

# Theurgy as a Widespread Practice

## The Example of Jung's *Red Book*

### I. Introduction

This chapter explores the question of whether Neoplatonic theurgy is a practice accessible to any suitably trained person, or whether it is a rare accomplishment of exceptional individuals. To expose the issues, I focus on Jung's production of his *Red Book*,<sup>1</sup> which is the result of a unique series of theurgical experiments that he conducted from 1913 to 1919, and which he claimed to be source of all his later ideas. Peter Kingsley's recent two-volume essay, called *Catafalque: Carl Jung and the End of Humanity*,<sup>2</sup> compares Jung's singular revelation to those of prophets such as Pythagoras, Parmenides, Empedocles, Isaiah, Joachim of Fiore, and indeed Jesus. From this perspective, such divine revelations are rare and restricted to a few privileged individuals in each age. However, Jung's theurgical experiments are the basis of the psychoanalytic practice called *active imagination*, which corresponds closely to Neoplatonic theurgy and operates on similar principles.<sup>3</sup> Jungian psychologists recommend active imagination, either self-directed or under the guidance of an analyst, as a valuable practice aimed toward psychological integration. Ancient theurgists seem to agree: though individuals may differ in their aptitude (or *epitêdeiotês*), in principle anyone can learn to practice theurgy and engage with divinity. This is the paradox.

### II. Jung's *Red Book*

Jung's *Red Book* had its origin in a series of active imagination experiments that he conducted on himself between 1913 and 1916.<sup>4</sup> He was in effect in the midst of a midlife crisis with doubt about his professional direction, but also beset by dreams and spontaneous visions. The results of these experiments were recorded in six journals known as the *Black Books*. Later he produced a draft transcription of his experiences with added commentary and interpretation. This draft was edited by Jung and his closest colleagues, but without significant alteration to the primary text. In 1915 he began to embody the material in a form suitable to its importance, in the style of a medieval manuscript, with illuminated Gothic calligraphy, first on parchment, later in a commissioned 600-page blank folio volume bound in red leather, and thus known as the *Red Book*. The title that Jung had embossed on the spine is *Liber Novus*, which may be taken as its

---

<sup>1</sup> Jung (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Kingsley (2018).

<sup>3</sup> MacLennan (2005, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Jung (2009) 198–203.

official title. After transferring about two-thirds of the material (202 pages), he abandoned the project, breaking off mid-sentence. (Herein *Red Book* refers to the complete text, not just the portion transcribed into the folio volume.)

Although Jung apparently entertained the idea of publishing the *Red Book*, only the last section (“Scrutinies”) was published in his lifetime (1916), as *Septem Sermones ad Mortuos*, in a small privately printed edition and under the pseudonym “Basilides of Alexandria.” Jung showed the *Red Book* to very few people, and after his death in 1961, the Jung family kept it hidden, eventually in a Swiss bank vault. The reticence of Jung, his family, and many Jungians to reveal the *Red Book* to a wider audience arose from concern that it would “appear like madness”<sup>5</sup> and diminish Jung’s scientific reputation. Jung’s friend and translator, R. F. C. Hull, said it provided “the most convincing proof that Jung’s whole system is based on psychotic fantasies—which of course it is—and therefore the work of a lunatic.”<sup>6</sup> Ten years ago, it was finally published in an impressive facsimile edition with an English translation and extensive notes.<sup>7</sup> The world is still assimilating it.

It will be worthwhile to mention just a few incidents from the *Red Book* for readers unfamiliar with it. It is divided into three parts, titled *Liber Primus*, *Liber Secundus*, and *Scrutinies (Prüfungen)*. In *Liber Primus*, Jung encounters “the spirit of this time” and “the spirit of the depths,” and he seeks his alienated soul. Among other experiences, in “Mysterium Encounter” he meets the prophet Elijah and blind Salome, who is Elijah’s daughter in this world and professes her love for Jung. They are examples of what will later be called the Wise Old Man and Anima archetypes. Elijah tells Jung, “We are real and not symbols.”<sup>8</sup> The following night, he is instructed by them, and on the third night he is deified and Salome’s sight is restored.

In *Liber Secundus* Jung visits Ammonius in the desert, and the anchorite explains how the Logos was made a living concept by being *elevated* to the human level; Jung wonders if the hermit is a Gnostic. The following day, Ammonius acknowledges that the pagan religions contain most of the truths of Christianity, but he is horrified to find himself expressing pagan veneration of the sun, which he blames on Jung’s influence. He attacks, but Jung is instantly returned to the twentieth century. The following night (January 2, 1914) Jung finds his way to Death himself, who reveals a vision of an enormous wave of human and animal corpses flowing to the sea, which turns into an ocean of fire and blood foaming at his feet. Later, in a pleasant meadow Jung meets the Red One, grown old, traveling with Ammonius, now a worldly monk thanks to his encounter with Jung; the church and the devil need each other.

Another time, in a symbolic landscape where East meets West and light meets dark, Jung encounters the giant Izdubar (Gilgamesh), who is seeking the setting sun. Jung tells him the West is the land of science, where myths have died, and so Izdubar gradually loses all his strength, poisoned by scientific “truth.” The next evening Jung realizes that he can save the god by declaring him to be imaginary, thereby allowing him to be shrunk to an egg. “Thus my God found salvation. He was saved precisely by what one would actually consider fatal, namely by declaring him a figment of the imagination.”<sup>9</sup> There follow twelve pages of illuminated incantations, and then the opening of the egg, whereby the healed god is reborn as the sun.

---

<sup>5</sup> Jung (2009) 360, Jung’s characterization in a note he added in 1959 in the folio (p. 190).

<sup>6</sup> Bair (2003) 293.

