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# Erich Neumann: Theorist of the Great Mother

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HOW SHOULD the humanities be taught, and how should scholars in the humanities be trained? These pivotal questions confront universities today amid signs of spreading agreement that the three-decade era of poststructuralism and postmodernism is over.

It remains my position—as detailed in my long review-essay, “Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders,” published in *Arion* in 1991—that Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault were false gods, created and promoted by secular academics who might have been expected to be more skeptical of authority. As it became institutionalized in the undergraduate and graduate curriculum, poststructuralism hardened into dogma, and many humanities professors lost the ability to respect, assess, or even recognize any hypothesis or system outside their own frame of reference. Such insularity has little to do with genuine intellectualism and is more akin to religious fundamentalism.

Most seriously, poststructuralism did manifest damage to two generations of students who deserved a generous and expansive introduction to the richness of the humanities and who were instead force-fed with cynicism and cant. I fail to see that American students are emerging today even from elite universities with a broad or discerning knowledge of arts and letters. Nor has poststructuralism produced any major new critics—certainly none of the towering scholarly

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stature once typical of prominent professors who had been educated in the first half of the twentieth century.

The issue I address here is what kind of thinkers or theorists should be set before students as models of progressive yet responsible scholarship. How does one cultivate sensibility or develop scholarly aptitude and judgment? Which writers prove most fruitful over time by stimulating new work in an original voice rather than by simply coercing sycophantic replication?

During my college years, I regarded the declining New Criticism, based on close reading of literary texts, as too limited for the forces—social, historical, psychological, and sexual—then converging in the 1960s, and I began searching for alternate templates. I was drawn to maverick writers who had broken through disciplinary boundaries—Marshall McLuhan, Leslie Fiedler, Norman O. Brown, Alan Watts.

In graduate school, I ransacked the library in my quest for inspiration: it was a kind of archaeological excavation. Today, because of online catalogs and specialty Web sites, information can be targeted with pinpoint accuracy and accessed with stunning speed. Hence I doubt whether that kind of untidy, often grimy engagement with neglected old books will ever appeal again to young scholars. But it was through the laborious handling of concrete books that I learned how to survey material, weigh evidence, and spot innovative categorizations or nuggets of brilliant insight. Many times, the biggest surprises revealed themselves off-topic on neighboring shelves.

One of my central, galvanizing discoveries was Erich Neumann, who was born in Berlin in 1905 and who wrote in German throughout his life. He was a product, I would argue, of the final phase of the great period of German classical philology, which was animated by an ideal of profound erudition. Neumann's higher education and maturation belonged to the Weimar cultural milieu, with its daring, heady spirit yet underlying economic instability and rising political tension. Neumann pursued graduate study in philosophy at the University of Erlangen in Nuremburg and received his

PhD in 1927. Researching eighteenth-century Hasidism and cabalism, he chose as the subject of his dissertation Johann Arnold Kanne, a Christian philosopher who had been influenced by Jewish mysticism. In his subtitle, Neumann called Kanne “a neglected Romantic.”

Increasingly intrigued by psychoanalysis, Neumann began medical studies at Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin. He passed his examinations in 1933 but was unable to obtain an internship because of the race laws affecting Jews. Decades later, when he was already internationally famous, the university granted him a belated medical degree. Neumann had an early interest in the arts: he wrote poetry as well as a long novel, *Der Anfang* (*The Beginning*). He undertook a critical study of Kafka's novels in 1932, when Kafka was still a minor figure.

Though Freud made a deep impact on him, the pivotal figure in Neumann's career would be Carl Jung, whom he met and studied with in Zurich in 1934. Neumann (thirty years younger) eventually became Jung's anointed intellectual heir. The relationship between these two prolific writers was close yet ambivalent because of Jung's sporadic anti-Semitism. Neumann and his wife Julia, who had joined Zionist organizations in their teenaged years, emigrated to Palestine in 1934. There Neumann began his lifelong practice as a Jungian psychologist in Tel Aviv. His wife too became an analyst (and oddly, earned a high reputation as a professional palm reader). Neumann later became president of the Israel Association of Analytical Psychologists.

