

ASSOCIATIONS OF A FOUR-YEAR-OLD CHILD - (1920)

Here is part of a letter from an American mother: 'I must tell you what my little girl said yesterday. I have not yet recovered from my astonishment. Cousin Emily was talking of how she was going to take an apartment. Whereupon the child said: "If Emily gets married, she'll have a baby." I was very much surprised and asked her: "Why, how do you know that?" And she replied: "Well, when anyone gets married, a baby always comes." I repeated: "But how can you tell that?" And the little girl answered: "Oh, I know a lot besides. I know that trees grow in the ground." What a strange association! That is precisely what I intend to say to her one day by way of enlightening her. Then she went on: "And I know that God makes the world." When she talks like this I can scarcely believe that she is not yet four years old.'

The mother herself seems to have understood the transition from the child's first remark to her second one. What she was trying to say was: 'I know that babies grow inside their mother.' She was not expressing this knowledge directly, but symbolically, by replacing the mother by Mother Earth. We have already learnt from numerous incontestable observations the early age at which children know how to make use of symbols. But the little girl's third remark carries on the same context. We can only suppose that she was trying to convey a further piece of her knowledge about the origin of babies: 'I know that it's all the work of the father.' But this time she was replacing the direct thought by the appropriate sublimation - that God makes the world.