

# Jung, Alchemy and the Technique of Active Imagination

Part 3 of a 5 part talk delivered as 'Alchemy and the Imagination' to the Bendigo Writers' Council and the general public in 2008 by Dr Ian Irvine.



**Article Copyright:** Dr. Ian Irvine, 2008-2010, all rights reserved.

**Image:** 'Actorum Chymicorum' by Hiernel, 1712. (Public domain image)

**Publisher:** Mercurius Press, Australia, 2010.

NB: All quotes from Jung's works used with respect to international copyright provisions allowing academic 'review and critique' of significant cultural texts.

## Author Bio (as at September 2010)

Dr. Ian Irvine is an Australian-based poet/lyricist, writer and non-fiction writer. His work has featured in publications as diverse as *Humanitas* (USA), *The Antigone Review* (Canada), *Tears in the Fence* (UK), *Linq* (Australia) and *Takahe* (NZ), among many others. His work has also appeared in two Australian national poetry anthologies: *Best Australian Poems 2005* (Black Ink Books) and *Agenda: 'Australian Edition'*, 2005, as well as in the *Fire* 'Special International' edition of 2008. Ian is the author of three books – *Dream-Dust Parasites* a novel (written as Ian Hobson); *The Angel of Luxury and Sadness* a non-fiction book concerned with post-traditional forms of alienation/chronic ennui; and *Facing the Demon of Noontide*, a collection of poetry. Dr. Irvine currently teaches in the Professional Writing and Editing and Community Services programs at BRIT (Bendigo, Australia). He has also taught history and social theory at La Trobe University (Bendigo, Australia) and holds a PhD for his work on creative, normative and dysfunctional forms of alienation and morbid ennui. In his recent theoretical work he has attempted to develop an anti-oppressive approach to creative writing based upon the integration of Cultural-Relational theories concerning 'self in relation' with Jungian and Groffian models of the 'collective' or 'transpersonal' unconscious.

## ***Jung, Alchemy and Active Imagination***

*In Part Three of this series of articles on 'Alchemy and the Imagination' we look at the influence of Alchemical ways of thinking on one of the twentieth century's most innovative psychologists, Carl Jung. In particular this article looks at the contribution of the more reflective, meditative aspects of late Medieval and Early modern alchemy to Jung's notion of 'active imagination'. Part Four of this series of articles will return to the figure of 'Hermes/Mercury' and his largely un-acknowledged contribution to Postmodern culture.*

### **What Was Jung Looking for in Alchemy?**

In a chapter entitled 'The Work' in Jung's virtual autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* he writes of the years 1918 to 1926:

... when I began to understand alchemy I realized that it represented [a] historical link with Gnosticism, and that a continuity therefore existed between past and present... alchemy formed the bridge on the one hand into the past, to Gnosticism, and on the other into the future, to the modern psychology of the unconscious.<sup>1</sup>

After his professional split with Freud in 1914 Jung sought to elaborate his own theories of the psyche by way of two strategies: 1) a thorough critique of the ethnocentrism and secularism of Freud's approach and, most interestingly for our purposes, 2) a search among antique traditions for precursors to his own theories of the psyche. In short Jung was looking for a link between the psychologists and soul doctors of the past and his own form of psychoanalysis. As the above quote indicates the search eventually brought him to alchemy as, and the term is important, 'a bridge' to the past. Any encounter with alchemy is also, as I've stated elsewhere, an encounter with Hermes Trismegistus. The encounter was life changing for Jung and ongoing—a true 'work' in the alchemical sense. In the end Jung wrote over 2,000 pages (three books and numerous essays) inspired by late Medieval and Early Modern alchemical texts. In essence he made alchemy a spiritual precursor to his Archetypal theory of the psyche. It is no overstatement to argue that Jungian psychology represents the merging of Freud's theory of psychoanalysis with alchemical/Hermetic and Gnostic notions of personal development.

