

## **Encountering the Eco-symbolic:**

**A Jungian approach to the meaningfulness  
of environmental phenomena**

# The undifferentiated psyche

“In that stately tree dwells the thunder-god; this spring is haunted by the Old Woman; in that wood the legendary king is buried; near that rock no one may light a fire because it is the abode of a demon; in yonder pile of stones dwell the ancestral spirits...”

“All kinds of objects and signs mark these places, and pious awe surrounds the marked spot. Thus does the primitive man dwell in his land and at the same time in the land of his unconscious. Everywhere his unconscious jumps out at him, alive and real. How different is our relationship to the land we dwell in! Feelings totally strange to us accompany the primitive at every step. Who knows what the cry of a bird means to him, or the sight of that old tree!”

*(Jung , The Role of the Unconscious, CW10, §44)*

# 1: Recognising the symbolic experience

# Jung's concept of the symbol

- Numinous – impactful, awe-inspiring
- Dynamic – possessing energetic potential
- Multivalent – containing multifaceted significance and meaning
- Metaphorical – analogous to inner states or concerns
- Imaginal – shows a process of associative or 'fantasy' thinking
- Affective – has emotional impact and resonance
- Emergent – contains unconscious material and potential for development
- Synchronistic – can occur as meaningfully coincidental



## The numinous symbol

“We are dealing with life processes which, on account of their numinous character, have from time immemorial provided the strongest incentive for the formation of symbols.”

*(Epilogue, CW12, §564)*

“And since the symbol derives as much from the conscious as from the unconscious, it is able to unite them both, reconciling their conceptual polarity through its form and their emotional polarity through its numinosity.”

*(Aion, CW9ii, §280)*

“One can perceive the specific energy of the archetypes when one experiences the peculiar feeling of numinosity that accompanies them – the fascination or spell that emanates from them.”

*(Symbols & the Interpretation of Dreams, CW18, §547)*



## The dynamic symbol

“The symbol works by suggestion; that is to say, it carries conviction and at the same time expresses the content of that conviction. It is able to do this because of the numen, the specific energy stored up in the archetype.”

*(Symbols of the Mother & Rebirth, CW5, §344)*

“The psychological mechanism that transforms energy is the symbol.”

*(On Psychic Energy, CW8, §88)*

“How intimately the beginnings of religious symbol-formation are bound up with the concept of energy is shown by the most primitive ideas concerning a magical potency, which is regarded both as an objective force and as a subjective state of intensity.”

*(On Psychic Energy , CW8, §114)*

The multivalent  
symbol



“Anything potent, any content highly charged with energy, therefore has a wide range of symbolic meanings.”

*(The Transformation of Libido, CW5, §238)*

“Symbols are never simple – only signs and allegories are simple. The symbol always covers a complicated situation which is so far beyond the grasp of language that it cannot be expressed at all in any unambiguous manner.”

*(Transformation Symbolism in the Mass, CW11, §385)*

“A symbol is an indefinite expression with many meanings, pointing to something not easily defined and therefore not fully known. But the sign always has a fixed meaning, because it is a conventional abbreviation for, or a commonly accepted indication of, something known. The symbol therefore has a large number of analogous variants, and the more of these variants it has at its disposal, the more compete and clear-cut will be the image it projects of its object.”

*(Symbols of Transformation, CW5, §180)*

A stone sculpture of a bear, possibly a grizzly bear, standing upright and leaning against the trunk of a large tree. The bear is carved from a light-colored, textured stone, possibly granite or limestone, and is positioned to the left of the tree. The tree trunk is thick and has a rough, textured bark. The background shows a grassy area and some foliage, suggesting an outdoor setting. The lighting is natural, highlighting the textures of the stone and the tree bark.

## The metaphorical symbol

- “... to what kind of mentality does the symbolical or metaphorical way of expression correspond? It corresponds to the mentality of the primitive, whose language possesses no abstractions but only natural and “unnatural” analogies.”
  - *(The Structure of the Psyche, CW8, §309)*

Archetypal images can... be taken metaphorically, as intuitive concepts for physical phenomena.”

