

Theurgy in Jung and Neoplatonism: Comparative Phenomenology

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I. Introduction

Previous work has explored the similarities between Neoplatonic theurgy and Jungian active imagination, but this chapter focuses on the differences between them. On one hand, the overall aim of Neoplatonic theurgy seems to be illumination, elevation, and the spirit. In contrast, Jung's theurgy often involves a descent into darkness. Rather than union there is often confrontation, instead of beauty there is sometimes horror. Furthermore, while the overall tone of Neoplatonism is to devalue the material and sensible, Jung's theurgy often engages directly with the divine nature of embodied life and matter. If Neoplatonic theurgy has a dualistic tendency, Jung's theurgy is directed toward a progressive process of reconciling all oppositions, including that between spirit and matter.

Fortunately as Jung conducted his theurgical experiments he recorded detailed transcripts in a series of six notebooks known as the *Black Books*. They were finally published in 2020, a century after they were recorded, in seven volumes in facsimile with English translations, notes, and introductions.¹ The *Black Books* provide precious insights into the phenomenology of Jung's theurgical experiences. We are thus in a position to compare them to what we may infer of the experience of Neoplatonic theurgy. Unfortunately, we don't have comparable transcripts from the Neoplatonists or from adjacent traditions, such as the Gnostic and Hermetic, and the few that appear to be first-person accounts may be in fact literary compositions or post hoc elaborations comparable to Jung's *Red Book* (which he titled *Liber Novus*). Nevertheless I have used as comparanda several texts that do seem to reflect the experiences in ancient theurgy, including the visions of Zosimos of Panopolis, which Jung thought were authentic experiential accounts,² a Hermetic text (CH 13), and several Platonizing Gnostic

¹Jung (2020), *The Black Books 1913–1932*.

²Jung (1967) ¶88. Jung first became aware of Zosimos' visions in 1919: Jung (1973) 210.

texts: *Allogenes*, *Marsanes*, and *Zostrianos* (respectively, *NHC* XI.3; X; VIII.1), all named after Sethian Gnostics mentioned by Porphyry (*V. Plot.* 16) and *The Three Steles of Seth* (*NHC* VII.5).³

II. Praxis

Invocation

First I would like to contrast Jung's theurgical praxis with the Neoplatonists'. Although we don't have an actual Neoplatonic theurgical ritual, from Iamblichus and Proclus we can infer they were generally similar to analogous rituals in the Greek Magical Papyri, and that they involved elaborate invocations, hymns, and material symbols. *The Three Steles of Seth* is apparently the text of a Gnostic ascent ritual comprising group recitations for each of the three divine levels.

Jung's technique was much simpler. When Jung began his theurgical experiments he had been alienated from his soul for eleven years. Over six nights he prayed at length to "my soul," at first receiving only the sparsest of replies,⁴ but then she began to engage in more conversation.⁵ Once the communication with this figure, whom he later called his Anima, had been established, Jung was able to contact her with a brief invocation. Occasionally she declined to speak,⁶ but other times she kept him awake or disturbed his sleep until he contacted her to find out what was going on.⁷ We find a similar situation in *Zostrianos*, whose author tells us that he had retreated to the desert with thoughts of suicide, when an angel appeared to him and led him on a series of transformative experiences.

Setting

Regarding the setting for his experiments, so far as I can tell, Jung conducted most of his theurgical operations in the early evening, presumably after supper.⁸ Others clearly take place at midnight, and a few in the morning. They were solitary affairs, whereas Neoplatonic

³Zosimus: Berthelot and Ruelle (1888) III; *Corpus Hermeticum (CH)*: Copenhagen (1992); *NHC*: Robinson (1990).

⁴*Black Books*, 12–28 Nov. 1913.

⁵*Black Books*, 11 Dec. 1913.

⁶*Black Books*, 28 Feb. 1914.

⁷*Black Books*, 5 Jan. 1922.

⁸*Black Books*, 15 Nov. 1913.

theurgy typically seems to be a group ritual, although Iamblichus is said to have performed solitary rituals.⁹ Zosimos seems to have been alone, possibly engaged in the alchemical opus, when he had his visions.¹⁰ If we assume that *Zostrianos*, *Allogenes*, and *Marsanes* reflect actual experiences, they too seem to have been solitary affairs. On the other hand, *The Three Steles of Seth* seems to be the text for a group ritual of ascent in which all the participants hoped to witness the divine triad.¹¹

In contrast to these solitary and group rituals, it seems that the two Julians, father and son, who gave us the Chaldean Oracles, worked as a team. A number of rituals in the Greek Magical Papyri also involve two individuals, either a magician and a boy medium or a hierophant and an initiate;¹² the so-called “Mithras Liturgy” is an example.¹³ Many of the Hermetica depict a two-person operation, with Hermes Trismegistus, addressed as “father,” instructing or initiating his “son,” Tat.¹⁴ There are many ways to interpret this apparent participation of a god and his son in a ritual. First, “father” and “son” may refer to a spiritual father and son. Second, it has been supposed that Hermes is not the high god Hermes/Thoth, but a lesser being, even a mortal sage. Or the text might recount a mythological primordial initiation or revelation *in illo tempore*. Yet another possibility is that a mortal hierophant invoked the god into himself and “channeled” the deity during the ritual. This interpretation is supported by the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, in which the hierophant becomes Nous.¹⁵ Still another possibility—comparable to Jung’s practice—is that the entire operation takes place in the initiate’s imagination, wherein he encounters his divine father, who reveals the mysteries and initiates his spiritual son.

