

# **Theurgy as a Contemporary Practice: The Example of Jung's Red Book**

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# Theurgy as a Contemporary Practice: The Example of Jung's *Red Book*

Bruce MacLennan

## 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. Jung's theurgical experiments, however, 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

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

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

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

<sup>4</sup> Jung (2009) 198–203.

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 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 in Alexandria, the city where the East touches the West.”<sup>5</sup> 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>6</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>7</sup> Ten years ago, it was finally published in an impressive facsimile edition with an English translation and extensive notes.<sup>8</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,

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<sup>5</sup> Jung (2009) viii, 206.

<sup>6</sup> Jung (2009) 360, Jung’s characterization in a note he added in 1959 in the folio (p. 190).

<sup>7</sup> Bair (2003) 293.

<sup>8</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 or its art.

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>9</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 assaults Jung, who 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 depend on each other.

Another time, in a symbolic landscape where East meets West and light meets dark, Jung encounters the giant Izdubar (Gilgamesh), who is traveling toward the sunset, seeking the land of immortality where the sun is reborn. 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 (though still real), thereby allowing him to be shrunk, enclosed in an egg, and carried into a house of healing. "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>10</sup> There follow twelve pages of illuminated incantations, such as:

I am the holy animal that stood astonished and cannot grasp the becoming of the God.

I am the wise man who came from the East, suspecting the miracle from afar.

And I am the egg that surrounds and nurtures the seed of the God in me.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jung (2009) 246.

<sup>10</sup> Jung (2009) 283.

<sup>11</sup> Jung (2009) 284.

The healed god emerges like Phanes from the Orphic egg: “Healed? Was I ever sick? Who speaks of sickness? I was sun, completely sun. I am the sun.”<sup>12</sup> An incomprehensible and inexpressible radiance blazes from the god’s body. “You are the sun, the eternal light—most powerful one, forgive me for carrying you,” says Jung as the god departs; “Here reigned eternal light, immeasurable and overpowering.”<sup>13</sup>

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>14</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>15</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>16</sup>

The dead arrive *en masse* and Philemon gives them extended lectures 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>17</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>18</sup> Jung learns that something emerges from the Pleroma only by being differentiated from its opposite, and so opposites, such as God and the

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<sup>12</sup> Jung (2009) 286.

<sup>13</sup> Jung (2009) 286.

<sup>14</sup> Jung (2009) 313.

<sup>15</sup> Jung (2009) 329.

<sup>16</sup> Jung (2009) 336.

<sup>17</sup> Jung (2009) 347.

<sup>18</sup> Jung (2009) 349.

devil, are created simultaneously and are inherently interdependent. 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. The foregoing 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 his personal material from collective material, common to all people, 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>19</sup>

Therefore, beyond its significance for Jung, the *Red Book* is important as the seed from which grew analytical psychology. In addition to the elements specific to Jung's psyche, the *Red Book* revealed aspects of the collective unconscious that have been investigated over the past century by Jung and his colleagues and successors. 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.

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>20</sup> In fact, Jung had experimented

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<sup>19</sup> Jung (1989) 199.

<sup>20</sup> Other well-known examples include Dee (2003/1583), Newbrough (1882), Crowley (1976/1909), Urantia (1955), Schucman (1976), Walsch (1955).

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 consciously 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>21</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>22</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 as adaptations to life they can function better or worse. Like archetypes, complexes can behave as independent personalities, and analytical psychologists have identified them with *daimones* because they can possess a person, influencing or even compelling

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<sup>21</sup> Jung (CW 8) ¶154. Jung’s *Collected Works* (CW) are cited by volume and paragraph number.

<sup>22</sup> Jung (1920) 432.

behavior, and they can be projected onto other people.<sup>23</sup> The archetypes, since they are shared among all people, are experienced as universal gods, but the complexes, which are associated with individuals, are more akin to the personal *daimones* (*oikeioi daimones*).

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

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 [*psychikôn*], 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.

(*Enn.* 5.1.12 , tr. Armstrong)

These ever-living soul-parts (the archetypal gods and *daimones*) have their individual functions, offices, and areas of concern. We are unconscious of their activities until they intervene in consciousness, influencing perception, affect, motivation, and behavior to achieve their ends. We can, however, turn our consciousness inward, by methods such as theurgy and active imagination, and interact with them intentionally.

