

## A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF TANURE OJAIDE'S POETRY

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### Abstract

Psychoanalysis as a literary theory has helped to improve understanding about "human behaviour and human mental functioning." This is achieved through its perception of the human race as neurotic. However, with its application in poetic interpretation, poetry is perceived as an expression of displaced neurotic conflict: a consoling illusion, symptom, socially acceptable *phantasy* or substitute gratification. With the psychoanalytic reading of the poetry of Tanure Ojaide, an Anglophone African poet, poetry is understood as an expression of symptoms of the poet's personal and societal neurotic tendencies. Since our emphasis is on Jungian psychoanalysis, analyzing Ojaide's poetry through the orbits of the archetypes of Jungian psychoanalysis help to foreground the poetry as a consoling illusion or substitute gratification. Whereas the study reveals that Ojaide's poetry is dominated by the archetype of the "wounded healer" - a symbol of a wounded personality who also doubles as the needed messiah (the healer), it is depicted that the dominant nature of the archetype of the "wounded healer" is a result of the poet's experience which is at the centre of his poetic expression.

**Keywords:** Anglophone African poetry, Tanure Ojaide, Psychoanalytic Theory, archetypes

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Psychoanalysis has been defined as “a method of medical treatment for those suffering from nervous disorders” (Freud, 1952, p. 342). According to Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, as a literary theory, psychoanalysis “offers a new account of representation.” They posit further that it is “a new theory of human subjectivity” (Rice & Waugh, 2001, p. 13). In affirmation of Rice and Waugh’s assertions, James Mann points out that “all that we know about mental functioning and human behaviour comes from psychoanalysis. Its lessons are equally applicable in the conduct of any kind of psychotherapy” (Mann, 1973, p. xi). Terry Eagleton explains that “the revelation of the human behaviour and human mental functioning is part of psychoanalytical practice” (Eagleton, 2008, p 159). In another part of the same book, Eagleton has attributed this to the fact that psychoanalysis represents the human race as neurotic. This is also the reason poetry is seen in psychoanalysis as an “expression of displaced neurotic conflict: a consoling illusion, symptom, socially acceptable *phantasy* or substitute gratification which compensates us for the inevitable renunciation of desire involved in the necessary accession to the ‘reality principle’” (Rice & Waugh, 2001, p. 13). This is also linked to the fact that, as James Strachey (1927, p. viii) reveals, psychoanalysis had its “origin in connection with the study of hysteria” hence it is referred to as “a dialogic and symbolic method of interpretation which works with a manifest narrative (talk, dream, *phantasy*) in order to uncover its latent and buried source of meaning”. It uncovers its latent source through such term as “talking cure” - a process through which “repressed and painful memories” and “negative energies” are unlocked or “cathartically released”.

However, scholars like Sigmund Freud, Lionel Trilling, and Martin Gross have argued in their different essays that there is a major link between psychoanalysis and poetry. While Sigmund Freud (1986, p. 419) describes poetry as a “substitute gratification”, Lionel Trilling says that psychoanalysis has helped to reveal that poetry “serves the purpose of a narcotic” (1973, p. 2805) and Martin Gross (1978) points out that the poet shares some attributes with the neurotic - somebody experiencing psychic disturbances as a result of his accumulated, either tyrannical or blissful experiences - and schizophrenia - a disorder of a type involving breakdown in the relation between thought, emotion, and behaviour and leading to faulty perception, inappropriate actions and feelings, withdrawal from reality and personal relationships into fantasy and delusion, and a sense of mental fragmentation. Carl Jung clarifies this link when he

posits that the poets' expressions "contain images and thought-associations" which they "do not create with conscious intent" but "[...] arise spontaneously without their assistance and are representatives of a psychic activity withdrawn from [their] arbitrary will" (1971, p. 75). With recourse to Anglophone African poetry of all generations, Senanu and Vincent (1976) share in Carl Jung's view of poetry, when they note that poetry is "a cumulative verbal entity through which the poet expresses a vision of life hidden to the less imaginative" (p. 5). Like all other poets from Europe and America who have been used to demonstrate these claims, the Anglophone African poets have shown evidence of these disturbances in their poetry. Through their poetry, the psychological states that condition their poetic production are revealed. According to Akporobaro (2005), there is usually a psychological connotation that underlines the poetry of the poets of the different generations of the Anglophone African poetry. While the first generation of poets led the way in their psychological light to prove Africa a developing civilization, the poetry of the second generation contains the psychological connotation that presented Africa as a continent of castrated hope.