⁹Eunapius, *VS*, 458 (Loeb ed. 364–5).

¹⁰Jung (1967) ¶188.

¹¹Robinson (1990) 396–397.

¹²Example divinations with a boy medium: *PGM* IV.850–929 (Spell of Solomon for a Trance), VII.348–58 (divination by means of boy), XIV.1–92 (vessel divination); *PDM* xiv.489–515 (lamp divination).

¹³*PGM* IV.475–829 (Betz 48–54).

¹⁴Similarly, *Allogenes* (the Other-born) is a semidivine figure—perhaps Seth—who, after his ascent, transmits his revelation to his “son” Messos.

¹⁵*NHC* VI.6.58. The father, addressed as Hermes and Aeon of Aeons, says “I am Nous” several times.

Dismissal

Lastly, with regard to praxis, Jung's operations do not seem to finish with a definite dismissal. Sometimes the figure stops speaking;¹⁶ sometimes Jung asks to stop;¹⁷ once he says he has to stop because his tobacco has run out!¹⁸ We may contrast this with the more formal dismissals we find in the Greek Magical Papyri, in which daimons or deities are asked (or commanded) to depart and to return to their own proper places. One of the fragments of the Chaldean Oracles, however, suggests that the god will terminate the operation when the theurgist becomes tired and loses concentration on the divine: "The sluggish mortal, nodding here, the god's release."¹⁹ In the Hermetica and Gnostic texts it is the hierophant, if present, who brings the operation to an end. For example, *The Three Steles of Seth* finishes with a simple redescent through the three levels: "The way of ascent is the way of descent."²⁰

III. Phenomenology

Next I will turn to the phenomenology of Jung's theurgical experiences, as evidenced by examples from the *Black Books*, and make some comparisons with theurgical experiences in Neoplatonism and similar traditions.

Manifestation

In Neoplatonic theurgy a god sometimes manifested in the imagination, appearing before the inner eye, but at other times there was apparently visible manifestation, perhaps in a reflective medium as we find in rituals for vessel divination.²¹ Iamblichus tells us how various classes of deities appear and says the highest and most veridical manifestations are uniform, unchanging, and brightly flashing with an irresistible, symmetric beauty.²² Thus deities are identifiable by their form of manifestation.

¹⁶*Black Books*, 15 Nov. 1913.

¹⁷*Black Books*, 27 Jan. 1914.

¹⁸*Black Books*, 15 Feb. 1914.

¹⁹CO 141, my trans.

²⁰NHC VII.5.127; Robinson (1990) 401.

²¹Iamblichus, *DM* III.6.

²²*DM* II.3–10.

For Jung, in contrast, as we will see, manifestations were more or less naturalistic (even if bizarre!), and entities often identified themselves. As implied by the name that he eventually gave to his theurgical technique—*active imagination*—Jung’s experiences were mediated by his imagination. Most often this took the form of voices that he heard in his mind; sometimes the figures used Jung’s own voice to speak out loud. Generally he interacted, often in quite remarkable ways, with figures in his visual and even somatosensory imagination. He recorded his experiences in his black notebooks as they occurred. In contrast, Zosimos describes his visions as dreams, but in one case the vision had already begun when he fell asleep: “But as I was about to ascend, I lost my way again; greatly discouraged, and not seeing in which direction I should go, I fell asleep. And while I was sleeping I saw an anthroparion ...”²³ This suggests that his vision began when he was awake or in a hypnagogic state, a possibility Iamblichus also mentions.²⁴ *The Three Steles of Seth* declare, “Truly we have been saved. We have seen thee by mind,” which suggests that the congregation experienced the ascent in their imaginations.²⁵

Descent into Darkness vs. Ascent into Light

Neoplatonic theurgy, like its Gnostic and Hermetic cousins, seems to be metaphorically upward and toward the light, toward the principles of order and unity, to escape for a time from the chaotic flux of sensible reality. In *CH* 13, for example, under the guidance of Hermes, Tat calms himself, turns his attention inward from the senses, cleanses himself of the “irrational torments of matter,” expels the twelve zodiacal vices, and receives the ten divine powers so he can be reborn. Then, in *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, which may be intended as the next initiation,²⁶ father and son have prayed for and experienced visions of the eighth and ninth spheres. We also have ascents through the divine realms in *Marsanes*, *Allogenes*, *The Three Steles of Seth*, and *Zostrianos*, and the latter exhorts his followers to seek the light and to flee darkness. If we may suppose that the “Mithras Liturgy” reflects the actual experience of its author, then he felt himself lifted up from the earth to

²³Zosimos III.v.1; Jung (1967) ¶86. Translations of Zosimos’ Greek are by A. S. B. Glover from the text in Berthelot and Ruelle (1888), with reference to Ruelle’s French and Jung’s German translations.

