Carl Gustav Jung and The Red Book: Liber Novus

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Description

The Red Book is an exquisite red leather-bound folio manuscript crafted by the Swiss psychologist and physician Carl Gustav Jung between 1915 and about 1930. It recounts and comments upon the author's imaginative experiences between 1913 and 1916, and is based on manuscripts first drafted by Jung in 1914-15 and 1917. Despite being nominated as the central work in Jung's oeuvre (LN 221), it was not published or made otherwise accessible for study until 2009.

While the work has in past years been descriptively called "The Red Book," Jung did emboss a formal title on the folio's spine: he titled the work *Liber Novus* (the "New Book"). His manuscript is now increasingly cited as *Liber Novus,* and under this title implicitly includes draft material intended for but never transcribed into the red leather folio proper.

Composition and Publication

Liber Novus contains a literary and artistic recension of what has been called Jung's "confrontation with the unconscious," an intense period of imaginative activity accompanied by waking visions that began in 1913 and continued with variable intensity for about six years. In his biographical memoir, Jung clearly announced the centrality of these events to his life work. (Jung/Jaffe 170ff) Speaking to Aniela Jaffe in 1957, Jung stated:

> The years . . . when I pursued the inner images were the most important time of my life. Everything else is to be derived from this. ... Everything later was merely the outer classification, the scientific elaboration, and the integration into life. But the numinous beginning, which contained everything, was then. (LN vii)

Nonetheless, throughout his life and for nearly a half-century after his death the details of what happened during this period remained a mystery. Lacking access to Jung's own primary records, historians, biographers and critics struggled to contextualize or understand these seminal years of activity and their profound influence upon his later work. (Shamdasani, 2005)

Jung kept an extensive and detailed record of his imaginative or visionary experiences—an endeavor he initially referred as "my most difficult experiment." (LN 200) First, there were six sequentially dated journals, known as the "Black Books" (so named because of their black covers), which he began on the night of 12 November 1913 and continued recording through the early 1920s. The journals are the record of his experiment, and might be described as his contemporaneous ledger of a voyage of discovery into an imaginative inner world; in *Liber Novus* he explains, "This inner world is truly infinite, in no way poorer than the outer one. Man lives in two worlds**."** (LN 264)

During the initial months of fantasy activity, Jung conceived of his activity as primarily referent to his personal situation. After the outbreak of world war in August 1914—an event presaged in visions Jung had recorded during the prior winter—the magnitude and meanings of his experience constellated in a broader context. What he had endured apparently had more than personal import; it was a reflection of a crucial cultural moment and it needed formal record. He began that record by compiling an approximately 1000 page draft manuscript detailing the initial flood of imaginative material recorded in his "Black Book" journals between November 1913 and April 1914, adding further reflections on its meaning. With this protean draft at hand, he next turned to creating an enduring testament to the experience.

With prodigious artistic craft—employing antique illuminated calligraphy and stunning imagery—he labored for sixteen years translating the manuscript records of his experiences into an elegant folio-sized leather-bound volume. This is the "Red Book", titled *Liber Novus,* "The New Book". Despite his extended labors on the transcription and accompanying symbolic artwork, the book was never finished; only approximately two-thirds of the text Jung compiled was transcribed into the Red Book. The remainder survives in his draft manuscripts.

Jung did not record *Liber Novus* as a private, aesthetic pretension. He clearly addressed it to readers in some future time, though from the beginning he was never quite sure when that time might come. (LN 212f, 223) During his life Jung eventually allowed only a handful of his students and colleagues to examine the work; after his death in 1961, his heirs refused all requests for access to the Red Book and related materials.

