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RELIGION AND 'CREATIVE ILLNESS' IN JUNG'S NIGHT JOURNEY INTO THE PSYCHICDEPTH

According to Henri Ellenberger, the historian of psychiatry, shamans, mystics, creative writers, artists, and philosophers sometimes undergo creative crises which are accompanied by recurrent neurotic and psychosomatic symptoms. Because of the accompanying psychological and physical disorders, Ellenberger suggests that shamanic ecstasy and mystical illumination should be classified as "creative illness", a term adopted from the German Romantic poet, Novalis.¹ He describes "creative illness" as follows:

"A creative illness succeeds a period of intense preoccupation with an idea and search for a certain truth. It is a polymorphous condition that can take the shape of depression, neurosis, psychosomatic ailments, or even psychosis. Whatever the symptoms, they are felt as painful if not agonizing by the subject, with alternating periods of alleviation or worsening. Throughout the illness the subject never loses the thread of his dominating preoccupation. It is often compatible with normal professional activity and family life. But even if he keeps to his social activities, he is almost entirely absorbed by himself. He suffers from feelings of utter isolation, even when he has a mentor who guides him through the ordeal (like a shaman novice with his master). The termination is often rapid and marked by a phase of exhilaration. The subject emerges from his ordeal with a permanent transformation in his personality, and the conviction that he has discovered a great truth or a new spiritual world."² Ellenberger contends that both Freud and Jung came by their respective theories of the unconscious in the course of "creative illness."

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1. Henri Ellenberger, 'La Notion de Maladie Cr=TTvatrice,' *Dialogue*, Vol. III, 1, 1964., pp. 25-41.
 2. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*. (New York: Basic Books, 1970.), pp. 447f.

On one level, scientific achievements such as the discovery of the unconscious, are intellectually disruptive in that they challenge received standard opinion and therefore encounter resistance. Such resistance is subjectively experienced as well as encountered in the scientific community. It occurs because the new paradigm challenges the veracity of received standard opinion. In the case of Freud and Jung, their theories of the unconscious threatened rationalism and therefore both science and philosophy. At the same time, the discovery of the unconscious followed from perplexities concerning the irrational which first arose among the Romantics. As Kuhn points out, rather than add to existing knowledge, the new paradigms arise from anomalies within it which threaten its veracity.³

This was the effect of scientific works such as Ptolemy's *Almagest* and Newton's *Principia*. Both established revolutionary views in terms of which the scientific community was forced to see nature in a different way than before.⁴ Since scientists are as human as everyone else, such disruptive developments are always emotionally disturbing, not only to the community, which is invariably resistant, but to the scientist who has achieved the new breakthrough. It constitutes an intellectual crisis in him which has its emotional consequences in anxiety, isolation, and sadness as well as exhilaration. His own learning is threatened as well as that of the establishment. Not only is he rejected by others but part of his own consciousness shares the community's hostility to the new ideas. He suffers inner conflict as well as rejection.

Thus scientific progress creates crisis both for the individual scientist and his colleagues.⁵

While Kuhn's theories of structure and challenge are useful where conscious processes are concerned, they do not take the unconscious sufficiently into account. The very theories of the unconscious themselves were developed in the course of very irrational episodes experienced by Freud and Jung which much resemble mystical experiences, or, to use Ellenberger's term, "creative illness."

3. Peter Homans, *Jung in Context: Modernity and the Making of a Psychology*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979.), pp. 74ff.

4. Thomas A. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965.), p. 10.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Freud's "creative illness" occurred during 1894-1900 at the conclusion of which he wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Jung's "creative illness" occurred during 1913-1918 following his break with Freud. At the termination he wrote *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (1916) and *Psychological Types* (1918). Almost everything he had to say about the archetypes of the collective unconscious is to be found in them.

By the beginning of 1913, Jung's break with Freud was outwardly complete. His *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido* (1912) advanced no new theories but asserted rejection of Freud's sexual theories. Jung contended that libido was a sort of *elan vital* which included but transcended sexuality. He had not, however, gone much further than Freud himself in the development of the doctrine of collective unconscious.