²⁴*DM* III.2 (pp. 121–2), 4 (131).

²⁵*NHC* VII.5.125; Robinson (1990) 401.

²⁶Bull (2018) ch. 6.

encounter the celestial gods, especially the Sun, with experiences of fire, lightning, thunder, and other phenomena of light. Even when Anubis is invoked as “Pharaoh of the Underworld” in a bowl divination (*PDM* xiv.528–53), he is expected to dispel darkness and to bring light.

We can infer from the Chaldean Oracles that the material archons and hylic daimons—the “hounds of Hecate”—could impede the theurgist’s ascent, and so they were avoided.²⁷ In contrast, Jung’s task was often to engage with and to integrate psychologically these spirits of embodiment. Therefore, rather than ascending to the light, Jung often descends into earthly darkness. In one of his earliest experiments Jung’s Anima whispers to him, “Look into your depths!”²⁸ and he later explained his method of descent as a way of delving deeper when ordinary introspection had reached its limit. He described the procedure in a 1925 seminar as follows: “I devised such a boring method by fantasizing that I was digging a hole, and by accepting this fantasy as perfectly real.”²⁹ He observes that descent is a powerful archetype for activating the unconscious, as evident in the Mithraic caves and other similar ritual spaces. I would add that it echoes mythic pit rituals, such as Odysseus’ *nekylia* and Gilgamesh’s evocation of Enkidu’s shade.

We do find two sorts of descents in the Sethian Gnostic texts. One is the descent—the return to ordinary reality—that follows an ascent into the higher orders of reality, such as we find in *The Three Steles of Seth*.³⁰ The other is the descent of a divine savior figure, such as Seth or Barbelo, which are found in the apocalyptic Gnostic texts.³¹ Neither of these are comparable to Jung’s descents into infernal depths, which are more akin to the *nekyliai* and *katabaseis* we find in literature and mythology.

Psychopomp

Jung’s Anima often functioned as a mediator by introducing Jung to other figures or, when they were invisible to Jung, by describing them and reporting what they said. In fact the majority of Jung’s theurgical operations involved his Anima or were mediated by her. This would seem to contrast with Neoplatonic theurgy in which the theurgist

²⁷Majercik (1989) 13–14.

²⁸*Black Books*, 22 Nov. 1913.

²⁹Jung (2012) 51.

³⁰*NHC* VII.5.127.

³¹Turner (2001) 80–85; Burns (2014) 77–78.

interacts directly with a variety of divine beings, from daimons, to gods, up to union with the One itself. However, we do find a parallel in the Chaldean Oracles, some of which are spoken by Hekate, who is especially the god of the theurgists and serves as a mediator.³² In the Oracles Hekate is associated with the World Soul and is the nearest god to the sublunary realm. Jung originally addressed his psychopomp as “my soul,” but he later recognized her as his Anima (which of course also means “soul”). She is a personal daimon associated with Jung, but behind her is the archetypal Anima, who fulfills a role like Hekate’s in the Oracles. Jung’s Anima may be compared also with Youel in *Zostrianos* and *Allogenes*, who is the angel who leads these prophets on their visionary ascents.

Gods and Daimones

It appears that in Neoplatonic theurgy any god could be contacted, but only one at a time, for the *sumbola* and *sunthêmata* would be attuned to a particular deity or at least to a single *seira*. In a Hermetic ascent ritual such as *CH* 13, however, the initiate encounters an entire hierarchy of divine beings. Similarly Jung, with the help of his Anima acting as mediator or interpreter, engages with a variety of other beings, some of whom are known from tradition, but often with unfamiliar characteristics. These include the devil, Abraxas, Wotan, Elijah, Salome, Ammonius, Gilgamesh, Baucis, and Philemon, but also more obscure figures such as Ha and Ka. Ultimately these are many of the same archetypal figures represented under various names in traditional pantheons, but Jung does not encounter a hierarchy of beings as we find in an ascent ritual. Rather, he encounters an unpredictable array of surprising figures, as did Zosimos in his visions. Importantly, Jung also interacts with the shades of the dead, which does not seem to be Neoplatonic practice, and as will be apparent he also engages with the hylic daimons, rather than avoiding them. By interacting face to face with these various beings, Jung avoids being possessed by them.