<sup>7</sup> Jung (2009). A “readers edition,” Jung (2012), of the translation is also available, but it does not include a facsimile of the calligraphic manuscript.

<sup>8</sup> Jung (2009) 246.

<sup>9</sup> Jung (2009) 283.

In a later encounter, Salome offers Jung a magic rod in the form of a black serpent. To learn its magic, Jung journeys to a far-off land where a great magician lives, ancient Philemon and his wife Baucis (last seen in Goethe's *Faust*, Part II). Philemon is reticent and teaches in paradoxes: "Magic happens to be precisely everything that eludes comprehension."<sup>10</sup> Another time, the serpent opens the gate to the mysteries, so that Elijah and Salome reappear; they want her to be Jung's wife, and he is grateful, but cannot accept. Before departing, the serpent tells Jung, "No one besides you has your God. He is always with you, yet you see him in others, and thus he is never with you."<sup>11</sup>

In *Scrutinies*, Jung's soul calls to him from above, where she has become sun-like. She says,

You should become serious, and hence take your leave from science. There is too much childishness in it. Your way goes toward the depths. Science is too superficial, mere language, mere tools. But you must set to work.<sup>12</sup>

The dead arrive *en masse* and Philemon gives them an extended lecture on his gnostic philosophy. For example, "In the Pleroma there is nothing and everything. It is fruitless to think about the Pleroma, for this would mean self-dissolution."<sup>13</sup> And, "This is a God you knew nothing about, because mankind forgot him. We call him by his name *ABRAXAS*. He is even more indefinite than God and the devil."<sup>14</sup> While in Philemon's garden, a blue shade approaches the old man and addresses him as Simon Magus and Baucus as Helena. It emerges that the shade, Philemon's master, is Christ. This must suffice as a sample of the *Red Book*.

Jung's experiments in active imagination were enormously significant for him, for through them he rediscovered his soul and navigated his midlife crisis. Moreover, by separating personal material from collective material, he laid the foundations of analytical psychology. Late in life he said:

The years when I was pursuing my inner images were the most important in my life—in them everything essential was decided. It all began then; the later details are only supplements and clarifications of the material that burst forth from the unconscious, and at first swamped me. It was the *prima materia* for a lifetime's work.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, beyond its significance for Jung, the *Red Book* is significant as the founding document of Jungian psychology. In addition to the elements specific to Jung's psyche, the *Red Book* revealed aspects of the collective unconscious that have been investigated by Jung and his colleagues and successors over the past century. Nevertheless this central document for the history of analytical psychology has been inaccessible for nearly a century, and now that it is available, that history is being reassessed.

---

<sup>10</sup> Jung (2019) 313.

<sup>11</sup> Jung (2009) 329.

<sup>12</sup> Jung (2009) 336.

<sup>13</sup> Jung (2009) 347.

<sup>14</sup> Jung (2009) 349.

<sup>15</sup> Jung (1989), 199.

There are some interesting parallels between the *Red Book* and the Chaldean Oracles. They are both, as I will argue, the product of similar psychological practices: the active imagination of Jung and the theurgy of the two Julians. Moreover, they are canonical and—one might say—inspired texts that are the foci for commentary and elaboration in two philosophical systems: analytical psychology and Neoplatonism. Both are mythic in content and require considerable interpretation. Finally, the Chaldean Oracles are largely lost, as was the *Red Book*, in effect, for nearly a century.

Both the *Red Book* and the Chaldean Oracles have some similarities to the products of automatic writing.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Jung had experimented with automatic writing, but there are important differences. Automatic writing tends to be a passive process in which information is received and transcribed; the medium or “channel” might even be unconscious of what they are communicating. In active imagination, in contrast, practitioners engage *as themselves* with the figures they encounter; they have experiences that result from their participation in psychic realms that are not under their control. In this respect, active imagination is a genuine theurgical operation.

### III. Theurgy and Active Imagination

To see that Jungian active imagination is a kind of theurgy, with similar means and ends, we can begin with the observation that the Jungian archetypes are the psychical manifestations of the Platonic Ideas. For example, Jung explained the archetypes as

active living dispositions, ideas in the Platonic sense, that preform and continually influence our thoughts and feelings and actions.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the archetypes, as regulators of human behavior, act like independent personalities and populate the world’s mythologies as gods and other beings. Jung identified the archetypes with “the ruling powers, the Gods, that is, images of dominating laws and principles, average regularities in the sequence of images, that the brain has received from the sequence of secular processes.”<sup>18</sup> They reside in the collective unconscious, that is, the part of the unconscious mind that all people have in common, which is part of the psychological structure of *Homo sapiens*.

Throughout an individual’s life, unconscious *complexes* develop around archetypal cores in the psyche; they adapt the archetypes to the individual in ways determined by the individual’s experiences. As such they are a normal and necessary component of a complete human psyche, but they can function more or less well as adaptations to life. Complexes too can behave as independent personalities, and analytical psychologists have identified them with *daimones* because they can possess a person, influencing or even compelling behavior, and they can be projected onto other people.<sup>19</sup> The archetypes, since they are shared among all people, are experienced as gods, but the complexes, which are associated with individuals, are more akin to the personal *daimones* (*oikeioi daimones*).

---

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Dee (2003/1583), Newbrough (1882), Crowley (1976/1909), Urantia (1955), Schucman (1976), Walsch (1955).

<sup>17</sup> Jung (*CW* 8) ¶154. Jung’s *Collected Works* (*CW*) are cited by volume and paragraph number.

<sup>18</sup> Jung (1920) 432.

<sup>19</sup> von Franz (1980).