During World War Two, when communications were disrupted, Neumann suffered severely from his lack of contact with European colleagues. But from 1948 to the end of his life (he died of kidney cancer at the age of fifty-five in 1960), he frequently traveled to and lectured in Europe, notably at conferences of the Eranos Society in Ascona, Switzerland. (Other attendees at the Eranos conferences included Mircea Eliade, Herbert Read, Heinrich Zimmer, and Carl Kerényi.) Princeton University Press published Neu-

mann's wide-ranging lectures on art and psychology as four volumes of essays in its Bollingen Series.

Neumann's first published book was *Depth Psychology and a New Ethic* (1949), which interpreted the "scapegoating" of the Nazi era as a projection of repressed cultural and psychological forces. In the same year appeared his first magnum opus, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, with a foreword by Jung. In this book, my personal favorite of his works, Neumann argues that each individual's psychological growth recapitulates the history of humanity. He charts what he calls "the mythological stages in the evolution of consciousness": the creation myth, the hero myth, and the transformation myth, identified with the Egyptian god Osiris. Here he also presents his idiosyncratic theory of centroversion in ego formation—a blend of extraversion and introversion.

The massive volume for which Neumann is most renowned, however, is *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, a study of the Magna Mater that was evidently first published as a 1955 translation into English by Ralph Manheim. (The dedication reads: "To C. G. Jung, Friend and Master in his Eightieth Year.") In such evocatively titled chapters as "The Primordial Goddess," "The Great Round," "The Lady of the Plants," and "The Lady of the Beasts" (all ancient epithets), Neumann traces the genealogy and symbolism of goddess figures in world culture. Though *Origins* is well-illustrated, *The Great Mother* is a visual feast, a truly essential text with 74 figures and 185 plates of pictures of prehistoric and tribal artifacts of mother goddesses, juxtaposed with striking sculptures and paintings from classical antiquity through the Renaissance. The core of these images came from the Eranos Archive for Symbolic Research, assembled by Olga Froebe-Kapteyn, the free-thinking founder of the Eranos Society who was an early disciple of Jung.

Other substantial writings by Neumann include two monographs, *Amor and Psyche*, a Jungian reading of a myth in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* (1952), and *The Archetypal World of Henry Moore* (first published as an English translation by

R. F. C. Hull in 1959), a study of the British artist's monumental sculptures of women. The latter is another of my favorite Neumann works: Moore supplied some of his own private, previously unpublished photos for the book, and Neumann supplemented them with comparative images of French Neolithic, Egyptian, Cypriote, Mayan, Peruvian, and African objects. Neumann pointedly calls Moore's mother-and-child groups "fatherless" and sees them as prophetic evidence of cultural change: "Today a new shift of values is beginning, and with the gradual decay of the patriarchal canon we can discern a new emergence of the matriarchal world in the consciousness of Western man."

Though he dismissed Freud's *Totem and Taboo* as "ethnologically untenable," Neumann hailed Freud as a "Moses" who had led his people out of "servitude": "Freud opened the way for the liberation of man from the oppression of the old father figure, to which he himself remained deeply fixated." But Freud saw too late that an "earth mother" had preceded the "Father-God": "He never discovered the decisive significance of the mother in the destiny of the individual and of mankind." Neumann found greater variety and flexibility in Jung's system, with its spiritual metaphors drawn from alchemy, the occult, and the I Ching. In a tribute to Jung published in 1955, he insisted that Jung had surpassed Freud: "What now emerged was the primal psychic world of mankind, the world of mythology, the world of primitive man and of all those myriad forms of religion and art in which man is visibly gripped and carried away by the suprapersonal power that sustains and nourishes all creative development. The human psyche stood revealed as a creative force in the here and now." Neumann implied that the therapeutic Freud was too fixed on social adaptation and that he trapped patients in their private past.