Jung committed himself over many decades to a process of deep engagement with key alchemical texts; these texts he typically interpreted from an archetypal psychoanalytic perspective which in turn he saw as an evolution of the older system. He increasingly came to see 'The Work', or *opus*, of alchemy as a model for therapeutic work on the psyche, that is, it became a kind of blue-print for psychic healing and personal development. According to Jung, the end goal of the alchemists, at least in part, was not the creation of material 'gold' or the production of a physical 'elixir of life' (i.e. some sort of medicine), but the pursuit of the immaterial gold and/or elixir; the gold, if you like, of harmonious psychic life, i.e. the realization of the 'self archetype'. Such a goal Jung, of course, conceptualised in terms of his own concept of 'individuation', that is, the process by which the Self archetype is actualised. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (p.231) he writes:

I had very soon seen that analytical psychology coincided in a most curious way with alchemy. The experiences of the alchemists were, in a sense, my experiences, and their world was my world. ... I had stumbled upon the historical counterpart of my psychology of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Jung, C.G. 'The Work' in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p. 227.

unconscious.

To Jung, then, the Medieval alchemists were actually using ‘meditation’ and ‘active imagination’ techniques as a means to ‘unify’ the various ‘opposites’ in the psyche; opposites that had developed due to Medieval social and cultural developments. Jung was particularly interested in the way in which devotion to ‘the Work’ - as a process of ‘individuation’ through what became known as ‘active imagination’ and commitment to a simple hermit-like (hermetic?) existence - opened up possibilities for meaningful dialogue between consciousness and the more archaic realms of his version of the deep psyche, i.e. ‘the collective unconscious’.

Only after I familiarised myself with alchemy did I realise that the unconscious is a *process*, and that the psyche is transformed or developed by the relationship of the ego to the contents of the unconscious. In individual cases that transformation can be read from dreams and fantasies. In collective life it has left its deposit principally in the various religious systems and their changing symbols. Through the study of these collective transformation processes and through understanding of alchemical symbolism I arrived at the central concept of my psychology: *the process of individuation*.<sup>2</sup>

Thus ‘The Work’, to Jung, involved firstly accessing archetypal forces resident in the collective unconscious such that they entered into a meaningful discourse with consciousness. Active imagination was one of the techniques Jung developed to encourage this consciousness/unconsciousness exchange of energies. Symbols communicated archetypal patterns and conflicts originating in the personal or collective unconscious to consciousness. Long-term commitment to this work, Jung believed, was beneficial to the psyche since it promoted imaginal catharsis, which relieved psychic pressures and realigned human beings with more positively polarised archetypes. In an illuminating section of *Psychology and Alchemy* (p.277-78) he summarises the way in which medieval alchemists envisaged the imagination:

Rutland says, ‘Imagination is the star in man, the celestial or supercelestial body.’ This astounding definition throws a quite special light on the fantasy processes connected with the opus. We have to conceive of these processes not as the immaterial phantoms we readily take fantasy pictures to be, but as something corporeal, a “subtle body”, semi-spiritual in nature. ... The *imagination*, or the act of imagining, was thus a physical activity that could be fitted into the cycle of material changes, that brought these about and was brought about by them. ... Imagination is therefore a concentrated extract of the life forces, both physical and psychic.

Jung’s final alchemical study, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* (Vol 14 of his *Collected Works*), gives us a key understand his perspective on what the alchemists were actually doing as they stared into their heated ‘flasks’ hallucinating green lions, salamanders, ravens, hermaphrodites and the likes. Jung in effect argues that the alchemists ‘transferred’ unconscious content outwards into the paraphernalia of flask and tubes, only partially aware that they were actually involved in a process of ‘active imagination’ and thus of psychic transformation, self-healing, personal development. The figures they hallucinated into the flasks were the archetypes of their own personal and collective unconscious, i.e. archetypal projections of inner complexes and conflicts common, according to Jung, to all peoples. Jung reasoned that alchemical processes of self-healing had remained relatively stable over many centuries and across a range of cultures.

