

# Twenty-first Century Theurgy

---

Bruce MacLennan, PhD  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

## Introduction

We would like to understand Plotinus' experiences during his divine unions.<sup>1</sup> We would like to be a fly on the wall when Maximus invoked Hecate.<sup>2</sup> We would treasure a long discussion with Iamblichus about the value of theurgy in his life. Any of these would afford us a much deeper understanding of theurgy than we can glean from the available texts. This in turn would advance our understanding of Neoplatonic philosophy, in which theurgy played such an important role. Although we cannot consult the ancient theurgists, we can get important insights from contemporary practices that are, in essence, theurgy. In this presentation I will discuss two examples: first, active imagination in analytical psychology and, second, practices explicitly called "theurgy." I will explore these practices in terms of their goals, techniques, and outcomes.

## Active Imagination

Carl Jung developed a psychological procedure that he eventually called *active imagination*, but this somewhat sterile term is less informative than some of his other names for the procedure. At various times he called it "the technique of introversion or introspection," "trancing," "visioning," "the technique of the descent," and — significantly — "the dialectical method."<sup>3</sup> It became the central tool of his personal psychological development and of his therapeutic practice. It is still widely used by Jungian analytical psychologists. The goals and techniques of active imagination correspond closely to theurgy, which should not be too surprising, for Jung was deeply influenced by Neoplatonism and Gnosticism.

In this paper I am drawing primarily on the book *Inner Work* by Robert Johnson and secondarily on Jung's writings collected by Joan Chodorow in her book *Jung on Active Imagination*.<sup>4</sup>

## Goals

Jung famously remarked that the ancient gods and daimons are still with us, but in the guise of neuroses and other psychological disturbances.<sup>5</sup> The gods correspond to archetypes, which are

---

<sup>1</sup> Porphyry (*Vit. Plot.* 23.17–18) says Plotinus attained this goal four times during the years they were together.

<sup>2</sup> Eunapius, *Vit. Soph.* 475.

<sup>3</sup> Jung (1997) 3.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson (1986); Jung (1997).

<sup>5</sup> Contemporary man "is blind to the fact that, with all his rationality and efficiency, he is possessed by 'powers' that are beyond his control. His gods and demons have not disappeared at all; they have merely got new names" (Jung, von Franz, Henderson, Jacobi & Jaffé, 1964, 82).

unconscious structures regulating perception, motivation, affect, and behavior to serve biological ends. Through repeated activation in the circumstances of an individual's life, each archetype accumulates associations that form unconscious *complexes*. Although complexes are normal components of the psyche, and mediate between the phylogenetic psyche and an individual's life, they can be maladaptive, sources of psychological problems. Jung observed that complexes can behave like autonomous *subpersonalities*, and Jung and other analytical psychologists sometimes use the language of daimons and possession to describe their psychological effect. Repressed and frustrated complexes grow in power until they erupt in undesirable ways. The alternative is to accommodate their needs in some acceptable way. As I will explain, active imagination provides techniques for interacting with these subpersonalities to mitigate psychological disturbances and to achieve greater psychological balance and integration.

Complexes are not inherently pathological. Rather, they are unconscious accumulations of psychodynamic energy, which can compensate imbalances in the conscious attitude. For example, emotionally sensitive complexes can compensate an overly rational conscious personality. Therefore, complexes have much to contribute to our conscious lives as sources of inspiration and as means toward a more balanced personality. One goal of active imagination is to engage with these subpersonalities in order to recruit their power and to secure their aid in living a more harmonious life. They can contribute to our psychological renewal and development.

More broadly, the goal of active imagination is to live in partnership with the unconscious, both respecting its needs and gaining access to its wisdom. In this way we discover the structure of our individual psyches and follow the Delphic maxim, *Gnôthi s'auton*. The ultimate goal is the conscious integration of your complete individual psyche, a lifelong process that Jung terms *individuation*.<sup>6</sup>

Jung calls the bridge between consciousness and the unconscious the *transcendent function*, which he defines as "the symbol-making function." That is, the unconscious communicates by means of symbols, and it is the language of symbols that we must learn in order to interact with the archetypes and complexes. We use symbols to invoke the gods and daimons and they respond to us in symbols.

## Technique

The basic technique of active imagination, as described by Jung and his students, is relatively straightforward. I think the parallels to theurgy will be apparent.

First there is an appropriate *set and setting*.<sup>7</sup> Analytical psychologists stress that the process should be taken seriously; it's not a game. One should approach the gods and daimons with an attitude of respect. In order to induce the proper mental state it is appropriate to wear special

---

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Jung (*CW* 7, ¶1266; *CW* 9 i, ¶1490); Jacobi (1967).