*(On the Psychology of the Unconscious, CW7, §151)*

“An archetypal content expresses itself, first and foremost, in metaphors. If such a content should speak of the sun and identify with it the lion, the king, the hoard of gold guarded by the dragon, or the power that makes for the life and health of man, it is neither the one thing nor the other, but the unknown third thing that finds more or less adequate expression in all these similes, yet – to the perpetual vexation of the intellect – remains unknown and not to be fitted into a formula.”

*(The Psychology of the Child Archetype, CW9i, §267)*

# The imaginal symbol



“The question of where the mind’s aptitude for symbolical expression comes from brings us to the distinction between the two kinds of thinking – the directed and adapted on the one hand, and the subjective, which is actuated by inner motives, on the other.”

*(Two Kinds of Thinking, CW5, §37)*

“...we might say that a fantasy needs to be understood both causally and purposively... Purposively interpreted, it seems like a *symbol*, seeking to characterize a definite goal with the material at hand, or trace out a line of future psychological development.”

*(Definitions, CW6, §720)*

“It is clear that archaism attaches primarily to the *fantasies* of the unconscious, i.e., to the products of unconscious fantasy activity which reach consciousness... Archaic, too, are the associations-by-analogy of unconscious fantasy, and so is their symbolism.”

*(Definitions, CW6, §684)*

## The affective symbol



“It is a great mistake in practice to treat an archetype as if it were a mere name, word, or concept. It is far more than that: it is a piece of life, an image connected with the living individual by the bridge of emotion. The word alone is a mere abstraction, an exchangeable coin in intellectual commerce. But the archetype is living matter.”

*(Symbols & the Interpretation of Dreams, CW18, §589)*

“Instead of observable details with clearly discernable features, it is life itself that wells up in emotions and symbolic ideas. In many cases emotion and symbol are actually one and the same thing”.

*(Symbols & the Interpretation of Dreams , CW18, §570)*

“The profundity and pregnant significance of the symbol appeal just as strongly to *thinking as to feeling...*”

*(Definitions, CW6, § 823)*

# The emergent symbol



“The true symbol ... should be understood as an expression of an intuitive idea that cannot yet be formulated in any other or better way.”

*(On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry, CW15, §105)*

“A term or image is symbolic when it means more than it denotes or expresses. It has a wider “unconscious” aspect – an aspect that can never be precisely defined or fully explained. This peculiarity is due to the fact that, in exploring the symbol, the mind is finally led towards ideas of a transcendent nature, where our reason must capitulate.”

*(Symbols & the Interpretation of Dreams, CW18, §417)*

“The method is based...on evaluating the symbol (i.e., dream-image or fantasy) not *semiotically*, as a sign for elementary instinctual processes, but symbolically in the true sense, the word “symbol” being taken to mean the best possible expression for a complex fact not yet clearly apprehended by consciousness.”

*(The Transcendent Function, CW8, §148)*



## The synchronistic symbol

“Symbols, like dreams, are natural products, but they do not occur only in dreams. They can appear in any number of psychic manifestations: there are symbolic thoughts and feelings, symbolic acts and situations, and it often looks as if not only the unconscious but even inanimate objects were concurring in the arrangement of symbolic patterns.”

*(Symbols and the Interpretation of Dreams, CW18, §480)*

“Meaningful coincidences – which are to be distinguished from meaningless chance groupings – ... seem to rest on an archetypal foundation.”

*(Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle, CW8, §846)*

“By far the greatest number of spontaneous synchronistic phenomena that I have had occasion to observe and analyse can easily be shown to have a direct connection with an archetype.”