The narrowness of Freud's view of women, based on a limited sample of late-nineteenth-century types, has often been denounced and became an easy excuse in some quarters of mainstream feminism to dismiss his revolutionary work wholesale. I would maintain that Freud's gender the-

ory, however problematic, was ultimately irrelevant to his mapping of the psyche and the dream life, which radically transformed modern art and thought. Jung's relations with women, including his unstable mother, were blatantly conflicted, but a remarkable number of the first Jungian analysts were forceful, articulate women, who supplied what they found missing in his theories. Neumann's work belongs to that successor generation, among whom there was considerable mutual influence.

Neumann laid out what he theorized to be four fundamental stages in women's psychological development. The first is an undifferentiated matrix or psychic unity where the ego and the unconscious are still fused. He called this stage matriarchal and symbolized it as the uroboros, an ancient symbol of a snake biting its tail, both devouring and giving birth to itself, an image of either solipsism or fertility. In the second stage, there is spiritual invasion and domination by the Great Father archetype (associated with rationalism and monotheism), who is perceived as a destroyer or rapist. A gloss here might be William Blake's peculiar, haunting poem, "The Sick Rose," where a ruthlessly phallic "invisible worm . . . flies in the night / In the howling storm" to "destroy" a virginal rose's passively self-enclosed "bed / Of crimson joy." In the engraved plates of *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789, 1794), Blake, like Neumann, is picturing an unfolding series of spiritual and psychosexual states.

In his third developmental stage, Neumann embodies the masculine in a normative individual, a rescuing hero who liberates the young woman from the controlling father but yokes her to conventional marriage under new male authority. Sex roles are polarized, with masculinity and femininity mutually exclusive. Neumann's fourth and final stage has feminist implications: here the mature woman discovers her authentic self and voice. As she borrows from the masculine, sex roles are blurred.

I hope I have outlined Neumann's four stages accurately. This is not in fact the aspect of his work that most drew or

influenced me. General theories of female psychology quickly lost favor after the resurgence of the women's movement in the late 1960s. They appeared arbitrary and reactionary insofar as they reflected a conception of women preceding their massive entrance into the professions. Issues relating specifically to motherhood were now avoided and gradually abandoned—at some cost to feminism in the long run. While women's groups lobbied on and off campus for such practical matters as daycare and flex time, biology and reproduction would be purged from discussion in most women's studies programs—or rather they were reduced to the single, still hotly contested matter of abortion rights (which as a feminist I fully support).

If one were to judge by the women's studies curriculum at most American colleges and universities over the past three decades, motherhood seemed permanently relegated to that distant past when the only roles open to women were wife or nun. The symbiosis of mothers and daughters was addressed in early women's studies because of its potential transmission of negative stereotypes; analysis was generally confined to social dynamics, with little or no consideration of biological factors. Contemporary motherhood faded completely in post-structuralism, which ideologically excludes nature and biology from its discourse and which sees nothing impinging on human life except oppressive political power. By the late 1980s and '90s, with the arrival of queer theory, an offshoot of poststructuralism, gender itself was declared to be entirely fictive, nothing but a series of language-mediated gestures.

Jungian approaches have regrettably played no role whatsoever in high-profile academic feminism. Principal reasons for this include Jung's religious orientation (his father was a Protestant minister) and his passion for nature. British and American academic feminists took up French Freud via the pretentiously convoluted Lacan instead. But Jung belongs in any humanities program that claims to be teaching "theory": his archetypes constitute the universal tropes and basic structures of epic, drama, folklore, and fairy tale. Erich Neumann's

work, above all, assimilates or smoothly dovetails with major literature and art. Poststructuralism, on the other hand, which is predicated on the Francocentric linguistics of Fernand de Saussure, can claim success only with self-reflexive literature—that is, writing that is self-referential or self-canceling in the ironic modernist way. Poststructuralism has nothing useful to say about the great religious and mythological themes that have dominated the history of world art.

There has been heavy Jungian influence on feminism outside the academy, however. Jung is a cardinal progenitor of the New Age movement, which developed from two important strands of 1960s thought—the back-to-nature imperative (which can be classified as vestigially Romantic) and multiculturalism, notably relating to East Asian and Native American religions. (I would identify my own work as New Age in this sense; I am an atheist who reveres the symbol systems of world religions.) Part of the Jungian legacy is the feminist goddess cult, an almost entirely off-campus phenomenon that may have peaked in the 1980s but is still flourishing less visibly today.