This paper limits itself to the poetry of Tanure Ojaide. Since Ojaide's poetry shares a lot of characteristics with other poets of his contemporaries in terms of thematic focus and other ideological matters, Ojaide's poetry serves as a representative poetry of the poetry produced by the writers of his generation. This paper is divided into two subsections: Tanure Ojaide and his poetry; and psychoanalysis and the reading of Tanure Ojaide's Poetry.

### **Tanure Ojaide and His Poetry**

Tanure Ojaide's poetry, like the poetry of his contemporaries is preoccupied with the themes of political and environmental degradation. According to Charles Bodunde, Tenure Ojaide's poetry is an "aesthetic in which images are deployed to emphasize the idea that human right struggle is imperative in seeking to restore the people's well-being" (2002, p 24). However, in his essay entitled "New Trends in Modern African Poetry", Ojaide sees this aesthetic as a dominant trend in contemporary African poetry and this emerges from the context in which "the generality of the populace had become economically and politically marginalized" (Ojaide, 1995, p. 4). In his book of essays,

Ojaide makes it clear that his poetry revolves around the Niger Delta politics and its environmental problem:

To me as a poet, Childhood is vital, because it is the repository of memory. [...] My Delta years have become the touch-stone with which I measure the rest of my life. The streams, the fauna, and the flora are symbols I continually tap. [...] Home remains for me the Delta, where I continue to anchor myself. (Ojaide, 1995, p. 122)

Uzoечи Nwagbara (2009) argues in his essay entitled "Aesthetic of Resistance and Sustainability: Tanure Ojaide and the Niger Delta Question" that ecocriticism is central in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide and that Ojaide's poetry negates ecological imperialism. He goes further to argue that since Ojaide's poetry intersects with the realities of ecological imperialism, it is therefore a dependable barometer to measure "Nigeria's environmental / ecological dissonance for sustainable development" (p. 32).

In another essay entitled "Poetics of Resistance: Ecocritical Reading of Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs and Daydream of Ants and Other Poems*," Uzoечи Nwagbara (2010) is of the view that Ojaide's poetry follows in the footsteps of the Nigerian mould of interdiction, which can be called resistance poetics. James Tar Tsaaior (2011) is of the view that exile constitutes a visible presence in Nigerian poetic afflatus and imagination hence it forms the core aspect of Ojaide poetics. Tar Tsaaior argues that Ojaide's poetic imagination and sensibility have generously benefited from the trope of exile which has been conditioned by Ojaide's reality of living and working away from home. Philip Onoriode Aghoghovwia (2013), in his essay entitled "Versifying the Environment and the Oil Encounter: Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs*," sees Ojaide's poetry as a worthy literary representation of the Niger Delta region hence it is used to interrogate the oil encounter and the exploration of its impact on social and environmental structures. Of interest in the essay is the poet's unique and alternative insight, a kind of insider/indigenous knowledge, he provides through his poetry.

Unlike these other scholars, we would interrogate Ojaide's poetry using Jungian archetypes and some aspects of Jungian psychoanalysis. Our focus would be on Tanure Ojaide's selected poems from two of his different collections: *The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems* and *Invoking the Warrior Spirit*.

## Psychoanalysis and the Reading of Tanure Ojaide's Poetry

In *The Fate of Vultures and Other Poems*, a collection of fifty one poems all linked together by the theme of the precarious political and environmental condition of the persona's home country, Ojaide's persona expresses his pains towards the happenings in his home country. The effect of this pain is further expressed through the poet's persistent use of repetition. The repetition of words like "Listen", "cry", "song" and "communal" emphasizes the level of pains the situation in the persona's home country has cause him. As early as the second line of the poem entitled "The music of pain", the persona discloses the fact that though he expresses his pain, he does "[...] not cry in vain" (Ojaide, 1990, p. 2). In that line, there is an indirect comparison between the act of "crying" and the art of poetry. The impression that the persona creates in us is that through poetry, his pain is given expression. In line thirty four, the persona reveals that his poetry also means "the music of communal pain" (p. 3). This goes to reveal that the pain that is expressed is not very personal to him but communal. Apart from the fact that there is a comparison between "music" and "pain", there is also a comparison between "song" and "music", "cry" and "pain." Through these words, Ojaide's persona refers to both his response to personal worries and to communal troubles. His use of such word as "cry" depicts the gravity of the pain that his community has to bear. The "music" metaphor can also be said to represent a pointer to the extremity of the persona's pain.