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>24</sup> Both techniques combine 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,

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<sup>23</sup> von Franz (1980).

<sup>24</sup> Johnson (1986) 102.



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.

(*Hier. Art.*, tr. Copenhaver)

Appropriate symbols (*symbola*, *synthêmata*) are assembled to constellate an archetype or complex, evoking it into consciousness, so that we can interact with it. In active imagination as in theurgy, the spirits themselves may teach the symbols by which they are evoked; as Proclus explains:

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.

(*Hier. Art.*, tr. Copenhaver)

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 conscious ego, for they are also influenced 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>25</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. “Those who naively wish to use the archetypes for their personalistic ends will be made subject to their cruel tyranny.”<sup>26</sup>

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>27</sup> In so doing we must guard against ego inflation and, in particular, illusions of perfection, for as Plotinus said, “our goal is not to be morally flawless, but to be gods.”<sup>28</sup> That is, “the growth of the soul has as its goal a state of integrated wholeness rather than a condition of moral perfection.”<sup>29</sup> I understand this deification (*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>30</sup>

*Theôsis* is the ultimate goal of theurgy, and Jung described one of the events in the *Red Book* as his deification, his union with the inner Christ.<sup>31</sup> He found himself compelled to assume a crucifixion posture, whereupon Salome declared, “You are Christ.”<sup>32</sup> He explains:

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>33</sup>

The true God is encountered within, not in the world. Jung also remarked that his “master” Philemon was “the same who inspired Buddha, Mani, Christ, Mahomet—all those who may be said to have

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<sup>25</sup> Watkins (1984) 109.

<sup>26</sup> Hoeller (1982) 203.

<sup>27</sup> *On homoiôsis theô*, vid. *Tht.* 176AB, *R.* 500CD, *Ti.* 90BC.

<sup>28</sup> *Enn.* 1.2.6.

<sup>29</sup> Hoeller (1982) 41.

<sup>30</sup> Armstrong (2004).

<sup>31</sup> Jung (2012) 106.

<sup>32</sup> Jung (2009) 252.

<sup>33</sup> Jung (2009) 283.

communed with God.”<sup>34</sup> They all were inspired by the universal God image within their psyches.

#### IV. Ascents and Descents

Neoplatonic theurgy focuses on ascent (*anagôgê*) to The One, and so it might seem to be psychologically one-sided and unbalanced, repressing the dark depths.<sup>35</sup> Jung’s path in the *Red Book*, however, was one of descent into the underworld (*katabasis*), in apparently stark contrast to the goals of illumination and ascent typical of Platonism wherein the sage seeks to climb out of the cave toward the light. “The great explorer [Jung] often called this experience, or rather cycle of experiences, his *Nekyia*, using the term whereby Homer described the descent of Odysseus into the underworld.”<sup>36</sup> This would seem to be a significant divergence between Neoplatonic theurgy and Jung’s experience in the *Red Book*, which was more gnostic.

The ancient Greeks and Romans most commonly pictured their gods above the earth (for example on Olympus), and so they were reached by an ascent, and underworld powers were to be avoided. Sacrifices to Olympian gods took the form of a communal meal; those to the chthonic powers were terrible and apotropaic, designed to keep them at bay. The Eleusinian Mysteries were exceptional in that initiates apparently experienced a direct encounter with Persephone, which was a life-transforming and positive experience. Although she is queen of the underworld, it is significant that she *ascended* to meet the initiates.<sup>37</sup> It is also worth noting that although Mithraic rituals took place in natural or artificial caves, and Jung’s works are full of Mithraic references, nevertheless initiations ascended through the planetary spheres.

There are of course descents into the underworld in classical literature, but their objectives are usually to retrieve someone from Hades (e.g., the descents of Heracles and Orpheus), not to communicate with chthonic deities. There are accounts of necromantic rituals, including Odysseus’ *nekylia* in *Odyssey* 11 and Aeneas’ *katabasis* in *Aeneid* 6, but their objectives are to consult with the

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<sup>34</sup> From Cary Baynes’ letter of Jan. 26, 1924 in Jung (2009) 213.