The Neoplatonists also recognized that we have an unconscious mind, and Plotinus, for example, described unconscious archetypes and complexes:

*Enn.* 5.1.12

For not everything which is in the soul is immediately perceptible, but it reaches us when it enters into perception ... And further, each soul-part [*psukhikôn*], since it is always living, always exercises its own activity by itself; but the discovery of it comes when sharing with the perceptive power and conscious awareness takes place. If then there is to be conscious apprehension of the powers which are present in this way, we must turn our power of apprehension inwards, and make it attend to what is there. (tr. Armstrong)

The unconscious mind is the home of the individual manifestations of the *daimones*, gods, and Ineffable One.

Although there is not, so far as I know, any direct evidence that Jung was inspired by Neoplatonic or Gnostic theurgy when he developed his technique of active imagination, he was well aware of contemporary mediumship, spiritualism, and trance techniques. Moreover, theurgy and active imagination operate by very similar principles; both depend on ritual, which Jungian analyst Robert Johnson defines as “symbolic behavior, consciously performed.”<sup>20</sup> They both employ symbols—associated material objects and actions—to energize and engage autonomous personalities: gods and *daimones* in Neoplatonic terms, archetypes and complexes in psychological terms. Thus, according to Proclus,

*Hier. Art.*

the authorities on the priestly art [theurgy] have thus discovered how to gain the favor of powers above, mixing some things together and setting others apart in due order. They used mixing because they saw that each unmixed thing possesses some property of the god but is not enough to call that god forth. Therefore, by mixing many things they unified the aforementioned influences and made a unity generated from all of them similar to the whole that is prior to them all. (tr. Copenhaver)

In active imagination as in theurgy, the spirits may teach us how to contact them; as Proclus explains:

*Hier. Art.*

Beginning with these things and others like them, they gained knowledge of the daimonic powers, how closely connected they are in substance to natural and corporeal energy, and through these very substances they achieved association with the [*daimones*], from whom they returned forthwith to actual works of the gods, learning some things from the [gods], for other things being moved by themselves toward accurate consideration of the appropriate symbols. Thence, leaving nature and natural energies below, they had dealings with the primary and divine powers. (tr. Copenhaver)

---

<sup>20</sup> Johnson (1986) 102.

Both theurgy and active imagination proceed by a kind of unguided visualization. That is, while specific symbols and rituals are used to gain entry to the psychical realm, thereafter experiences develop according to their own logic. Like interactions in external reality, they are only partially under the control of the ego, for they are also affected by other autonomous beings.

Theurgy and active imagination have similar benefits for their practitioners. One is as a source of divine inspiration. For example, Porphyry acknowledges this in *Philosophy from Oracles*, and the Chaldean Oracles, which motivated so much philosophical thought, were inspired theurgical products. Active imagination, likewise, can be a powerful creative process, as it was for Jung. Nevertheless, psychologists advise against a transactional approach to active imagination: contacting gods and *daimones* only to satisfy the ego's needs and desires.<sup>21</sup> In Neoplatonic terms, the difference is between theurgy and thaumaturgy (or *goêteia*); gods and *daimones* are not our servants, and it is unwise to treat them so.

Active imagination, like theurgy, brings us into the community of gods and *daimones*. It allows us “to become gods so far as possible for mortals,” as Plato taught.<sup>22</sup> In so doing we must guard against inflated notions of our own perfection, for as Plotinus said, “our goal is not to be morally flawless, but to be gods.”<sup>23</sup> I understand this *theôsis* to mean that by being accepted into the community of gods and *daimones*, and by becoming at home in that community as we discover it in our individual psyches, we anchor our individual *nous* in the cosmic *Nous*, and thereby experience the divine life.<sup>24</sup>

## IV. Ascents and Descents

Neoplatonic theurgy focuses on ascent (*anagôgê*) to The One, and so it might seem to be one-sided and unbalanced, repressing the dark depths.<sup>25</sup> In the *Red Book* Jung's path was one of descent into the underworld (*katabasis*), which doesn't fit so well with Platonic ideals of illumination and elevation (e.g., Plato's cave allegory). This would seem to be a significant divergence between Neoplatonic theurgy and the *Red Book*.

In ancient Greek and Roman religion, deities were imagined, for the most part, above the earth, and so one ascended to reach them. Sacrifices to chthonic powers were often apotropaic rather than communal, intended to keep them away rather than to bring them close. On the other hand, we have the significant example of the Eleusinian Mysteries which culminated in a direct encounter with Persephone, the queen of the underworld, which was a transformative, positive experience for initiates, but she ascended to greet the initiates.<sup>26</sup> Mithraic references pervade Jung's oeuvre, and Mithraic initiations were conducted underground, but the initiatory degrees ascended through the planetary spheres.

Descents do appear in classical literature, notably, Odysseus' necromancy in *Odyssey* XI and Aeneas' *katabasis* in *Aeneid* VI, but these *nekyliai* are necromantic rituals to communicate with the ancestors, not to reach the gods. Most other *katabaseis* in classical mythology are to rescue someone from Hades (e.g., the descents of Orpheus and Heracles). One notable exception

---

<sup>21</sup> Watkins (1984) 109.

<sup>22</sup> On *homoiôsis theô*, vid. *Th.* 176AB, *R.* 500CD, *Ti.* 90BC.

<sup>23</sup> *Enn.* 1.2.6.

<sup>24</sup> Armstrong (2004).

<sup>25</sup> Hillman (1979).

<sup>26</sup> Kerényi (1967).

is Psyche's descent in the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius Madaurensis. These literary descents were not pleasant affairs, but neither were Jung's descents as described in the *Red Book*.

