

Book Reviews

C. G. JUNG: A BIOGRAPHY IN BOOKS. (2012). BY SONU SHAMDASANI. NEW YORK: NORTON.

Reviewed by Lance S. Owens

Using a dazzling alliance of texts and images, all bound up with stunning scholarship, Sonu Shamdasani has concocted the most important biographical study of Jung published in a generation. And to boot, the book is beautiful—another exemplar of publishing art from W. W. Norton and Mondadori Printing in Italy (who produced *The Red Book: Liber Novus*). In sum, *C. G. Jung: A Biography in Books* radiates a rare quality I can only call “delight.” It will enchant anyone interested in the life and work of Jung.

By the evocative act of turning the first pages of this book, Shamdasani magically conjures us into Jung’s private library for an extraordinary session of show and tell. We sit by Jung’s desk. He pulls volumes from the shelves and

opens long locked drawers full of private notebooks and manuscripts. He lays them before us, lets us thumb them—the Black Books, the Red Book, the alchemical work books, the calligraphic manuscript of *Septem Sermones ad Mortuos*, rare volumes with revealing marginalia, and much more—while he explains contexts, contents and meanings surrounding each item. From these archival puzzle pieces, a vital new portrait of an amazing life materializes. No matter how extensive one’s knowledge of Jung, an evening with *A Biography in Books* is certain to summon new perspectives.

Sonu Shamdasani has spent decades immersed in the universe of Dr. Jung, and the breadth of his mastery of C. G. Jung’s work is daunting. *A Biography in Books* reflects not just that scholarly passion, but his genuine delight in sharing the treasures touched and the insights earned during his years cloistered with Jung’s incalculably important but until now mostly sequestered archival legacy.

This present work germinated in *The Red Book* exhibition Dr. Shamdasani curated in 2011 at the Martin Bodmer Foundation and Library in Geneva.¹ For that show, he gathered an unprecedented array of documents (most never before seen) from Jung’s private

library and archives, augmented by rare manuscripts from the Bodmer collection. These were all assembled surrounding *The Red Book*, spatially contextualizing the “New Book” within both Jung’s opus and the humane tradition of the book. The exhibition was remarkable. The book it nurtured is an essential companion to the understanding of *Liber Novus* and its centrality in the genesis of Jung’s later work.

Of course, Shamdasani has repeatedly maintained that *Liber Novus* is the long occulted key to comprehending everything Jung said and wrote after 1916. He stated his opinion forceful in the introduction to *The Red Book: Liber Novus*, with his concluding declaration:

It [*Liber Novus*] is nothing less than the central book in his oeuvre. With its publication, one is now in a position to study what took place there on the basis of primary documentation . . . and to grasp the genesis and constitution of Jung’s later work. For nearly a century, such a reading has simply not been possible, and the vast literature on Jung’s life and work that has arisen has lacked access to the single most important documentary source. (Jung, 2009, p. 221)

Now he gives elegant example of how a biographical study informed by “the single most important documentary source” begins.

It is a mislocation to circumscribe this work as an “intellectual biography” (words used on the dust-cover flap). This is not a study focused

on intellectual lineages in Jung’s work, nor is it a rounded biography. It is a concisely presented and documented exploration of Jung’s encounter with human imagination and his labor with the interpretation of vision: the hermeneutics of both his visions transcribed in *Liber Novus*, and thence, of the visionary literature of humanity writ large.

In his expansive 2003 study, *Jung and the Making of Modern Psychology*, Shamdasani did examine the vast intellectual sources Jung wove into his dream of a science. He pointedly described that effort not as biography, but an “essential preliminary to any informed biography” of Jung (p 26). What was essential in preliminary was piercing myths and misprisions encrusting and obscuring Jung’s intellectual and cultural roots, particularly the Freudocentric myth and its “complete mislocation of Jung and complex psychology in the intellectual history of the twentieth century” (p. 13). And in that seminal study written a decade ago, he portentously acknowledged, “My work on the Red Book, commenced in 1996, has transformed my understanding of Jung’s work, and enabled me to comprehend its genesis” (p. 25).

Subsequently, in 2005, Shamdasani wickedly critiqued a plethora of Jung biographies—sparing few—with *Jung Stripped Bare by His Biographers, Even*. The summary flaw shared (among many singular failings) was that they were lacking *Liber Novus*, and thus the

authors simply could not perceive what Jung was up to. Again, the conclusion: without understanding this central book and the generative event behind it, no one can understand Jung's story or write his biography.

So in a work now titled in part using the word "biography," Shamdasani's focus is inevitably upon the book he positions at the epicenter of Jung's life: *biography* and *book* collocate. In his critique of the Jung biographies, Shamdasani already marked the territory and task. At the beginning, to explain the transformative power in Jung's life of *Liber Novus*—the book whose absence eclipsed prior attempts at a Jung biography—he must establish Jung's relationship to the humane art and imaginative traditions of the book, reaching back with Jung to the medieval manuscript. At the other end, to substantiate the pervasive consequences of *Liber Novus* on Jung's life, he must illustrate how this one book becomes the primary hermeneutic force in Jung's subsequent readings and expositions. Both tasks hang on the crux: In the middle, he needs to fill the gaping hole left by prior biographical treatments and plainly explain what Jung was up to between 1913 and about 1920. That is a colossal charge, since what the dear doctor did during the years he was working on *Liber Novus* is apparently beyond the threshold of quotidian comprehension and vocabulary. It has baffled more than a half-century

of historians and biographers, and their readers.

Shamdasani meets these challenges with precision and erudition, seamlessly integrating an astounding range of documentary detail. His essay is concise and written with a natural eloquence. If his protracted academic exposition in *Jung and the Making of Modern Psychology* was a necessary preliminary to a biography, then *A Biography in Books* is certainly its artful prologue. By firmly locating *Liber Novus* as fulcrum of Jung's biography, Shamdasani has radically shifted the hermeneutic mode in which Jung's history will henceforth be rendered and read.

In concert with publication of *The Red Book: Liber Novus*, this sumptuously illustrated volume will stand as a landmark in Jungian studies. While the elusive "definitive" biography of Jung is probably still years in the future, Shamdasani has marked the way to come.

NOTE

1. "Le Rouge et Le Noir: C. G. Jung et la littérature universelle"; 26 Nov 2011 to 25 Mar 2012; Martin Bodmer Foundation, Geneva, Switzerland.

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