<sup>7</sup> Johnson (1986) 154.

clothing and to conduct the operation in a *temenos*, a place reserved for spiritual practice. In contrast to some ancient theurgical practices, Jungian analysts recommend conducting active imagination alone. This avoids any tendency to turn the operation into a performance or to contaminate the communications by what you suppose others expect.

Active imagination can be understood as a four-step process.<sup>8</sup> The first step is *invitation*, in which you open your consciousness to communication with a particular god or daimon.<sup>9</sup> In Jungian analysis this is often a dream figure, and so the practitioner goes back in their imagination to the dream. In other cases it is a known god or daimon, and the practitioner contemplates associated symbols and images to achieve an appropriate mental state. They might go in their imagination to a place where the figure had been met before. Or they might go to a symbolically powerful place, hoping to meet a guide or teacher, as Dante entered the dark forest, and as Odysseus journeyed to the House of Circe and to Hades. Sometimes it is an unnamed complex, which is causing a mood, psychological blockage, or a neurosis, and in these cases you invoke the daimon by putting yourself in a corresponding mental state. It might be a recurring fantasy, indicating an energized psychodynamic process, and so the practitioner faces the daimon through active imagination. Different people have talents for different approaches, but practice makes perfect. In all cases there are symbols that serve to activate the complex, that is, to invoke the daimon.

Once the invitation has been made, you clear your mind and wait for signs of the daimon's arrival. Some people will see an inner image, others will hear an inner voice. Often there is some outer sign of animation, some spark of liveliness in the environment. But the daimon we invited might not be the one who arrives, for the unconscious might have some more important issue to be addressed than what we intended. We should accept whoever arrives.

The second step is *dialogue*, but analysts suggest that you start by asking questions.<sup>10</sup> Who has arrived? What do they have to tell you? Why have they been meddling in your life? How can you solve a certain problem? Then allow the dialogue to take its course, treating the daimon with courtesy, respect, and restraint, but also defending your conscious position as appropriate. In other words, make it real, just like a conversation with someone whom you respect. You should record the dialogue in concrete form, preferably while it happens, by writing, typing, or sound recording. It's possible that the daimon will lead you on some journey in your imagination, but the goal is not predefined as in a guided visualization. You should not try to script the proceedings, or you will learn very little.

The goal of negotiation is to achieve an accommodation between your conscious ego and this subconscious daimon, a mutually beneficial agreement. But these subpersonalities, these complexes, are born of our biological nature and may make demands that are impractical or

---

<sup>8</sup> The following description follows Johnson (1986) 160ff. Others enumerate the steps somewhat differently (Jung 1997, 10–11).

<sup>9</sup> Johnson (1986) 165.

<sup>10</sup> Johnson (1986) 179.

incompatible with our conscious values. Therefore the third step focuses on *ethics* and is founded upon negotiation and secure ethical standards.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the negotiation should result in some kind of agreement, but reaching this conclusion might take several sessions of active imagination. Analysts recommend that the agreement be made concrete, certainly by writing it down, but also by some concrete action that symbolizes it in the sensible world.<sup>12</sup> Thus the fourth step is *ritual*, which Johnson defines as “symbolic behavior, consciously performed.”<sup>13</sup> This can be ad hoc or traditional, as suits the practitioner. Especially, however, if you have made some vow, then you should fulfill it, or at very least negotiate an alternative. Finally, the agreement should be actualized through some change in your life or through some service to others. This is the broader ethical dimension of the operation. In summary, the four steps are *invitation, dialogue, ethics, and ritual*.

It’s possible to overemphasize the aesthetic aspect of active imagination by developing its result into an artistic creation rather than by focusing on its personal meaning. It’s also possible to overemphasize the intellectual aspect by spending too much time analyzing the symbols that arise. Much of the value of active imagination arises from the experience itself, and Jung stresses that the symbols are healing in themselves and that, as products of the transcendent function, they promote psychological integration.<sup>14</sup>

## Outcomes

Now let’s consider some of the outcomes of a regular practice of active imagination, for they shed light on the outcomes of theurgy as well. They can be described as *therapeia* for the soul in two senses: cure for its ills and care for its ongoing development. Johnson describes three levels of effects.

The first is improved psychological integration.<sup>15</sup> By achieving a rapprochement with interfering complexes, we avoid the risk of destructive possession and increase the opportunity for cooperation with these storehouses of psychodynamic energy and untapped potential. The multiple subpersonalities that constitute a normal human psyche become less of a quarreling family and more of a cooperative team with diverse talents.

