
**Key Words:** myth, archetype, dream, mythology, psychology, collective unconscious, innate releasing mechanism IRM, Jung, Campbell, Segal, Anthony Stevens, Ritske Rensma
What makes a good book? Isn’t it that you are immediately interested and somehow you don’t lose interest even when deep into it because the author stays with you, tells you why you are there, what you are looking for and that you will find it, and in which chapter you will? This is such a book and its author, Ritske Rensma, even ventures in the end to tell how the reader will benefit from reading it.

It is a book about myth as a reality in itself and at the same time a part of humanity that is part of us. It’s about myth viewed as an expression or product of an innate substratum in ourselves that is responsible for our ability to dream (beyond our personal dreams) of mythical times, or rather of us as we once were, as Mircea Eliade would say.¹ Not to worry, this is only my poetical description, if I may, of an otherwise very serious scholarly text that has all the elements of a good book mentioned above and that I’ll briefly identify now.

As the title aptly suggest, it is a book about that quality of myth – innateness – that is revealed if one resorts to a psychological approach of mythology, particularly C. G. Jung’s theory of the unconscious and the concept of the archetype, as Joseph Campbell did. According to a statement Campbell made in the 1980s which Rensma quotes on page 154: ‘[As] far as the psychological interpretation of mythology and elucidation and evaluation go, I find Jung the base.” But Campbell didn’t always valorize Jung that way. Rensma believes that Campbell’s reception of Jung was uneven and it affected his outlook on myth throughout his career as a professor, writer and public speaker on mythology. The author of this book sets off to find out when and why Campbell’s interpretation of Jung underwent such significant change, in Rensma’s term the ‘Jungian turn’, that made Jung’s concept of the archetype, “the very backbone of his theoretical framework.”²

To a great extent, the book is the result of Rensma’s research at the Joseph Campbell Archive in California. The novelty of the interpretation is due to Rensma’s original idea and also to the use of unknown unpublished material. In addition to being thoroughly researched, the book is also extremely well organized and focused. It has two sections, one on Jung and one on Campbell, and a total of seven chapters, each with subchapters dedicated to the most significant issues. At the end of Rensma’s laborious endeavor, the reader has a clear idea of the changes in the ideas of both Jung and Campbell, where they meet and to what extent was the latter influenced by the former.

The introductory Chapter 1 is precious as it lays out the most important arguments the author is making in the book. It also provides an overview of each chapter. As regards the critical tools employed, Rensma maneuvers in the space between two critical perspectives: that of Robert Segal in his Joseph Campbell – an introduction³ which Rensma contradicts, and that of psychiatrist and Jungian analyst Anthony Stevens in Archetype revisited – an updated natural history of the self ⁴ with which Resnma agrees.
He chose Segal’s work as he found it a very good study on Campbell, especially in relationship to Jung, not that there are so many critical analyses of Campbell. In fact, Rensma notes that while “Campbell has been embraced by the popular culture, the academic community has never really caught on to the ‘Joseph Campbell phenomenon’.” Campbell’s enormous popularity in the United States in the late ‘70s and ‘80s was due significantly to his influence on Hollywood screenwriting – the scripts of Star Wars, ET, Schindler’s list, Babe, to name just a few famous films, are linked to his name. Also, as we find out from the Preface to this book, the PBS TV broadcast in America of a series of six interviews with Campbell entitled *The power of myth* in 1988 had 2.5 million viewers, and the subsequent printed version of the interviews was a *New York Times* best-seller for over half a year. One ready reason why Joseph Campbell, a contemporary of another mythologist in the US, Mircea Eliade, did not receive too much academic attention would be that Campbell was not a theorist of myth per se. Rensma specifies that “Campbell’s books deal mostly with the myths themselves, not with putting forward a theory of myth, and for that reason one has to ‘read between the lines’ to a large extent if one wants to understand the exact nature of his theoretical framework.”

