C.G. Jung: The Transforming Pathology

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For we have forgotten that the self must be transformed if we are to see the world as it is and that the transformation into loving persons is not accomplished overnight by declaring our good intentions but by submitting patiently to the suffering which makes us real.


What are we to do with our pathologies, the small ones of everyday life, and the large ones that threaten to engulf us? Can our pathologies be viewed through any lens other than that of dread? Can our pathologies be re-visioned as potentials for transformative affirmation, in contrast to the more common view that our troubles exist only to be eradicated?

One celebrated case of pathology envisioned as a life’s work is that of C.G. Jung, the story which he recounts in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1963), and encapsulated in the chapter titled “Confrontation with the Unconscious.”\(^1\) Jung was born on the 26th day July, 1875, in the village of Kesswil on the shores of Lake Constance in Switzerland. Upon graduation from medical school he applied for a post in the famous Burgholzli Psychiatric Hospital in Zurich, a position he began in 1900. Psychiatry was very much in its infancy at the turn of the century, one might say it was primitive. “Mental patients in those days were frequently isolated in clinics, almost like lepers . . . many forms of mental illness were accepted incurable, and the few practising

\(^1\) All quotes are from *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* unless otherwise noted and are indicated as *MDR*. 
psychiatrists regarded as eccentrics if not quacks.”

The year 1900 is further significant in the history of psychiatry and in Jung’s story: it is the year that Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* was published. Jung is reported by biographers to have read *The Interpretation of Dreams* and prepared a report on it for Bleuler, one of his colleagues at the Burgholzli, and it is likely that he discussed Freud’s new book with the Burgholzli staff. Jung was experimenting, at this time, with formulating one of the first psychological tests that would be administered as a word association test. “This test consisted of enunciating to a [patient] subject a succession of carefully chosen words; to each of them the subject had to respond with the first word that occurred to him; the reaction time was exactly measured.” The tested subject’s psychological profile would be derived from the nature and timing of the word responses.

Jung’s medical dissertation was published in 1902 and dealt with his work with his cousin Helene Preiswerk. The dissertation was entitled “The Psychology and Pathology of So-Called Occult Phenomena” and draws on Freud’s work. Jung’s first published articles on psychology also appear in 1902 and in these first scholarly articles Jung cites Freud in support of his theories of psychology.

In 1902 Jung took a leave of absence from the Burgholzli and studied with Pierre Janet (1859-1947) in Paris. He returned to the Burgholzli early in 1903 and was married on 14 February 1903. After his marriage and his return to the Burgholzli Jung took up Freud’s theories outlined in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and begins to incorporate them more fully into his own work. Jung

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3 *Id.* at 75.

found a link between the varying reactions of his subjects when administered the word-association test and the repressive mechanisms that Freud had described at work in our dreams.

In March or early April of 1906 Jung “at last brought himself to write a letter to Freud . . . .” The correspondence with Freud, was followed by several meetings, a trip to the United States, and a relationship that was to last for ten years. Freud was, to put it simply, deeply impressed with Jung, admitting his admiration for Jung’s broad reading and knowledge. Freud saw Jung as an ally who could lend needed support.

In March, 1907, Freud and Jung had their first meeting, a talk that “became a marathon exchange which ran on, with brief breaks, for thirteen hours . . . .” Ellenberger notes that this “psychoanalytic period” in Jung’s life ran until 1913 when Jung broke off from the Psychoanalytic Association. (Freud called the method he used with patients psychoanalysis.) When Jung broke with Freud in 1913, he resigned his teaching post at Zurich University and began to reassess his life’s work.

Jung picks up the story in Memories, Dreams, Reflections, his intellectual and psychological autobiography, in a chapter he calls “Confrontation with the Unconscious.” “After the parting of the ways with Freud, a period of inner uncertainty began for me. It would be no exaggeration to call it a state of disorientation. I felt totally suspended in mid-air, for I had not yet found my own footing.” (MDR: 170). Remember, Jung is talking about 1913; he is 38 years old. He has been practicing psychiatry for thirteen years. He has been married for ten years.

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5 Brome, supra note 2, at 88.