The second level of outcome is the opportunity to live otherwise unlived lives.<sup>16</sup> Each of our psyches contains the blueprints for many potential lives; we each have several destinies available, but a single lifetime does not permit them all to be actualized. The paths not taken are still accessible, but they are hidden in the unconscious. Through active imagination we can contact guides who will lead us to these paths and help us to navigate them. In this way we can

---

<sup>11</sup> Johnson (1986) 189.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson (1986) 196.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson (1986) 102.

<sup>14</sup> Jung (1997) 12.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson (1986) 201–3.

<sup>16</sup> Johnson (1986) 207–9.

actualize more of our unique psychological potential, even in a single lifetime. One's life becomes more nearly complete.

Johnson describes the third level as “experiencing the spiritual dimension,” that is, the visionary experience.<sup>17</sup> This includes contact with the archetypal gods, who represent the collective psyche of humankind and can reveal the role our individual lives play in the destiny of humanity. Further, active imagination facilitates individuation, the integration into consciousness of the root and unifying principle of all the archetypes, which Jung has called “the God-image within.” In Neoplatonic terms we may undergo *henôsis*. Johnson remarks that this experience is a grace, which should not be sought.<sup>18</sup>

## Explicit Theurgy

Although analytical psychologists do not call their techniques “theurgy,” in other quarters there is growing interest in practical theurgy grounded explicitly in Neoplatonic texts. For example, July 2014 will bring the fifth annual TheurgiCon conference, specifically for contemporary practitioners. The conference website defines the goal of theurgy as

the use of magick to contact the One or a particular God by use of appropriate signs and symbols and thereby achieving information or enlightenment. Personal spiritual development and happiness are generally the goals.<sup>19</sup>

That is, essentially the same as the aim of the ancient practice. Further, several recent and forthcoming books present theurgy as a valuable spiritual practice for our time, including my own book published in December 2014, *The Wisdom of Hypatia: Ancient Spiritual Practices for a More Meaningful Life*. For the present paper I conducted email interviews with six contemporary theurgists who have written books or spoken at TheurgiCon.

## Background

In July 2014 Brandy Williams' fifth book, *Pagan Theurgy*, will be released. She writes:

My definition of theurgy includes witchcraft and ceremonial magic as well as pure Neo-Platonic practice. That said, I have been a Witch for 40 years, Ceremonialist for over 35, and I've been working magic from the GMPT [*Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*<sup>20</sup>] for nearly 25.

---

<sup>17</sup> Johnson (1986) 216–19.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson (1986, 217) provides the following sound advice: “Such experiences should not be sought. ... It is better just to do your humble work. When you have done enough work, invested enough energy into the unconscious, and if it is appropriate, visionary experience will come uninvited. If it doesn't come, it means that you don't need it.”

<sup>19</sup> theurgicon.com (accessed 20 April 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Betz (1986).

She considers all three to be essentially Neoplatonic. She remarks, “I’ve been grappling with Neo-Platonism for my adult life and have recently come to terms with its influence on my life and practice.” As sources for her practice she cites the Greek magical papyri, books by Sarah Iles Johnson and Gregory Shaw, and some of my own writings, in addition to her own experimentation.

July will also see the publication of Jean-Louis de Biasi’s book, *Rediscover the Magick of the Gods and Goddesses: Revealing the Mysteries of Theurgy*. He is the lifetime Grand Master of Ordo Aurum Solis, an initiatory order founded in the late nineteenth century, and has been practicing theurgy since the 1980s. He traces its sources to Neoplatonism and Hermeticism, and its published practices focus on planetary ritual. He adds that he is trying to live as a Pagan, Neoplatonist, and theurgist.

At the University of Bristol, Sam Webster has completed a doctoral dissertation on the history of theurgy from Iamblichus to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. He writes that since 1984 he has been “teaching the late form of theurgy preserved as the western magical tradition... often in a Golden Dawn framework, but always in a Pagan context.” He adds that his practice is highly conditioned by Alfred North Whitehead, whom he ranks among the Neoplatonists and takes to have corrected some errors in traditional Neoplatonism.

Richard Reidy is the author of *Eternal Egypt: Ancient Rituals for the Modern World*, which was published in 2010. He is associated with several Kemetic temples in the United States, which worship the ancient Egyptian gods. He has practiced theurgy for sixteen years, learning it from the writings of Iamblichus, ancient Egyptian ritual texts, and personal experimentation.