The reader of the original edition of Jung's *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido* (1912) or its earliest English translation (*Psychology of the Unconscious*, 1915) will not encounter the term "archetype." Indeed, the original *Wandlungen* is an entirely different book from the much revised *Symbols of Transformation* (1952) in the *Collected Works*.⁶ The reader must consult Jung's original text to appreciate his position at the beginning of 1913, and also review the published correspondence between him and Freud.⁷

During 1913, Jung resigned his post as *privat docent* (roughly lecturer) at the University of Zurich as well as his position as editor of *Jahrbuch*, the journal of the Psychoanalytic Association, and from the association itself. His closest professional associates had been psychoanalysts and he felt the loss of these relationships acutely. He particularly suffered from the loss of his close friendship with Freud

6. Cf. Carl G. Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious: A Study of the Transformations and Symbolisms of the Libido*, trans. Beatrice M. Hinkle, (New York: Moffat, Yard, and Company, 1917). Jung first published in two parts in the *Jahrbuch für psychoanalytische und psychologische Forschungen* (Leipzig), III, IV (1911-1912), and republished the same year by Deuticke Verlag, Leipzig and Vienna. No changes of substance were made in the second edition, in 1922, but the fourth edition, *Symbols of Transformation (Symbole der Wandlung, 1952)*, Vol. V of *The Collected Works of Carl G. Jung* was rewritten from the original 1912 work in terms of Jung's mature theories of the archetypes of the collective unconscious. It is in many respects a more confusing book than the original which itself suffers considerably from lack of focus and structure.

7. Cf. *The Freud - Jung Letters* (New York: McGuire Pub., 1974).

who had been his surrogate father. The published Freud/Jung correspondence shows that the relationship had begun to deteriorate as early as 1908, when the two went to America together to lecture at Clark University, and that Jung had begun to chafe at Freud's authoritarianism.⁸ Jung was thirty-five when he aroused Freud's displeasure over the third part of his *Wandlungen* in which he boldly asserted that libido is a general energy. Too, his own personal annoyance with Freud deepened. The friendship deteriorated during 1912 and terminated by the end of the year.

The onset of Jung's "creative illness" occurred during late 1912 and early 1913. Based chiefly on his memoirs, written at the age of eighty, and from certain disclosures. The beginning was a four day cruise with four friends on Lake Zurich. One of them entertained the others by reading from Homer's *Odyssey* and Jung was particularly struck by the hero's *nekylia* or "night journey" into the underworld, described in Chapter XI. The parallel between mythic stories of descent into the underworld and descent into the unconscious occurred to Jung and he felt inclined to take an inner journey. He later wrote that "It was a pleasant prelude to the journey through the unconscious that he was to accomplish and which he often referred to as his own *nekylia*". The story of the Lake Zurich journey and Jung's fascination with the "night journey" of Odysseus occurs in the German version of his memoirs but not the English translation.⁹

Around Christmas in 1913, Jung decided to embark on an "experiment" following a strange dream. In the dream he was in an Italian loggia with pillars, marble floors, and balustrade. He was sitting on a gold Renaissance chair, before a beautiful table made of emerald green stone. His children were at the table as well. Suddenly a white dove

8. The complete file of Freud/Fliess letters has been recently published by Jeffrey M. Masson. Cf. *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887-1904*, Trans. and ed. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, Cambridge Massachusetts: The Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1985. This publication supersedes the earlier selective publication: *The Origins of Psycho-Analysis: Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, Drafts and Notes, 1887-1902*, by Sigmund Freud, Edited by Marie Bonaparte, Anna Freud, and Ernst Kris, New York: Basic Books, 1954; German edition.

9. Homans, *Jung in Context: Modernity and the Making of a Psychology*, p. 86.

descended and changed into a blonde girl of around eight who ran off with the children. Presently she returned, threw her arms around Jung's neck, and then turned back into a dove. The dove spoke. "Only in the first hours of the night can I transform myself into a human beings, while the male is busy with the twelve dead." Jung awoke perplexed by the dream which seemed to have profound significance. He could not fathom its meaning but decided to plunge into systematic self-analysis, much as Freud had done during 1897-1900, though using a different technique.

"In order to grasp the phantasies which were stirring in me, 'underground,' I knew I had to let myself plummet down into them as it were." As a psychiatrist he knew the perils, but, as a scientist, he knew he must risk them.

The "experiment" began soon after. Meditating at his desk in solitude, he entertained various phantasies until one seized him. "I was sitting at my desk once more, thinking over my fears. Then I let myself drop. Suddenly it was as though the ground literally gave beneath my feet, and I plunged down into dark depths . . . I landed on my feet in a soft, sticky mass. I felt great relief, although I was apparently in complete darkness. After a while my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, which was rather like a deep twilight. Before me was the entrance to a dark cave in which stood a dwarf with a leathery skin, as if he was mummified. At first I could make out nothing, but then I saw that there was running water. In it I could make out nothing, but then I saw that there was running water. In it a corpse floated by, a youth with blond hair and a wound in the head. He was followed by a gigantic black scarab and then by a red, newborn sun, rising out of the depths of the water."¹⁰