Jung was not particularly interested in what modern scholars of alchemy call the ‘physical’ side to alchemy—i.e. alchemy as a proto-science, specifically a precursor to modern chemistry. He was much more interested in alchemy as a spiritual pursuit, rather, as he would

---

<sup>2</sup> Jung, C.G. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p.235.

have it, a psycho-spiritual pursuit.<sup>3</sup> His exact terminology however is intriguing: ‘Through [my essay on] Paracelsus I was finally led to discuss the nature of alchemy ... as a form of religious philosophy.’ In the same passage he goes on to confess that he himself had been through a ‘process of alchemical transformation’ between 1913 and 1917 after his split with Freud.<sup>4</sup>

### **Jung’s Understanding of the Role of the Imagination**

Critical attention must be eliminated. Visual types should concentrate on the expectation that an inner image will be produced. As a rule such a fantasy-picture will actually appear—perhaps hypnagogically—and should be carefully observed and noted down in writing. Audio-verbal types usually hear inner words, perhaps mere fragments of apparently meaningless sentences to begin with ... Others at such times simply hear their ‘other’ voice.<sup>5</sup>

This is the beginning of the transcendent function i.e. of the collaboration of conscious and unconscious.<sup>6</sup>

We are now in a position to understand the alchemy derived Jungian perspective on ‘creativity’ and its role in healing individuals and, indeed, whole communities. The key Jungian question, of course, concerned the nature of the ‘imagination’. Through his studies of alchemy Jung learnt that the imagination is not simply a sideshow to the main functions of the psyche, i.e. relevant only to the ‘projection of personal unconscious conflicts’ (as per Freud) rather it has a much more central role. Patrick Harpur in his work on the history of the imagination summarises the epiphany Jung experienced after reading Martin Rutland’s *Lexicon of Alchemy* (1622):

The Work takes place in a realm intermediate between mind and matter. It is a daimonic process, a ‘chemical theatre’ in which processes and psychic transformations interpenetrate.<sup>7</sup>

Jung thus saw the ‘mythopoeic imagination’ as the intermediary between everyday ego consciousness (and its physicality) and the two realms of his version of the unconscious—i.e. the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. He believed that anyone could draw on what he called the ‘fund of unconscious images’; he’d noticed, for example, that though many of his patients were sometimes flooded by images and fantasies originating in the unconscious, artists and writers also accessed such realms. He also noticed that such images could rise to consciousness in otherwise ordinary people during periods of physical illnesses, great stress or change, also, in response to peak experiences (falling in love, the birth of a child etc.). Another term he used was ‘the matrix of the mythopoeic imagination’ which, he said, ‘has vanished in our rational age.’<sup>8</sup>

### **Active Imagination**

---

<sup>3</sup> Jung is not alone in reading alchemy as more than a mere proto-pharmacy, Titus Burckhardt, in his work *Alchemy*, also believed that spiritual elevation was at the heart of ‘The Work’, though he probably would not agree with Jung’s psychologising of alchemical procedures.

<sup>4</sup> Jung, C.G. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p.236.

<sup>5</sup> C.G. Jung, ‘The Transcendent Function’ in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, p.82-83.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p.82.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Harpur, *The Philosopher’s Secret Fire: A History of the Imagination*, p.141. Also, “He suddenly saw the Opus, not as a series of ‘immaterial phantoms’ but as something actual and corporeal, a ‘subtle body.’ Imagination, he says, is ‘perhaps the most important key to the understanding of the Opus’. It is ‘a physical activity that can be fitted into the cycle of material changes, that brings these about and is brought about by them in turn.”

<sup>8</sup> C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p.213.

Jung, of course, made no special claim to the discovery of the above way of thinking about the imagination, but he was the first to deliberately incorporate this kind of thinking into the psychoanalytic method by way of the technique of ‘active imagination’. It is a slightly different method to Freud’s ‘free association’ though it is still based upon Freud’s emphasis on the dreams of his patients. Freud and other psychoanalysts encouraged their patients to write down, meditate upon and share their dreams with their analysts though often the analyst would interrupt the client’s narrative to offer ‘reasonable’ interpretations of symbolic content; unconsciously making the analytic intervention more important than intuitive engagement with all dimensions of the dream or fantasy.

