



The Red Book

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Jung's *Red Book: Liber Novus*

Where did it come from and why does it matter?

1. Where did *The Red Book* come from?

In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* Jung writes: “Somewhere deep in the background I always knew that I was two persons.” One was Jung’s everyday self, well adapted to the world, “The other was grown up - old, in fact . . . remote from the world of men, but close to nature, the earth, the sun, the moon . . . and above all close to the night, to dreams, and to whatever “God” worked directly in him.”

Jung emphasises that this “has nothing to do with a “split” or dissociation in the ordinary medical sense. On the contrary, it is played out in every individual.” (1963, p. 55)

In 1903 Jung chose psychiatry as his profession hoping that it would draw on both of these facets and he joined the staff of the Burghölzli Hospital. However, the research approach of the Burghölzli foregrounded the interests of Jung’s practical and adapted first personality to the detriment of his second. He pioneered an innovative scientific approach in the Word Association Test and was instrumental in the introduction of psychoanalysis to the Burghölzli. For about a decade the interests of his second personality thus seem to have been pushed aside.

In 1912 Jung published a major study entitled, in the *Collected Works, Symbols of Transformation*. This version is, however, Jung’s 1952 revision and omits key passages of the original. Reference to these deleted sections gives clues to the genesis of *The Red Book*. Jung wrote in 1912:

“The religious symbolic theory is merely a figurative interpretation of certain endopsychic perceptions [NB: “merely”] . . . I think belief should be replaced by understanding, then we would keep the beauty of the symbol but still remain free from the depressing results of submission to belief. This would be the psychoanalytic cure for belief and disbelief.” (1916, n.42, p.226)

Far from the myth that Jung offended Freud by introducing a valid category of religion, Jung in 1912 was at his most ruthlessly reductive. As he wrote to Fr Victor White in 1945: “I began my career with repudiating everything that smelt of belief.” (2007, p.6) In 1913 Jung seems to have had what he later termed an enantiodromia, that is, the reversal of a one-sided attitude into its diametric opposite.

On Wednesday 12th November 1913, following promptings from some vivid dreams and from a repeated hypnagogic vision Jung withdrew into his study and invoked his neglected soul:

“My soul, where are you? Do you hear me? I speak, I call you - are you there? . . . After long years of wandering, I have come to you again.”

Jung recorded this meditation in his notebook. He subsequently used it to open Chapter 1 of *The Red Book*. He continued a series of disciplined meditations until April 1914 and these constitute the core material of *The Red Book*. In a series of over thirty active imaginations he recorded a process analogous to initiation. Later in 1914 Jung added a second layer of text and began to transcribe this material into a calligraphic volume entitled *Liber Novus*, that is, *The New Book*. He continued to work on this transcription, freely embellished with images, up to the early 1930's and returned to work on it towards the end of his life. A facsimile edition of Jung's *Liber Novus* was published in 2009 and the *Black Books* from which much of the text was drawn were published in facsimile with translation in 2020. These hitherto unpublished notebooks also contain further active imaginations from 1916 to 1932.

The Prologue of *The Red Book* introduces us to “the spirit of this time” which “*would like to hear of use and value*” and to “*the spirit of the depths*” who “*took away my belief in science, he robbed me of the joy of explaining and ordering things . . . The spirit of the depths took my understanding and all my knowledge and placed them at the service of the inexplicable and the paradoxical.*” Might we regard Jung's No. 1 Personality as his personal experience of the spirit of this time, and No. 2 as the precursor of the spirit of the depths which re-engaged Jung in 1913, and of which engagement *The Red Book* is Jung's testimony?

2. Why does *The Red Book* matter?

The Red Book matters because it finally lays to rest some of the persistent myths by which Jung and his work have been mis-defined. It clarifies that Jung's work is in no way a Freudian variant, but has its roots in Jung's own experience and in an intellectual underpinning significantly different from that of psycho-analysis. It makes quite clear that, far from suffering a mental breakdown in the period of its composition (1913-1916) these were arguably the most creative years of Jung's life, the contemporaneous record of which we can now study.

It matters because it enables us better to understand Jung's major new psychological concepts. From 1916 Jung set out in the medical scientific language of the day the main psychological insights he had derived from the experiences of which *Liber Novus* is the record. His signature concepts of the collective unconscious, archetypes and the individuation process all date from this period and have their origins in *Liber Novus*. A close study of *Liber Novus* now clarifies what Jung intended by this conceptual apparatus and liberates it from later mis-interpretations. By reference to *The Red Book* we are now able to question misunderstandings that have accumulated around Jung's neologisms. For example, “individuation” has frequently been discussed as if it were a project of self-improvement or self-fulfilment in which the conscious ego is effectively the project-manager. This contrasts with a view of individuation adumbrated in *Liber Novus* as the individual's

participation in cosmological development in time. Speaking to a meeting of close analytic colleagues in Zürich in June 1914, within a few weeks of the visionary stream of which *The Red Book* is the record, Jung stated: “*Individuation is a process of the absolute condensation of the libido, which wants to become personal. . . . Out of this tension, the images are generated. Life proceeds through images.*” (Minutes of the Analytical Psychology, Union, 14 July 1914).

It matters too because from 1916 Jung redefined the nature and practice of psychotherapy in the light of his *Liber Novus* experiences. Psychotherapy is no longer to be regarded simply as a treatment for neurosis but is also presented as a universally valid form of higher human development. This redefinition is set out in *The Relations Between the Ego and the Unconscious* (1928).

Liber Novus matters because it gives insight into the esoteric core of Jung’s belief and practice. It also contains multiple warnings that he is not to be imitated or copied. It is now for everyone to find their own way, not to follow Jung’s. *Liber Novus* demonstrates one man’s disciplined and thoughtful engagement with the power of the primordial forces which Jung subsequently termed “the collective unconscious”. It clarifies Jung’s understanding of the monistic nature of the cosmos from which his concepts of *participation mystique* and synchronicity derive. It shows us how Jung formed his view of the relationship between good and evil which he later elaborated in *Answer to Job*. In *Liber Novus* Jung writes in a lively register often absent from his *Collected Works*. This provides us with new insight into his understanding of the nature and significance of love, sacrifice and suffering.

It demonstrates that when Jung claimed to be “an empiricist” the empirical material on which he was drawing was often his own experience as recorded in *Liber Novus*. Jung very rarely referred to his *Red Book* material when advancing his ideas, preferring to draw on analogous experiences of others. For example, his discussion of alchemy, Taoism and Nietzsche are used as vehicles to advance the insights of *Liber Novus*. This has often made it difficult to understand what Jung was trying to say. Such difficulty can now be resolved by direct reference to his original *Liber Novus* text.

The Red Book, Liber Novus is a difficult text of critical importance for any understanding of Jung’s work and psychotherapeutic approach. The reader already familiar with Jung’s work will be challenged to reconsider radically many commonly-received interpretations of Jung’s ideas. Those unfamiliar with Jung’s work now have the priceless but demanding opportunity to begin at the beginning.

References

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