Jung did not willfully conjure up this phantasy. It possessed him. The images came unbidden and compulsively disclosed themselves in consciousness as revelations. They seemed alien, not his thoughts or visions, but wholly other. These particular visions also seemed to be transpersonal. From then on until 1918, Jung withdrew from society

10. Carl Jung, *Memories Dreams and Reflections*, (Aniela Jaff - TTV, editor, New York, Vintage Books/Random House, 1965.), p. 178. (German edition: *Erinnerungen, Traume, Gedenken*, 1962).

though not from his practice, and devoted himself primarily to the analysis of his phantasies and dreams. He did not employ Freud's technique of free association but wrote out and painted the motifs and images. He also formulated rules which he imposed on himself, attempting, as much as possible to make it a controlled experiment. The rules required him to scrupulously observe all his normal domestic and professional duties, to apply his critical faculties in the analysis of the data, to record data and conclusions objectively and in full. But he also determined to relax the critical faculties in the course of his meditations, to allow phantasies to surface and also to recall and record his dreams.

In several of his sessions an old man and a young girl appeared. The latter eventually identified himself as Philemon, the Wise Old Man. "In my phantasies," Jung wrote, "I held conversations with him, and he said things which I had not consciously thought. For I observed clearly that it was he who spoke, not I."¹¹ The young woman disclosed to him that what he was doing was not science but art. He called her Anima, soul. "I was like a patient in analysis with a ghost and a woman!" he recalled in his memoirs. "Every evening I wrote very conscientiously, for I thought if I did not write there would be no way for the anima to get at my phantasies. Soon I discovered that the anima had a distinct personality of her own, also that she was an oracle. It is she who communicates the images of the unconscious to the conscious mind."¹²

During 1916, Jung wrote a strange book entitled *Septem Sermones ad Mortuos* which he attributed to a Basilides of Alexandria. As he confided to his memoirs, "the soul, the anima, establishes the relationship to the collectivity of the dead; for the unconscious correspondence to the mythic land of the dead, the land of the ancestors. If, therefore, one has a phantasy of the soul vanishing, this means that it has withdrawn into the unconscious or into the land of the dead. There it produces a mysterious animation and gives visible form to the ancestral traces, the collective contents. Like a medium it gives the dead a chance to manifest themselves. Therefore, soon after the disappearance of the soul, the 'dead' appeared to me, and the result was the *Septem Sermones*."

During these days, Jung and other members of his family had uncanny experiences. He felt that "they" wanted him. There was an ominous

11. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 186f.

atmosphere. The house seemed to be haunted. One night his oldest daughter saw a phantom glide through her room. His second daughter complained that her blanket had been snatched off; his young son had a nightmare. The next afternoon the doorbell rang insistently and there was no one there. "The atmosphere was thick, believe me! Then I knew that something had to happen. The whole house was filled as if there was a crowd present, crammed full of spirits. They were packed deep right up to the door, and the air was so thick it was scarcely possible to breathe . . . Then they cried in chorus, 'We have come back to Jerusalem where we found not what we sought.' From this wierd day, "These conversations with the dead formed a kind of prelude to what I had to communicate to the world about the Unconscious."¹³ They were not ghosts in the ordinary sense but symbols of the ancestors of the race.

During 1918, as medical officer at an internment camp for British officers, Jung had leisure and spent his time sketching. One day he drew a small circular figure in his notebook. He drew and painted more circular designs thereafter, and, as he did so, found himself emerging from the darkness. He experienced deep inner peace, joy, and the exhilaration of discovery.¹⁴ He was becoming whole, individuated, and the physical and neurotic symptoms which had disturbed him gave way to physical and psychological health. He felt healed, and also knew that he had made a breakthrough into undiscovered territory. He felt inspired to show others the way. He had returned from the land of the dead with wisdom to impart. Both the "experiment" and the "creative illness were over.

Jung had already published *Two Essays on Analytic Psychology* (1916) and was writing *Personality Types* (1918). Both studies announced his discovery that the collective unconscious was a reality. He had experienced the archetypes himself and identified them. He announced that certain images and ideas do not emerge from personal but universal depths, that there are psychic dimensions of the unconscious so archaic and vast as to include the whole of humanity from early man to the present. Each of us is able to make the "night journey" into the land of the dead. Jung had shown the way. All the rest was clarification and expansion.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 196f.

He now set out to map the psychic underworld and to identify the features of its landscape. In 1917 he noted "dominants," specific recurrent forces which produced images and ideas; soon after he called them "primordial images," a term borrowed from Jakob Burkhardt, the historian, and finally, in 1919, "archetypes," a term adopted from the Corpus Hermeticum and Dionysus the Areopagite, a Christian mystic.