Just prior to the First World War it seems as though Jung took Freud’s method of interpreting dreams a step further by, in a sense, extending the association between the patient (in the first instance himself!) and key figures encountered in dreams and active daytime fantasies.

In *Dream, Memories, Reflections* he describes in detail the psychological crisis he underwent between 1913 and 1917 after his professional split with Freud—a period in which he was struggling to outline the differences between his own beliefs about the unconscious and those of, in particular, Freud and Adler:

In order to grasp the fantasies which were stirring in me ‘underground’, I knew that I had to let myself plummet down into them as it were.

He decided that it was necessary to open his patient up to, not merely analysis of the unconscious, but to a true ‘exchange’ between unconscious energies and the patient’s conscious ego. He asked himself: ‘What do these dream figures wish us to do? What do they have to say about their condition and ours?’ Of course, he was under no illusion that their advice would always be useful or of benefit to patients (he’d had a lot of experience with people suffering from schizophrenia), but he did feel it was important to let such ‘personalities’ have their say, also to allow them to enter into discussion with other unconscious figures, and even, on occasion, he thought it worthwhile to do their bidding in the real world.

After four years scrupulously entertaining his own archetypal guests he realised that on occasion the presences had nothing to do with complexes associated with his own childhood. Similarly, the ones that seemed most useful for his own healing purposes (he was, remember, going through a period of intense introversion) were either mythological figures (he early on encountered his ‘anima’, for example) or, on some occasions, ‘spirits of the dead’ or spirits of socio-cultural warning (even prophesy).

### **Siegfried, Elijah, Salome and Philemon Pay Jung a Visit**

The first such useful figure to emerge was the figure of the Germanic culture hero ‘Siegfried’. He first encountered Siegfried after entering in his imagination a ‘dark cave’—having had to squeeze past ‘a dwarf with leathery skin’. Once inside the cave he lifted a ‘red glowing crystal’ and encountered a corpse in running water—‘a youth with blonde hair and a wound in the head’. This figure was followed by ‘a gigantic black scarab and then by a newborn sun, rising up out of the depths of the water’. Whilst attempting to extricate himself from this frightening imaginative sequence—which he instantly realised as a solar myth and a hero myth—he became covered in imaginative blood—‘a thick jet of it leaped up, and I felt nauseated’.<sup>9</sup>

Blood was quite a theme for Jung that year—he had many fantasies in which it featured—and he searched his childhood memories in vain for a link to a personal complex. Before the outbreak of WW1 he dreamed himself to be standing with a ‘brown skinned man’. The two were on a ‘lonely, rocky mountainside’ just before dawn when Siegfried turned up

---

<sup>9</sup> C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p.203.

riding ‘on a chariot made of the bones of the dead.’ The two men shot at and killed the ancient Germanic hero and Jung woke feeling profoundly guilty and yet compassionate.

Later, after hearing a voice that ordered him to ‘understand the dream’ or shoot himself he realised:

Siegfried represents what the Germans want to achieve, heroically to impose their will, have their own way... I had wanted to do the same... The dream showed me that the attitude embodied by Siegfried, the hero, no longer suited me. Therefore it had to be killed.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly:

My heroic idealism had to be abandoned for there are higher things than the ego’s will.

Not long after, of course, the full horrors of the First World War descended on Europe and Jung had reason to thank his unconscious for delivering him such a clear, though mythological/symbolic, warning about the dangers of blind adherence to the ‘hero’ archetype.

The next figures to emerge were the Biblical figures Elijah and a blind Salome, i.e. a wise old man and a young woman or erotic anima figure. It puzzled him that a bearded old man (Jung himself was in his later thirties) should be travelling around with a blind young woman. These two were accompanied by a large black snake, which Jung took to be an aspect of the ‘hero’ archetype. Soon after, Elijah merged with the figure of Philemon, a positive, nurturing figure from Greek mythology, also a version of the ‘wise old man’ archetype.