Finally, in 2009—with full cooperation of Jung's estate, and after thirteen years of exhaustive editorial work by Dr. Sonu Shamdasani—*The Red Book: Liber Novus* was published in a full-sized facsimile edition, complete with an English translation, the concluding portions of manuscripts not transcribed into the Red Book volume, a comprehensive introduction, and over 1500 editorial notes, including excerpts from Jung's Black Book journals and other previously unknown contemporaneous documents. Editions in multiple languages soon followed. In sum, publication of *The Red Book: Liber Novus* signaled a watershed moment in the understanding of the life and work of C. G. Jung. In its light, Jung's legacy is undergoing an intense reconsideration. (Stein, 2012)

The Threshold of Vision

A comprehensive understanding of *Liber Novus* requires consideration of the singular visionary activity underlying the text, the hermeneutic method employed in translating these imaginative experiences to literary form, the signal themes emerging from the book as a whole, and the influence of the entire project on Jung's subsequent work. Among these tasks, understanding what Jung experienced in his "waking dreams" or "visions"—the imaginative activity that is foundational to *Liber Novus*—is perhaps the primary and most difficult one.

For several years prior to 1913, Jung's interest had focused on the evidence he saw in myths, dreams, fantasies and psychotic delusions of an autonomous myth-making function inherently underlying human consciousness. The psyche—the soul—seemingly expressed itself in an arcane language of myth and symbol. To further understand the psyche, Jung recognized a need to investigate this mythopoetic substratum of consciousness. During the same period, he was increasingly disillusioned with theoretical constructs about the origin and nature of unconscious contents—a disenchantment that led to termination of his six year misadventure with Freud. As he explained in the draft manuscript of *Liber Novus*, speaking of his situation around this time, "I had to accept that what I had previously called my soul was not at all my soul, but a dead system that I had contrived." (LN 232 n39)

Around the beginnings of 1913 Jung noted growing internal turmoil. This crested in October of 1913 when he was overcome by the spontaneous and detailed vision of a monstrous flood of blood covering all of Northern Europe up to the Alps. The same vision recurred two weeks later and again lasted for about an hour. (Jung/Jaffe, 175) The eruption of two visual hallucinations portending vast death and destruction caused Jung to fear that he was "menaced with a psychosis." (Jung/Jaffe 200, LN 198) Over the next weeks he outwardly surveyed his situation, seeking some therapeutic or palliative insight. Finding none, he determined to search inward. And so, on the evening of 12 November 1913, Jung sat at his desk, opened his journal and addressed the mystery petitioning him:

> "My Soul, where are you? Do you hear me? I speak, I call you—are you there? I have returned, I am here again. I have shaken the dust of all the lands from my feet, and I have come to you, I am with you. After long years of long wandering, I have come to you again...." (LN 232)

This journal entry begins the record that became *Liber Novus*. But the course then before him was obscure. He had no theory or concept to explain what he was doing, whom he was addressing, or how he should proceed. He determined to simply let things happen, let the unconscious have a voice. During twenty-five subsequent evenings, he practiced turning off outward consciousness and engaging any awaiting unconscious contents. Slowly responses began to come, finding voice through him. He explained, "Sometimes it was as if I were hearing it with my ears, sometimes feeling it with my mouth, as if my

tongue were formulating words; now and then I heard myself whispering aloud." (Jung/Jaffe 178)

By early December 1913 Jung discovered that his focused imaginative activity could evoke autonomous visionary scenes, personages and dialogic interactions. The initial vision is recorded in his journal on 12 December 1913 and recounted in *Liber Novus*: "The spirit of the depths opened my eyes and I caught a glimpse of the inner things, the world of my soul, the many-formed and changing…." (LN 237)

In the introduction to *Liber Novus*, Dr. Shamdasani further explains:

> From December 1913 onward, he carried on in the same procedure: deliberately evoking a fantasy in a waking state, and then entering into it as into a drama. These fantasies may be understood as a type of dramatized thinking in pictorial form…. In retrospect, he recalled that his scientific question was to see what took place when he switched off consciousness. The example of dreams indicated the existence of background activity, and he wanted to give this a possibility of emerging, just as one does when taking mescalin. (LN 200)

