of *Weltuntergang* and total absorption. Splitting processes and schizoid symbols will appear as projections of unconscious defence mechanisms against this experience of primal anxiety, just as persecutory anxieties and fear of separation will form an integral part of such traumatic patterns of *Urangst*.

Examples pointing to this dynamic process of transformation are Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" and "A Midsummernight's Dream," Wagner's "Tannhäuser" and "Lohengrin," and Goethe's "Die Leiden des jungen Werther" and "Clavigo." In his pioneering work "Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido" (1912) Jung described the projection of these transformative patterns of the unconscious in a wide variety of myths and legends and, in pathological form, in the fantasies of a schizophrenic patient. Jung, however, did not realize that the death-and-rebirth patterns of his material represented a projection of the unconscious patterns of the birth trauma.

If the regressive patterns described above represent the topography of the unconscious during the first stage of the individuation process, it follows that the remaining stages of this selfsame process are bound to signify a revival and projection of the unconscious patterns of man's prenatal creation, a *Tiefenregression* into an inner universe for which we have no words, only symbols.

In the Twentieth Century, the individuation process in its total course has been most forcefully and clearly expressed in the artistic opus of the American-English poet T. S. Eliot (1889–1965) (Fabricius 2003).

In his last collection of poems, "The Four Quartets," Eliot sums up the whole course of a lifelong process of artistic creation and psychological transformation, a course which he emphatically identifies with the pull of a regressive unconscious or *Tiefenregression* that aims at leading the ego back to its very beginning. This is his vision of individuating man:

*With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover*

*Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river.*

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