

# Alchemy in The Red Book of C.G. Jung

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## Introduction

In his talk held during the presentation of *The Red Book* or *Liber Novus* at the “Library of Congress”, Sonu Shandasani compares the experiences which would eventually lead Jung to compose *The Red Book* to a descent into Hell or a *katabasis*. Nevertheless these experiences in which time and time again, Jung found himself in danger of being overwhelmed by the numinous contents of the unconscious, provided Jung with the *prima materia* for his latter work. As he himself writes in *Memories, Dreams, Reflection (MDR)*: «The years in which I was pursuing my inner images were the most important in my life – in them everything essential was decided.» (Jung 1963, p.199)

After the break with Freud brought about by the publication of *Symbols of Transformation*, Jung found himself isolated and disorientated and gradually came to the realization that he, like modern man, had lost all sense of possessing a personal myth by which to give meaning to his life. In December 1912 Jung had the famous dream in which he encounters a dove which then transforms into a little blonde girl and then transforms back into a dove, telling Jung that she can only take on human form when the male dove is busy with the 12 dead. One important detail is that the dream takes place in an Italian loggia where Jung is sitting in front of a table made out of green emerald-like stone to which Jung immediately associates the famous alchemical *Tabula Smaragdina* of *Hermes Trismegistus* on which were engraved the basic tenets of alchemical wisdom. In the autumn of 1913 Jung began to have a series of terrifying visions and dreams which he feared were a sign that he was being threatened by a psychosis. In an effort to understand what was happening to him, Jung returned to a childhood game and began collecting and using stones in a kind of building game which in turn released an incessant stream of fantasies. In December 1913, under the pressure of these fantasies Jung took the courageous step to abandon himself completely to the fantasies in a descent into the depths of his own darkness. It was only with the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, that Jung recognized the precognitive nature of his visions and fantasies and he came to the realization that it was important to understand their meaning not just for himself but also in order to understand the collective malaise of Western Europe that had led to the horrors of the war. He began to write down his fantasies in the “Black Book”, six black-bound leather notebooks and he later transferred them to the “Red Book” in which he transcribed them in an elaborately literary frame accompanied by illustrations and a series of mandala drawings. He would only begin to emerge from the darkness of the depths around 1918 when he began drawing a series of mandalas which helped him to observe from day to day his psychic transformations and to begin to have some inkling of the true purpose of his descent. As he himself declared: «When I began drawing the mandalas however, I saw that everything, all the paths I had been following, all the steps I had taken, were leading to a single point –namely to the mid-point [...] during those years between 1918 and 1920, I began to understand that the goal of psychic development is the self.» (Jung 1963, p.222) In 1927, when his friend Herman Sigg was dying, Jung had the famous ‘Liverpool’ dream which he represented in a mandala which is reproduced in fig. A3 in CW. 13, and a year later he drew a second mandala which was later reproduced as an anonymous example of a European mandala. Under he describes the mandala as «a city with a wall and a moat. Within, a broad moat surrounding a wall with sixteen towers and with another inner moat. This moat encloses a central castle with golden roofs whose centre is a golden temple.» (Jung 1929, fig. A10)

When it was finished Jung was struck by the fact that the form and choice of colours seemed to him Chinese although as he notes, «there was nothing outwardly Chinese about it». (Jung 1963, p.

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222) Shortly afterwards he received a packet from his friend Richard Wilhelm enclosing the Daoist manuscript entitled *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. Jung was so impressed by the 'strange' coincidence between his drawing and the text that he subsequently wrote under the drawing, «In 1928, when I was painting this picture, showing the golden, well-fortified castle, Richard Wilhelm in Frankfurt sent me the thousand-year-old Chinese text on the yellow castle, the germ of the immortal body.» (Jung, 1963, p.223)

Jung devoured the manuscript for as he remarks, «the text gave me an undreamed-of confirmation of my ideas about the mandala and the circumbulation of the centre. This was the first event which broke through my isolation.» (Jung 1963, p. 222-223)