In the section of the book devoted to Jung, Chapter 2 focuses on Jung’s ideas, particularly on the concept of the archetype, the link to the concept of myth in Campbell. After a brief summary of Jung’s life as a psychiatrist and his friendship with Freud, Rensma describes a dream that Jung had in 1909 which inspired his theory of the unconscious and concept of the archetype. Basically he dreamt of being on the second floor of what appeared to be a rococo-style house, went downstairs to a 15th-16th century room, beneath that he found a room from the Roman times, and in the basement saw a cave with two skulls in it, an indication to him that he had reached pre-history. It was Jung’s idea that the modern room represented the conscience, the ground floor stood for the unconscious, and the lower ones represented the world of primitive man within every human being. Rensma notes that interpreting the dream, Jung formulated the idea of the phylogenetic layer in the psyche of man (the unconscious) which consists of archetypes whose contents, primordial images, fill this “collective a priori beneath the personal psyche”? The theory, which was to be refined in time, took shape in 1911-1912 in the book *Wandlungen und symbole der libido* translated as *Psychology of the unconscious*.

It is in Chapter 2 that Rensma includes Jung’s interpretation of the archetype related to myth. Because the association does not immediately come to mind and is relevant in relationship to Campbell’s obsession with the similarity of myths, I shall include the quote from Jung here:

> I have often been asked where the archetypes or primordial images come from. It seems to me that their origin can only be explained by assuming
them to be deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity. One of the commonest and at the same time most impressive experiences is the apparent movement of the sun every day. We certainly cannot discover anything of the kind in the unconscious, so far as the physical process is concerned. What we do find, on the other hand, is the myth of the sun-hero in all its countless variations. It is this myth, and not the physical process, that forms the sun archetype. The same can be said about the moon. The archetype is a kind of readiness to produce over and over again the same or similar mythical ideas.⁸

Talking about the inborn quality of the archetype, one cannot escape relating it to the idea of heredity and evolutionary theories, not too easy a subject for the interpreter. Rensma, however, steers clear in this area, showing that in his later works, Jung leans more toward Darwinism than toward the discredited Lamarckian theory he was accused of favoring. Thus, the most important distinction Jung makes in this sense is in the paper “On the nature of the psyche” delivered at the Eranos conference in 1946. It is the distinction between archetypes-as-such and archetypal images, with respect to which Rensma cites the clear explanation of Anthony Stevens: “It is the archetype-as-such (the predisposition to have a certain experience) that is inherited, not the experience itself.”⁹

One question that stays with the reader and is triggered by the very title of the book is: how does Campbell’s reception of Jung reflect on the interpretation of myth as being innate? Additionally, what renders the myth innate in the first place? One explanation comes with the analysis of C. G. Jung’s concept of the archetype in subchapter 2.2 “On the nature of the psyche”, it is in fact the first reference to “innateness” in the book, apart from the title, and continues with Anthony Stevens’ interpretation in Chapter 3. In this subchapter, Rensma looks at the relationship between archetypes and instincts and explains that in Jungian perspective, the archetype links instincts to the outside world, and as an innate structure that humans are born with, prepares humans for the regular situations of the world. For clarification, he quotes Jung who says: “The form of the world into which he [man] is born is ultimately inborn in him as a virtual image.”¹⁰

Quite importantly is that the archetype is “irrepresentable” in Jung’s terminology. But if we cannot make visualizations of it, we can visualize its effects, the archetypal images. Rensma explains that the innate component of the archetype (which Jung calls ‘archetype-as-such’) is a psychological structure (in the unconscious) to which we have no direct access, but we do have access to the images and ideas that the archetype-as-such produces in the conscious mind. With this distinction, we move to
Chapter 3 in which the author brings Anthony Stevens interpreting Jung’s ideas.