The persona continues to play on the idea of pain. In line seventeen, he posits that his poetry "[...] took the cause of the country/ into its expanding heart" (p. 2). Here poetry is given the human attributes of being capable of absorbing pain and taking it into its "expanding heart". In line three and four, the persona says why he does "not cry in vain" with the use of another personification, thus: "For my song I sought/ the chorus of resistant cries" (ibid). In the poem, "cries", a word that refers to abstract human actions, is given the human ability of being able to put up resistance. What the persona simply means is that the pain in his heart about the condition of his country is so heavy on him. This is also as a result of the fact that the poet embodies a personality to whom his people's predicament conditions his happiness. This is evident in the persona's concentration on the pain of the marginalized and the deprived and thus linking it to his own trouble:

They have the bite of desperate ones!  
 [...]
   
 Haunting robbers of the proud heritage!  
 My song has captured the roar of lions (p. 2)

In the above lines, poetry takes the form of the communal voice hence it has the ability to “bite” and to haunt robbers. It is also elevated to a state of weaponry hence it is “the land’s infantry/ drawing into its veins/the strength of millions”. In line twenty five, poetry is described as the “fine-filed matchets” and in line twenty-seven, it is described as the “mystery bee” and possessing the capability to capture “the roar of lions/ and the jungle mortars of elephants”. In line thirty-two, Ojaide’s persona employs the popular African belief that a forty years old man cannot lie. Ojaide’s reference to age, in the poem, should be treated with some sense of importance, in that it provides a link between the persona’s “personal unconscious” and his “collective unconscious”. For instance, it is part of Africa’s collective belief that at forty a man starts to be very serious with life. This view is further fully expressed in the poem entitled “Now that I am forty”.

In the poem, with the use of lots of images, the persona concentrates his whole poetic energy contemplating the merit and the demerit of being forty years old. At the very first stanza of the poem, he juxtaposes the un-seriousness that trails his years before forty and with the use of the word “now” he emphasizes his seriousness with life after being forty of age. Having being forty years old, he is as a matter of fact standing “on a termite heap/gazing/at a cricket hole/in the horizon” (p. 98). What this implies is that, at forty years old he is resolute - he has learned to endure the heaps of problems around him. The word “now” is employed as a boarder word: it is used to depict the gap between the unserious past and the new and serious present. In the second stanza of the poem, the persona says that “now” that he is forty -

I will not abandon my road.  
 I wield the matchet  
 against adversaries;  
 with it I fan myself  
 when secure in dreams. (p. 98)

With the use of the word “road”, Ojaide’s persona refers to poetry and in the lines that follow he sends forth another message that this poetry of his is the means or the

channel through which he would “wield the matchet/against adversaries.” At the third stanza of the same poem, he reiterates the points he has made in the lines of the previous stanza. Hence helping to make the lines of the second stanza even clearer: “Whatever I hold firmly/can talk back to me and do my bidding./ Whatever I plant in my heart/will grow out/now that I am forty.” In this stanza and in other stanzas of the same poem, Jungian aspect of the psyche such as “persona” is invoked. In the poem, the poet employs his “persona” to do all his bidding for him. Even though in poetry, we are meant to believe that the personality of the “persona” is different from the personality of the poet, to Jung this is not so. Jung is of the view that the poet’s persona is the same person as the poet. This is therefore to say that Ojaide is not different from the person that we see acting out all his biddings. According to Jung, the reason why the poet does this is to completely purge himself of his acuminated pains and to get himself focused as to be able to face another round of problem that may soon come up after the previous has fully been dealt with.