We also have hints of philosophical descents, which come closer to theurgy. For example, the surviving fragments of Parmenides' poem appear to record a descent into the underworld and a meeting with Persephone, but we don't know the details of the procedure.<sup>27</sup> Biographies of Empedocles say he ended his days by jumping into the crater of Mt. Etna, and the associated symbols suggest an underworld destination and an alchemical transformation in the central fire; this legend might record an imagined descent analogous to Jung's descents in the *Red Book*.<sup>28</sup> Epimenides, according to Diogenes Laertius, slept in a cave for 57 years and emerged a prophet and healer.<sup>29</sup> And Pythagoras is supposed to have gone with Epimenides into the cave on Mt. Ida, and also to have constructed an underground chamber into which he disappeared for an extended time during which he visited Hades.<sup>30</sup> These stories might reflect theurgic descents in the imagination, which nevertheless could have been conducted in an actual cave or underground chamber. For example, consulting the Oracle of Trophonius involved physical descent into a cave.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, incubation to consult the dead often took place in caves or underground chambers. Although, necromancy was widely proscribed in ancient Greece and Rome, since it disrespected and disturbed the dead, communication with the souls of the dead by dream incubation in the *nekromanteia* at Cumae and other places was tolerated.<sup>32</sup> Therefore we do find some parallels to the descents to the underworld and communication with the dead that are described in the *Red Book*. In Neoplatonic theurgy one typically ascends to reach the gods and *daimones*, but similar visualization techniques permit theurgic descents to the underworld; often the gods show the way.

There is an apparent opposition between Olympian and Chthonic cult in ancient Greece: "On the one hand there is exaltation, on the other despondency."<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, there is a *coniunctio oppositorum*, because

the opposition between Olympian and Chthonic constitutes a polarity in which one pole cannot exist without the other and in which each pole only receives its full meaning from the other. Above and below, heaven and earth together form the universe.<sup>34</sup>

Often Olympian gods have (sometimes mortal) Chthonic counterparts (e.g., Zeus Hypsistos and Zeus Chthonios, Artemis and Iphigeneia). In these ways ancient cult preserved a balanced approach to reality:

The contour of the everlasting Olympian figures provided a standard and sense of direction; and yet in the reality of the cult their darker counterparts were retained in such a way that superficiality was avoided.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Kingsley (1999).

<sup>28</sup> Kingsley (1995), esp. chs. 17–19.

<sup>29</sup> D.L. 1.10.

<sup>30</sup> D.L. 8.3, 41. Diogenes' source presents the story as a trick, but it was likely an imaginative ritual.

<sup>31</sup> Meier (2009) ch. VII.

<sup>32</sup> Luck (1985) 166–9.

<sup>33</sup> Burkert (1985) 199.

<sup>34</sup> Burkert (1985) 202.

<sup>35</sup> Burkert (1985) 203.

In ancient Greek religion, heroes occupied an intermediate position between gods and mortals: on one hand, they received offerings and prayers like the gods; on the other, they had died, descended to the underworld, and had tombs like other mortals. They were not feared, but often invoked as saviors (*sôtêres*). In Neoplatonic theurgy they are understood as a kind of *daimôn* and invoked especially to aid in the spiritual ascent, for they counteract the material (*hulikoi*) *daimones*, who are responsible for embodiment and incarnation.<sup>36</sup> Some philosophers, including Parmenides and Plato, were venerated as heroes.

## V. Jung's Travail

Jung's experiences in active imagination that were recorded in the *Red Book* were disturbing, even traumatic:

I stood helpless before an alien world; everything in it seemed difficult and incomprehensible. I was living in a constant state of tension; often I felt as if gigantic blocks of stone were tumbling down upon me. One thunderstorm followed another. My enduring these storms was a question of brute strength.<sup>37</sup>

Was his experience typical of theurgy? Must all theurgists “purposely expose themselves to the danger of being devoured by the monster of the maternal abyss”?<sup>38</sup> While we should expect encounters with gods and *daimones* to be uncanny and sometimes bizarre and frightening, this is not a universal experience in active imagination. I believe that Jung's difficulties were in part the experiences he needed to have to break him free from his conservative Christian background and an atheistic scientific worldview. Moreover, we have to remember that Jung was a pioneer in the application of these techniques in psychotherapy. In this “most difficult experiment,”<sup>39</sup> as he described it, he was making “a voyage of discovery to the other pole of the world.”<sup>40</sup> In particular, unlike ancient theurgists, Jung had not been properly initiated; he did not know what to expect, or how to assimilate his experiences. As a result of the experiments of Jung and his colleagues, practitioners of active imagination today can be better prepared.

Since Jung's experiences were more Gnostic than Neoplatonic, we might look to Gnostic theurgy for closer parallels to the *Red Book*, but not so much is known about ancient Gnostic practices. We may assume that they were similar to Neoplatonic theurgy, since Gnosticism and Neoplatonism shared a common Middle-Platonic background, and they were close enough for Plotinus to feel obliged to exaggerate the differences.<sup>41</sup> I suspect, however, that Jung's Gnostic experiences in active imagination were compensatory to his conservative Protestant upbringing; it is what he needed to undergo in order to become more balanced. He needed to explore darkness and the depths of material embodiment, but others will have different needs and will have different experiences. In any case, the theurgical practices for ascending to the gods are

---

<sup>36</sup> Shaw (1995) 132–3.

<sup>37</sup> Jung (1989) 177.

<sup>38</sup> Jung (*CW* 7) ¶261.

<sup>39</sup> Jung (2009) 200n67.

<sup>40</sup> Jung (2009) 189.

<sup>41</sup> *Enn.* 2.9[33]. For detailed analysis, see Mazur (2019) and citations therein.



similar to those for descending into the depths of the collective unconscious; as Heraclitus taught, the way up and the way down are the same.