The goddess has attracted different degrees of belief. In some cases, she is a metaphor—a symbol for “the goddess within,” the liberated female spirit. Leading examples of this approach are Sylvia Brinton Perera’s *Descent to the Goddess: A Way of Initiation for Women* (1981), which celebrates the Sumerian goddess Inanna-Ishtar, and Jean Shinoda Bolen’s *Goddesses in Everywoman: Archetypes in Women’s Lives* (1984; 20th anniversary edition, 2004). In other cases, the goddess is literally worshipped, through witch-cult or druidism, as a pagan substitute for the patriarchal judgmentalism of main-line Judeo-Christianity, with its anti-nature and anti-sex biases. One liberal theological branch of feminism has attempted to correct or reform Christianity by implanting it with female paradigms (“Our Father” becomes “Our Mother”).

Goddess feminism went seriously wrong in accepting and promoting an error first made by the Swiss writer Johann Jakob Bachofen in his 1861 book, *Das Mutterrecht* (*Mother Right*). The worldwide ubiquity of prehistoric goddess arti-



facts led Bachofen to wrongly conclude that early societies were matriarchies, literally governed by women. His theory received wide circulation via the great British scholar of classical antiquity, Jane Harrison, who taught at Cambridge University from 1898 to 1922. I love Harrison's books and have been specifically influenced by her theme of the chthonic (I say "chthonian"), an uncanny motif of earth cult. But she was simply mistaken about the existence of prehistoric matriarchy, for which no evidence has ever been found.

When the matriarchal hypothesis resurfaced in Jungian feminism, it had turned into Arcadian soap opera: once upon a time, there were peaceful, prosperous, egalitarian, goddess-worshipping societies, happily thriving for eons until they were viciously overthrown by *men*—those greedy aggressors who invented violence, war, oppressive social hierarchies, and the unjust economic disparities we suffer from today. This naive view of political history was promulgated in innumerable feminist books over two decades (and is still detectable in some ecofeminist denunciations of the capitalist exploitation of nature). Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987), for example, has achieved near-canonical status despite its partisan sentimentalism and flimsy historical claims. It may even have influenced Dan Brown's internationally bestselling mystery novel, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), which alleges a suppressed tradition of woman power in early and medieval Christianity.

A principal evangelist for matriarchy was the Lithuanian archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, who taught at UCLA. It is unfortunate that Gimbutas took as her Jungian mentor not the scholarly Erich Neumann but the popularizing Joseph Campbell, who had been a colleague of Neumann's in the Swiss Eranos conferences and who edited six volumes of the Eranos Yearbooks. A teacher for thirty-eight years at Sarah Lawrence College, Campbell became known to the public through his 1949 bestseller, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (which supposedly inspired George Lucas' film trilogy, *Star Wars*), and through a 1988 public television series, *The Power of Myth*,

where he was interviewed by Bill Moyers. Campbell encountered Bachofen's theory of matriarchy in Jane Harrison and uncritically adopted and transmitted it. Later, Campbell officially endorsed Gimbutas by writing the foreword to her 1989 book, *The Language of the Goddess*. Both are deceased, but their alliance is memorialized today in the Joseph Campbell and Marija Gimbutas Library at California's Pacifica Graduate Institute.

The ancient Great Mother was a dangerously dual figure, both benevolent and terrifying, like the Hindu goddess Kali. Neumann saw this clearly, but Campbell and the goddess' feminist boosters did not: they sanitized and simplified, stripping away the goddess' troublesome residue of the archaic and barbaric. Neumann cited and praised Bachofen's pioneering work in prehistory but was careful to note that the latter's idea of matriarchy (as Neumann puts it in *The Great Mother*) must be "understood psychologically rather than sociologically." While quoting Bachofen in *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, Neumann insists that the matriarchal stage "refers to a structural layer and not to any historical epoch." Such fine distinctions are precisely why I admire Neumann—because he scrupulously tempers speculation with evidence. This vexed issue of matriarchy, which remains one of the most dubious strains in feminism, is of special importance to me because it provoked some of my earliest public clashes with fellow feminists when I began teaching in the early 1970s.