Predictability

Jung’s experiences were unpredictable and often surprising, even horrifying, and typically he was an active participant in their unfolding, not a mere witness. Zosimos’ visions are similar, although with more limited participation. Our Hermetic and Gnostic texts, in contrast, are

³²Majercik (1989) 7; e.g., *CO* 53, 72, 146, 147, 211*, 222*, 223*, 224* (starred fragments are doubtful).

typically orderly ascents through a hierarchy of ontological spheres and divine beings. If these texts reflect actual experiences and not post-hoc rational reconstructions, then it is possible that the orderliness results from prior indoctrination or from guidance during the ritual. Thus a spiritual “father” might lead his “son” in a guided visualization, with a more predictable outcome and less active participation than in active imagination.

In *CH* 13, in which Hermes brings about the rebirth of his son Tat,³³ we find both preparation and guidance. First, Tat claims that he has studied the *General Discourses* and prepared himself in other ways.³⁴ Then, after systematically banishing the twelve vices and invoking the ten virtues, Hermes sings the secret hymn of rebirth, which brings about Tat’s illumination. Similarly, in the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, before they pray together Hermes exhorts Tat to recall the progress and foreknowledge that has come to him from the books. In this prayer Tat rehearses what he has learned about the eighth and ninth spheres, after which they embrace and experience their visions, which they keep to themselves.

The Mithras Liturgy includes a detailed description of what the practitioner will see and hear. We do not know if this reflects the actual experiences of the ritual’s author, or the extent to which the description might predispose later practitioners to have similar experiences. Although it does involve passing some threatening beings, overall the ascent is more orderly and predictable than Jung’s experiences, and of course directed upward toward the light. Other PGM texts also describe what the practitioner should see, and these descriptions may function as indicators, as they do for Iamblichus, that the operation has been performed correctly.³⁵ For Jung, in contrast, the characteristics of an authentic experience are that it does *not* go in an expected direction, but that it is emotionally charged. In this way it brings something new and significant from the unconscious into conscious awareness.

³³Bull (2018) ch. 5.

³⁴*CH* 13 [1].

³⁵Examples: *PGM* I.42–195 (Spell of Pnouthis for acquiring an assistant), *PGM* IV.930–1114 (direct vision spell), *PDM* xiv.117–49 (a god’s arrival). Cf. *DM* II.3–10.

IV. Examples

Finally I will consider several examples from the *Black Books*.

Importance of the banal³⁶

In one of his earliest experiments Jung's Anima delivers him to a scene out of a gothic romance: an isolated castle in a dark forest.³⁷ He seeks lodging for the night, and the master of the place, an ancient scholar pouring over his tomes, rudely sends him to his room. Jung is outraged that his Anima has deposited him in a situation out of a vulgar novel and he wonders if Hell is just such banality. Predictably enough, a beautiful damsel enters his room and says she is trapped there by her desiccated and distracted father. It is such a ludicrous situation that Jung questions her reality to her face. When she becomes indignant at the insult, he finally grants that she is real. In gratitude she reminds him that what has been repeated for millenia "comes nearest the ultimate human truth." Her commonness, she says, proves her universality and she offers an important lesson about the highest truths:

Black Books 28 Dec. 1913.

The more uncommon these highest truths are, the more inhuman must they be and the less they speak to you as something valuable or meaningful concerning human essence and being. Only what is human and what you call banal and hackneyed contains the wisdom that you seek.

Thus Jung learned where to seek the universal human essence, and learned it not from some exalted and superhuman god, but from an archetypal person, the essence of humanity itself. Later Jung concluded that, like the old scholar, in his own intellectual pursuits he had become alienated from his soul and ordinary human life. He was out of balance and descent had to compensate ascent: "You cannot at the same time be on the mountain and in the valley, but your way leads you from mountain to valley and from valley to mountain."³⁸

Deification³⁹

Sometimes Jung himself or other beings are transformed in his experiences. In one early series of experiments Jung descends to the

³⁶This experiment is the basis of *Liber Novus* II.ii "The Castle in the Forest."

³⁷*Black Books*, 28 Dec. 1913.

³⁸*Liber Novus* II.ii, p.11; Jung (2009) 265.

³⁹This experiment is the basis of *Liber Novus* I.xi "Resolution."

underworld where he interacts with the prophet Elijah, his serpent familiar, and Salome, who is the prophet's blind daughter in that dark realm. Space does not permit a complete discussion of what happens, but on the third night, Christmas night 1913, Jung had a remarkable experience. He finds himself in a liminal wasteland where light and dark meet and mingle. The prophet shows him a series of mysterious visions culminating in Christ on the cross. The serpent winds around Jung's feet and spirals upward, squeezing his body. Jung reports:

Black Books 25 Dec. 1913.

The prophet looks at me with fiery gaze. I am contained and I spread my arms wide as if spellbound. Salome draws near from the right—The serpent has wound itself around my whole body, and it seems to me as if my countenance is that of a lion.

That is, he has become the *leontocephalus* of the Mithraic Mysteries. Salome says, "Do you understand now? ... You are Christ." He is horrified at this sacrilegious fantasy, but the serpent squeezes tighter until Jung's blood pours out, running down the mountainside. He continues:

Black Books 25 Dec. 1913.