Jung defined and redefined the archetypes, sometimes creating confusion but he always means by them a priori structural dominants of the psyche which are biologically rooted and which give all things their specific qualities. They are bound up with life itself.

Jung's best definition of "archetype" is often said to be the statement in his Introduction to Esther Harding's *Woman's Mysteries* (1955): "The term (archetype) is not meant to denote an inherited idea, but rather an inherited mode of psychic functioning, corresponding to the inborn way in which the chick emerges from the egg, the bird builds its nest, a certain kind of wasp stings the motor ganglion of the caterpillar, and eels find their way to the Bermudas . . ." The archetype is rooted in the biological organism itself. But within the psyche it presents itself in numinous form, "that is, it appears as an experience of fundamental importance. Whenever it clothes itself in the appropriate symbols, which is not always the case, it puts the individual into a state of possessiveness, the consequences of which may be incalculable."¹⁵

Elsewhere, Jung repeatedly denies that archetypes are inherited modes, memories, or knowledge of any sort. They are not symbols or myths but forms without content. Thus, "When a situation occurs which corresponds to a given archetype, that archetype becomes activated and a compulsiveness appears, which, like an instinctual drive, gains its way against all reason and will, or else produces a conflict of pathological dimensions, that is to say, a neurosis." The archetypes are both archaic and original (arche) forces, analagous to instinct, which stamp (typos) themselves when a psychological imbalance occurs. They are compensatory. These forms are realized in consciousness as ideas, symbols, images, and mythic themes (mythologems). As such they seize the conscious mind and impose themselves as compulsions. The effect is to give the ego the impression of alien thoughts or images in his mind. The archetypes manifest themselves in ways that seem to be "wholly other."

15. Jolande Jacobi, *Complex/Archetype/Symbol*, (Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1959.), pp. 33-35.

Whatever else can be made of Jung's "experiment," it argues in favour of Fritjof Capra's thesis that scientific discovery closely resembles mystical experience. According to Capra, "A mystical experience... is not any more unique than a modern experience in physics. On the other hand, it is not less sophisticated either, although the sophistication is of a very different kind. The complexity and efficiency of the physicist's technical apparatus is matched, if not surpassed, by that of the mystic's consciousness - both physical and spiritual - in deep meditation. The scientists and the mystics, then, have developed highly sophisticated methods of observing nature which are inaccessible to the lay person. A page from a journal of modern physics will be as mysterious to the uninitiated as a Tibetan mandala. Both are records of inquiries into the nature of the universe."¹⁶

What was Jung? And what did he discover? His detractors among positivists and behaviourists denounce him as a mystic. His disciples and followers argue that he was a scientist. Many Christian theologians oppose him as an atheist in disguise. Many Hindus, Buddhists, and scholars sympathetic to Eastern Religions hail him as a devotee of the spiritual way. As Jung himself acknowledged, his "experiment" was not science but art. By its nature it could not be a controlled, objective, experiment but one which was highly subjective. In some respects, he was a philosopher, but not in the post-modern sense of logical positivist or linguistic analyst. He was a psychotherapist yet, in many respects, his system of psychotherapy is closest to the approach of guru and disciple, or shaman and novice. Yet, he did not assert the ontological reality of the archetypes of the collective unconscious but attributed them to biological evolution. His "creative illness" resembles mystical experience in its psychological dimensions but sharply differs from mysticism in the nature of his discoveries. He was not possessed by God, the *mysterium tremendum*, the numinous, or by spirits and ghosts. What he experienced during the more occult phases of his "experiment" is, indeed, parapsychological, but interpreted in purely naturalistic terms. His ghosts from the underworld, as well as the Wise Old Man and the Anima, were interpreted as imaginal figures emergent from the unconscious not objective elementals, deities, or spirits. Thus, while the distinctions between Jung's "creative illness" and mystical experience are clear, there are also many points of resemblance.

16. Fritjof Capra. *The Tao of Physics* (New York : Bantam Books, 1977.), p. 23.

Perhaps what Jung's "experiment" best shows is the extreme caution which must be exercised in the categorizing of some experiences as religious experiences and others as psychological experiences. While the differences appear to blur, since the parallels are so strong, they still remain clear. From the Jungian point of view, all so-called religious experiences are actually psychological experiences, a major reason for the hostility with which Jung's theories are greeted in orthodox religious circles. On the other hand, from the religious point of view, mystical experiences are more than psychological experiences. Ultimately, the choice one way or the other is a matter of interpretation. There can be no final answer.