## VI. Children of the Gods

Deification (*theôsis*) is the ultimate goal of theurgy, and in the *Red Book* Jung tells us that after he was forced into a crucifixion posture, Salome declared, “You are Christ.”<sup>42</sup> Jung later described this as his deification and union with the inner Christ.<sup>43</sup>

We should not bear Christ as he is unbearable, but we should be Christs, for then our yoke is sweet and our burden easy. This tangible and apparent world is one reality, but fantasy is the other reality. So long as we leave the God outside us apparent and tangible, he is unbearable and hopeless. But if we turn the God into fantasy, he is in us and is easy to bear.<sup>44</sup>

Jung also said that his “master” Philemon was “the same who inspired Buddha, Mani, Christ, Mahomet—all those who may be said to have communed with God,”<sup>45</sup> all divine or semidivine figures. Is there any sense in which Jung is the son of God?

Although in Christianity the son of God is unique, ancient pagans recognized many children of the gods (*theopaidés*). In fact, it is an archetypal pattern: some god (often Zeus in Greek mythology) impregnates a mortal woman, who gives birth to a semidivine mortal who has a special connection to the god; sometimes they are deified at death (e.g. Asclepius, Heracles, Orpheus, Dionysos, Harmonia, Helen). Less frequently, a goddess takes a mortal lover and bears a semidivine child (e.g., Achilles, Aeneas).

Outside of mythology, there are historical instances. For example, Pythagoras was rumored to be a son of Apollo, whose Delphic oracle informed Pythagoras’ (mortal) father Mnesarchus that his wife was pregnant with a son,

Iamb. *VP* 2.5

a child surpassing in beauty and wisdom those who had ever yet existed, and he would be an enormous help to the human race in its manner of living. (tr. Dillon & Hershbell)

So Mnesarchus renamed his wife Pythais and named the unborn child Pythagoras, both after Pythian Apollo.

Pythais of all Samians the most fair,  
Zeus-loved Pythagoras to Phoebus bare.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Jung (2009) 252.

<sup>43</sup> Jung (2012) 106.

<sup>44</sup> Jung (2009) 283.

<sup>45</sup> From Cary Baynes letter of Jan. 26, 1924 in Jung (2009) 213.

<sup>46</sup> Adapted from translation in Stanley (1743) Part IX, ch. 1, p. 394.

On the basis of his congress with the gods, Pythagoras gained theological knowledge and reformed religious practices (e.g., allowing initiates to make only bloodless offerings).<sup>47</sup> Indeed, as here, the priestly art is often taught by the gods themselves.

Likewise, “Plato was a divine man, an Apollonian man” (*theios, Apollōniakos*).<sup>48</sup> When Plato’s parents married, according to legend, Perictione was already (though not obviously) pregnant by Apollo, who had come to the virgin in a vision. After Ariston repeatedly tried to have sex with her, Apollo visited him in a dream and commanded that he leave her alone for ten months until Plato’s birth, which was on Apollo’s birthday, the seventh day of the month Thargêliôn. (Socrates was born on the sixth of Thargêliôn, which was Artemis’ birthday; she was born the day before Apollo so she could assist as midwife; likewise, Socrates was the philosophical midwife to Plato.) Thus divine Plato was born of a virgin, and Athenians often said Apollo begat two sons: Asclepius and Plato, one to cure bodies, the other to cure souls.<sup>49</sup>

He did not issue from a mortal bed;  
A god his sire; a god-like life he led.<sup>50</sup>

Twenty years later, Socrates had a dream in which a cygnet took flight from an altar in the Academy and landed in his lap. Suddenly becoming a full-fledged swan, it flew up to the heavens, serenading both gods and mortals “so that all who heard it were spell-bound.”<sup>51</sup> The next day, as Socrates related his dream, Plato was introduced to him for instruction, and Socrates exclaimed, “This is the swan from the Academy!” The swan of course is Apollo’s bird, and the god’s birth on Delos was celebrated by circling, singing swans. Plato called himself “a fellow-slave with the swans,” implying that he was in the lineage (*seira*) of Apollo. Socrates’ dream foretold that Plato would reach intellectual perfection under his tutelage and that no one would be able to resist his words.<sup>52</sup>

Shortly before his death, Plato dreamed that he was a swan leaping from tree to tree, escaping the fowlers’ grasp. It was interpreted to mean that everyone would try to grasp Plato’s meaning, but none would succeed, for his words supported many interpretations. According to some reports, Plato willed himself to die on his birthday, thus completing exactly 81 years, further proof of his Apollonian origin, for 81 is a perfect number, with beginning, middle, and end, the square of the number of Muses. Therefore the Magi came to Athens to sacrifice to Plato, thinking him more than mortal. The Delphic oracle confirmed that Plato’s monument should be honored like images of the gods.<sup>53</sup>

Other examples may be cited and the archetypal pattern is apparent. Are these stories merely hagiolatry? What does it mean for a mortal to be the child of a god (*theopais*)? Is it more than a metaphor or a projection? Highly individuated persons can, with some accuracy, be called

---

<sup>47</sup> Philostratus, *V. Apoll.* I.i.

<sup>48</sup> *Prol. Plat. Phil.* I, pp. 2–3.

<sup>49</sup> There are many differences among the biographies of Plato; for an overview, see Boas (1948). Details here are drawn from biographies by D.L. III.1, Hesychius, and Olympiodorus; translations can be found in Burges (tr.), *Works of Plato*, VI, 179, 229, 232. Other material is from *Prol. Plat. Phil.* I, Plutarch, *Symposiacs* VIII (Quest. 1), and Stanley (1743) V, 1, p. 161.

<sup>50</sup> Stanley (1743) V, 1, p. 161 (spelling and capitalization modernized).

<sup>51</sup> *Prol. Plat. Phil.* I.

<sup>52</sup> D.L. III, 5 and Olympiodorus (both in Burges, *W. Plato*, VI, 177–8, 233, 236), Apuleius, *Doctr. Plato* I, 1 (in Burges, *W. Plato*, VI, 324), *Prol. Plat. Phil.* I, and Callimachus, *H. Apollo*.