Suddenly, there appeared from the right [of a sky mingled with earth and sea elements] a winged being sailing across the sky. I saw that it was an old man with the horns of a bull. He held a bunch of four keys, one of which he clutched as if he were about to open a lock. He had the wings of the kingfisher with its characteristic colours.<sup>11</sup>

Jung had many conversations, often whilst wandering around his property between visits from patients, with this extraordinary figure and credits ‘it’ with many of the intellectual breakthroughs associated with Archetypal Psychology. He wrote: ‘Philemon represented a force that was not myself.’

Around 1928, after discussions with a friend of Ghandi’s, Jung realised that Philemon was acting as what the Indians termed a ‘spirit guru’, as it turned out quite a common relationship between the living and the dead on the sub-continent.

Another figure, the ancient Egyptian ‘Ka’ figure, emerged later. This was an earthy—initially a Mephistophelian—spirit of nature in rude form (associated with metals, Jung realised). He heralded a decades long scholastic detour into Medieval alchemy, and Jung later realised that apart from representing the ‘Ka’ of a dead king (as per Egypt), he had associations with both the Egyptian scribe God Thoth and the Greek deity Hermes (also associated with Mercury/Mercurious). Thus the key archetype of the medieval alchemists, Hermes Trismegistus, entered the frame and a long and fruitful dialogue between this figure and Jung’s conscious mind was initiated. The results were most obviously Volumes 12, 13 and 14 of Jung’s *Collected Works*, i.e. over 1,700 pages of discussions concerning relationships between Medieval alchemy and Archetypal Psychology—alchemical investigations, however, are also foundational to much of his other work.

### **Jung’s Hermetic Conundrum: Artist or Psychologist?**

Another version of Jung’s ‘anima’ figure appeared prior to 1920. Interestingly she first presented

---

<sup>10</sup> C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p.205.

<sup>11</sup> C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p.207.

as the disincarnate voice of a female patient who wanted to impress upon him the artistic/literary nature of his 'active imagination' fantasies. He seems to have had quite a few internal arguments (some of them heated!) with this figure, and though he resolved the impasse in terms of letting her have her say (literally, by letting her use his own voice to make lengthy statements!) he never seems to have believed his writings to be 'art'. History, however, may well have given the 'anima' the last word.

In 'The Transcendent Function', written around 1916, Jung notes two ways of dealing with the unconscious material arising out of 'active imagination' experiments—the paths of 'creative formulation' and 'understanding'. Articulating for posterity his conflict with the 'anima' over differences between literature and the products of 'active imagination' Jung warned: 'The danger of the aesthetic tendency is overvaluation of the formal or 'artistic' worth of the fantasy productions; the libido is diverted from the real goal of the transcendent function and sidetracked into purely aesthetic problems of artistic expression.'

In short, over emphasising the artistic dimension mid-analysis can feed defences and post-pone psychic integration. However, though 'patient as patient' and 'patient/artist as artist' are drawing from the same underground stream, there is nothing to stop a writer from developing techniques whereby he or she defers creative elaboration (i.e. selecting genre, editing and seeking an audience) of the raw material until after the therapeutic analysis concludes itself. To my mind, one can, proceeding with due caution, have one's art and therapise it!

Another important aspect of Jung's 'anima' figure was her capacity to make sense of the emotional contents of his unconscious:

For decades I always turned to the anima when I felt that my emotional behaviour was disturbed, and that something had been constellated in the unconscious.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, the prolonged and creatively fruitful relationships Jung seems to have had with the various 'personalities' in his unconscious, might be something that creative writers, thinkers and artists might like to encourage in themselves. Indeed, it could be argued that creative writers need to develop this imaginative faculty to the very highest degree if they are to be successful in conveying literary (and visionary) other worlds to their readers in vivid ways. This is to suppose, of course, traditional, Romantic or Symbolist modes of narrative progression. Post-modernist writers, on the other hand, would perhaps see little use for Jung's technique embedded as it is within his theory of universal archetypes.