Tony Mierzwicki has practiced ceremonial magic since 1990, but in the late 90s began experimenting with spells from the Greek magical papyri, curse tablets, and the Nag Hammadi texts. In 2001 he began leading workshops, first in Australia, now in the United States. He has published one book, *Graeco-Egyptian Magick: Everyday Empowerment*, and has another coming out in 2014. His practice has moved gradually toward Neoplatonic theurgy, based especially on Iamblichus. He has developed his practice primarily from book research, and remarks that he is unaware of any groups practicing authentic Neoplatonic theurgy.

Donald H. Frew has been a practicing Witch since 1972 and was initiated into Gardenerian Witchcraft in 1985. As a result of his research into its origins he has concluded that it is essentially Neoplatonic. He writes, “Gardner himself specifically stated that the group he joined were Neoplatonists and that Sallustius’ *On the Gods and the World* could be taken as a statement of their ‘creed’.”<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Gardner (1959, 188–9) writes “this teaching of Sallustius ... might have been spoken at a witch meeting, at any time, as a general statement of their creed.”

## Goals

All of my respondents said that the goal of their theurgy is interaction and union with the divine. For Mierzwicki, this should be the goal of all spiritual practice, because otherwise, he says, “it’s just going through the motions.” Webster says that his goal is “integration with the Cosmos and to serve in its administration.” Williams writes,

Theurgy is a spiritual practice rooted in the philosophies which are the foundation of the culture in which I live and allows me to make sense of my world as a polytheist Pagan. My goal is to interact with the divine as understood through interaction with individual deit[ies] as well as with the ultimate source of life, and to live a life of quality upholding the web of life and acknowledging the debt I owe to my fellow humans and to all living things.

De Biasi says that the goal of the theurgic ascent is to come back to the world to which we belong, adding that the Aurum Solis emphasizes critical reason, logic, science, and living a balanced life. He notes that the ancient Neoplatonists were philosophers, not fanatics. Reidy adds, “the goal of human life is deification after death.”

Frew explains that Gardnerian Witchcraft shares three important goals with Neoplatonism. The first is *henôsis*, for he writes:

The goal of the theurgic process – or of Gardnerian Craft – is to live, to locate your sense of Self, in union with the One and thereby participate in the emanation of Goodness, Truth, and Beauty into the world.<sup>22</sup>

This has two secondary benefits.<sup>23</sup> The first is *free will*, that is, the escape from fate through understanding of the higher realms of reality. The second is *immortality*, by relocating one’s sense of self into the higher realms and experiencing life there.

## Operations

Now, to particular practices. I think it is safe to say that most of my respondents have been influenced significantly by the practices of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, but in a Pagan context. The reason, perhaps, is that the Golden Dawn rituals have been published and there are many functioning lodges. The Pagan orientation of my respondents seems to have motivated them to dig into the Neoplatonic roots of these spiritual practices.

The theurgical operations practiced by Williams include *sustasis*, animation of images, and the invocation and evocation of deities; she aspires to *henôsis*. Her morning begins with prayers and offerings to a number of deities from several pantheons, and she prays to others before retiring at night. Her spellcraft, both solitary and in her Wiccan coven, includes the evocation of deities and of elemental and planetary forces. For aid in public speaking she evokes Seshat, the

---

<sup>22</sup> Frew (2002) 6.

<sup>23</sup> Frew (2002) 6–7.

Egyptian goddess of writing and wisdom, and steps into that evocation. In group ritual, she also channels the goddess Nuit as part of her role as an ordained priestess of the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica.

Reidy says that the practice in their Kemetic temples is to invoke a deity into a statue or other image by means of repetitive chants drawn from ancient Egyptian ritual texts. Offerings are made to the god dwelling in the image. Solitary practices include rhythmic breathing and repetition of divine salutations and glorifications, especially at sunrise.

Mierzwicki's theurgical practices include invocation of a deity, *sustasis* with his personal daimon, and dream incubation by invoking a deity before retiring at night. He uses variations of the Mithras Liturgy to ascend through the planetary spheres. He avoids animating statues due to the practical difficulties of daily service to an ensouled icon. He mentioned that evocation of a deity into visible manifestation before a group, as Iamblichus is supposed to have done with the river spirits, is beyond his skill level.

Webster says that he considers all theurgical operations either to be invocation in one form or another, differing in degree of materiality, or to be the results of invocation. Frew says that the Garderian initiatory system is preparation for invocation and *henôsis*, especially with the god in your chain of emanation.