<sup>53</sup> Boas (1948); *Prol. Plat. Phil.* I; Stanley (1743) V, 12, p. 180.

children of the gods. They have integrated the archetypes into consciousness, and in this sense are living a divine life. Such a life is an expression of the Self, which Jung called the God-image within. However, individuation is the end of long and conscious developmental process; I don't think anyone is born individuated.

There is another possibility. If the archetypes are the psychological aspects of the evolved regulatory patterns of human life,<sup>54</sup> then a person might be considered a child of an archetypal god if their psyche were genetically dominated by that archetype. Perhaps all people have, to varying degrees, a dominant deity, and this is the meaning of each person being in the lineage or chain (*seira*) of some god. If a person's psychology is especially closely aligned with their "parent" god or goddess, they could be an effective prophet of that deity. With some accuracy, we could call them a child of that god. Therefore, from the perspective of evolutionary Jungian psychology, Jesus might well be a son of God, but Pythagoras, Plato, and Apollonius of Tyana might also be sons of gods. Moreover, in this view children of the gods continue to be born, and perhaps Jung can be considered such.

## VII. Contemporary Theurgical Practice

Peter Kingsley's *Catafalque* places Jung in the company of famous prophets, with *Liber Novus* the *apokalypsis* for a new age, and it has been noted that *Liber Novus* can be read "New Bible,"<sup>55</sup> but Jung is emphatic that his *Red Book* is an example, not sacred scripture:

I give you news of the way of this man, but not of your own way. My path is not your path therefore I cannot teach you. The way is within us, but not in Gods, nor in teachings, nor in laws. Within us is the way, the truth, and the life. ... There is only one way and that is your way. You seek the path? I warn you away from my own. It can also be the wrong way for you. May each go his own way. I will be no savior, no lawgiver, no master teacher unto you. You are no longer little children.<sup>56</sup>

Certainly, the *Red Book* reveals some universal truths, applicable to all people, but they are entangled with material particular to Jung's psychological state at the time of his experiments, and it took Jung and his colleagues years to separate the two. Therefore, Jung advised people to make their own *Red Books* containing the results of their own experiments in active imagination.<sup>57</sup> I think it is most accurate to consider Jung's *Red Book* to be what is sometimes called a *liber spirituum* or spirit journal. This is a record of congress with spirits, including the invocations and sigils by which they may be contacted, and any resulting agreements ("pacts"). By virtue of the symbols it contains, the *liber spirituum* itself becomes a potent theurgical instrument. But Jung's *Red Book* was an instrument tuned to his soul, not ours. Rather, it is important for each person to embody the results of their own active imagination in

---

<sup>54</sup> Stevens (2003).

<sup>55</sup> Giergerich (2010).

<sup>56</sup> Jung (2009) 231.

<sup>57</sup> Jung (2009) 216.

some tangible form (a book, images, sculpture, dance, etc.).<sup>58</sup> “I should advise you to put it all down as beautifully as you can,” Jung wrote, “in some beautifully bound book, for in that book is your soul.”<sup>59</sup> (Could this be why Jung avoided completing the *Red Book*, breaking off twice mid-sentence?)

Jung described his active imaginations of 1913–1919, which produced the *Red Book*, as his “most dangerous experiment” for it seemed like a voluntary descent into psychosis. This then brings us to the central question of this chapter: should ordinary people do theurgy or (equivalently) active imagination? Or should it be confined to those rare individuals who are the prophets of their age? In his *Catafalque*, Kingsley describes the extraordinary characteristics and experiences shared by Jung and other prophets,<sup>60</sup> and Jung warned, “It must not by any means be supposed that the technique described is suitable for general use or imitation.”<sup>61</sup> Analyst Anthony Stevens says, “It is potentially dangerous, because it amounts to a self-induced psychotic episode,”<sup>62</sup> and Jung also warned that active imagination could unleash latent psychoses.<sup>63</sup> In fact, for many years the general opinion in analytical psychology was that active imagination should be conducted only under the guidance of a therapist.

This danger is one reason that traditionally theurgical techniques have been taught in religious, spiritual, or philosophical groups under the guidance of an individual spiritual director, teacher, or guru who could monitor the student’s psychological progress and readiness to learn more advanced practices. Sometimes this readiness is formalized in a system of degrees. Perhaps it is a result of our contemporary democratic aversion to gate-keepers and elitist institutions, but current opinion in analytical psychology seems to be that active imagination is not especially dangerous for most people.<sup>64</sup> One safeguard is to remain securely grounded in ordinary life, to keep one’s feet firmly on the ground. Jung tells us:

Particularly at this time, when I was working on the fantasies, I needed a point of support in “this world,” and I may say that my family and my professional work were that to me. It was most essential for me to have a normal life in the real world as a counterpoise to that strange inner world. My family and my profession remained the base to which I could always return, assuring me that I was an actually existing, ordinary person. The unconscious contents could have driven me out of my wits.<sup>65</sup>

It is significant that while Jung was engaged in the active imagination experiments that resulted in the *Red Book*, he continued to see patients and to discharge his Swiss military duty. “Balance finds the way,”<sup>66</sup> he advised, and many of the pitfalls can be avoided by maintaining an equilibrium between the inner and outer worlds. In active imagination, as in theurgy, one visits other worlds and beings, but with the intention of returning with something of value for life in *this* world. Jung tells us:

---

<sup>58</sup> Johnson (1986) 196–199.

<sup>59</sup> Jung (2009) 216.

<sup>60</sup> Kingsley (2018).

<sup>61</sup> Jung (2012) 55.

<sup>62</sup> Stevens (1995) 241.

<sup>63</sup> Jung (*CW* 8) 68.

<sup>64</sup> Johnson (1986) 137–8.