6 Id. at 93.

7 Ellenberger, supra note 4, at 694.
During this period of disorientation, Jung in his words, “lived as if under constant inner pressure. At times this became so strong that I suspected there was some psychic disturbance in myself.” (MDR: 173). Jung seeks, as we suspect any one of us would, to understand the nature of the disturbance and the disorientation it produces. Jung begins his exploration, still under Freud’s influence, by turning to his dreams. He pours over the details of childhood memories to see if he can account for the “cause of the disturbance.” (MDR: 173). “But this retrospection,” he tells us, “led to nothing but a fresh acknowledgment of my own ignorance.” (MDR: 173). Finding nothing directly helpful in the methods that he has learned from Freud, he determines to submit himself “to the impulses of the unconscious.” (MDR: 173). Jung, in making his decision, has chosen to move off the well-worn path.

Jung’s work with the unconscious begins with a memory from the time he was ten or eleven about “playing passionately with building blocks,” a memory now accompanied by a great deal of emotion. Jung, seeking to find some connection to the energy he associates with this early memory and its power to continue to evoke strong feelings, determines that he has “no choice but to return to it [this childhood play] and take up once more that child’s life with his childish games.” (MDR: 174). And it is at this moment, Jung tells us, that there is a turning point in his fate, but not a turning point that he readily accepts. “I gave in only after endless resistances and with a sense of resignation. For it was a painfully humiliating experience to realize that there was nothing to be done except play childish games.” (MDR: 174).

Vincent Brome, in his biography of Jung, says of this period: “In anyone else the straightforward term ‘breakdown’ would describe the general, nontechnical characteristics of what
took place . . . .” Jung struggles to maintain his bearings while being subjected to

[a]n incessant stream of fantasies . . . . I did my best not to lose my head but to find
some way to understand these strange things. I stood helpless before an alien world;
everything in it seemed difficult and incomprehensible. I was living in a constant
state of tension; often I felt as if gigantic blocks of stone were tumbling down upon
me. One thunderstorm followed another. My enduring these storms was a question
of brute strength. Others have been shattered by them--Nietzsche . . . and many
others. (MDR: 176-77).

Jung experiences difficulty holding his emotions in check and practices yoga exercises to
keep his emotions in control. “I would do these exercises only until I had calmed myself enough to
resume my work with the unconscious. As soon as I had the feeling that I was myself again, I
abandoned this restraint upon the emotions and allowed the images and inner voices to speak
afresh.” (MDR: 177). He set out to “translate the emotions into images--that is to say, to find the
images which were concealed in the emotions . . . .” (MDR: 177). And it is this process of
conversion--of emotions into images--that Jung credits as the key to his temporary relief from the
pressure he was experiencing and preventing him falling into a more seriously disturbed state.

Jung devotes himself to his child-like building game finding in it, the possibility that he might
discover his “own myth.” (MDR: p.174-75).

I went on with my building game after the noon meal every day, whenever the
weather permitted. As soon as I was through eating, I began playing, and continued
to do so until the patients arrived; and if I was finished with my work early enough
in the evening, I went back to building. (MDR: 174).

The play consisted of collecting stones from the lake shore and building a village of cottages and a
castle, and a church. This building with stones “released a stream of fantasies . . . .” (MDR: 175). It
was difficult to work with these fantasies because they seemed to present “a blank wall” and yet it

8 Brome, supra note 2, at 158.
was this stream of fantasies that Jung would return to throughout his professional life as a psychologist. In later years he would paint the images he found in his fantasies, and draw upon these images for the stone work he did at his summer retreat he called Bollingen. (*MDR*: 175). Jung found that each of the methods that he used provided an experience which “proved to be a *rite d’entree* for the ideas and works that followed hard upon it.” (*MDR*: 175).