With almost nightly frequency through January 1914, and then more sporadically until the early summer of1914, Jung volitionally engaged "visual fantasies" or "visions." He recorded about thirty-five major visionary episodes in his journals during this period; these accounts along with commentary appended the next year comprise the first and second sections ("Liber Primus" and "Liber Secundus") of *Liber Novus.* The majority of this material was recorded into the red leather folio*.* A final section, compiled in 1917 and titled "Scrutinies", adds account of a second period of visionary activity between late-1915 and 1916. This last section exists in draft manuscript and contains Jung's summary revelation to *Liber Novus,* the "Septem Sermones ad Mortuos" (Seven Sermons to the Dead). Independently titled and privately printed by Jung in 1916, these summary sermons comprise a vast cosmogonic myth and are the only portion of *Liber Novus* disclosed and distributed by Jung during his lifetime. (Hoeller, 1982)

Thematic Content of *Liber Novus*

While many alternative summaries are possible, the following list reflects themes Jung focused upon in his own consideration of the text.

Reclaiming the soul. At the outset of his experiment, Jung recognized the need to reclaim and revalorize something lost and forgotten by his age. In the opening pages of *Liber Novus,* the primordial power of the "spirit of the depths" confronts the arrogant "spirit of this time"—the secular materialism and positivistic science that dominates European culture. The spirit of the depths instructs Jung to turn away from the spirit of the time, and to look into the depths, to speak to his soul, "to call upon her as a living and self-existing being." (LN 232) *Liber Novus* recounts Jung's struggle to reclaim the soul; and it exposes the method by which he revalorizes the soul's mythopoetic and symbolic voice.

Experiencing God. Early in the dialogue, Jung petitions his soul: "I am ignorant of your mystery. Forgive me if I speak as in a dream, like a drunkard—are you God?" (LN 233) This question resonates throughout *Liber Novus*. In his journey through vision, Jung confronts God not as a theological concept, but as an experience encompassing light and dark qualities, and as a fact in intimate relationship with human consciousness.

Renewing the God Image. In a keynote fantasy, Jung meets Izdubar, an ancient god from the East. The meeting goes tragically wrong—confronted by Jung's toxic modernity, Izdubar is stricken and sickened unto death. The dying Izdubar asks Jung if his Western lands have gods. Jung replies, no, just words. Having lost contact with the experience of deity, only verbal concepts remained. Jung undertakes the healing and regeneration of the stricken god. A theophanic recognition ensues: "I am the egg that surrounds and nurtures the seed of the God in me." (LN 284)

Imitating Christ. His visions inexorably led Jung toward confrontation with the *imitatio Christi;* this becomes a leit motif throughout *Liber Novus*. Jung surveys what it means to be not just a Christian believer, but a Christ—a full and conscious participant in the act of redemption. Near the end of *Liber Novus*, Christ appears in a vision and is addressed:

> "My master and my brother, I believe you have completed your work…. What one individual can do for men, you have done and accomplished and fulfilled. The time has come when each must do his own work of redemption. Mankind has grown older and a new month has begun." (LN 356)

Harrowing Hell. In an astonishing passage, Jung declares: "No one knows what happened during the three days Christ was in Hell. I have experienced it." Indeed, two evenings after witnessing a rebirth of the God—which he describes as a vision of "eternal light, immeasurable and overpowering" (LN 286)—Jung descends into Hell; he confronts the ultimate darkness of evil. This horror he must acknowledge as resident within himself and all humankind. He concludes, "Man must recognize his complicity in the act of evil." (LN 291) The work of redemption demands conscious confrontation with the existential fact of evil.

Conjoining Opposites. Throughout *Liber Novus* Jung attempts to come to term with what has been rejected, with the opposite, the adversary: the missing half that brings wholeness and heals the wound of one-sided consciousness. He explains, "You begin to have a presentiment of the whole when you embrace your opposite principle, since the whole belongs to both principles, which grow from one root." (LN 248) In *Liber Novus*, unification of the opposites has not only personal developmental implications, but also a profound soteriological function.