*(Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle, CW8, §912)*

# The symbolic experience



**EMERGENT  
MATERIAL**

**DYNAMICALLY  
AND  
SEMANTICALLY  
CONSTELLATED**

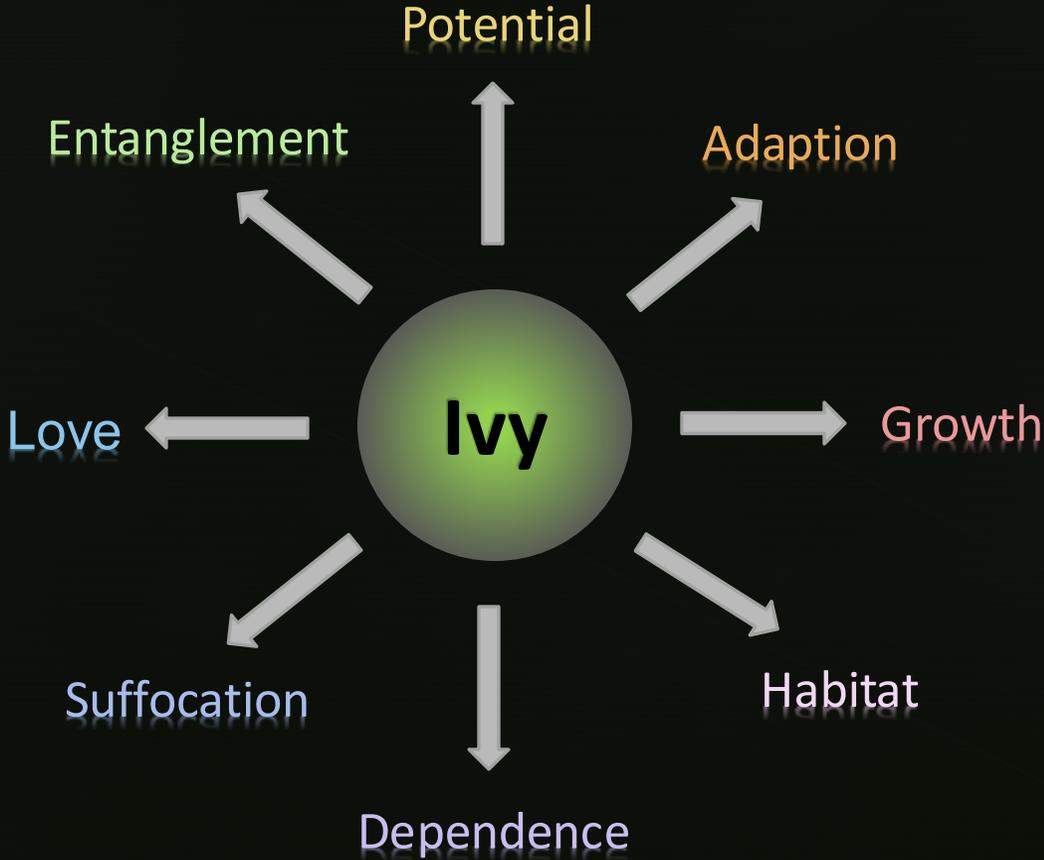
## 2: The meaningfulness of the other-than-human

# Encountering the symbol in nature

“I’m kind of fascinated by a fallen-down trunk ahead that is clad in ivy, dead ivy. Walking towards it ... and then wondering. The ivy is this mesh of, it’s like a squeezing thing at the bottom of this trunk, like an enmeshed thing and there’s mushrooms again growing out of this ivy, this dead ivy. And I don’t know what’s being told to me with all this ivy. What are you trying to say? Shall I sit with you a while and understand you? I’m so frightened that I’m you, somehow, and that I’m killing things, suffocating things, squeezing them. I can’t see you as a good thing. So twisted, so got a grip on, dying together. Kind of beautiful, utterly beautiful as well. And I think about me, and how I’ve always thought there’s an intergenerational element...I’m thinking how I always end up in this life, death, this shadow of the ivy.”

*(Study Participant, Brown, 2024)*

# Recorded associations to 'ivy'



# Thematic Analysis of participant narrative

Observation	Symbolic Themes	Code
Incredible, the most incredible thing	Awe, wonder, fascination	<i>J Numinosity</i>
I'm wondering about my twist as well	Analogy, comparison	<i>J Metaphor</i>
I want to say I love the ivy	Feeling, emotion, sentiment	<i>J Affect</i>
It puzzles me, I can't work it out	Enigma, question, possibility	<i>J Emergent</i>
Almost like a cave	Imagination, fanciful idea	<i>J Fantasy</i>
New life, out of old life	Energy, life force, potency	<i>J Dynamism</i>
All observations	Multiple associations, significances	<i>J Multiplicity</i>

# Working with the environmental symbol



“Traumatic experiences are generally very difficult to express in words. Working with nature provides a channel of communication for clients to express what has happened to them and its impact on them. For people rendered speechless not only by the impact of trauma but by unfamiliarity with the language of exile, being able to point to a broken-off branch or a withered leaf and say ‘This is how I feel’ can be a very releasing experience. These natural objects may express clients’ sense of themselves more eloquently than words. Working beside a psychotherapist in a natural environment offers many opportunities for this type of rich, symbolic communication.”