As we meander through the lines of the fourth stanza, we are confronted with a very important rhetorical question: “But can it be this length/that takes the bee to the honey comb,/can it be this length alone/that the farmer covers to harvest,/can it be this very length/of patience, of vicissitudes/before the magic of sweet?” (p. 98) This rhetorical question helps to bring Jungian aspects of the psyche such as “archetype”, “personal unconscious”, “collective unconscious” and “individuation” to mind. In this stanza, for instance, the archetype of “the wise old man” which is part of the “collective unconscious” is invoked. At the age of forty, the persona sees himself as “the wise old man”. Hence, in the stanza, he asks himself whether this is how difficult it takes to arrive at this state of wisdom. “The magic of sweet” as used in the stanza represents wisdom. Hence, in the stanza, one can as well say that the Jungian concept of individuation is fully expressed. The Jungian concept of Individuation, as captured in the poem, emphasizes the persona’s age of “forty” years. “Now” in the poem is likened to “the magic sweet”, a time after a “length/ of patience” - a protracted time when an individual achieves the result he has so awaited.

In “When soldiers are diplomats” the persona paints a picture of deceit, problems and death that characterized the country under military leadership. The poem depicts that the military pretend to be good but are very dangerous. In the first stanza of the

poem, the persona is of the view that though the soldiers might look innocent, they are still dangerous. This is captured in the three major lines of the first stanza, thus: "you will never see the leopard's fangs in the dark/ you will never trace the rainflushed blood trail to a den/you will never catch the slayer by his invisible hand" (p. 4). The irony that dominates the poem is even expressed at the tail end of the first stanza, when he says, "The bedbug doesn't care/for the taste of your blood". We also see irony at work in the last stanza of the poem, where the persona tells us the consequences of putting a soldier in a diplomatic position:

But put a savage in a suit  
 know him by his blood-tinted teeth  
 you will always know the whore  
 pacing the globe in a plaited gown  
 selling smiles, lip-cheap wares.  
 There is a heartless joke to learn  
 from the fortune-seeking trade (pp. 4-5)

And like the lines that end the first stanza of the poem, the adjoining lines of the second stanza reveal that diplomatic soldiers are very dangerous. In the poem, he stresses the wickedness behind every of their activities with the use of a symbolic insect, "bedbug". At two different occasions in the poem, he laments: "The bedbug doesn't care / for the taste of your blood" (p. 4) and "[...] the bedbug, that smug cannibal, / doesn't care for the rank smell of blood" (p. 5). However, in the poem, the Jungian archetype that is evoked is the archetype of the "shadow." Just as Jung has rightly explained, the shadow is the side of our personality which we do not display in the public. The soldiers have very dangerous "shadow" which they do not display in the public. With reference to the shadow archetype, the poem becomes even clearer. The meaning this brings to the poem is that the look of things does not say how they really are. The poem that follows it contains rhetorical questions. In the poem, the persona wonders aloud: "What poets do our leaders read?" The "poet" that the poem refers to is symbolic. The "poet" represents sycophant. The rhetorical questions and the symbols in the poem give force to the poem and also reveal our leaders' foolish and dirty dealings. For instance, the first stanza of the poem captures our leaders' foolishness:

When the ostrich heard the kingfisher's song  
 It swept to the stream to pick the blues  
 To redeem its ugly head, but drowned;

The wind, bearer of tales, wasn't accused of murder  
But settled to whistle a dire [...] (p. 6)

What Ojaide is saying through his persona is that even when the sycophant says the wrong thing, it is the leader who is unable to sieve the words of the sycophant that should be blamed. In the second stanza, the persona advises the leaders and as a result lays emphasis on what he expects of African leaders. In the heart of the third stanza, the persona asks even a more disturbing question: "what strings do top ones hold to/ that they always dangle sideways,/ never staying with the people?" (p. 6) As if in reaction to the question, he posits that the leaders are careless about the people, "they never ever want to be caught undressed" yet "you can see the cape in their mitred shave". "The cape in their mitred shave" as used in this line signifies their folly: they don't want to be seen as ordinary people yet we see their folly fully in display. In the fourth stanza of the poem, the persona describes the leaders with the use of derogatory words, thus:

When they hear a rib-relaxing sigh,  
a grief-dispelling chant,  
they kick the air, demon-possessed  
and need blood to still their spasm (p. 6)

In the last stanza of the poem, he makes ridicule of their activities by even referring to it as "giant strides". The "giant strides" as used here is ironic and can be rewritten as "giant foolishness." In this stanza, he tells us that having seen their "giant strides" one would indeed see why "small heads are so full of themselves" (p. 7).