Ritske Rensma warns that the level of innateness in Jung’s archetype is much debated, sometimes due to initial ambiguity in his texts that he finally rewrote many times. For instance, in a reference like this: [The archetype] is an inherited mode of functioning, corresponding to the inborn way in which a chick emerges from the egg, the bird builds its nest...”¹¹ Does Jung imply that the archetype is fixed, a ‘closed system’, not ‘imprintable’ by experience? According to Anthony Stevens, archetypes in the human nervous system aren’t ‘closed systems’, they are open to imprinting by individual experiences. Robert Segal thinks otherwise:

Like Tylor, Frazer and Freud, Jung attributes the similarities in myth to independent invention. But unlike them, he attributes independent invention to heredity rather than experience. He claims that everyone is born not just with a need of some kind that the invention of myths fulfills, but with the myths, or the contents of myths themselves. More precisely, everyone is born with the contents of myths already elevated to the level of myth.

(…) For Jung, by contrast, experience provides only an occasion for the expression of pre-existent archetypes.¹²

Robert Segal’s reading of Jung’a archetype as a closed system, wholly innate, leads him to an interpretation of Campbell as ‘un-Jungian”, which is where Rensma differs from Segal. We shall come back to these scholars’ understanding of Jung’s archetype when we talk about phase two of Campbell’s career. It is Rensma’s choice to use the interpretation of the Jungian archetype submitted by Anthony Stevens noting how similar this is to Campbell’s own reception of Jung in phase three of his career.

One important element in Chapter 3 is Stevens’ claim that Jung’s concept of archetype is related to the ethological concept of ‘innate releasing mechanism’ abbreviated IRM. Ethologists believe, like Jung, that human beings are born with mechanisms allowing them to deal with the common problems in life. The definition that Stevens has for the archetype-as-such is held by Rensma as the most important statement for the topic of the book: “The archetype-as-such is the inherent neuropsychic system – the ‘innate releasing mechanism’ – which is responsible for patterns of behavior (…)”¹³ Subchapter 3.1.2. is dedicated to the IRM and concludes with the findings of Stevens that are relevant for the archetype: the archetype is a biological concept, equivalent to the IRM, it is not wholly innate, it is open to imprinting, therefore it is an ‘open’ IRM, it allows organisms to respond not in a totally preprogrammed way to stimuli from the environment.
In his book, Rensma does a special thing: he repeats quotes that he analyzes not to exhaust their meaning, rather to show how one thinker (Campbell) bases an argument on another thinker (Jung) and interprets it similarly to or differently from another interpreter (Anthony Stevens or Robert Segal, or even himself). One quote from Jung that Rensma repeats, wholly or partly, several times in his book (pages 64, 117-118, 140, 143, 163), is the following:

Again and again I encounter the mistaken notion that an archetype is determined in regard to its content, in other words that it is a kind of unconscious idea (if such an expression be permissible). It is necessary to point out once more that archetypes are not determined as to their content, but only as regards their form, and then only to a very limited degree. A primordial image is determined as to its content only when it has become conscious and is therefore filled out with the material of conscious experience [Rensma’s italics].

Firstly, the quote is used to bring forth Jung’s distinction between the innate form of the archetype (the archetype-as-such) and its content “filled-out” by personal experience as primordial image (archetypal image, archetypal idea). Secondly, it is identified in Anthony Stevens’ interpretation of the archetype as not wholly innate, unlike Campbell’s interpretation in volume I of *The masks of God: primitive mythologies* as wholly innate, not open to imprinting, similarly to Robert Segal’s interpretation, and like Campbell’s interpretation in volume IV of *The masks of God: creative mythologies*, which marked his “Jungian turn”.