<sup>35</sup> Hillman (1979).

<sup>36</sup> Hoeller (1982) 4.

<sup>37</sup> Kerényi (1967).

ancestors, not the gods. Psyche's descent in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* 6 is one exception. Significantly, like Jung's descents in the *Red Book*, these literary descents were very unpleasant and dark, far from divine elevation.

In the *Red Book* Jung does not explain the technique of active imagination; we learn only of his experiences and his interpretations of them. In a 1925 seminar, however, he tells us: "I devised such a boring method by fantasizing that I was digging a hole, and by accepting this fantasy as perfectly real."<sup>38</sup> Discussing *katabaseis* more generally, he says, "a hole is cut in the threshold of consciousness through which the unconscious flows."<sup>39</sup> We may compare the *nekyia* of Odysseus, who travels to the western limits of the earth, digs a ritual pit (*bothros*) with his sword; pours libations of milk, honey, and wine; sprinkles barley; and slaughters a black ram and a black ewe, spilling their blood into the trench: all potent *symbola* to evoke the shades of the dead.<sup>40</sup> There are parallels between the Homeric epics and the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and a necromantic pit ritual is mentioned on tablet 12,<sup>41</sup> which is an Akkadian translation of the Sumerian story of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Underworld*.<sup>42</sup> Gilgamesh has lost in the underworld two objects made from the base and crown of the *halub*-tree given to him by the goddess Inanna, perhaps a drum (*pukku*) and its beater (*mekku*), conjectured to be the ritual instruments of a shaman or exorcist.<sup>43</sup> Enkidu, his companion, volunteers to retrieve them, and Gilgamesh gives him detailed instructions how he may enter and return from the underworld, but Enkidu flouts them and is trapped there. Grief-struck Gilgamesh finally convinces the god Ea to open a hole (*takkabu*) to the underworld, from which the ghost (*utukku*) of Enkidu temporarily emerges. Like Odysseus and Anticlea, they try to embrace but cannot. Nevertheless, Enkidu is able to tell Gilgamesh about the underworld and how the fate of the dead depends on how they had lived.

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<sup>38</sup> Jung (2012) 51.

<sup>39</sup> Jung (1988) 694.

<sup>40</sup> Ekroth (2018).

<sup>41</sup> Graf (2018).

<sup>42</sup> Gadotti (2014).

<sup>43</sup> Gardner & Maier (1984) 257; but cf. Gadotti (2014) 40.

There is debate about whether the Homeric *nekyia* reflects a real ritual or is a purely literary invention.<sup>44</sup> Most later descriptions of similar pit rituals (e.g., in Apollonios Rhodios' *Argonautika* 3 and in the Orphic *Argonautika*) can be traced back to the *Odyssey*, but in at least two cases there is historical evidence of an actual ritual, probably also inspired by Homer.<sup>45</sup> There is, however, abundant evidence for Hittite pit rituals for necromantic and other purposes.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, perhaps we can see a third alternative between literary invention and literal enactment: the *nekyia* may be an active imagination, comparable to Jung's excavation and descent, a theurgic ritual to open a way to the underworld.

Outside of mythology, there are stories in the lives of the philosophers suggestive of philosophical descents more akin to theurgy. The remaining fragments of Parmenides' poem seem to record a descent into Hades to meet Persephone, and we may suppose this was accomplished by incubation or another theurgical procedure, but we lack evidence.<sup>47</sup> According to Diogenes Laertius, Epimenides became a healer and prophet after sleeping in a cave for 57 years, which may be a legendary exaggeration of an extended period of incubation.<sup>48</sup> Diogenes also tells us that Pythagoras went with Epimenides into a cave on Mt. Ida, but also made his own subterranean chamber where he stayed for an extended period during which he journeyed to Hades.<sup>49</sup> Although Diogenes presents this as a deception, the story might reflect an active imagination ritual. Burkert argues that the chamber was a temple of Demeter and that Pythagoras returned from his *katabasis* with the edicts of the Mother (*tês mêtros paraggelmata*), a goddess.<sup>50</sup> Legends such as these might be reminiscences of subterranean incubation and theurgy.

More historical are accounts of the Oracle of Trophonios, which involved being drawn into a cave where profound but literally stupefying waking visions occurred.<sup>51</sup> Also, although necromancy

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<sup>44</sup> Ekroth (2018).