▪ *(Grut, 2002)*

# Fostering a symbolic understanding

“I invited [the client] to make a fire, they made a pile of wet leaves and kept trying to light it and I said, this won’t burn because the leaves are wet, and asked why did you get wet leaves?, they said it was the closest thing around, so I asked how is that like your life? well I just do whatever’s close rather than going to look for the good material, that’s how my relationships are, that’s how my business is ... so here we have the opportunity to re-pattern that right now and try something different, what would you do different? I’ll go look for dry sticks and maybe dry leaves” ... I say “great so what did you learn from that and how might you do something different in other areas of your life?”

- *(Study participant, Mayseless & Naor, 2020)*



## Nature as co-facilitator

“And the more I sit and go with the woods permission to be and just be present the more difficult it is to kind of ... put that into words. It’s a calmness and it’s a quietness and it’s a stillness. It’s a privilege and it feels like medicine.”

*(Study Participant, Brown, 2024)*

“While she was having these reflections, the old tree was visited by a woodpecker and she realized it was continuing to support life. She said all her thinking about her role in her family was changed by this experience.”

*(Scull, 2009)*

“The one minute nature is sparkling with beautiful colours and the next it is rotten and dead. This makes me reflect a lot about that it may be okay to have a period in your life when you are in dissonance with yourself and not feeling so good... because nature is formed that way”

*(Participant, Green Rehab, Sahlin, 2016 )*

## Finding the self in nature

“In November, I attended the first guided nature walk during my rehabilitation. The guide stopped at a spot in the forest and scratched away the brown autumn leaves which covered the ground and some closely knotted small sprouts that emerged just above the surface were revealed. These are, said my guide, wood anemones awaiting spring and their flowering. Now (in May) on my last nature walk before I left Green Rehab, we visited the same place again and now the wood anemones were in full bloom and when I saw them I realized that it was me – I was the wood anemones.”

*(Participant, Green Rehab, Sahlin, 2016)*



# The Ecological Self

“The perspective of the ecological self develops from the internalization of a framework of seeing the world as a network of differences in which the identities of things are constructed through their interrelationships with other things.”

*(Brown, C.S., 2014)*

“...the ecological self is an ongoing evolving structure of interactions with animals, plants and place”