It is not easy to work with emotions—as anyone who has been in counseling and therapy will tell you—and the images concealed in our emotions are even more difficult to excavate. Jung makes clear that this is easy work, and it is most definitely not work for the weak of heart (or stomach). Jung, for example, confronted emotions and images which he did not “approve”; some of his fantasies struck him as “nonsense”; and there were many “strong resistances” to continuing his exploration. Jung’s fantasies and images were a curious and “diabolical mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous.” They spoke in a “language of high rhetoric, even of bombast” which was irritating to Jung, as a man of science. (*MDR*: 178). Yet, Jung went on because he viewed what was happening and what he was doing in response as a “scientific experiment” that he was conducting and was being conducted on him. (*MDR*: 178). He realized that if he did not learn whatever possible about these fantasies that he could not expect to help his patients work with theirs. Jung believed that if he could work with his own emotions and fantasies he would be able to help his patients as they experienced difficulties. It was this belief that “helped . . . over several critical phases.” (*MDR*: 179).

Viewing his situation as a scientific experiment did not make the work any less difficult. He both resisted what he was doing and experienced fear. “I was afraid of losing command of myself and becoming a prey to the fantasies . . . .” (*MDR*: 178). Even so, “there was no other way out. I had to take the chance, had to gain power over them [the fantasies], for I realized that if I did not do so,
I ran the risk of their gaining power over me.” (MDR: 178).

Fear crept over me that the succession of such [imaginal/fantasy] figures might be endless, that I might lose myself in a bottomless abyss of ignorance. My ego felt devalued—although the successes I had been having in worldly affairs might have reassured me. In my darkness . . . I could have wished for nothing better than a real, live guru, someone possessing superior knowledge and ability, who would have disentangled for me the involuntary creations of my imagination. (MDR: 183-84).

During this work Jung quit reading scientific literature and he was able to produce few scholarly papers. He continued, however, to see patients and maintain his family life.

It was during this period of disturbance that he began to draw mandala figures: “small circular drawing[s]” which, he says, seem to “correspond to my inner situation at the time.” (MDR: 195). He concluded, based on his work, that these mandalas were representations of the self and corresponded to “the microcosmic nature of the psyche.” (MDR: 196). Mandalas are “cryptograms concerning the state of the self . . . .” (MDR: 196).

It is from the mandalas that Jung begins to understand “that the goal of psychic development is the self. There is no linear evolution; there is only a circumambulation of the self.” (MDR: 196). This disturbed period of his life reaches a turning point in which Jung begins to glimpse his personal myth and envision a new way of thinking about psychology that will become his life’s work. It is during this time of pathology that he is constructing a new way of looking at the world. “One could not go beyond the center. The center is the goal, and everything is directed toward that center . . . . [T]he self is the principle and archetype of orientation and meaning. Therein lies its healing function.” And from this insight that Jung derives a “first inkling” of his “personal myth.” (MDR: 198-99).

The significance of his personal pathology for his future work is clear. Jung, writing his
autobiography near the end of his life, concludes that: “All my works, all my creative activity, has come from those initial fantasies and dreams which began in 1912, almost fifty years ago. Everything that I accomplished in later life was already contained in them, although at first only in the form of emotions and images.” (MDR: 192).

It has taken me virtually forty-five years to distill within the vessel of my scientific work the things I experienced and wrote down at that time. As a young man my goal had been to accomplish something in my science. But then, I hit upon this stream of lava, and the heat of its fires reshaped my life. That was the primal stuff which compelled me to work upon it, and my works are a more or less successful endeavor to incorporate this incandescent matter into the contemporary picture of the world. The years when I was pursuing my inner images were the most important in my life—in them everything essential was decided. It all began then; the later details are only supplements and clarifications of the material that burst forth from the unconscious, and at first swamped me. It was the *prima materia* for a lifetime’s work. (MDR: 199)

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We live according to a personal and social “logic” that can, as C.G. Jung’s life demonstrates, break down. The “logic” we assume for our life turns out to be incomplete. The plan that has guided us fails. Jung cannot assume, uncritically the role of heir to Freud’s work, and must find his own path. The only way to go on, if we follow Jung, is to invent—to re-formulate—the logic of our life-script.