In this poem, the archetype of the "shadow" also comes to mind. Jung tells us in his essay that the fact that one has the shadow does not mean that one is conditioned to do the wrong thing. As a matter of fact, the shadow has its positive and negative qualities. A bad person only pushes the bad side to the public. This is what we have seen in the poem. African "leaders" push their dark sides to the public because they decided to be bad. This is the reason the suffering of the people meant nothing to them.

In another poem entitled "Song for my land", the persona tells us that every day that passes by his home country become a place of mockery. He implies that the situation he finds his "land" is a pitiable one. In line six, the persona posits that: "naked trees flaunt sterile bodies at me" (p. 41). In this line the human attributes of being

“naked” and to possess a “body” is ascribed to trees. A similar thing is seen in line eight, where “the winds” is given the human attribute of having the ability to “gossip”: “the winds gossip loud my dalliance”. To the persona these are only possible because the country is a pitiable state. This even gives credence to the first rhetorical question in the poem, thus: “Where are the evergreens of my palm;/ why is the sun of salvation eclipsed/ by coups and intolerable riots?” This rhetorical question is employed to emphasize the worry and pain that are central in the poem. Yet the second rhetorical question in the poem, thus: “And what celebrated union isn’t beset/by one trouble or another?” reinforces the connectivity between the “song” and the “land”. The “song” here represents all good activity that the “land” needs to develop.

In the second stanza and the third stanza of the poem, Ojaide uses personification to explain the pitiable state in which the land has been plunged. In the same stanza, where he says, “my blood is hot but not on heat,” he refers to lack of electric power supply. He goes further to posit thus: “Every step I take on the land/ is fraught with torments”. Here he implies that everywhere he goes he sees people suffering. In the lines that follow he depicts how the suffering now concerns him. The suffering in the land is also conditioned by tribal discrimination. This is made evident in the following lines of the stanza, “my clan no longer contains me; / where I am the adopted son/ I am asked for marks I don’t possess/ before I can be embraced”. In the poem, the Jungian archetype such as the “shadow” and the “wounded healer” is revealed on. Most Africans have pushed their good nourishing sides inside while their bad negative sides have been pushed to the public. In the poem we are made to know that what is responsible for this horrible situation is suffering. We have noted that Ojaide also employed the archetype of the “wounded healer” - a “wounded” persona, who is yet the hope of the people. The archetype of the “wounded healer” can also be found in the poem “Visiting Home.” Like the poem earlier mentioned, the persona recounts his experience during one of his homecoming. The home that is referred to in the poem is the persona’s home of the Delta. In the poem, his focus is on what used to be the beautiful “spring” in his “homestead” of the Delta. The persona allows us to share in his feeling of pain and anguish as he exposes the ruin that is left of his “homestead” and his beautiful “spring”. He does this by exposing how the only “spring” from where he goes “to half-quench my burning tongue” is now in ruins that “I can neither drink of its

present state” (p. 158). The spring is, though, not only literary, it is also figurative. The spring is a metaphor for farm land, environment, even the air they breathe at the Delta. Even though, the whole of these have been ruined, as the poem comes to its end, the persona did not resign to fate. He states, in line twenty three and twenty four, that all hope is not lost. This beautiful spring can still be made clean, thus: “I can neither drink of its present state/ nor will I throw away the calabash/I must fashion ways to drink of it/ without its dirt, drink it only clean”.

In the poem, Ojaide projects the archetype of the “wounded healer”. He has though been wounded by the ruin of the spring in his homestead yet he does not lose hope of it. Instead he thinks of ways to bring healing to it. However, this archetype also can be found in another poem of the collection entitled “No”.