After his contact with Chinese alchemy, Jung abandoned for ever the aesthetic elaborations of his fantasies, leaving the "Red Book" unfinished and he began gradually to dedicate himself to the study of alchemy, especially European alchemy. He commissioned a Munich bookseller to send him any alchemical books he could find and soon afterwards he received the *Artis Auriferae Volumina Duo*, a collection of alchemical texts dating from 1593 which included among other works the *Aurora Consurgens. Volume II*. This book lay on his desk for two years almost untouched. He would occasionally look at the pictures but each time he would pull back, convinced that it was all blatant nonsense and impossible to understand. Gradually however the strange and fascinating nature of the illustrations caught his attention and he began to read the book with attention. From then on until the 1940's he would collect alchemical manuscripts and photocopy texts from museums until he had built up one of the most comprehensive alchemical libraries of his generation. As he writes in 1959 in the *Afterword to the Red Book*, «My acquaintance with alchemy in 1930 took me away from it. The beginning of the end came in 1928 when (Richard) Wilhelm sent me the text of the *Golden Flower*, an alchemical treatise. There the contents of the book found their way into actuality and I could no longer continue to work on it.» (p.226)

*The Red Book* starts and finishes therefore with alchemy, and many of those who have read the text and studied the illustrations have been struck by their decidedly alchemical character. Again the number of significant coincidences between Jung's dreams and fantasies and alchemical symbols and processes is striking but these leaves us then with the question of whether the relationship between *The Red Book* and alchemy is purely synchronistic or if there are possible sources that may have influenced Jung.

### Alchemical Sources for the Red Book

In his exposition of the *Liber Novus*, Shamdasani discusses Jung's alchemical sources and notes that «Jung had been familiar with alchemical texts from around 1910. In 1912 Flournoy had presented a psychological interpretation of alchemy in his lectures at the University of Geneva and in 1914 Herbert Silberer published an extensive work on this subject». (*The Red Book*, p. 219) We know from Jung's writings before 1912 that he was also familiar at that time with Gnostic texts and with Berthelot's "Les Alchimistes Grec". In the first English version of *Symbols of Transformation* entitled *Psychology of the Unconscious: a Study of the Transformations and Symbolism of the Libido*, he refers to «the especially important alchemical vision of Zosimos who found people in boiling water within the cavity of the altar.» (p.136-137) Jung's interpretation of this text however somewhat reductive as we can see from the note on p.137 where he writes, «I cannot refrain from observing that this vision reveals the original meaning of alchemy. A primitive magic power for generation, that is to say, a means by which children could be produced without the mother.» Silberer in *Problems of Mysticism and its Symbolism*, took issue with this interpretation of Jung, as he felt that Jung's approach is too one-sided and draws too far-reaching a conclusion, suggesting instead that the *homunculus* motive which is closely interwoven with alchemy in general, cannot be interpreted only in terms of infantile fantasies, but that it also has an anagogic significance which points to the ideas of spiritual regeneration.(1917, p. 322) Gradually Jung too through his researches into alchemical manuscripts became aware of the spiritual significance of alchemy and of its importance for his conceptualization of the psyche. In Deirdre Bair's biography of Jung, she describes the first meeting between Jung and Marie-Louise Von Franz in 1933 when Jung told the 18-year-old that his interest in alchemy sprung from the realization that everything within his own

fantasies that he thought was personal, was really anchored in a long historical tradition. Mythology had not given him the answers he sought, nor had his forays into comparative religion such as Gnosticism, Manicheism and others. He was convinced that a study of the historical development of alchemy would result in parallels with his own spiritual development.” (2003, p.369-370) From the *Protocols* for MDR, as Deirdre Bair notes, Jung in discussing why he had abandoned the Red Book, refers to this text as «a curious mix of fantasy and prophecy» and recounts that during 1920 when he was striving to find a historical foundation for his fantasies he had reread Silberer whom he had not consulted since his years with Freud but that he found Silberer wanting, «because he mainly [...] applied the Freudian interpretation.» As Freud broke with Silberer exactly because of his anagogic interpretation of alchemy as a means of spiritual development, this is somewhat ungenerous on the part of Jung but it also raises the question of why Jung so late in life found it necessary to downplay the role of Silberer in tracing out the psychological significance of alchemy. Certainly there is the problem of the need to establish the anteriority and originality of his thought as we can see from the Honegger episode and the attribution of who first described the solar phallus. Even more important however is the fact that Jung depended heavily on alchemy to prove the existence of the archetypes as timeless and unchanging structures within the collective unconscious, just as he depended on the many coincidences between his own experiences and the writings of the alchemists as one of the essential proofs of the concept of synchronicity. There are indeed many such coincidences but if we look carefully however, there are many indications that Silberer may in fact have been an important source of the alchemical references in *The Red Book*.