<sup>45</sup> Ekroth (2018) 42–3.

<sup>46</sup> Ekroth (2018).

<sup>47</sup> Kingsley (1999).

<sup>48</sup> D.L. 1.10.

<sup>49</sup> D.L. 8.3, 41.

<sup>50</sup> Burkert (1972) 155–61.

<sup>51</sup> Meier (2009) ch. VII; Renberg (2017) App. II.2. Renberg (2017) provides a recent, comprehensive review of incubation in the Greco-Roman world.

seems to have been widely proscribed in ancient Greece and Rome, presumably because it disturbed and dishonored the dead, dream incubation for communication with the dead was tolerated at the *nekromanteia* at Cumae and elsewhere.<sup>52</sup> In these and other cases we do find parallels to Jung's descents into the underworld and communication with the dead recounted in the *Red Book*.

It is plausible that most of Jung's journeys went downward in order to compensate for his conscious attitude, which was dominated by clarity, illumination, and elevation, arising from his scientific mindset and traditional Christian morality. He needed balance, for "The spirit of this time is ungodly, the spirit of the depths is ungodly, balance is godly";<sup>53</sup> "You achieve balance, however, only if you nurture your opposite."<sup>54</sup>

We find a similar compensation in ancient Greece, despite a divergence of Olympian and chthonic cult, in which "On the one hand there is exaltation, on the other despondency."<sup>55</sup> As Jung discovered in his own experience, both are necessary:

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>56</sup>

Such a balanced view of reality is implicit in ancient mythology, in which Olympian gods often have chthonic complements, some of whom are mortal (e.g., Zeus Hypsistos and Zeus Chthonios, Artemis and Iphigeneia):

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>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Luck (1985) 166–9.

<sup>53</sup> Jung (2009) 238.

<sup>54</sup> Jung (2009) 263.

<sup>55</sup> Burkert (1985) 199.

<sup>56</sup> Burkert (1985) 202.

<sup>57</sup> Burkert (1985) 203.

For much the same reasons, Jung needed to descend into the underworld and explore the shadow side of life:

For the completion of life a balance with death is fitting. If I accept death, then my tree greens, since dying increases life. If I plunge into the death encompassing the world, then my buds break open. How much our life needs death!<sup>58</sup>

It is his *down-going*. In “The Opening of the Egg” in *Liber Secundus*, Jung says of the reborn god Izdubar/Gilgamesh:

But behold! I caught the sun without realizing it and carried it in my hand. He who wanted to go down (*untergehen*) with the sun found me through his downgoing (*Niedergang*). I became his nocturnal mother who incubated the egg of the beginning. And he rose up, renewed, reborn to greater splendor.

While he rises, however, I go down (*untergang*).<sup>59</sup>

The down-going (*Untergang*) of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* was a recurring theme in Jung’s psychological thought and in his gnostic philosophy. It is a descent from the light of consciousness into the dark unconscious, and from spiritual idealism into the manifold realities of embodied existence.<sup>60</sup> Spirit and matter are both divine. In his fifth sermon to the dead, Philemon says, “The world of the Gods is made manifest in spirituality and in sexuality. The celestial ones appear in spirituality, the earthly in sexuality.”<sup>61</sup> Jung and contemporary Western religion had overvalued the spiritual pole and neglected the physical, but “balance is godly,” and to achieve wholeness Jung had to go down.

In order to restore the *pleroma*, or experience the fullness of being, we must know evil, which is not the same as doing evil. Evil-doers in the true sense are almost inevitably persons acting under one or several compulsions of an unconscious nature. It is thus their very lack of self-knowledge, and with it their lack of knowledge of their own evil, that forces them to do antisocial and evil acts. Unconscious content not brought into the Gnosis

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<sup>58</sup> Jung (2009) 274.

<sup>59</sup> Jung (2009) 287, folio p. 66.

<sup>60</sup> Jung (1988) 19.