Salome bends down to my feet and wraps her black hair round them. She lies thus for a long time, then she cries, "I see light!" And truly, she sees, her eyes are open. The serpent falls from my body and lies languidly on the ground. I stride over it and kneel at the feet of the prophet, whose form shines like a flame.

He speaks: "Your work is fulfilled here. Other things will come, of which you do not know yet. But seek untiringly, and above all write exactly what you see."

The experiment done, Jung observes, "I am back again. Something has been completed. It is as if I had brought with me a certainty—and a hope." Jung later referred to this experience as his deification.⁴⁰ He said we are not redeemed by a hero, but by ourselves becoming Christs through self-sacrifice, which is an inner transformation.⁴¹

Jung's experiences have a number of similarities to the visions of Zosimus, who witnessed the transformation of people into spirits,

⁴⁰Jung (2012) 106.

⁴¹*Liber Novus* I, fol. vii(r); Jung (2009) 253–254.

escaping their bodies by being boiled in a bowl-shaped altar.⁴² In his wanderings he says, “I saw an old man whitened by years, who had become wholly white, with a blinding whiteness. His name was Agathodaimon.”⁴³ The old man ascends the altar, where the fire transforms him into a pillar of flame with blood-filled eyes.⁴⁴ Groaning, he says, “I am the leaden man and submit myself to an unendurable torment.”⁴⁵ Like Jung, Zosimus was told at the vision’s end “The procedure is completed.”⁴⁶

Saving the god Izdubar⁴⁷

Another time Jung finds himself in a desolate landscape, where he encounters Izdubar (that is, Gilgamesh) traveling from the East toward the setting sun, seeking the secret of immortality.⁴⁸ When he learns Jung comes from the West, he asks where the sun goes, and Jung teaches him some modern astronomy. The giant bull-man is disabled by this knowledge and cries, “Miserable worm, where did you suckle on this poison?” Jung replies, “what you call poison is science. In our country we are nurtured on it from youth, and that may be one reason why we haven’t properly flourished and remain so dwarfish.” Izdubar says, “your poison ... has lamed me to the marrow. Your magical poison is stronger than the army of Tiāmat.” Jung replies that he only intends to speak the truth, but the giant objects, “You call poison truth? Is poison truth? Or is truth poison? Do not our astrologers and priests also speak the truth? And yet theirs does not act like poison.” Jung explains that we must drink this poison or we will be lamed as he has been. In fact all our gods are dead for science has destroyed our belief.

Jung realizes that Izdubar also is dying, poisoned by science.⁴⁹ Wishing to save him, Jung has an idea and convinces the giant to accept that he exists in the imagination. He resists of course, but Jung argues that in this way he continues to exist, which he cannot do if projected into external reality. Thus the god is saved and wins his immortality.

⁴²Zosimus III.i.3; vi.1.

⁴³Zosimus III.v.3.

⁴⁴Zosimus III.v.3.

⁴⁵Zosimus III.5.3.

⁴⁶Zosimus III.5.3.

⁴⁷These experiments are the basis of *Liber Novus* II.viii “First Day” – ix “Second Day.”

⁴⁸*Black Books*, 8 Jan. 1914.

⁴⁹*Black Books*, 9 Jan. 1914.

Jung later remarked that once upon a time people had so much unreason that they needed the Logos in order to be saved, but now we were being poisoned by it, although we have managed to keep the One within us safe from the poison.⁵⁰ Since the tangible world is one reality, but the imagination is another reality, he advised that we conceal the god within, where he is always with us.⁵¹

Sacrifice of divine child⁵²

In one memorable experiment Jung confronts the existence of evil.⁵³ After several incidents he arrives in a dismal valley treacherous with serpents, and he stumbles upon the mutilated corpse of a young girl. A veiled woman, who claims to be the child's soul, stands by it and orders him to extract the child's liver and to eat a bit of it as atonement for the crime, for although he did not commit the crime, he is human, and humans commit such crimes every day. After much resistance, with blood on his hands, he eats the offal; thereupon the woman throws off her veil and announces, "I am your soul." Jung understands this as his participation in the sacrifice of the divine child, whose mother is the soul.⁵⁴ The restoration of the human soul requires recognition of the evil in which the human qua human is complicit, which is accomplished by eating the sacrificial flesh. Thus the primordial powers of the god, possessed in potential form by the soul, are redeemed and incorporated into the living soul in active form.

We may compare Jung's experience to a vision of Zosimos, in which he encounters Ion, the priest of the inner sanctuary, who says he had been pierced with a sword, dismembered, and scalped.⁵⁵ His flesh and bones were burned on the altar so he could become entirely spirit, but when Zosimos grasps him, he becomes a mutilated corpse with blood-filled eyes, eating his own flesh and spewing it out. Jung explains that scalping is "*pars pro toto* incorporation of the life principle or soul,"⁵⁶ and thus comparable to eating the child's liver. In another vision Zosimos encounters a celestial figure, called the Meridian of the Sun,

⁵⁰*Liber Novus* II, pp. 42–3; Jung (2009) 280.