### Jung and Silberer

In 1926 Jung had a dream in which he finds himself in the South Tyrol on the Italian front, driving in a cart with a peasant in a very dangerous situation with shells exploding all around. They cross a bridge and go through a tunnel and Jung finds himself in the region around Verona. With the peasant he drives into the courtyard of a Northern Italian manor house when the gates close behind him and the peasant exclaims,, “Now we are caught in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.” At this point of the dream, Jung thinks that they will be caught in the 17<sup>th</sup> century for years but then the thought comes to him that some day he will be able to get out again. In Jung’s account this dream so impressed him that he searched in many texts of religion and philosophy to understand the meaning of the dream but this only became clear to him when he began to discover alchemy. (MDR,p.230) If we bear in mind that Freud often holidayed in the South Tyrol, that the South Tyrol was the scene of bitter battles between the Italians and the Austrians, that Jung found himself on the Italian side and that Jung interpreted the missiles as effects emanating from the unconscious, it does not seem too far-fetched to suggest that the dream underlined to Jung the dangers he had run when he entered into conflict with Freud, dangers that the tragic deaths of Tausk in 1919 and Herbert Silberer in 1923 who had also entered into conflict with Freud over their ideas, would have brought home to him. For Jung therefore alchemy and his long struggle to understand its symbolism and its profound meaning could provide him with the means by which he could finally emerge both from the relationship with Freud and from the encounter with the unconscious precipitated by Jung’s break with him.

In *The Psychology of the Unconscious*, the book that marks Jung’s first serious attempt to develop his own different approach to mythology and to the history of the human mind, among the analysts he quotes as making important contributions in this field he mentions the “beautiful investigation entitled *Phantasie und Mythos*” (p.7) by Herbert Silberer published in 1910 in the *Jahrbuch*. Silberer, like Jung, was one of the circle around Freud and a member of the Vienna Psychoanalytical Society from 1910, but the relationship with Freud rapidly soured when Silberer began to develop his own original approach to the psyche and to its symbolism. Unlike Jung however, Silberer was unable to distance himself from Freud and continued to seek his approval. He was bitterly disappointed by Freud’s cold reception of his book *Problems of Mysticism and Its Symbolism*, first published in German in 1914 and in English in 1917, and he finally hung himself in January 1923 at the age of 40, after Freud had broken off all personal contact with him in a letter of April 1922 as Paul Roazen refers in *Freud and his Followers* and after his lecture on dreams was unfavourably received by the Vienna Society in

November 1922, as Stekel noted in a Memorium to Herbert Silberer in 1924.

In his writings Silberer anticipated many of Jung's intuitions as Jung himself admits in the various references to Silberer scattered throughout his works but there has been little work done on the relevance of Silberer to Jung. Silberer, like Jung, stressed the multiple significance of symbolic contents and he distinguished between the psychoanalytical and the anagogic levels of interpretation (the analytical-reductive and the synthetic-hermeneutic interpretation in Jung's terminology. (CW 16,p.8). In his 1909 article, *Report on a method of eliciting and observing certain hallucination phenomena*, he described the experiments he carried out on himself on hypnagogic states and explored the function of symbols as revealing affects and emotions in a functional way and personalizing various states characteristic of the dreamer's psychic processes. A generation before Jung, Silberer discovered the psychological and spiritual significance of alchemy as Jung himself acknowledges, «Herbert Silberer has the merit of being the first to discover the secret threads that lead from alchemy to the psychology of the unconscious.» (CW14, p. 555), (CW 12, p. 228) and he was the first to see the *coniunctio* as the central idea of the alchemical procedure. (CW 14, p. 457)

Jung was in correspondence with Silberer from 1909 and he clearly valued his work just as there are frequent appreciative comments on Jung's ideas in Silberer's work. It is all the more surprising therefore that Jung discounted Silberer's work on alchemy as a possible source for some of the alchemical ideas that can be found in the Red Book, especially in *Liber Secundus*. As he writes in MDR, «Oddly enough, I had entirely forgotten what Herbert Silberer had written about alchemy. At the time his book was published, I regarded alchemy as something off the beaten track and rather silly, much as I appreciated Silberer's anagogic or constructive point of view [...] As his tragic death shows, Silberer's discovery of the problem was not followed by insight into it. He had used the main late material, which I could make nothing of. The late alchemical texts are fantastic and baroque; only after we have learned how to interpret them can we recognize what treasures they hide.» (p. 230)