Indeed it should be noted that on the whole Jung's 'active imagination' technique privileged the aesthetic foundations to late-Romantic & early-Modernist literatures and art experiments (the Symbolist, even Imagist, elements are obvious enough). His emphasis on symbolic universal narratives (with characterisation understood in 'archetypal' terms, i.e. stripped of Freud's psychic 'realism' and 'naturalism') is strong and perhaps runs counter to the main currents of twentieth century art and literature. Jung's remarkable critique of Joyce's *Ulysses* (arguably the first major Postmodern novel) contained in *The Spirit in Man Art and Literature* illustrates both Jung's engagement with the new literary 'imagination' and ultimate dismissal of it.

### **Indulging the Whims of Archetypal Visitations**

The technique of active imagination seems relatively simple to learn. The important thing is to let the fantasies or dreams run their course. At times one may even need to engage in conversation with the personalities that emerge. The act of writing these sequences down seems to have been therapeutic, both to Jung and to many of his patients, since it allowed unconscious

---

<sup>12</sup> C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p.212.

material to communicate itself to consciousness, thus externalising and resolving psychological (and creative) conflicts and blocks. Jung also seems to have meditated on the elements to many fantasy sequences by resorting to detailed historical research. Even apparently minor details in a dream or fantasy were often thoroughly researched (e.g. the 'kingfisher wings' of Philemon discussed above seemed significant to Jung). At times Jung decided to actually do the bidding of certain fantasy figures that seemed to him to be harmless. One night he followed the ghost of a dead friend who had turned up at the foot of Jung's bed after the funeral.

I followed him in my imagination He led me out of the house, into the garden, out to the road, and finally to his house. I went in and he conducted me to his study. He climbed on a stool and showed me the second of five books with red bindings which stood on the second shelf from the top.<sup>13</sup>

Fascinated by the 'visitation' Jung resolved to visit the widow of his friend to see if the book in question was in the place described in the dream.

Amazingly, there was indeed a book (one of five) with red binding high on his friend's second to top bookshelf. Jung ascended a conveniently placed stool and took down the book. It was a work by Zola entitled, *The Legacy of the Dead*. The title turned out to be the most significant aspect of the book for Jung, though he doesn't say why in his own description of the event.

## Reading Jung as a Political Radical

Critiques of Jung's work have pointed to the apparent essentialism evident in his theory of the universal archetypes. Likewise, from a literary perspective, there has been criticism of the way in which literary characters and narrative structures are often analysed by Jungians as if the socio-cultural and historical components of the story were more or less irrelevant. This is not the place to analyse all the dimensions to such critiques - however, it is worth noting before we begin Part Four of this series, that Jung saw 'alchemy' as a highly individualistic, non-authoritarian journey toward personal growth. In this sense he expressly contrasts the path of the Hermetists and alchemists of the Middle Ages and Early Modern period with the more dogmatic path outlined, indeed enforced, by the various mainstream denominations of the Christian church. In this sense Jung was in fact reiterating ancient 'democratic' (dare we say 'existential'?) aspects to the 'Hermes/Mercury' archetype or principle that have been discussed at some length by recent scholars of Hermes including Karl Kerényi, Norman O. Brown, Lopez-Pedraz, Garth Fowden and, most recently, Anton Faivre<sup>14</sup>. As I will argue in the next article of this series, the peculiar poetic that Hermes announces is remarkably consistent with important strands to Postmodern poetics. Both are highly subjectivist and democratic in outlook. Likewise, the 'deconstructionist' element to Postmodernist poetics is surely a recapitulation of the core alchemical principle associated with the notion of 'dissolution'. This principle of dissolving outmoded, inflexible, perhaps authoritarian, structures is not only central to the 'nigredo' phase of the 'work' but is also recapitulated constantly during later stages on the path to the *filius philosophi* - a state of being notoriously difficult to describe in ordinary (prosaic) language.

The second critique discussed briefly above perhaps carries more weight - one can, with selective reading, view Jungian psychology as an eminently conservative modality. As

---

<sup>13</sup> C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, p.344.