I would propose that Erich Neumann is the key for a future incorporation of Jung with academic feminism. But gender inquiry is only one aspect of Neumann's work. I regard him as an accomplished culture critic whose synthesis of art, history, and psychology offers a more promising direction for culture studies than the current approved academic models, which are mainly derived from British or German Marxism (such as the Frankfurt School). Authentic cultural criticism requires saturation in scholarship as well as a power of sympathetic imagination. Neumann's manipulation of material is improvisational rather than schematic, though he does draft illustrative psychic graphs that will inevitably seem quirky or

bogus to the non-Jungian. But there is neither moralism nor a political agenda operating in his work.

Because of the deftness with which he deploys archaeological and etymological evidence, Neumann belongs, in my view, to the 150-year-long dynasty of German scholars following the idealizing Winckelmann, such as Hermann Usener, Werner Jaeger, and Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, who bitterly warred over the character and methodology of classical studies. I would call Neumann a historicist, except that the term “historicism” has been tainted by German nationalism and imperialism, with which the Zionist Neumann obviously had no connection. In his gravitation toward Hellenistic and Oriental (that is, Near Eastern) studies, which began to boom in the late nineteenth century, Neumann is in the line of Jacob Burckhardt and Friedrich Nietzsche, who had controversially expanded the definition of Greek culture beyond serene Athenian high classicism.

Neumann always has a keen sense of historical context even as he weaves his eclectic details into a dense tapestry. He appropriates but not to fragment and destabilize, in the post-modernist way. In resituating facts, he retains their historical weight and gives them a psychological aura. Neumann accepts chronology and acknowledges cause and effect in history—which poststructuralism does not. But he also perceives deep cycles and repetitions, as do Vico, Nietzsche, and Yeats, so that history and nature become dimly analogous. I found this hybrid perspective in Neumann very appealing. I strongly believe in a measurable time line, but it is not ascendant and progressive, in the Victorian way. My book *Sexual Personae* (the title of which invokes Jung’s concept of “persona,” that is, the social mask) portrays art and history as an unstoppable, near-compulsive sequence of growth, loss, and revival.

Neumann’s meshing of European with world cultures continues and extends Jung’s enterprise, whose syncretistic anthropology can be traced to Sir James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. Frazer’s epic work, published in twelve volumes from 1890 to 1912, had a huge impact on the first gen-

eration of modern writers and artists, the most famous example being T. S. Eliot's apocalyptic 1922 poem, *The Waste Land*. I would call Neumann's philology Frazerian. Like Frazer (whose "mass of ethnological material" he cites), Neumann creates a vast, dreamlike prose-poem, with startling and sometimes bizarre material floating in and out.

Neumann's scholarship is an art form partly because it emanates from his deep knowledge of and intimacy with the arts. He is the supreme exemplar of the Jungian flair for the visual image. Freud, in contrast, saw language as primary: he characterized the contents of the unconscious as entirely verbal; hence his device of the interminable "talking cure" to unravel neurosis. In Freud's linguistic analysis of dreaming, every detail resolves into wordplay, whereas Jung treats dreams as visions, which may be symbolic but are potent in their own right.

Neumann found revelation and inspiration in art. In his essay, "The 'Great Experience,'" he says that effective art provides "a streaming moment, as flowing and ungraspable as the vitality of life itself": "The infinite abundance of the art of humanity presupposes a corresponding abundance of human responses." He speaks of "human openness and readiness to receive 'great art' or alternatively to remain closed and unmoved by it" (the latter being dismayingly rampant in recent academe).

