

Reading The Red Book

by Mary Davis

Most persons interested in depth psychology and the work and thoughts of Carl Jung eagerly awaited the publication in October, 2009, of Carl Jung's *The Red Book (Liber Novus)*. Public interest was enhanced by the mystery surrounding its contents as well as by the fact that the original had been locked in a Swiss bank's vault for many years.

Dr. Jung appears to have written most of the first version of what became the first part of *The Red Book* between 1913 and 1915, although some of the dreams and visions upon which it is based appear to have occurred earlier. Off and on, at least through 1930, he revisited, re-worked, and revised the material and created the calligraphic version with images.

In 1957, prior to his death in 1961, Dr. Jung said, "...*The years of which I have spoken to you, when I pursued the inner images, were the most important time of my life. Everything else is to be derived from this. It began at that time, and the later details hardly matter anymore. My entire life consisted in elaborating what had burst forth from the unconscious and flooded me like an enigmatic stream and threatened to break me. That was the stuff and material for more than only one life. Everything later was merely the outer classification, the scientific elaboration, and the integration into life. But the numinous beginning, which contained everything, was then.*" (Quotation from the beginning of *The Red Book*)

The C. G. Jung Society of Atlanta has made several contributions to the Philemon Foundation, which supported the work of the editor and primary translator of *The Red Book*, Sonu Shamdasani. Our Jung Society copy arrived in late 2009. I was captivated by the beauty of the calligraphy and the images of the first part of the book, although the calligraphic version is diffi-

cult to decipher even if one knows some German. The English translation is very helpful, especially with the extensive footnotes and the introductory material by Sonu Shamdasani.

Our Jung Society initiated a *Red Book* discussion group in early 2010, and so finally in 2010, I purchased my copy. I had hoped the price would decrease, but instead, the price continued to climb! I heard Daniel Baumann, one of Dr. Jung's great grandsons, say that the publisher underestimated the public demand for copies. He said that by April, 2010, more than 45,000 English language copies and more than 10,000 German language copies had been sold.

So, my personal journey with reading *The Red Book* began in early 2010. I first read the English translation and footnotes...as we were reading passages together in our discussion group, sometimes comparing to the German, often comparing with the images. We still continue reading together, a year later, becoming close friends as we explore what Dr. Jung called his "confrontation with the unconscious" and our own lives.

Four "big" introductory *Red Book* events (seminars and exhibits) were held in the United States: New York City, Los Angeles, Portland (Oregon), and Washington (D.C.). They were all filmed and recorded for future distribution in a documentary.

I attended the last two events. This is the first of several essays I am writing to share some of what I learned at these events, plus an essay/interview about the Philemon Foundation.

I actually stumbled upon the Portland, Oregon event when I planned to visit two of my children who live in Seattle, not realizing it was one of the "Big Four" until I was there. The Oregon Friends of Jung sponsored a Friday evening lecture and Saturday all-day seminar (with a visual presentation) by Sonu Shamdasani, followed by a dinner and dance. Several of Dr. Jung's descendants, including Daniel Baumann, attended and also spoke to us.

Mary Davis is a member of the Jung Society's Board of Directors. She was an elected Atlanta City Councilmember for 20 years. Davis is the Editor of *Mythic Passages* and chairs Publications for the Mythic Imagination Institute.

In his lecture, Shamdasani presented “the landscape” and in the seminar, he presented in detail “the imaginal characters.” Friday evening, in his introduction of Shamdasani, Baumann spoke of “Sonu’s engagement and devotion.” He continued, “Sonu worked more than thirteen years on *Liber Novus*... longer than the Trojan War!” Baumann also said, “It is up to each of us to find an appropriate attitude to *The Red Book*.”

Much of what Shamdasani discussed about the specific history of *The Red Book* is contained within the book’s pages. However, his lecture and his answers to audience questions contain additional information and guidance.

Shamdasani said, “There are two ways to read *The Red Book*: to fit into the mold of what we know about Jung (and Freud) or to allow this book to reconfigure what we *think* we know about Jung.” He said, “Today, when the *real* Jung steps forward, he’s accused of being a counterfeit.” Continuing, he commented, “My work on this book is over; yours is just beginning!”