<sup>14</sup> The key texts are: Karl Kerényi, *Hermes*; R. Lopez-Pedra, *Hermes*; Norman O. Brown, *Hermes the Thief*; Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* and Antoine Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes*. See also Jung's 'The Spirit Mercurius' pp.193-250, being Part IV of *Alchemical Studies*, Volume 13 of The Collected Works of C.G. Jung.

he aged, however, Jung had more and more to say about the devastating international effects of the social and political unconsciousness he saw all around him. We also note the radicalism of his critique of 'science' and 'technocracies'. Likewise, there is a case to be made for Jung as a proto-feminist. Similarly, his notion that projections associated with the 'Shadow' archetype (themselves generated by cultural imbalances) could distort the vision of whole peoples is surely one of the most unique and disturbing insights of twentieth century psychology - and it lies on a continuum with Freud's equally 'political' insights as expressed in *Civilisation and its Discontents*. Nevertheless, Jung's studious avoidance of sociology and political theory throughout his career does reinforce the view that he was to some extent a reactionary. In my view a radical reading of Jung's archetypal theory is necessary - to some extent it begins with some fascinating comments made by Murray Stein in his book, 'Jung's Map of the Soul'. During his discussion of Jung's notion of 'complexes' he writes:

What knits the various associated elements of [a] complex together and holds them in place is emotion. This is the glue. Furthermore, 'the feeling-toned content, the complex, consists of a nuclear element and a large number of secondarily constellated associations' [Jung]. The nuclear element is the core image and experience on which the complex is based - the frozen memory. But this core turns out to be made up of two parts: an image or psychic trace of the originating trauma and an innate (archetypal) piece closely associated to it.<sup>15</sup>

Stein is suggesting that at the core of the Jungian perspective on mental illness and mental traumas are trace memories of actual traumas and experiences glued (by emotion) to constellated archetypes. Such a notion implicitly highlights the role of 'nurture' and 'environment' in human psychic development. It also highlights the constant exchanges going on in the deep psyche between elements of the personal and collective unconscious. Put more simply: events in the real world of individuals (and perhaps by extension, in the real social world) can activate any number of archetypal constellations/polarisations, both positive and negative. By definition then the archetypal world of psychic projections shares its functioning with stimuli coming in from the external world - the nature of that external world (i.e. what archetypal - genetic? - content it may trigger) becomes all important. Such an insight demands that Jungians become explicitly sociological/political in their outlook.

Returning for a moment to the main focus of this series of talks, we might also suggest that any 'poetics' arising out of the above insights should be particularly attentive to interactions between 'environment' (that is personal experience and social realities) and archetypal projections. The Imagination, on such a reading, becomes central as a radical faculty of the psyche. In the alchemical sense it is charged with the task (perhaps an adaptive evolutionary task) of dissolving and reconfiguring stagnant, out-dated, overly authoritarian personal or social 'coagulations' that have acquired negative archetypal polarisations. Despite Jung's critique of Joyce's *Ulysses* perhaps the two thinkers, had a great deal in common. Joyce was arguably the most alchemical of early twentieth century literary figures. In some respects his greatest works submerged key aspects of the Modernist literary aesthetic in an alchemical bath of humour/parody, innovation and sheer linguistic audacity (all key traits of the Hermes/Mercury principle) on the way to something more responsive to the times. The result was literary postmodernism.

---

<sup>15</sup> Murray Stein, p. 52, *Jung's Map of the Soul*, 1999.