The transforming “illness” of Ivan Ilych (in Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilych”), Jean-Baptiste Clamence (in Camus’s *The Fall*), Alice Koller in *An Unknown Woman*, and C.G. Jung, break the logic that signals to us that the self is whole and that we are living the lives we want to live. We learn in illness and pathology—from the symptoms of illness and pathology—that we are not whole, that there is no One Me; what we find is a reservoir of emotions and fantasies that underlie our everyday world of routine, family, and work. A transforming illness has a purpose that it does
not announce, wearing as it does the cloak we wish to shed. The illness plays a game with us, making us ill and not telling us why. And when we ask the question why we get no where. (The question how may be better suited for this purpose, but semantical strategies will probably not be sufficient.) An illness with transformative potential, as the story of Ivan Ilych makes clear, is always elusive.

Transforming pathologies teach us that the ego can be an untrustworthy guide. Jung says, “I knew by now that I could not presume to choose a goal which would seem trustworthy to me. It had been proved to me that I had to abandon the idea of the superordinate position of the ego. After all, I had been brought up short when I had attempted to maintain it. (MDR: 196). But even when the ego is not enough, as Jung helps us see, Jung suggests that the ego is not to be abandoned. The fantasies which Jung admits into consciousness must be handled with care and it is with the help of the ego that these fantasies can be “stripped of their power.” Jung does not glorify the unconscious.

The essential thing is to differentiate oneself from these unconscious contents by personifying them, and at the same time to bring them into relationship with consciousness. That is the technique for stripping them of their power.

... In the final analysis the decisive factor is always consciousness, which can understand the manifestations of the unconscious and take up a position toward them.” (MDR: 187).

Jung argues that fantasy needs “firm ground underfoot” which is possible only when one “return[s] wholly to reality.” For Jung “reality meant scientific comprehension.” It is the “concrete conclusions” he draws from his insights into the unconscious that given him the “task [that] was to become a life work.” (MDR: 188). Jung describes the task as scientific in nature, but it is also an ethical one. Jung believed that “[i]nsight into them [the fantasies] 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.” (MDR: 193).

During the period in which he devoted his work on his own fantasies Jung found support in his family and his professional work. “It was most essential for me to have a normal life in the real world as a counterpoise to that strange inner world. My family and my profession remained the base to which I could always return, assuring me that I was an actually existing, ordinary person. (MDR: 189). The actualities of his everyday life—his wife, children, his house in Kusnacht, his practice with patients—helped him maintain a sense of this-world reality and the realization that he “was not a blank page whirling about in the winds of the spirit . . . .” Jung compares his experience to that of Nietzsche who “lost the ground under his feet because he possessed nothing more than the inner world of his thoughts . . . .” (MDR: 189).

What comes out of this kind of psychological work is an appreciation for fantasies and the life of the unconscious and the knowledge that what comes to us from the basement of our mind is not private and idiosyncratic but a glimpse of ourselves as human beings like all other human beings. As Jung puts it:

There were things in the images which concerned not only myself but many others also. It was then that I ceased to belong to myself alone, ceased to have the right to do so. From then on, my life belonged to the generality . . . . It was then that I dedicated myself to service of the psyche. I loved it and hated it, but it was my greatest wealth. My delivering myself over to it, as it were, was the only way by which I could endure my existence and live it as fully as possible.” (MDR: 192).

Ira Progoff, who founded his own life’s work in a therapeutic approach to journal writing based on Jung’s ideas, argues that it is “[t]hrough the dissonances in consciousness,” that is, our “neurotic situation” that “forces the individual to come into active relation to the larger areas of the
psyche” that constitute our collective public life together.⁹

The liberating effort of a transforming pathology results from a psyche “severed from its natural order,” a psyche that “encounters and comes to grips with the archetypes . . . . When an individual finds himself in a grave and seemingly issueless psychic situation, archetypal dreams tend to set in, indicating a possibility of progress that would not otherwise have occurred to him.”¹⁰

Transformation is possible when we confront the unconscious. This does not mean, as Jung makes clear in Memories, Dreams, Reflections, that we give ourselves over to the unconscious. Giving one’s self over, whether to the unconscious or to the ego, is pathology. The stories of Ivan Ilych and Jean-Baptiste Clamence are stories of ego’s failure. Our encounter with ego failure confront us, with ego consciousness, with the consciousness that makes it possible to construct a cover story that promises that we not succumb to the pathologies we find in the agonizing stories of fictional characters like Ilych and Clamence, and even in a psychologist as astute as C.G. Jung.

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