*(Spitzform, M., 2000)*

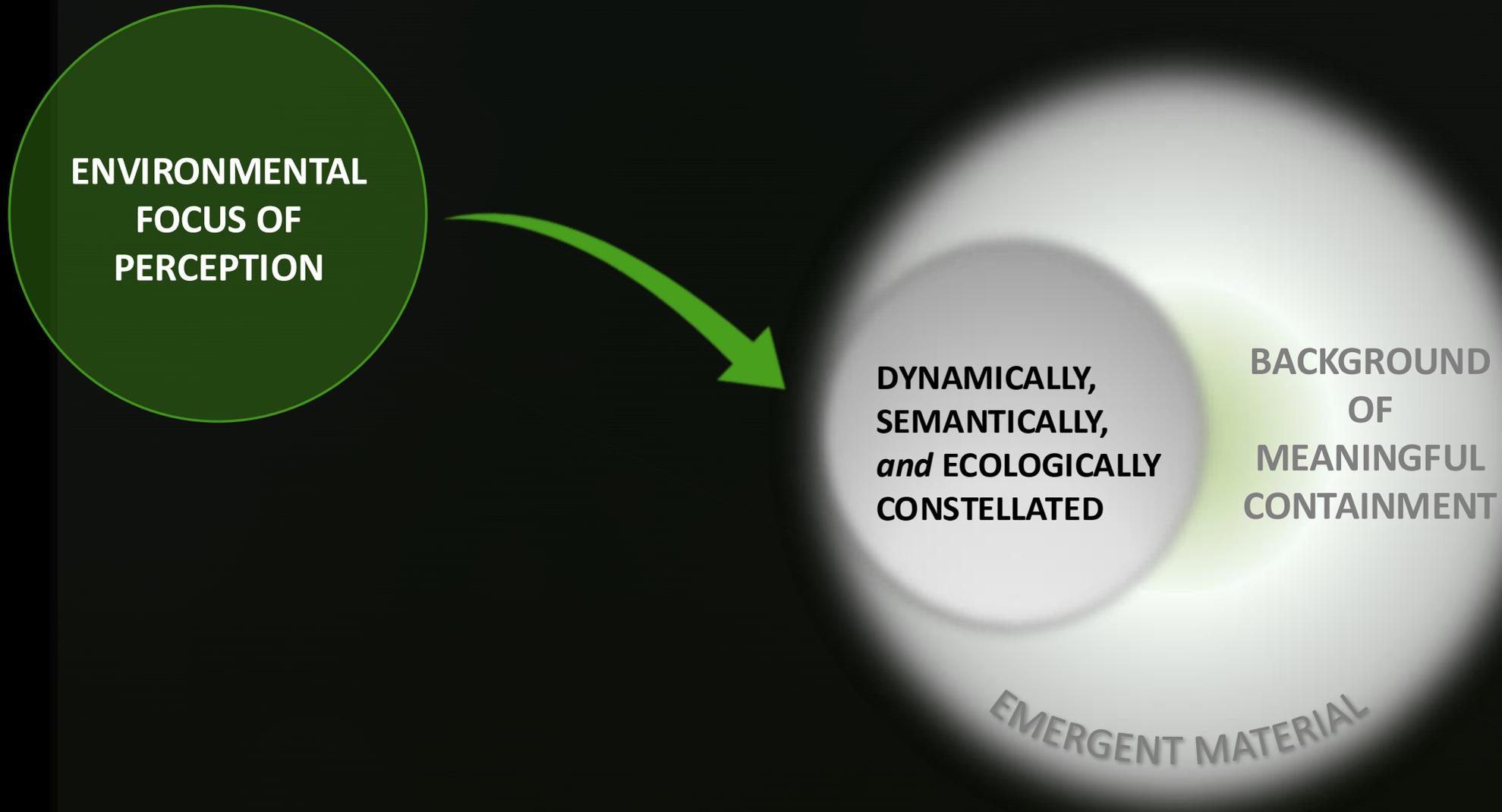
“The model of the ecological Self suggests that we are deeply woven into a complex web of physical and metaphysical relationships”

*(Kerr, M. & Key, D., 2018)*

# Thematic analysis of ecosystemic awareness

Observation	Ecosystemic Themes	Code
Nature adapting to circumstances	Interconnections, parts within systems	<i>E recognition</i>
Sense that we are all living creatures	Immersion, connection of self	<i>E integration</i>
Surrounded by leaves & feeling part of a tree	Deep merging, loss of self	<i>E absorption</i>
Feeling sad that people harm nature	Concern for the other/the environment	<i>E solicitude</i>
A ladybird enjoying the sunshine	Recognition of agency in the other	<i>E agency</i>
Not wanting to disturb a squirrel	Gratitude, consideration	<i>E reciprocity</i>

# The eco-symbolic experience



### 3: The language of wholeness: A theory of the eco-symbolic

# The development of Jung's thinking

“Whether one laments or welcomes the inevitable disappearance of that primordial world is irrelevant. The important thing is the question that nobody ever asks: What happens to those figures and phantoms, those gods, demons, magicians, those messengers from heaven and monsters of the abyss, when we see that there is no mercurial serpent in the caverns of the earth, that there are no dryads in the forest and no undines in the water, and that the mysteries of faith have shrunk to articles in a creed? Even when we have corrected an illusion, it by no means follows that the psychic agency which produces illusions, and actually needs them, has been abolished. It is very doubtful whether our way of rectifying such illusions can be regarded as valid.”

*(Jung, The Symbolic Life, CW18, §1362)*

# Language and indigeneity

“I describe the Okanagan language as a system of sounds through which meaning is called forth by combining a variety of syllables that describe moving pieces of an ongoing reality that stretches away from the speaker. The active reality could be thought of as a sphere sliced into many circles.”