## References

- **Amberlain, Robert.** Trans. Vaughan, Piers. *Spiritual Alchemy: The Inner Path*. 2005. PDF e-version distributed WWW accessed 2008.
- **Baigent, Michael and Leigh, Richard.** *The Elixir and the Stone: The Tradition of Magic and Alchemy*, Viking, 1997.
- **Bernoulli, Rudolf.** 'Spiritual Development as Reflected in Alchemy and Related Disciplines', p.305-339, in *Spiritual Disciplines*, part of *Papers from the Eranos Yearbook*, Vol. 4, Bollingen Series XXX, 1970.
- **Brown, Norman O.** *Hermes the Thief*.
- **Burckhardt, Titus.** *Alchemy: Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul*, Fons Vitae, 1997.
- **Campbell, Joseph.** 'The Left Hand Way' p. 262-297, in *Creative Mythology. The Masks of God*, Vol. IV, Souvenir Press, 2001.
- **Churton, Tobias.** *The Gnostics*, especially, Part 3 'The Hermetic Philosophy', Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987.
- **Eliade, Mircea.** *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- **Faivre, Antoine.** *The Eternal Hermes*.
- **Filorama, Giovanni.** 'The Transformation of the Inner Self in Gnostic and Hermetic Texts', p.137-149 of *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions*, ed. Jan Assmann and Guy G. Stroumsa, part of *Studies in the History of Religions*, LXXXIII. Brill, 1999.
- **Fowden, Garth.** *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind*, 1986, Princeton University Press, 1993.
- **Franz, Marie-Louise Von.** *Alchemical Active Imagination*, Revised Edition, Shambhala, 1997.
- **Harpur, Patrick.** *The Philosopher's Secret Fire: A History of the Imagination*, Penguin, 2002.
- **Helmond, Johannes.** Trans. by Hanswille and Brumlich. *Alchemy Unveiled*, 1996, Merker Publishing. First published as *Die Entschleierte Alchemy*, Rohm Verlag Bietigheim, 1961.
- **Jung, Carl.** *Psychology and Alchemy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Vol. 12, Bollingen Series XX, 1980.
- **Jung, Carl.** *Alchemical Studies*, *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Vol. 13, Bollingen Series XX, 1968.
- **Jung, Carl.** *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Opposites*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Vol. 14, Bollingen Series XX, 1976.
- **Jung, Carl.** *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Flamingo, 1989.
- **Kerenyi, Karl.** *Hermes: Guide of Souls*, revised edition. Spring Publications, Inc. 2003.
- **Lopez-Pedraza, Rafael.** *Hermes and His Children*, Spring Publications, 1977.
- **Marlan, Stanton.** *The Black Sun: The Alchemy and Art of Darkness*, Texas A&M University Press, 2005.
- **Salaman, Owen, Wharton & Mahe** (Translators). *The Way of Hermes*, Inner Traditions, 2004.
- **Scott, Walter. Editor.** *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus*, Shambhala, 1993.

Jung developed a technique he called active imagination. It deals with consulting the oracle within your own self. Active imagination is a process of consciously dialoguing with our unconscious "for the production of those contents of the unconscious which lie, as it were, immediately below the threshold of consciousness and, when intensified, are the most likely to erupt spontaneously into the conscious mind." [C.J. Jung, The Transcendent Function] Someone who has learned active imagination is thus able to take some degree of control over his or her own growth process. When the oracle was consulted at Delphi, the priestess -- the Pythia -- became totally receptive to whatever flowed through her. Read "Alchemical Active Imagination Revised Edition" by Marie-Louise von Franz available from Rakuten Kobo. Sign up today and get RS. 100 off your first purchase. Although alchemy is popularly regarded as the science that sought to transmute base physical matter, many of the medieva... In particular, she shows that the alchemists practiced a kind of meditation similar to Jung's technique of active imagination, which enables one to dialogue with the unconscious archetypal elements in the psyche. Originally delivered as a series of lectures at the C. G. Jung Institute in Zurich, the book opens therapeutic insights into the relations among spirit, soul, and body in the practice of active imagination. About this book. 194 Pages. Active imagination is a specific therapeutic technique of entering the imaginal world that was pioneered by Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) in the early twentieth century. We could think of it as forced intercourse between two corroborating aspects of being -- the ego and the personal unconscious -- that make up the transcendent self. Central to the endeavour is the plucking of an image, mood, picture, or event from the ocean of the unconscious, personifying or clothing the former in a way that makes it entirely comprehensible to the conscious mind, and then engaging it through spoken dialogue or some