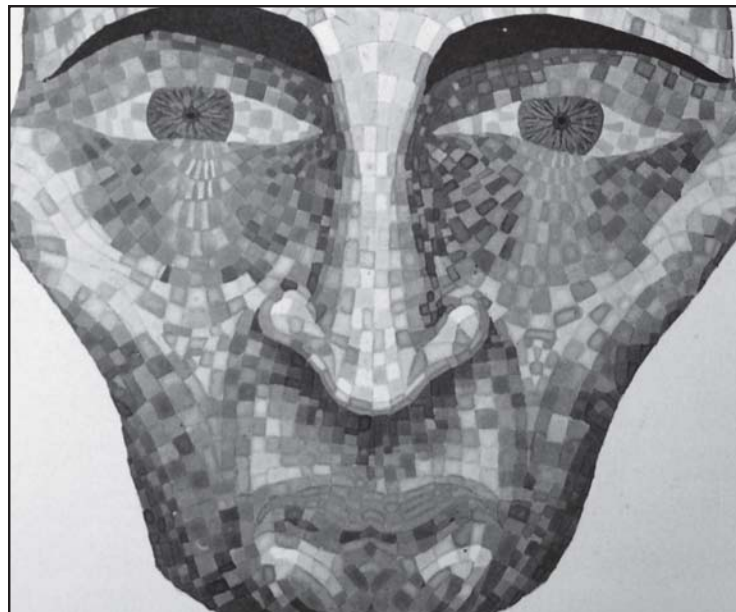
He suggested, “Forget what you know or have read by Jung... stumble upon this text and read it as if it is by an anonymous author.”

He then discussed some of Jung’s life: during Jung’s adolescence, his interest in occult phenomena; in 1898, his conversion to a natural scientific outlook; his marriage in 1902 with the “bittersweet sensation of leaving behind his solitude” and his decision to enter the field of psychiatry; his beginning association with Freud in 1906,07; his purchase of land by the lake in 1908, building of his house, quitting his post, becoming a “radical renegade.” Jung turned to the subject of mythology, examining religions and mythology and their relationship to “libido/ psychic energy.” In 1911 and forward, he is continuing his exploration of religions, mythology, libido (psychic energy); “fantasy as mythological functioning,” dreams, daydreams, and schizophrenia.

Then, Jung has a series of “dreams he doesn’t understand, despite all of his hermeneutics.” Shamdasani continued, “He also meets Toni Wolff, who reminds him that he once had a soul. He’d lost any sense of meaning in his life; he’d forgotten his interests.”

Then, in October of 1913, Jung has “waking dreams of a European-wide catastrophe (and he suspects catastrophe for himself, too)... This leads him to pick up his old Brown Book and write again (after eleven years) and he tries to address his Soul. When there is no answer, he keeps writing to get into contact... he investigates the stream of images within himself.” In December, 1913, “He experiments with visualization and enters a dialogue with the characters who emerge.” He continues to write in his Brown Book, then in his Black Books (which are like notebooks) “without trying to *understand*.” He is involved in family life and work at the same time.

In July, 1914, Shamdasani continued, after presenting a lecture in Aberdeen on schizophrenia, Jung learns that war has broken out, and that his fantasies appear to have been pre-cognitive. With this new insight, Jung realizes that if *some* of his material was pre-cognitive (about the war), perhaps other parts are also pre-cognitive. “So, he looked over his dreams to see what within him connected to the world outside. Then, he wrote the first draft of the first two sections of *Liber Novus*... He’d symbolically lived it in himself before it happened in the world.” Then, he devised general principles relating to humans, human experience. He re-transcribed this on parchment,” The



detail of painting from *Red Book*

Way of What Is To Come.”

In the summer of 1915, as he was transcribing, the fantasies began again. Shamdasani said, “Then, he’s got into the flow of it; he understands what’s taking place.” In 1916, “Jung privately publishes *Septem Sermones*, as written by Basilides... in 1917, the authorship is attributed to Philemon.” Shamdasani noted the figure Abraxas (master of the world) is about uniting a Christian “god” with “satan,” uniting the opposites, about “how to accept life in its totality.” Following Jung’s military service in 1917, and after showing some of his sketches to acquaintances, Jung realized these images depict the state of his psyche, the Self, the totality of the personality. He continues transcribing and continues the fantasies. He circulates some of the contents to some of his friends, and in 1924 he asked Cary Baynes to transcribe, telling her, “You’ll understand my ideas from their foundation.”

Shamdasani said that initially Jung is working with understanding a system of meaning for Jung himself and for no one else. He is interested in the concept of religious transformation, the relationship to war, the resolution of conflict in the world. Then, he becomes more interested in the *psychology*, the *process* of religious transformation... as a window into mankind’s religious heritage... and he tries to understand what of this is generic.”

