



The Red Book, First Impressions

By

Thomas Kirsch

Jung's *Red Book* has just been released, and I am writing this a week after the material has been made available to the public. What has long been considered the source of all Jung's creative ideas after his traumatic split with Freud is now public. In the seminal chapter "Confrontation with the Unconscious" in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, his so-called autobiography, Jung writes "All my later discoveries come from the experiences that I had during that period of immersion in my inner fantasies." This is where Jung experienced the reality of the unconscious and "knew" that there was a layer beyond the personal unconscious as expressed by Freud. This deeper strata of the unconscious Jung variously called the realm of archetypes, collective unconscious, the objective psyche, but no matter what name he used, he identified an aspect of the psyche that is common to all mankind and is similar to other inborn functions of the human organism. Since his break with Freud, Jung has been criticized by scientists and others who have not accepted his theory that there is an inherited level of the psyche, the collective unconscious.

Now, thanks to the brilliant editorial work of Sonu Shamdasani, with the support of the Jung Estate, we have the raw data of *The Red Book*, carefully researched and amply footnoted. It is from this material that Jung developed all his mature thoughts on the nature of the psyche. How does one interpret this book of 54 paintings and over 200 pages of text written in Gothic text? Jung spent most of his time working with these images and text during the period between 1913 and 1918, although he continued to add to *The Red Book* until 1930.

It is important to realize that Jung did not begin to draw these images or write in any preconceived way. They emerged spontaneously out of his own psyche, and they tended to control him rather than he controlled them. He later developed this experience into a technique, which he called “active imagination,” a process where one consciously dims the ego and opens oneself to the unconscious. Active Imagination has become an important method for those of us in Jungian analysis to tap into this level of psyche. For Jung it was his “self-analysis,” and the images and writings that emerged in this process were healing for his psyche.

This brings us to the important question about how to interpret the material in *The Red Book*? Is the material to be read as a spiritual quest similar to other mystics, such as Brother Klaus, Meister Eckhart, or Jacob Boehme? Should it be interpreted as an archetypal fantasy without reference to the personal situation of Jung? Or should we consider the situation in which Jung found himself in 1913? How should we view this material? This is a major question in hermeneutics. Should the text be analyzed and interpreted completely on its own, or should the personal biographical material be considered in the interpretation of the text? This question is not just theoretical and abstract. It is what divides the “developmental Jungians” from the “symbolic Jungians”, the developmental school focusing on the personal and biographical, whereas the symbolic Jungians focus primarily on the image and text. All practicing Jungian analysts fall somewhere along this gradient. I think that this is a major question, which has relevance not only for the interpretation of *The*

Red Book but also for the direction that the practice of Jungian analysis will take in the future.

In my view both the nature of the images and the personal equation of Jung must be considered when making an interpretation of *The Red Book*. The initial temptation is to evaluate the material entirely on the nature of its archetypal content without regard to Jung's personal situation. However that disregards what Jung himself says about the precarious state of his own psyche after his break with Freud [in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*]. One can surmise that he was in a state of disorientation, depressed, alone, and isolated and that he did not know what to do or where to turn. He began playing in the sand on the shores of Lake Zurich, and then drawing and writing down the fantasies that spontaneously came to him. A process of paying attention to his unconscious relieved his distress. Jung believed that he had no choice but to do this, as it came from an inner necessity. It was through this process that he finally came upon the image of the quadrated circle, in Sanskrit called the mandala. He did not know then how important the mandala was going to be for him, but it was what naturally emerged from his psyche. Once the mandala came to him, he looked for other cultures where the mandala might exist, and of course saw that this image was ubiquitous in Tibet, India, and in a variety of religious systems.

For Jung drawing mandalas became a healing experience that he would utilize and study for the remainder of his professional life. Jung's relationship to the impersonal layer of the psyche as manifest in mandala images shows a major difference from Freud who was focused on the personal unconscious. Jung sensed early on in his relationship to Freud that he must accept Freud's dogma of

sexuality or there would be great difficulty. If Jung were not to accept this dogma, it opened the unconscious to the “black tide of mud of occultism” (1961/1989, p. 147). At the time Freud was referring to everything that philosophy and religion, including the rising contemporary science of parapsychology was stating about the psyche. It was within a very few years later that Jung came upon the quadrated circle and the discovery of the collective layer of the psyche.

For early followers of Jung it was thought that once one discovered the mandala in one’s dreams, the goal of analysis would be achieved. That was similar to my initial thought about Jungian analysis where the goal was to spontaneously draw a mandala and then one would achieve individuation. How simplistic that was! The emergence of the mandala or any four-fold figure is a centering symbol, which helps any individual to stabilize his or her psyche. After all, small children from age three draw mandalas, and again, this squared circle, or mandala, is a symbol seen in many cultures throughout the world.

The main point about the mandala is that it is an archetypal symbol found universally across cultures. Just as getting too identified with the archetypal realm can destroy the individual, it can also be life-saving to connect to the impersonal world of the archetypes of the collective unconscious. However, contact with the archetypal realm occurs in the context of an individual’s life and personal development. There is a danger that the mandala and all the other symbolic images originating in this realm can become too ethereal, too spiritualized, and too disconnected from the personal and cultural context in which they appear. Without a real connection to the personal experience of the

individual, the fascination with the mandala becomes reduced to "draw your mandala" weekend workshops or intellectualized discussions of cosmology. Just as it is important for the individual to be in touch with the archetypal layer of the psyche, it is equally important for the archetypal realm to be grounded in the real human experience of the individual. It can be disastrous for the individual to lose this grounding and, furthermore, it can be disastrous for the Jungian tradition should we not honor equally in our discussion of *The Red Book* a balance between the archetypal layer and the human, personal, individual realm.

In *The Red Book* we have the raw data from which Jung developed his main ideas. It is understandable that Jung was ambivalent about publishing this material during his lifetime. He would have been considered a mystic, a term that was already applied to him in a derogatory way, and it would have damaged his scientific reputation. We can be thankful to Sonu Shamdasani and the Jung Estate for making this material available to us. The collective seems more ready to accept this kind of material today. I have offered a context and some possible ways to understand *The Red Book* in this brief essay. What becomes the prevailing interpretation of *The Red Book* will have a long-lasting effect on which direction analytical psychology will take.

Bibliography

Jung, C.G. (1961/1989) *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. London and New York: Routledge.