



“Beyond” by Chiara Tozzi

ACTIVE IMAGINATION

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An Encounter with the Unconscious and an Ethical Confrontation with Ourselves and the World¹

In our time, it has become easier and quicker to communicate and be social than it had been in the past, thanks to new technologies and globalization. This makes us feel that we can get to know each other, reach out to anyone, and access information quickly and easily, in ways never experienced by humanity in the previous centuries. Moreover, neurosciences and psychology have been and continue to provide us with more tools for getting to know ourselves and understand our behavior both privately and socially. We could say that we now seem more capable of controlling and governing our lives and those of others.

Yet, when we face the unconscious, which speaks to us through hitherto unknown and powerful images, emotions, dreams, impulses and wishes that suddenly burst into our consciousness, we once again feel unprepared and defenseless like the hominids who faced the mysterious and disturbing monolith in the famous film by Stanley Kubrick, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Despite our acquired knowledge and progress, it is still hard for each and every one of us to truly and deeply get into contact with the unconscious and face it, as it were, on equal footing.

But Jung tells us that it is possible to reach this deep and real inner confrontation. It is through Active Imagination that he himself faced the power of the unconscious. The intensity of this experience took Jung to the threshold of deep psychological-existential crisis in his life during the period between 1912 and 1920.

At that particular and critical time, Jung was able to explore the unconscious as Freud had already done, and to take the risk of allowing the unconscious to reveal itself through images; not during sleep, as it occurs in dreams, but during wakefulness. We could say that while Freud believed that dreams are the *via regia* to the unconscious, C.G. Jung believed that the *via regia* to *facing* the unconscious — which is very different from a reductive *interpretation* of the unconscious — is through Active Imagination.

What Jung had the courage to undertake and verify in person through the practice of Active Imagination was in fact the possibility of “*daydreaming*”, not through fantasies arising from the Ego’s desire, but favoring access to the unconscious in the daily reality, and operating a consequent and symmetrical dialogue between the conscious Ego and the images emerging from the unconscious.

This dialogue can lead to a psychic transformation; a profound and radical transformation for the person who experiences it, as it allows a different way of functioning and being in the world. Together with one’s own creative and constructive resources, it makes it possible to wander from the intrapsychic to the interpsychic dimension, overcoming limits, which could not be crossed by resorting only to the thinking function².

¹ In numerous contexts, Jung repeats that the goal of this dialogue is the ethical confrontation of the ego (if it is able to really face the unconscious at a symmetric level), not as superior, as is usually the case. It is exactly as if a dialogue were taking place between two human beings with equal rights (Jung 1957).

² According to Jung, four *functional* types correspond to the means by which consciousness obtains its orientation to experience. *Sensation* (i.e. sense-perception) tells you that something exists; *thinking* tells you what it *is*; *feeling* tells you whether it is agreeable or not; and *intuition* tells you whence it comes and where it is going (Jung, 1961)

The first step, indispensable for introducing a patient to Active Imagination, is developing what Jung defined as the capacity for 'symbolic thinking' (Von Franz, 1980, p.131), which led him to always write and speak with a "double meaning" (Jung, 1951/1961, p.70). Acquiring the capacity for symbolic thinking, typical for Active Imagination, is not simple. The more we think in a familiar way, the more difficult it is to master symbolic thinking (Von Franz, *ibid*, p.131). Murray Stein (2017, p.52) explained this difficulty very well through the example of an active imagination of the physicist, Wolfgang Pauli, the purpose of which was to try to combine the different languages of two initially separate schools, the school of science and the school of meaning: "*in the older of the two, one understood words but not meaning, while in the newer, one understood meaning but not words*".

Following this, I would like to stress that Active Imagination, even though it requires a special training and mastery by the analyst, is not a technique. The patient can learn from his/her analyst how to practice Active Imagination just by acquiring and developing what Jung's student, Gerhard Adler, defined as an *attitude and not a technique* of Active Imagination (Adler, 1966). In my opinion, one can state that this special attitude constitutes the unique foundation of Analytical Psychology. Through this special attitude and psychological disposition, we can be open to the emerging unconscious elements into our consciousness and then observe this independent development, remaining passive and receptive, while actively focusing our attention on what is about to happen.

This situation is no different from watching a movie or listening to music: in both cases we "receive" something that is not produced by the spectator/listener, but still requires our attention, which is a specific kind of activity. According to Adler, the one and only difference is that through Active Imagination the "movie" is projected inwards.

Active Imagination allows us to familiarize ourselves during wakefulness with the images that represent the archetypal contents of the individual and collective psyche, closely in line with what has happened and happens inside and outside of us. Through this familiarization, we are able to face our individuality, as well as the images and contents of the unconscious collective matrix.

The hard and fascinating journey described by Jung in the *Red Book* teaches us that it is possible to have a dialogue with these images. In the same way, writers, playwrights, screenwriters and film directors engage in a dialogue with the characters of a story who seem to come out of nowhere, but who in reality come from their unconscious and from the collective unconscious.

Jung also shows us that this special dialogue can lead to an *ethical comparison*, meaning that we take responsibility for ourselves and for the world around us. Thanks to the practice of Active Imagination, the analytical psychotherapeutic journey does not disconnect us from the world in a self-referential way, but connects and opens us to the Other, giving us the tools and resources to integrate what seems to be dark and unknown, while differentiating us from the conforming echo of the collective consciousness.

In all of Jung's writings, the engagement with the images from the unconscious leads to a greater knowledge of oneself and consequently to greater reflection regarding the value of objects and choices that all individuals have to face throughout their lives. In Jung's opinion:

It is equally a grave mistake to think that it is enough to gain some understanding of the images and that knowledge can here make a halt. Insight into them must be converted into an ethical obligation. Not to do so is to fall prey to the power principle, and this produces dangerous effects which are destructive not only to others but even to the knower. The images of the unconscious place a great responsibility upon a man. Failure to understand them, or a shirking of ethical responsibility, deprives him of his wholeness and imposes a painful fragmentariness on his life (Jung, 1961 b, p.237).

Therefore, acquiring an attitude of Active Imagination differentiates a Jungian analyst from the attitude of psychologists and analysts from other schools of psychotherapy and analysis.

Active Imagination is a treasure.

It is a unique resource, a precious legacy from Jung who, on the 12th of December 1913, decided to take the risk of personally facing and experiencing the unconscious to help himself and all of us live to the fullest, as citizens of the world, both in our private emotional and professional life, and in our collective and public life.

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