Shamdasani stated, “These are the grand themes of *Liber Novus* which Jung in the 1920’s hesitated to make public.” After the anonymous publication in 1916 of *Septem Sermones*, Jung decided to try another “more scientific” approach, “plus, he thought his reputation would be shot”... with publication. However, he said that it is clear that Jung did write this for eventual publication. “Later, Jung’s exoteric language became misunderstood as esoteric.” He also noted, “The directness of *Liber Novus* did not get into the later *Collected Works*.”

In his Introduction to *The Red Book*, Shamdasani provides much more information about Jung’s history and the history of *The Red Book*. This essay is a very brief version of some of the information presented in the Portland lecture. The contents of the Portland seminar are too lengthy for this discussion.

In discussing the history of his own involvement with the text, Shamdasani noted that he was struck by the theological

nature of the text, and that he stopped trying to understand everything as he was translating. In his conversations with the Jung family, he discovered that more of Jung's writings are unpublished than published, actually more than fifty per cent are unpublished. Shamdasani feels that the *Collected Works (CW)* are so incomplete that it constitutes an "unmitigated disaster." He said that the *CW* do not include Jung's 1917 *Psychology of the Unconscious Processes*. Also, prior to Jung's death, no one had looked in his cupboards; in 1988, well over one hundred manuscripts of Jung's had not been published, including an unfinished work on alchemy. At least eighty volumes of Jung's correspondence remain unpublished; many seminars are unpublished; and private family archives remain unpublished.

Shamdasani stated that it is very important that we read the primary literature before we read the secondary literature... and that only by publishing all of Jung's work can we determine what's significant. He asked, "How can we consider ourselves post Jungian when we haven't read all of Jung?" He also suggested reading Jung's writings *chronologically* from the *originals* (first editions), rather than from the *CW*. He stated, "*Liber Novus* with its lyrical, dramatic language and images is the first accurate window into Jung. It's like a light being switched on."

Answering questions from the audience, Shamdasani made recommendations for reading *Liber Novus*:

"Don't start with the images, because they came last."

"Read it several times in different ways. So, read the *layers* of text *consecutively*; then, chronologically; then, read the Notes."

He compared reading the text to listening to jazz, "Listening to John Coltrane, first listen to the music, then follow the different instruments."

"Use it as a springboard. It took me five years to get the chronology straight...and layer one and two."

Audience members asked, "How did this affect you? What stirred in you after thirteen years of wrestling with the dragon?" Shamdasani answered, "A process works in you, perhaps a process you might not choose...You find yourself almost turning into a character in the book...like Ammonius in the desert." He also quoted Rilke on surviving, and he cited Jung's quote from *The Odyssey*, "Happy escape from the jaws of death."

Shamdasani also emphasized the importance of refraining from judgment, not concretizing, not being Procrustean, not being dogmatic about any of this. He expressed his belief that if this work is taken seriously, "Things are going to start changing." He said, "What happens next to a work like this depends upon its audience." That means us, *Red Book* Readers!

Notes:

The contents of this essay are taken from my notes of the Portland, Oregon lecture by Sonu Shamdasani, April 16, 2010, with the exception of the brief quotation from C.G. Jung at the beginning of *The Red Book/Liber Novus*.

In addition to reading *The Red Book*, you may enjoy reading an interview by Judith Harris of Sonu Shamdasani in the *Jung Journal*, Winter 2010 (San Francisco Jung Institute publication); and works by Sonu Shamdasani, including *Jung Stripped Bare, By His Biographers, Even* (2005); *Cult Fictions, C.G. Jung and the Founding of Analytical Psychology* (1998); and *Jung and the Making of Modern Psychology: The Dream of a Science* (2003).

To Dress a Chicken

by Wilson Elijah McCreary

I wonder why
they say "dress the chicken"
instead of "undress the chicken."
Not long after Grandma
had me kill the chickens
she had me dressing them,
an interesting process
involving: scalding
in water the proper temperature
(too hot and the feathers
don't want to come out
too cold and they don't want to either),
plucking the feathers;
singeing over some sort of flame
to burn the pesky little hairs
that persistently clung to the body
then cutting with a knife made sharp,
entrails first
saving the liver and gizzard
Some save the heart.
We never did and
I don't know why.
The heart seems such
an important organ
in life and death.
Then leg and thigh
leg from thigh
always looking for the joints,
the easy cutting places
then pulley-bone with its white meat
and finally the breast
I learned not to think
of the heart then
but now I do
and I grieve for people
who eat chicken
and never have to dress one.