⁵¹*Liber Novus* II, pp. 48–9; Jung (2009) 283–284.

⁵²This experiment is the basis of *Liber Novus* II.xiii "The Sacrificial Murder."

⁵³*Black Books*, 12 Jan. 1914.

⁵⁴*Liber Novus* II, pp. 77–8; Jung (2009) 290–291.

⁵⁵Zosimos III.i.2.

⁵⁶Jung (1967) ¶93.

and is given a sword and commanded: “Cut off his head, immolate his body, and cut his flesh into pieces, that it may first be boiled according to the method, and then delivered to the place of punishment.”⁵⁷ Zosimos awoke, however, before he had to do the deed.

The holy books⁵⁸

In apparent contrast to Neoplatonic theurgy, but perhaps not ancient necromancy, Jung had profound and important interactions with the dead. One evening the shade of a woman acquaintance says that before they can speak the shades need a symbol.⁵⁹ Jung is baffled, but she says, “You can, grasp it—upward—onward.” Jung guesses, “A phallus?” and she confirms his guess and calls it “the God’s other pole.” She explains that while one God “is in the light, the other God is in the night.” This dark god “is the flesh spirit, the blood spirit, he is the extract of all bodily juices,” which she proceeds to enumerate. This is the dark, moist god of life, not the bright, arid god of spirit: Dionysos as opposed to Apollo. She tells him:

Black Books, 2 Dec. 1915.

Listen: Build the church. Write the holy books, the age-old new ones, that contain the echo of the eternal being, the mysterious ones—mocked wisdom—the lower and upper truth.

These truths that unite above and below, light and dark, are the ancient wisdom that is ever new.

In a similar way, Allogenes is told to record his visions in a book and to invoke a guardian to protect it:

NHC XI.3.68

Write down [the things that I] shall [tell] you and of which I shall remind you for the sake of those who will be worthy after you. And you will leave this book upon a mountain and you will adjure the guardian: “Come Dreadful One.”

In the *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* the initiate is commanded to engrave his vision on steles of turquoise and to set eight guardians around them so that whoever reads them is bound by a mighty oath.⁶⁰

⁵⁷Zosimos III.v^{bis}.

⁵⁸This experiment is the basis of *Liber Novus*, Scrutinies {4}.

⁵⁹*Black Books*, 2 Dec. 1915.

⁶⁰*NHC* VI.6.61–63.

Likewise, *The Three Steles of Seth* tell us Dositheos saw the steles and understood them. “And after he had read them, he remembered them. And he gave them to the elect, just as they were inscribed there.”⁶¹ Jung memorialized and elaborated on his own visions in his lavishly illuminated *Red Book*, and suggested that others do the same with the records of their active imagination exercises “for in that book is your soul.”⁶²

Revelations

In the process of his theurgical experiments, Jung received a number of revelations of both personal and general significance (sometimes difficult to disentangle). Some of these came as lectures; for example, Jung’s book, *Septem Sermones ad Mortuos*, is a transcription of Philemon’s lectures to the dead over seven evenings. Other revelations emerged from discussions or even arguments; yet others were witnessed in his mind’s eye.

Meeting Philemon⁶³

Once, as Jung and his Anima wander in the predawn night, she gives him a black rod carved as a serpent.⁶⁴ She tells him it is a magical rod, a gift of the darkness, but he objects that he has no need for magic. She chides, “don’t act so enlightened, as if deep down you did not believe in magic”; “Cast aside your blind judgment and critical gesture, otherwise you’ll never understand.” He objects that it’s hard to abandon his science, but she says it’s high time. He addresses the rod: “All the darkness of all former worlds crowds together in you”; “Are you time and fate—the essence of nature, hard and eternally inconsolable—yet the sum of all mysterious creative force?”

Four days later Jung seeks the power and meaning of the rod, and finds his way to the humble dwelling of Philemon and Baucis, last seen in Goethe’s *Faust*. Philemon has become a powerful magician and will be the sage who teaches Jung much of what he learns about the unconscious. Now, however, Jung pesters him to learn magic. Philemon tries to put him off, pretending there is no such thing as magic, yet when Jung complains that it’s difficult to abandon reason, Philemon replies,

⁶¹NHC VII.5.118.

⁶²Jung (2009) 216.

⁶³These experiments are the basis for parts of *Liber Novus* II.xix “The Gift of Magic” and xxi “The Magician” (fol. 139–142).

⁶⁴*Black Books*, 27 Jan. 1914.

“that is exactly how difficult magic is.” Moreover, Philemon informs him “magic is the negative of what you can know” and “there is nothing for you to understand.” With these introductory lessons in the antilogic of magic, Jung wanders away dazed.