Turning now to the second section of the book that is dedicated to Campbell, we move to Chapter 4 that deals with Campbell’s life. The author seeks in this chapter those formative influences that account for Campbell’s later ideas. He looks at Campbell’s catholic upbringing, passion for Indian American traditions, nature, medieval literature, art; the question of the similarity of myths all over the world, the perception of myth as a product of the imagination, as art, the scholarship in Munich where he learnt German and became acquainted with Freud, Jung, Mann, and learnt Sanskrit, his readings in Oswald Spengler, Leo Frobenius, the idea of the persistence of myths and symbols even in modern times. Special mention is made of his encounter with Heinrich Zimmer, a German scholar of Indian mythology, whose works he would edit posthumously, and who had a capital influence on Campbell, also of his only meeting with Jung. Additionally, Rensma mentions the editorial work in connection with the Eranos conferences, Campbell’s own participation in the conference, his successful *The hero with a thousand faces* and *The Masks of*
God, the lecture circuit in the US, the Historical Atlas of World Mythology, of which two volumes appeared before Campbell’s death in 1988.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on Campbell’s works divided according to Rensma’s model into three phases, including the Jungian turn. One of the most important points Rensma makes in this part of the book is that Campbell’s reception of Jung changed significantly over time. He identifies three phases in Campbell’s career and implicitly in his reception of Jung. Chapter 5 covers the first two, while Chapter 6 focuses on phase three whose main characteristic is a high valorization of Jung’s ideas.

In phase one (1943-1959), Campbell attributes equal importance to Freud and Jung, using psychoanalysis as a tool to interpret myth in The hero with a thousand faces and in his Introduction to Grimm’s fairytales. Rensma tracks two key themes through Campbell’s work: a “metaphysical theme” that subsumes statements like: myth is not a collection of irrational statements, mythological symbols represent metaphysical intuitions, myth connects to a ‘plane of reference’ that ‘transcends all categories of knowledge and thought’; and a “psychological theme” according to which myth is of the order of dreams.

In The Hero with a thousand faces, Campbell sets off to identify the “underlying structure” of similar stories of hero’s journeys and to find the meaning of this structure. The structure is comparable to that of the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return as stages of the hero’s journey. In this work, Rensma finds an earlier twist to Jung in Campbell’s heroic journey which he compares to Jung’s concept of ‘individuation’ (“the development of the psychological individual”).

Phase two (1959-1968) begins with the publication of The masks of God – volume I: “Primitive mythologies”. In this phase, Campbell goes for the ethological perspective, and to Rensma’s surprise, proposes an interpretation very similar to that of Anthony Stevens twenty years later, except that at this point he reaches the opposite conclusion about the archetype. Rensma can explain why: “(...) there are two different approaches in interpreting Jung’s concept of the archetype: the ‘inheritance only’ approach, which is the one taken by Robert Segal; and the ‘inheritance plus experience’ approach, which is the one taken by Anthony Stevens. Campbell, because of the fact that he equates the concept of the archetype with a ‘closed’ IRM, takes the ‘inheritance only’ approach. However, it seems that Campbell did not have access to Jung’s “On the nature of the psyche” at the time and may have been unaware of the distinction between archetype-as-such and archetypal images.

Chapter 6 comments extensively on phase three (1968-1988), making use of material from interviews and lectures which are revelatory for Campbell’s attitude to Jung. Rensma pinpoints two main factors that are responsible for Campbell’s ‘Jungian turn’: the fact that Campbell edited The portable Jung in 1971, for which he reread Jung’s works, and secondly, the publication in English translation, starting in the early ‘60s, of Jung’s
Collected works that contained many rewritten sections and additional footnotes to make the text clearer. Most of these Campbell read thoroughly as the heavily underlined volumes stand proof in the Joseph Campbell Collection. Volume 4 of *The masks of God* entitled: “Creative Mythologies” marks the Jungian turn in Campbell. Rensma reads through the chaotic text written under pressure for publication and finds ideas that will stay with Campbell in the years to come, for instance that the artist has the role to communicate myth to the world today. Rensma finds many statements in the book that are “strikingly Jungian in tone.” Not only in tone but also in substance, Campbell shows what psychological approach to myth he chooses. In chapter 2 of his book entitled: “Symbolization”, Campbell discusses the difference between Freud and Jung as regards dreams and myths – if the former views dreams and myths as personal experiences of the dreamer or mythmaker, the latter views them as products of the unconscious. Campbell supports Jung’s distinction between personal and collective unconscious and further distinguishes between personal recollections or reflections as images rising from the personal unconscious, and the “imagery of myths” rising from the collective. Related to this, the point that Rensma makes is that in Jung’s theory of the unconscious Campbell finds an adequate explanation to the similarities of myths, a lifelong issue with Campbell.