In the poem, like the one before it, irony is dominantly put to use. Through some sort of play with the use of irony Ojaide’s persona encourages all good people to resist all bad people. This is done through juxtaposing the good with the bad. With the use of irony, the persona also enlightens us on the devastating effect of fear. This is done in order to encourage us to be brave. For instance, in stanza one, we are presented with probably what the persona perceives as one of man’s foremost fear: what our “enemies think” of us. In the second stanza, we are confronted with another of such fear: the fear of not wanting to be called a “hard-hearted” person. Hence, in attempting to avoid this, we put ourselves into very bad situation that may eventually make us “a murderer,” “a pauper,” or eventually have us “kill” (p. 43). Having said these in the fifth stanzas, in the sixth stanza, we are urged to stop the bad people who want to use our fears to their own advantage:

before they devour you  
for their own reasons your own fears  
stop them with an instant “NO”. (p. 43)

In the poem, the Jungian archetypes of “ego”, “shadow” and the “eternal child” are projected. As we have seen in the poem, it is our “ego” that makes us want to please everyone even to our own disadvantage. If one has control over his “ego” one would be able to say “no” under any situation, but if not one would have others lead one to a disastrous end. In this poem, “shadow” is also importantly projected. In the poem, the persona is saying that the majority of African people have now pushed their bad sides to the public. Hence, they now unconsciously act out what Jean-Paul Sartre describes as

“schadenfreude” - a situation where people derive joy in inflicting pain on others. In the poem, the archetype of the “eternal child” is also projected. The persona has to advise the people as if they are his children. As long as the poem is concerned, the people that are addressed are the children - just as the wordings of the poems are frozen, so also would the people spoken to in the poem would continue to be children.

In the poem “Delta Blues” we see a similar situation as above. As the poem begins with persona’s lament, thus: “the inheritance I sat on for centuries/ now crushes my body and soul” (p. 159). In the second stanza, which also contains two rhetorical questions, he makes it clear to us that the reason why this is so is because this so-called inheritance is being envied. As if remembering the calamity this envy has caused the land in recent past, he exclaimed: “my nativity gives immortal pain / masked in barrels of oil”. By this lines, he meant that the calamity upon the land is because of the “oil” that has been discovered in it.

At the fifth stanza, he reveals to us that “now we are called to banquets” by those who are the enemies of the land. In the stanza the persona tells us that they have conceded to the tricks of their “enemies” and end up describing their enemies with an exaggerated name, “baron robbers.” Because of this, in line twenty eight, the persona says it is “time to say goodbye to our birth/right” (p. 160). In line twenty nine, he says, as a matter of fact, their birthright is “now a boon cake for others”. At the second to the last stanza, he casts his mind back to the memory of those who lost their lives trying to “right chronic habits/of greed and every wrong of power” (p. 161). “Chronic habits”, as used here, is also an hyperbole. It is put to use to depict the level of greed among these persons. The whole of that memory is captured in the lines, thus:

And I am assaulted by visions of  
the hang men on a hot Friday noon  
the cries in the garden streets of the port  
and the silence in homes that speak loud  
of grief that deluged the land’s memory.  
Those nine mounds woke  
Into another world, ghostly kings  
Scornful of their murderers. (p. 160)

After this remembering, he ends the poem with the same declaration with which the poem opens: "The inheritance I have been blessed with / now crushes my body and soul" (p. 161). However, in the poem, there is a focus on such archetype as the "shadow". In order to enrich themselves, people plunge other people's environment into a state of chaos. It is only when the bad side of the "shadow" is dangerously at work that this kind of thing happens.

### Conclusion

We have come to see the archetypes that play themselves out in the poet persona's mind. Through these archetypes we are able to penetrate the poet persona's mind and share in his feeling of pain, worry and bliss. However, from our analysis of the poems, it is revealed that the dominate archetype in the persona's mind is the archetypes of the "wounded healer" and the "shadow". The reason for the presence of the archetype of the "wounded healer" in the persona's mind is because all through the poems there is this feeling of a wounded personality who is also the needed messiah (the healer) running through the collection; whereas the reason for the presence of the archetype of the "shadow" is because the poet persona finds himself in a country where a lot of people derive joy in doing the wrong things. It is because a lot of Africans enjoy projecting this bad side of theirs to the public that has created a platform where poetry of lamentation and wail now flourish in Africa.

Through the poems we do not only perceive how Ojaide see himself; we also see his unconscious importations of what Jung refers to as "primordial archetypes of human evolution" - which in other words are the windows through which we see the labyrinths of his past and his attempts at bringing his scattered past together. It is therefore important to note that it is in the manner in which the poet represents his "primordial archetypes" that distinguish him from the other poets of his generation and those before him.

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