<sup>65</sup> Jung (1989) 189.

<sup>66</sup> Jung (2009) 294n24.

This idea—that I was committing myself to a dangerous enterprise not for myself alone, but also for the sake of my patients—helped me over several critical phases.<sup>67</sup>

Moreover, in these interactions with gods and *daimones*, it is crucial to maintain a firm ethical position,<sup>68</sup> balancing the ethical norms of the contemporary world against the interests of an archetypal divine and daimonic realm that is beyond good and evil. This is facilitated by secure ethical foundations and an experienced spiritual director, psychotherapist, or other guide.

A trap in the way of anyone engaging in active imagination or other theurgical practices is the supposition that one's individual gnostic experience has some relevance for other people. It is a dangerous psychological inflation to assume that the knowledge or insights gained are a sort of revelation to be shared with (or imposed upon) the world, and to suppose that one is the privileged and unique receiver of such revelations. The term “unverified personal gnosis” is sometimes used to refer to these insights that, while highly significant for the receiver, may have less relevance to other people. Typically there is a mixture of more universal, archetypal material with more personal, daimonic content. One finds such a mixture of individual and universal insights in the *Red Book*, and it took Jung and his colleagues many years to sort them out, if it is even done yet.

One technique for extracting universal material, applicable to all people, from personal material is *amplification*: seeking parallels in world mythology and folklore. For example, many of Jung's insights were confirmed when he received the Daoist *Secret of the Golden Flower* from Richard Wilhelm, and later by his study of alchemy.<sup>69</sup> Another way to separate the personal from the collective is to become better aware of one's personal *daimones* (complexes), especially the personal Shadow. The *Red Book* informs us:

He who comprehends the darkness in himself, to him the light is near. He who climbs down into his darkness reaches the staircase of the working light, fire-maned Helios.<sup>70</sup>

Moreover, psychological humility and realism demand that the theurgist acknowledge that the personal element can never be eliminated completely. The *Red Book*, with its mixture of the personal and the collective, is a good example. There may be some people whose complexes are thin, that is, very close to the archetypes around which they form, and these people will have more direct access to universal archetypes. In effect, they are more directly in contact with the gods, unmediated by *daimones*. They are the true prophets, but even they may have difficulty separating the personal from the collective, and may suffer ego inflation.

We return to the central question of this chapter: whether theurgy (especially in the form of active imagination) can or should become a common spiritual practice. The techniques are not so difficult to learn, and we have contemporary books teaching both active imagination<sup>71</sup> and

---

<sup>67</sup> Jung (1989) 179.

<sup>68</sup> Johnson (1986) 189–95.

<sup>69</sup> Jung (2009) 231; Jung (1989) 176.

<sup>70</sup> Jung (2009) 272.

<sup>71</sup> E.g., Johnson (1986).

Neoplatonic theurgy.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, one may wonder how many people will dedicate the time to a regular theurgical practice, but if they don't, how will they learn about the divine? Presumably through the experiences of others, such as those recorded in the *Red Book*, but it warns:

Woe betide those who live by way of examples! Life is not with them. If you live according to an example, you thus live the life of that example, but who should live your own life if not yourself? So live yourselves.<sup>73</sup>

Those who have not engaged in theurgy or active imagination themselves may harbor a distorted view of the products of these practices, either receiving them as sacred scripture or rejecting them as mad ravings.

While we may wonder how many people will practice theurgy, a more fundamental question is: Why should they? What is its value? One answer is that the practice may reveal insights such as contained in the *Red Book*, though they may require many years of interpretation. The more fundamental reason is that theurgy brings us into contact with the divine, harmonizes the individual *nous* with the universal *Nous*, and allows us “to become gods so far as possible for mortals.”<sup>74</sup> As Plato tells us:

*Ti.* 90BC

But he who has seriously devoted himself to learning and to true thoughts, and has exercised these qualities above all his others, must necessarily and inevitably think thoughts that are immortal and divine, provided that he gets a grasp on truth; and in so far as it is possible for human nature to partake of immortality, he will not in any degree lack this; and inasmuch as he is forever tending his divine part and duly magnifying that *daimôn* who dwells along with him, he must be supremely blessed [*eudaimona*]. (tr. Bury, modified)

He will be blessed by a propitious indwelling *daimôn*.

In conclusion, theurgy—especially in the form of active imagination—could become a widespread spiritual practice. While it may occasionally result in artifacts of general value, exemplified by Jung's *Red Book*, more typically theurgical practice will have value only for the individual theurgists. But this value is real and will help them to live in communion with the gods.

---

<sup>72</sup> E.g., Mierzwicki (2006), Dunn (2013), Kupperman (2013), MacLennan (2013), de Biasi (2014), Williams (2016).

<sup>73</sup> Jung (2009) 231.

<sup>74</sup> Sedley (2017).

# Bibliography

## Editions and Translations

- Westerink, L.G. 2011. *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Platonic Texts and Translations, Vol. V. Westbury: Prometheus.
- Diogenes Laertius. Hicks, R.D. 1980. *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library 184 & 185. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Pr.
- Iamblichus. Dillon, J., & Hershbelle, J. 1991. *On the Pythagorean Way of Life*. Atlanta: Scholars Pr.
- Philostratus. Conybeare, F. C. 1912. *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, 2 vols. London: William Heinemann,.
- Plato. Burges, G. 1865. *The Works of Plato*, Vol. VI. London: Bohn.
- Plotinus. Gerson, L. P. 2018. *The Enneads*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr.
- Proclus. Copenhaver, B. 1988. "On the Hieratic Art According to the Greeks," in B. Copenhaver, "Hermes Trismegistus, Proclus, and the Question of a Philosophy of Magic in the Renaissance," in Ingrid Merkel & Allen G. Debus (eds.), *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*. Washington: Folger Books, 79–111.