From this non-rational daimon Jung learns that true magic, transformation, and creation take place in the dark, where forms are indistinct, categories are confused, existence is fluid, and contradiction rules. Jung later remarked that enigmas are a gift of the darkness, and we should submit to them, nurture them, and be pregnant with them, and thus with the future, which is conceived in the depths. This way unites above and below, heaven and hell. Moreover, he says that because “the world comprises reason and unreason,” our way must be magical, for magic, which operates on oneself, is compatible with unreason and must be used to “invoke the messenger” to communicate in the incomprehensible realm. “Magic is a way of living,” he says, which recognizes that “a greater other” is steering the chariot.⁶⁵ Similarly, Iamblichus argues that the only way to live well is through union with the gods effected through theurgy and sacred divination.⁶⁶

Importance of darkness

Jung also asks his Anima an important phenomenological question: “Why are all these things so dark and bleak?” and she replies:

Black Books, 27 Jan. 1922.

Because everything is a process of change. The times that previously were have become old and strive for new order. That’s why everything is dark. Gloomy for you, but alive and active within.

He asks the Anima what she can do about the disorder and chaos, but she says she can only look and he must bring about his own salvation; she explains:

Black Books, 27 Jan. 1922.

The primordial man lived and died. He has given you everything that the past could give you. Now you must create the present and build the future. The future will be created. The past lived. It outlived itself.

⁶⁵*Liber Novus* II.xix, pp. 129, 130; Jung (2009) 308; II.xxi, 143–5; Jung (2009) 314–15.

⁶⁶*DM* X.1–6.

That is, the future is created and lives in the chaos, dynamism, evolution, and infinite potential of darkness. In contrast, Neoplatonists, Hermetists, and Gnostics seek to ascend to an eternal, changeless realm.

Ha and the runes

In his theurgical experiments Jung encountered a number of dark figures, some explicitly evil, quite different from the deities Neoplatonic theurgists anticipated meeting. One night in a cold, dark, mist-filled forest, the Anima perceives “Inexpressible, unascertainable, fearsome things—like tangles of serpents, intertwined, knotted ropes—like runes, barely readable signs.”⁶⁷ She proceeds to describe these so-called runes, which Jung records and draws in his notebook.

A year later the Anima introduces Jung to Ha, whom she describes as “A darker spirit, a spirit of deception, a sorcerer of Satan, an adept of the blackest magic.”⁶⁸ Although he claims to be Philemon’s father, the Anima wants nothing to do with him; he is “too dreadfully earthy.” Ha replies,

Black Books, 7 Oct. 1917.

Listen, sister, you are also of our kind. Some murder, some blood—pleases you, does it not? Some more darkness, some more abyss—doesn’t that entice you? Why then so high up—it is warmer down here.

After some more back and forth, she forces him to reveal a further sequence of twelve “runes.”⁶⁹ When she does not understand his interpretation of them, he says it is because “You lack dirt. Your understanding has no dung in it.” He produces and explains more “runes” and interprets others received previously. This may be compared with Marsanes’ revelation of occult alphabet lore, but without the evil backdrop of Jung’s experience.⁷⁰

Encounters with Ka

Another time Jung’s Anima introduces him to Ka, the brother of the dark sorcerer Ha and his other side.⁷¹ Ka says, “I gave him the runes and the lower wisdom. I am his spirit.” Jung is suspicious and asks the

⁶⁷*Black Books*, 29 Sept. 1916; the serpents are depicted in *Liber Novus*, Image 71.

⁶⁸*Black Books*, 7 Oct. 1917.

⁶⁹These runes are depicted in *Liber Novus*, Images 89, 90, 94, 95.

⁷⁰*NHC* X.26–39.

⁷¹*Black Books*, 22 Oct. 1917.

Anima to invoke the wise magician Philemon to get his opinion of Ka. Philemon states that Ka is his shadow, whom Jung needs as much as he needs Philemon himself. He explains, "There is no one above who doesn't have his shadow below. My light is strong, and my shadow is dark." When Philemon sings his praise of Phanes the consoler, Ka interrupts,

Black Books, 22 Oct. 1917.

Philemon, stop! Your speech is hollow. Where is your shadow?
Your shadow says to you:

The earth is damned, eternal heavens are damned, man and his daimon are damned. All great tidings are damned. What lies are you speaking, Philemon? What shimmering piece of serpent-conjuring art do you perform in your blue lofty heaven? My speech is iron, your lukewarm drops of consolation don't melt me. It's me you should speak to, you lovely trick of untruth.

Philemon acknowledges that Ka is correct and confesses "I am a crime of the Gods against man." Later Jung explained Ka as the earthy daimon who makes things real, in other words, a hylic daimon. He calls Ka the father who creates, in contrast to Philemon, who is the father who imposes law and order. Ka is the Dionysos to Philemon's Apollo; both are essential.