*(Armstrong, 1995)*

“In contrast to colonizing worldviews which position language as the representation of discrete objects or entities that are somehow separate from the *whakapapa* of the world, Māori philosophy views language as bringing the world “into presence.” It is a sort of gathering of entities rather than merely an instrument for singling out any one thing. Within *Te Ao Māori*, the interconnected totality of things “culminates in one utterance”; that which is being manifested through language is “fundamentally unknowable and never the less influential and constructive”.”

▪ *(Williams, 2019 citing Mika, 2016)*

# Jung's distinction of 'sign' and 'symbol'

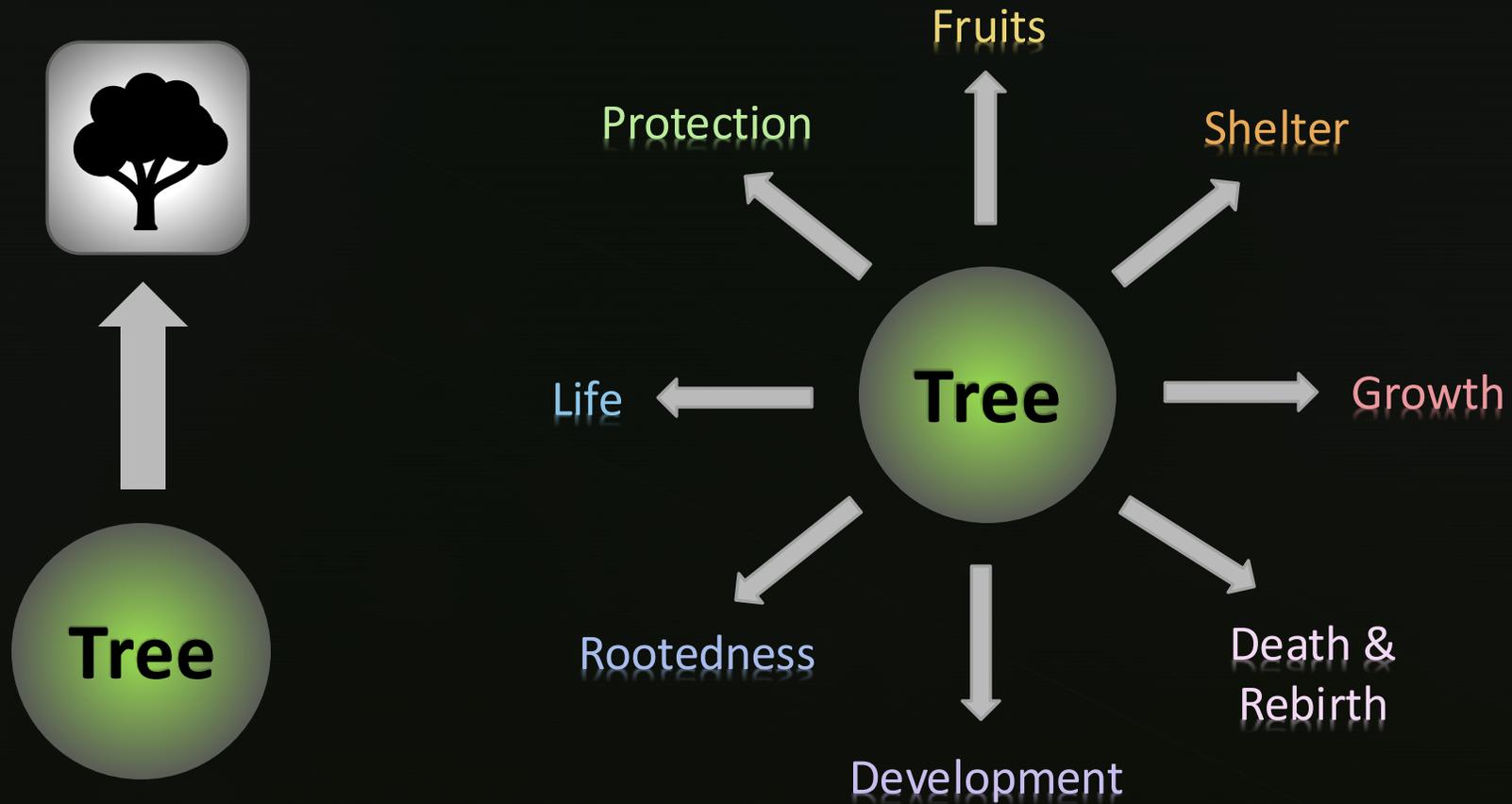
“An expression that stands for a known thing remains a mere sign and is never a symbol. It is, therefore, quite impossible to create a living symbol, i.e., one that is pregnant with meaning, from known associations. For what is thus produced never contains more than was put into it. Every psychic product, if it is the best possible expression at the moment for a fact as yet unknown or only relatively known, may be regarded as a symbol, provided that we accept the expression as standing in for something that is only divined and not yet clearly conscious.”