## Secondary Sources

- Armstrong, A.H. 1984. *Plotinus*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Pr.
- Armstrong, John M. 2004. "After the Ascent: Plato on Becoming Like God," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 26, 171–83.
- Bair, Deidre. 2003. *Jung: A Biography*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.
- Boas, George. 1948. "Fact and Legend in the Biography of Plato," *The Philosophical Review*, 57, 439–457.
- Burkert, Walter. 1985. *Greek Religion*, tr. J. Raffan. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Pr.
- Crowley, Aleister. 1976/1909. *The Book of the Law (Liber AL vel Legis)*. York Beach: Weiser.
- de Biasi, Jean-Louis. 2014. *Rediscover the Magick of the Gods and Goddesses: Revealing the Mysteries of Theurgy*. Woodbury: Llewellyn.
- Dee, John. 2003. *John Dee's Five Books of Mystery: Original Sourcebook of Enochian Magic: From the Collected Works Known as Mysteriorum Libri Quinque*, ed. Joseph H. Peterson. Boston: Weiser Books.
- Dunn, Patrick. 2013. *The Practical Art of Divine Magic: Contemporary & Ancient Techniques of Theurgy*. Woodbury: Llewellyn.
- Giergerich, Wolfgang. 2010. "Liber Novus, that is, the New Bible: A First Analysis of C. G. Jung's *Red Book*." *Spring: A Journal of Archetype and Culture*, 83, 361–411.
- Hillman, James. 1979. *The Dream and the Underworld*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Johnson, Robert 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*, ed. H. Read, M. Fordham, & G. Adler. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953–78; New York: Pantheon, 1953–60, and Bollingen Foundation, 1961–67; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967–78.

- Jung C.G. 2012. *Introduction to Jungian Psychology: Notes of the Seminar on Analytical Psychology Given in 1925*, rev. ed., ed. S. Shamdasani & W. McGuire. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Pr.
- Jung, C.G. 1920. *Collected Papers in Analytical Psychology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. C.E. Long. Covent Gardens: Baillière, Tindall & Cox.
- Jung, C.G. 1989. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, rev. ed., recorded & ed., A. Jaffé, tr. R. & C. Winston. New York: Vintage Books.
- Jung, C.G. 2009. *The Red Book: Liber Novus*, ed. Sonu Shamdasani, tr. John Peck, Mark Kyburz, and Sonu Shamdasani. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Jung, C.G. 2012. *The Red Book: Liber Novus. A Reader's Edition*, ed. Sonu Shamdasani, tr. John Peck, Mark Kyburz, and Sonu Shamdasani. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Kerényi, Carl. 1967. *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*, tr. R. Manheim. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Pr.
- Kingsley, Peter. 1995. *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kingsley, Peter. 1999. *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*. Inverness: Golden Sufi.
- Kingsley, Peter. 2018. *Catafalque: Carl Jung and the End of Humanity*. London: Catafalque Pr.
- Kupperman, Jeffrey S. 2013. *Living Theurgy: A Course in Iamblichus' Philosophy, Theology, and Theurgy*. London: Avalonia.
- Luck, Georg. 1985. *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Pr.
- MacLennan, Bruce J. 2005. "Evolution, Jung, and Theurgy: Their Role in Modern Neoplatonism," in R. Berchman and J. Finamore (eds.), *History of Platonism: Plato Redivivus*. New Orleans: University Press of the South, 305–322.
- MacLennan, Bruce J. 2006. "Individual Soul and World Soul: The Process of Individuation in Neoplatonism and Jung," in T. Arzt and A. Holm (eds.), *Wegmarken der Individuation: Studienreihe zur Analytischen Psychologie Band 1*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 83–116.
- MacLennan, Bruce J. 2013. *The Wisdom of Hypatia: Ancient Spiritual Practices for a More Meaningful Life*. Woodbury: Llewellyn.
- Mazur, Zeke. 2019. *Introduction and Commentary to Plotinus' Treatise 33 (II.9) Against the Gnostics and Related Studies*. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Meier, C.A. 2009. *Healing Dream and Ritual: Ancient Incubation and Modern Psychotherapy*. Einsiedeln: Damon.
- Mierzwicki, Tony. 2006. *Graeco-Egyptian Magick: Everyday Empowerment*. Stafford: Immanion.
- Newbrough, John Ballou. 1882. *Oahspe: A Kosmon Bible in the Words of Jehovih and his Angel Embassadors*. London: Oahspe Publ. Assoc.
- Pike, Sarah M. 2004. *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America*. New York, Columbia Univ. Pr.
- Schucman, Helen (ed.). 1976. *A Course in Miracles*. New York: Viking.
- Sedley, David. 2017. "Becoming Godlike" in Christopher Bobonich (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Ancient Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 319–37.
- Shaw, Gregory. 1995. *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.



- Stanley, Thomas. 1743. *The History of Philosophy*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Millar.
- Stevens, Anthony. 1995. *Private Myths: Dreams and Dreaming*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Pr.
- Stevens, Anthony. 2003. *Archetype Revisited: An Updated Natural History of the Self*. Toronto: Inner City Books.
- Urantia Foundation. 1955. *The Urantia Book*. Chicago: Urantia Found.
- von Franz, M.-L. 1980. *Projection and Re-collection in Jungian Psychology: Reflections of the Soul*. La Salle: Open Court.
- Walsch, Neale Donald. 1995. *Conversations with God, Book 1: An Uncommon Dialogue*. New York: Putnam's.
- Watkins, Mary. 1984. *Waking Dreams*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Woodstock: Spring.
- Williams, Brandy. 2016. *For the Love of the Gods: The History and Modern Practice of Theurgy, Our Pagan Inheritance*. Woodbury: Llewellyn.