A god of fear and obedience

On one occasion Jung calls out, "Oh my soul, what summons me at midnight? What fear stalks my sleep and shatters it with the captain's command?"⁷² His Anima answers, "Why do you hesitate? Quick, here, your master is there," but Jung can't see him. "Terrible is his beauty," she says, "more beautiful than death," illuminated with "the glow of the dead," he appears "risen." The being tells Jung that in the land of the dead he was shrouded in death, but in Jung's presence he is cloaked in words. But he says he knows nothing, not even who he is, for he can be everything. Jung promises to discover his identity.

The following evening Jung asks his Anima to help him understand this dark figure and he wonders, "what is beyond being and non-being?"⁷³ In his next session, two nights later, Jung reports:

⁷²*Black Books*, 2–3 Jan. 1923.

⁷³*Black Books*, 3 Jan. 1923.

Black Books, 5 Jan. 1923.

Verily, he came again in the middle of the night. I heard his shrill, terrible whistle, when he whistled to the great bloodhound, who hurried to fulfill his master's wish like an arrow whirring ... from a bow.

His Anima says, "He is a mighty hunter, a hunter of men"; in fact Jung will later identify him as Wotan. When the god says his power needs wisdom, but he doesn't know why, Jung explains:

Black Books, 5 Jan. 1923.

God is the overpowering being. Wisdom is the opposite, it is mild, it is never violent, it does not shatter, nobody feels fear and grovels before it in the dust. Because a God is a great power, he mostly lacks wisdom. So it is.

Wotan asks if wisdom should destroy power, and Jung replies, "Wisdom destroys unjust power and gives right form to right power." After Wotan departs, Jung discusses him with his Anima, and concludes ominously:

Black Books, 5 Jan. 1923.

Despite the fact that we have spoken for years of a God who is to come, when he came, he was shockingly new. I confess that I'm as shocked as you, stunned—a God of fear and ruthless obedience, a fool with a lightning hammer, who would have thought it! But a man, a master, a mighty one! It's a pleasure to obey him.

More than a decade later—in 1936—Jung would write that Germany was possessed by Wotan, and he seems to have our time in his grip as well. If one does not reach an accommodation with the gods in the inner world, then they are likely to escape into the outer world, either possessing oneself or projecting onto others.

Coniunctio oppositorum

Much of what Jung learned related to the union of the opposites in many different guises. In one session, Jung's Anima explains that his work will not progress so long as he is spellbound by Philemon and Ka.⁷⁴ In the midst of a long speech she proclaims, "Respect for and disdain of the Gods—that is the mystery," and this "begins with respect

⁷⁴*Black Books*, 1 Mar. 1918.

for and disdain of oneself.” This is the first contradiction to be embraced. She explains her own role:

Black Books, 1 Mar. 1918.

Man, who must always work as the mediator for the part of God in him and the seed, can never do this through conscious devising or puzzling out, but only through the help of his soul, or through the help of someone who still has the soul of the other in them.

That is, we can fulfill our destiny only with the aid of our psychopomp—our Anima or Animus—or with the assistance of someone inspired by this daimon. She further proclaims God to be simultaneously smallest and largest:

Black Books, 1 Mar. 1918.

I tell you, man is completely in God. He is the mediator between God as world and God as seed. Philemon sees God only as goal, Ka only as ground. You see him through me as seed and world.

Jung asks if humans are mediators in the transformation of God himself, and she agrees and adds, “animals and plants also have their role in this work.” That is, in contrast to Neoplatonic doctrine, living nature transforms divinity. Jung remarks that this seed, this “kernel of the innermost,” has been called the devil, and she replies, “God is in conflict with himself” and *both* redeemers teach “the redemption from good and evil.” Therefore, in contrast with Platonism, she says:

Black Books, 1 Mar. 1918.

We shouldn’t strive toward the good, but toward life. Life, so it is called in us, is higher than the good, since the good is just a fruit of life. But nowhere is the fruit more valuable than the tree on which it grew. [emphasis in original]

She concludes, “We cannot believe that life must die un-lived. We believe that life is a flame that burns in itself and radiates itself.”

V. Conclusions

In conclusion, Neoplatonic theurgists sought to elevate themselves into the bright light of the Intellect, to approach the perfect One and the eternal Good. Jung in contrast, regardless of whether he chose to descend, often found himself in a dark and harsh realm interacting with antagonistic beings. In this dark chaos, however, he found the living and fertile roots from which the future springs, by which our psyches

may transcend their inner and outer divisions. No doubt Neoplatonists also had experiences like Jung's, but probably they considered them mistakes and aborted the operations.⁷⁵ Jung, however, accepted the reality of his experiences, engaging in them critically and later subjecting them to analysis. We may suppose that Jung had the experiences that he did because he needed them to compensate for his overly elevated religious and scientific attitudes and to discover the spiritual aspects of embodied life and nature. Some of what he learned applied only to his own situation, and some is more generally valid, but Jung stressed that we *each* must follow our own spiritual path.

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