*(Definitions, CW6, §817)*

“A sign is always less than the thing it points to, and a symbol is always more than we can understand at first sight. Therefore we never stop at the sign but go on to the goal it indicates; but we remain with the symbol because it promises more than it reveals.”

*(Symbols & the Interpretation of Dreams, CW18, §482)*

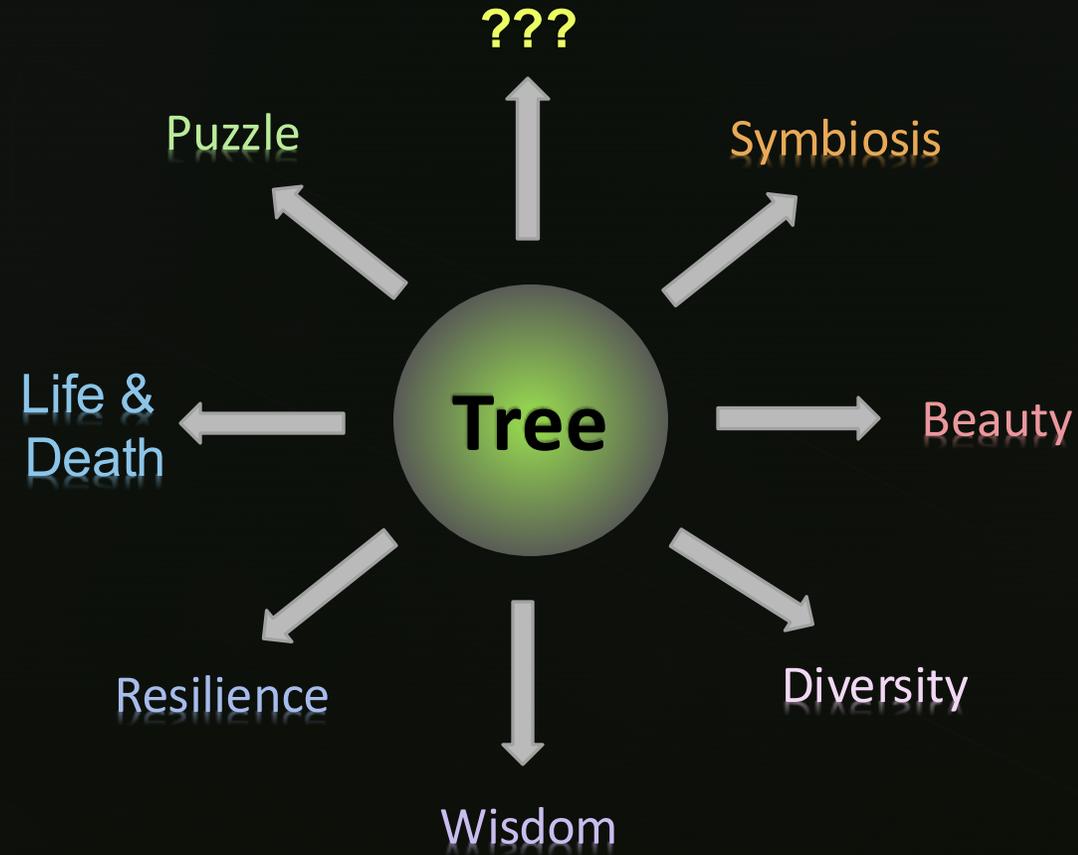
# The multiple referents of the symbol



Semiotic

Symbolic

# Recorded associations to 'tree'



(Study Participant, Brown, 2024)



# Nature and the emergence of meaning

“All the mythologised processes of nature, such as summer and winter, the phases of the moon, the rainy seasons, and so forth, are in no sense allegories of these objective occurrences; rather they are symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to man’s consciousness by way of projection – that is, mirrored in the events of nature”

*(Jung, Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious, CW9i, §7)*

“When an inborn archetypal structure passes into the manifest form of an archetypal fantasy or image, the psyche makes use of impressions from the external surroundings for its means of expression.”