Indeed, very early in his book, Rensma introduces us to the questions that have been of utmost importance to Joseph Campbell: What gives the similarity of mythical motifs all over the world and at all times? What is the nature of myth? Even in phase one, in *The Hero with a thousand faces*, Campbell linked myths to dreams: “Particularly after the work of psychoanalysts, there can be little doubt, either, that myths are of the nature of dream, or that dreams are symptomatic of the dynamics of the psyche.”

Let me propose now that we pursue the myth-dream relationship in Campbell’s Jung-based views through some well chosen quotes and stories in Chapter 6 of Ritske Rensma’s book, from sources that are not always readily available, I might add.

Asked in a 1971 interview about the need for a journey into the unconscious to find myth and the meanings it once carried, Campbell responded:

[the] myths originally came out of the individual’s own dream consciousness. Within each person there is what Jung calls a collective unconscious. We are not only individuals with our unconscious intentions related to a specific social environment. We are also representatives of the species homo sapiens. And that universality is in us whether we know it or not. We penetrate to this level by getting
in touch with dreams, fantasies and traditional myths; by using active imagination [my italics].

In the same interview he referred to “creative imagination” as “the source from which all mythology springs.” In a talk he gave in 1973 published in the collection *Pathways to bliss* he took his interpretation of myth further, in this case he was talking about the hero’s journey myth which he explicitly related to Jung, and said that the “archetypal story that springs from the collective unconscious”, may appear “not only in myth and literature, but if you are sensitive to it, in the working out of the plot of your own life.” This sounds like probing your unconscious for your personal myth. Well, that is what it actually means.

At the Campbell Archive Rensma found the notes of a talk that Campbell gave over and over again during his lecture circuit which is based on a story about Jung’s searching his personal myth. It turns out, during the turmoil times of his life after his break with Freud, that Jung had a clear question in his mind: what meant living with a myth and living without it, and he wondered actually what his personal myth was. The method used to discover his own myth Jung called later “active imagination”. He kept a record of all his impulses and dreams, he resumed making castles out of stones, which he had done as a boy, and realized he was an adult and could build a real castle, so he built his tower in Bollingen, on the lake opposite Zurich. Campbell notes a most significant fact: that while sorting out his dream records, Jung discovered that dreams fell into two categories: “little dreams” and “big dreams”. This distinction is directly related to that between the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious, the former produces the “little” autobiographical dreams, the latter produces the “big” dreams dealing with problems of humankind. Rensma accurately notices that here in his talk Campbell establishes the connection with mythology, which is concerned with great problems of humankind also.