<sup>61</sup> Jung (2009) 352.

of consciousness is forced to live itself out by way of compulsive acts performed by the ego.<sup>62</sup>

The cosmology Jung discovered in his explorations and the philosophy that he learned from Philemon were gnostic, both in character and name. This is apparent in the pseudonymous Basilides of Alexandria, in such terms as Pleroma and Abraxas, and in his recognition of the importance of embracing the wholeness of existence. He acknowledged the ancient Gnostics as the discoverers of depth psychology and said of them, "I felt as if I had at last found a circle of friends who understood me."<sup>63</sup>

The fact remains that Jungian depth psychology is more than a therapeutic discipline, just as Gnosticism is more than an ancient religion. Both are the expression at their particular levels of existential reality of a Gnosis, a knowledge of the heart directed toward the inmost core of the human psyche and having as its objective the essential transformation of the psyche.<sup>64</sup>

## VI. Contemporary Theurgical Practice

As recounted in the *Red Book*, Jung's experiences in active imagination were deeply disturbing and caused him to doubt his sanity:

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>65</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>66</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

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<sup>62</sup> Hoeller (1982) 42.

<sup>63</sup> Hoeller (1982) 16.

<sup>64</sup> Hoeller (1982) 33.

<sup>65</sup> Jung (1989) 177.

<sup>66</sup> Jung (*CW* 7) ¶261.



to have in order 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>67</sup> as he described it, he was making “a voyage of discovery to the other pole of the world.”<sup>68</sup> To some extent, his troubles can be attributed to the fact that, unlike ancient theurgists, he had not been initiated, by which he would have learned what to expect and how to assimilate his experiences. As a result, however, of the experiments of Jung and his colleagues, practitioners of active imagination today can be better prepared. Indeed, since Jungian analysts must first be analyzed themselves, this training is itself a sort of initiation.

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>69</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>70</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>71</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

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<sup>67</sup> Jung (2009) 200n67.

<sup>68</sup> Jung (2009) 189.

<sup>69</sup> Giergerich (2010).

<sup>70</sup> Jung (2009) 231.

<sup>71</sup> Jung (2009) 216.

contains, the *liber spirituum* itself becomes a potent theurgical instrument. But Jung's *Red Book* was an instrument tuned to his soul, not to ours. Rather, it is important for each person to embody the results of their own active imagination in some tangible form (a book, images, sculpture, dance, etc.).<sup>72</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>73</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>74</sup> and Jung warned, "It must not by any means be supposed that the technique described is suitable for general use or imitation."<sup>75</sup> Analyst Anthony Stevens says, "It is potentially dangerous, because it amounts to a self-induced psychotic episode,"<sup>76</sup> and Jung also warned that active imagination could unleash latent psychoses.<sup>77</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 progressively 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>78</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Johnson (1986) 196–99.

<sup>73</sup> Jung (2009) 216.

<sup>74</sup> Kingsley (2018).

<sup>75</sup> Jung (2012) 55.

<sup>76</sup> Stevens (1995) 241.

<sup>77</sup> Jung (*CW* 8) 68.

<sup>78</sup> Johnson (1986) 137–8.

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>79</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>80</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:

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>81</sup>

Moreover, in these interactions with gods and *daimones*, it is crucial to maintain a firm ethical position,<sup>82</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

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<sup>79</sup> Jung (1989) 189.

<sup>80</sup> Jung (2009) 263n24.

<sup>81</sup> Jung (1989) 179.

<sup>82</sup> Johnson (1986) 189–95.

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>83</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>84</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>85</sup> and Neoplatonic theurgy.<sup>86</sup> One may wonder how many people will dedicate the time to a regular theurgical practice, but if they don't, how

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<sup>83</sup> Jung (2009) 231; Jung (1989) 176.

<sup>84</sup> Jung (2009) 272.

<sup>85</sup> E.g., Johnson (1986). Hannah (1981) includes contemporary and historical examples.

<sup>86</sup> E.g., Mierzwicki (2006), Dunn (2013), Kupperman (2013), MacLennan (2013), de Biasi (2014), Williams (2016).

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>87</sup>

Those who have not engaged in theurgy or active imagination themselves may harbor a distorted view of the products of these practices, such as the *Red Book*, 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>88</sup> As Plato tells us:

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*].

(*Tim.* 90BC, tr. Bury, modified)

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.

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<sup>87</sup> Jung (2009) 231.

<sup>88</sup> Sedley (2017).

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