*(Von Franz, Psyche and Matter)*

“Nature, the object par excellence, reflects all those contents of the unconscious which as such are not conscious to us.”

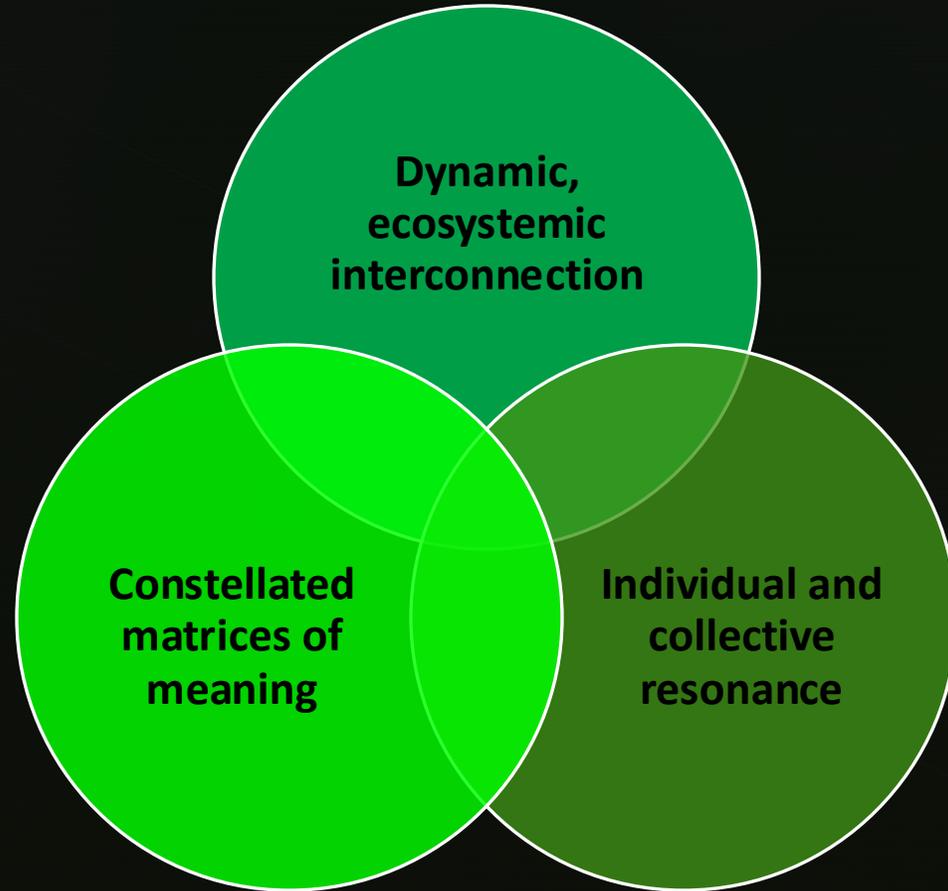
*(Jung, The Song of the Moth, CW5, §170, note 84)*

# The symbol as portal to nature

“The Jungian symbol is a form of animism indigenous to art and culture. It incarnates many voices in its multiple potentials for meaning. My point is that the symbol is indigenous to art as a *portal to nature*, as a form of *reciprocal unconscious, synchronous communication*. The symbol ... therefore joins the embodied psyche to the cosmos, in its linking of psyche and matter. It heals the split of nature and human nature.”

*(Rowland, 2015)*

# The eco-symbolic position



# Reclaiming our eco-symbolic selves

“We must therefore realise that despite its undeniable success the rational attitude of present-day consciousness is, in many human respects, childishly un-adapted and hostile to life. Life has grown desiccated and cramped, crying out for the rediscovery of the fountainhead. But the fountainhead can only be found if the conscious mind will suffer itself to be led back to the “children’s land”, there to receive guidance from the unconscious as before.”

*(Jung, Individual Dream Symbolism in Relation to Alchemy, CW12, §74)*



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