Rensma includes this frequently delivered lecture to show how much Campbell depended on Jung, how compatible he saw Jung’s theory of the unconscious and archetype with his own outlook on myth. I personally find that in this part of the book (pages 151-153) Rensma shows exactly how Campbell made Jung’s archetype “the backbone of his theoretical framework.” In my opinion, the reader finds in these pages the essential of Campbell’s interpretation of myth. Having made the distinction little dreams/big dreams, Campbell uses Adolf Bastian’s “elementary ideas” to represent the universal themes of archetypal images of myth, and “ethnic ideas” to represent in Campbell’s terms the images that “occur with historical inflections.” The second pair consists in the Indian terms “marga” (‘path’) and “desi” (‘province’) which takes its place as ‘universal’/‘local’ under “elementary ideas” and “ethnic ideas”, respectively. Campbell builds on the Jungian dichotomy archetype-as-such/archetypal image and the already discussed open IRM/imprint by
Chapter 7, the last one, is dedicated to conclusions. Indeed, the author delivered what he promised in the introductory chapter. Subchapter 7.1 contains an excellent summary of Rensma’s three phases model and includes his findings on each phase. Let me run a quick list of them. Under “Ideas in phase one”: for the psychological theme, Rensma mentions Campbell’s use of psychoanalysis in general, his idea that myths are of the order of dreams; for the metaphysical theme, Campbell’s view of myths is closer to philosophy than to divine revelation. Under “Ideas in phase two”: Campbell uses the ethological concept of the IRM, distinguishes between open (to imprinting) and closed systems, with the human nervous system having open IRMs. He dismisses Jung’s archetype in which he sees the equivalent of a closed IRM. A contradictory idea in phase two is that Campbell sees mythic symbols to point to the ‘numinous’ that he will later call the ‘transcendent.’ Under “Ideas in phase three”: Campbell suddenly endorses Jung’s archetype in which he sees an open IRM, sees Jung’s ideas compatible with his, Campbell’s interpretation of Jung is similar to Anthony Stevens’ interpretation of Jung two decades later, which makes Rensma conclude that Campbell made Jung part of the very backbone of his theoretical framework. A separate subchapter in Conclusion is devoted to Overview and close analysis of the author’s most important arguments. In this subchapter Rensma mentions: that Campbell’s attitude to Jung changes at the beginning of phase three, as does his interpretation of Jung, and that the core of Campbell’s theoretical framework is the same as Antony Stevens’ interpretation of Jung. A valuable part of the book is to be found in subchapter 7.3 “Campbell as a post-Jungian” in which Rensma uses the term coined by the Jung scholar Andrew Samuels to define those whose work can be seen as an extension to Jung’s work and concludes that both Campbell and Stevens are post-Jungian.

I meant for this to be an informed book review, but I am unsure of the result. There are many aspects that I did not cover in my review, for instance Jung’s concepts of “synchronicity” and “unus mundus” concerning the relationship of psyche and matter that Rensma found so similar to Campbell’s “transcendent”, which are so appealing in the book. (Let me refer the reader especially to pages 41-45 and 166-176.)

The benefits from reading this book are manifold to different readers. First, as the author suggests for the academic studies of Campbell’s ideas, the book may open the road to a better understanding of Campbell whose ideas changed in time. Secondly, Jungian scholarship may benefit by seeing in Campbell one of the most important popularizers of Jung’s ideas and a continuity of Jung’s work. Religious Studies, a department in which Campbell is taught, may benefit as well from the findings in this book, as
well as recent evolutionary approaches to the study of religion and even the research into New Age, which may resonate with some of Jung’s work.

I mentioned that this is a very well organized book. Let me add that the overviews in the beginning and the conclusions at the end of each chapter are extremely helpful. Also, one more thing, unlike some labyrinthine interpretive studies, Rensma’s book permanently guides the reader. I like that hand-holding, that implicit ‘you are here” sign. I like to know, for instance, in chapter 2, that I’m reading about the development of Jung’s ideas whose interpretation by Anthony Stevens follows in chapter 3.

At the end, I find that Ritske Rensma’s book does more than inform you, it teaches you. And it’s wonderful to be taught. I trust that even those who are well read in Jung and Campbell and have remained open to new interpretations of the two authors will feel the same.

Notes:


5 Ritske Rensma, ix.

6 Ritske Rensma, 12.


12 Robert Segal quoted in Rensma, 53.

13 Anthony Stevens, *Archetype Revisited*, quoted in Rensma, 60.
15 Ritske Rensma, 99-100.
16 Ritske Rensma, 102.
18 Ritske Rensma, 118-119.
19 Ritske Rensma, 138.
23 Joseph Campbell, “Pathways to Bliss – Mythology and Personal Transformation”, quoted in Rensma, 152.