With notable catholicity (rare at the time), Neumann embraced both classical and avant-garde modern art. His essays teem with allusions to the visual arts of every period—Giotto, Bosch, Grünewald, Titian, Rembrandt, El Greco, Goya, Hokusai, the Impressionists, Van Gogh, Cezanne, Rousseau, Picasso, De Chirico, Klee, Chagall, Giacometti, Dalí. Also conversant with music, Neumann devotes an essay to Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and elsewhere cites such composers as Bach, Beethoven, Verdi, and Wagner. His literary taste is similarly cultivated—Shakespeare, Cervantes, Goethe, Balzac, Poe, Baudelaire, Melville, Dostoyevsky, Zola, Thomas Mann, James Joyce.

For Neumann, art exists as form, materials, and technique and not just content—to which art has too often been reduced

in Freudian interpretations. Freud's analysis of the psychodrama of the modern bourgeois family was unsurpassed, but his discussions of art were uneven. Although he collected archaeological artifacts, Freud had little feeling for the visual arts or for music, and he tended to read the art work as neurotic symptom. Neumann's article, "Leonardo da Vinci and the Mother Archetype," pays due homage to Freud's important 1910 essay on Leonardo but is in fact a vigorous rebuttal. Neumann disputes Freud's account of the "pathological" genesis of Leonardo's art and asserts that Freud distorted facts about Leonardo's childhood. For Neumann, Leonardo is "a Western phenomenon," like Goethe an example of the titanic Western artist properly raised to "hero" status, as in Michelangelo and Beethoven. In the Jungian way, Neumann sees the creative man as "bisexual," even "feminine," because of his high "receptivity." Neumann wonderfully evokes Leonardo's "loneliness" and compares it to Nietzsche's. This essay alone would be enough to establish Neumann's virtuosity as a culture critic.

Freud's adoption by Lacanian poststructuralism compounded his basic problem—that is, his overestimation of language in our neurological makeup. The brain has many chambers: *Homo sapiens* also thinks in flashing images, which have become primary in what I have elsewhere called our modern Age of Hollywood. Erich Neumann was exquisitely attuned to the evolution and permutations of artistic style; he also had an awareness of the spirituality of art as well as a sophisticated understanding of the creative process—a subject too much neglected today. Furthermore, Neumann's time-frame vastly exceeds that of poststructuralism. Foucault, for example, was focused on the Enlightenment and its sequelae in Europe and North America; he knew little about world cultures or even about European classical antiquity until late in his career.

Any major theory of culture must begin with prehistory and the development of agrarian society out of the nomadic. Here is where the Jungian approach, with its attentiveness to nature, demonstrates its superiority to the strict social con-

structionism of poststructuralism. The deletion of nature from academic gender studies has been disastrous. Sex and gender cannot be understood without some reference, however qualified, to biology, hormones, and animal instinct. And to erase nature from the humanities curriculum not only inhibits students' appreciation of a tremendous amount of great, nature-inspired poetry and painting but also disables them even from being able to process the daily news in our uncertain world of devastating tsunamis and hurricanes.

A passage from Erich Neumann's superb essay, "Art and Time," displays his scope and quality of mind:

How can the individual, how can our culture, integrate Christianity and antiquity, China and India, the primitive and the modern, the prophet and the atomic physicist, into *one* humanity? Yet that is just what the individual and our culture must do. Though wars rage and peoples exterminate one another in our atavistic world, the reality living within us tends, whether we know it or not, whether we wish to admit it or not, toward a universal humanism.

This is a stirring manifesto for a new, comprehensive scholarship, a marriage of art and science as well as an enlightened multiculturalism.

While writing this lecture for the Mainzer Series, I found (through the magic of the Web) a rivetingly detailed article on Erich Neumann's life and career by the Israeli journalist Aviva Lori which was published earlier this year [28 January 2005] in the daily newspaper *Ha'aretz*. It was commissioned to coincide with a symposium held at Kibbutz Givat Haim Ihud to honor the centenary of Neumann's birth. To my surprise and delight, a conference about Neumann, sponsored by the Austrian Association of Analytical Psychology, was also held in Vienna last August to mark that centenary. It appears that the *Zeitgeist*—a force that Neumann says drives creative artists—is preparing the way for a Neumann revival.