De Biasi's forthcoming book describes a number of theurgical operations based on the Hermetic texts and reminiscent of Golden Dawn practices. Specific practices include:

1. invocation of Thoth;
2. invocation of Mnemosyne and daily review before retiring at night;
3. sunrise, noon, sunset, and midnight adoration of the sun god;
4. invocation of Apollo for an oracle;
5. drawing energy down through the chakras, each associated with a planetary god (much like the Middle Pillar exercise);
6. a centering practice based on the Hermetic text called *The Kratêr* (C.H. 4);
7. a Graeco-Egyptian version of the Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram;
8. invocations of the planetary gods and ascents to their spheres on their astrological days;
9. and finally, construction of an astral temple devoted to the twelve Olympians.

No doubt other practices are taught to Aurum Solis initiates.

## Outcomes

I asked my respondents to say a little about the outcomes and experiences resulting from their theurgical practices. Webster reports that he has experienced *ellampsis*, *theôsis*, and *henôsis*. Reidy experiences "[a]n intense sense of a mystical union with one of the gods (or goddesses)."

Mierzwicki says that common experiences include "feelings of warmth, body swaying or other motion, visions through the third eye, voices heard, messages conveyed." He adds that the



meanings of these experiences are not always obvious and may demand lengthy introspection before insight is attained. He and his students have contacted about forty deities, and he observed that they are quite different in character and in the ways they are experienced by theurgists.

In contrast, de Biasi observes that the techniques of the Aurum Solis lead to consistent experiences, no matter what the theurgist's culture. This has convinced him that the archetypal gods are real and universal.

Williams has regular, meaningful theurgical conversations with several deities, who protect her and help her to manage her emotions and to prosper, among other benefits. Previously, in group rituals she regularly embodied Inanna and other goddesses, but she avoids this practice now because it so easily leads to ego inflation. Recently she has been interacting with an animated statue of Rosmerta, the Celtic goddess of abundance and fertility, and she says it is giving her insights into how she benefits from American imperialism, exploitation, and inequality. She writes that Rosmerta "herself has brought me many insights and is helping to shape the direction of my life." She concludes that Neoplatonic theurgy is aiding her navigation of the disparate worlds in which she lives: scientific materialism, Christian monotheism, and contemporary Neopaganism.

In addition to interior colloquies and experiences of joyous union with a god, Frew describes a number of notable spiritual experiences. While in a state of interior conversation with a deity, that deity has possessed his body and demonstrated "prodigious feats of magic or strength to the coven." The god has also appeared to him "in the flesh," guiding him through the woods, pushing physical branches aside, to lead him to a sacred place, and then vanishing before his eyes. In summary, Frew writes, "I walk with the God and He walks with me. I ask and He answers. We speak as friends and brothers (although He is clearly the elder). What more could one ask of one's spiritual practice?"

## Conclusions

In conclusion, I think we can say that theurgy is alive and well in Western society. Some of its practitioners call themselves "theurgists" and their practices are informed directly by Iamblichus and other Neoplatonists. They are also influenced by the Western tradition of spiritual magic, especially the Golden Dawn. But theurgy is also taking place in the guise of active imagination within Jungian psychological analysis. Superficially the goals differ — spiritual illumination versus therapy — but in practice they resemble each other and correspond to the goals of ancient theurgy. These include direct engagement with the spiritual forces that govern our lives so that we can live more authentically human lives in harmony with those forces. Therefore we can get a deeper understanding of ancient theurgy and its impact on Neoplatonic philosophy by exploring contemporary theurgy and its consequences for its practitioners.

## References

- Betz, H. D. et al. (1986), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demotic Texts*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- de Biasi, Jean-Louis (2014), personal communication, 4 May 2014.
- Frew, Donald H. (2002), "Gardnerian Wica as Theurgic Ascent," unpublished presentation at 1st Pagani Soteira Symposia (29 June 2002, ver. 3.3).
- Frew, Donald H. (2014), personal communication, 10 June 2014.
- Gardner, G. (1959), *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, London: The Aquarian Press.
- Jacobi, Jolande (1967) *The Way of Individuation* (trans. R.F.C. Hull). London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Johnson, R. A. (1986), *Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Jung, C. G. (CW). *The collected works of C. G. Jung* (H. Read, M. Fordham, & G. Adler, Eds.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953–78; New York: Pantheon, 1953–60, and Bollingen Foundation, 1961–67; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967–78.
- Jung, C. G. (1997), *Jung on Active Imagination* (J. Chodorow, Ed. & Intro.), Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jung, C.G., von Franz, M.-L., Henderson, J. L., Jacobi, J., & Jaffé, A. (1964), *Man and his Symbols*, New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday.
- Mierzwicki, Tony (2014), personal communication, 27 May 2014.
- Reidy, Richard (2014), personal communication, 22 May 2014.
- Webster, Sam (2014), personal communication, 24 April 2014.
- Williams, Brandy (2014), personal communication, 20 April 2014.