Prophesying a New Age. Liber Novus has a distinctly prophetic tenor. While Jung adamantly rejected the mantle of prophet, his "new book" certainly challenges readers with its prophetic voice. On the first folio page of *Liber Novus*, Jung begins by quoting Latin Vulgate verses from Isaiah and the Gospel of John—prophetic words read over two millennia as prelude and prologue of the Christian age. Even the title—*Liber Novus*, the

"New Book"—asks readers to contextualize his text against historically received testaments of prophetic vision. A comment by Jung, recorded in 1923, places the book's tenor in an even stranger perspective: Jung privately avowed to a close disciple his impression that the guiding figure behind *Liber Novus*, "was the same who inspired Buddha, Mani, Christ, Mahomet—all those who may be said to have communed with God." (LN 213)

Among many possible readings, *Liber Novus* can be read as a prophetic book. And throughout *Liber Novus* one paramount prophetic declaration recurs: the Christian age has reached its terminus; the aeon of Pisces is nearing its end. Humankind stands at the difficult threshold of a new age of consciousness, heralded by a transforming divine image. Jung had seen it. (Owens, 2011)

Influence on Jung's Later Work

C. G Jung has most frequently been categorized encyclopedically as psychologist and founder of analytical psychology. But *Liber Novus*—described by its editor as "the book that stands at the center of his oeuvre"—is distinctly not a clinical or theoretical work of psychology. The word psychology does not appear in the text even once. If this is the foundation to Jung's life work—or, as Jung said, "the numinous beginning, which contained everything"—then his work has to date been inadequately contextualized and too narrowly characterized. (Shamdasani, 2012b)

Between 1913 and about 1920, Jung's engagement with imagination and its mythopoetic voice offered direct empirical evidence of an apparently autonomous psychoid realm underlying consciousness. Though it was a rare experience, focused engagement and dialogue with this otherwise inherently unconscious dimension opened measureless perspectives on the nature of consciousness itself. While potentially overwhelming and disorienting, the process of accessing and interacting with this realm—through functions of dream, fantasy, imagination and vision—had a transformative and expansive effect on human consciousness. This Jung witnessed with his own life.

Jung's experiment, formally documented in *Liber Novus,* provided him with a unique perspective on mystical and revelatory religious experience and on the general human propensity for mythic and imaginative expression. The primary hermeneutic task of translating into text and symbolic image his own encounter with mythopoetic imagination subsequently informed his recognition and appreciation of other similar enterprises in history. His extensive writings on mythology, Eastern and Western religious traditions, alchemy, Hermeticism and Gnosticism are all influenced by a hermeneutics of human imagination and vision grounded in his own experiences recorded in *Liber Novus*. (Shamdasani, 2012a)

The reassessment of Jung's life and work under the revelatory light of *Liber Novus* is a generational task only recently begun. As this effort proceeds and the foundation of C. G. Jung's hermeneutic enterprise is better understood, it is likely that the influence and

appreciation of his work will reach far beyond the cloisters of analytical psychology. As Sonu Shamdasani suggested shortly after publication of *Liber Novus*:

> If, as Jung claimed, Dante and Blake clothed visionary experience in mythological forms, could we not pose the question: Did Jung in turn attempt to clothe visionary experience in conceptual psychological forms? If so, the power and significance of his work does not reside in his concepts, which are familiar to us, but in the visionary experience which was at the back of them. (Shamdasani, 2010)

See Also: Analytical Psychology, Anima and Animus, Archetype, Archetypal Cultural Psychology, Collective Unconscious, Jung, Carl Gustav, Jung, Carl Gustav, and Gnosticism, Jung, Carl Gustav, and Phenomenology, Jung, Carl Gustav, and Religion, Jung and the Psychology of Religion, Jungian Feminists, Jungian Self, Mandala, Shadow, Myths, Myths and Dreams, Post-Jungians.

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Additional Reading:

Dr. Lance Owens has published three additional papers on Jung and his Red Book. Each adds new details to this brief encyclopedia article. These papers are now all available online, and the links are provided below.

The Hermeneutics of Vision: C. G. Jung and *Liber Novus*

Jung and *Aion*: Time, Vision and a Wayfaring Man

The Search for Roots: Jung and the Tradition of Gnosis

When read in order, these papers provide a comprehensive introduction to C. G. Jung and the *Red Book: Liber Novus*.