To anyone familiar with Silberer's book this statement is somewhat puzzling. If the parable Silberer interprets, taken from the second volume of a book entitled *Geheime Figuren der Rosenkreuzer aus dem 16ten und 17ten Jahrhundert*, published in Altona about 1785 which reproduces a text of 1625, *Guldenen Tractum vom philosophischen Stein* (CW 12, p. 69) is indeed typical of late alchemical texts, which have a decidedly spiritual and mystical flavour with little reference to laboratory practice, nevertheless in his attempts to interpret the meaning of the parable Silberer uses many references to early medieval and renaissance texts and to the early alchemists, many of whom Jung himself later referred to in his writings on alchemy. Silberer quotes extensively from the *Rosarium* of Arnold of Villanova, a famous 13<sup>th</sup> century alchemist who died in 1313 and he also refers to John Dastian, Nicholas Flamel, Janus Lacinus, the editor of the *Pretiosa Margarita* of Petrus Bonus, George Ripley, Isaac Hollandus, Melchior Cibebensis, Martin Ruland, Paracelsus, Daniel Mylius and Michael Maier as well as to early Greek and Arabic alchemists such as Ostanes, Zosimos and Artephius. He gives clear descriptions of alchemical processes such as calcination, dissolution, putrefaction, distillation, coagulation and tincturing and discusses their alchemical and psychological significance. He is familiar with the meaning of alchemical substances such as sulphur and mercury and of alchemical symbols such as the green lion, the dismemberment of the dragon, the Rebis or hermaphrodite, the Philosopher's stone and the coitus between the red man and the white woman. What I would like to do now is to look at some of the more alchemical illustrations in *The Liber Secundus* to show how Jung could have been influenced, albeit perhaps unconsciously by Silberer's work.

### Silberer as a Source of the Red Book

What I propose is to look at a particular sequence of illustrations which come from Chapter XVII of the *Liber Secundus*, *Nox Quartus* which have a particularly alchemical character to trace out the parallels between these illustrations and Silberer's alchemical references. This sequence are the illustrations 117, 119, 121, 122 and 123 which follow closely the sequence described by Morienus quoted by Silberer. «Our stone is like the creation of man. For first we have the union, 2, the corruption, [i.e. the putrefaction of the seed], 3, the gestation, 4. the birth of the child, 5, the nutrition.»

In plate 117, there is an illustration of Atmavictu as a dragon that is about to devour the sun accompanied by a 'youthful supporter', Telesphorus (one of the Cabiri) and the evil spirit in some men, depicted as a hyena-like creature. Below is written «The dragon wants to eat the sun and the youth beseeches him not to. But he eats it nonetheless.»

This image of the dragon which devours the sun is a common alchemical symbol and it represents one of the initial steps in the rebirth and renewal of the old principle through the union of two opposing substances. This union has a decidedly dark and uncanny character and can be depicted as an incestuous coitus in which a king returns to his mother's womb or where a sister, Beja incorporates her brother, Gabricus. Silberer quotes the Vision of John Dastian in which a king lies with his mother's daughter and becomes enclosed in her womb, «the woman however encloses her man, as a mother, quite carefully in the innermost part of her body.» (p. 134) At this stage the union between the opposites is a dissolution whose purpose is to destroy the old body in order to extract and transform the spirit within matter. In the parable, the extraction of the blood and the white bones from the lion also indicates that the lion has devoured the old principle in order to renew it.

In the next illustration in the series, plate 119, the dragon which has almost assumed the circular position of the *uroborus*, is being dismembered by a youth and in the blood that pours forth are contained many images of little suns. Below is written: «The accursed dragon has eaten the sun, its belly being cut open and he must not hand over the gold of the sun together with his blood. This is the turning back of Atmavictu, of the old one. He who destroyed the proliferating green covering is the youth who helped me kill Siegfried.»

Again the fight with the dragon and its dismemberment is a common alchemical theme. In the vision of Zosimos cited by Bertheolot and by Silberer is written: «The dragon is the guardian of the temple, sacrifice it, flay it separate the flesh from the bones and you will find what you seek.» (p. 128) In the parable utilized by Silberer, the adept seizes the lion and forces the blood out of his body and then further dissects him to extract the white bones. In alchemy the symbol of the lion, the serpent and the dragon are interchangeable and as Silberer writes, «The lion that must die is the dragon which the dragon fighter kills.» (p. 127)

In the next plate 121 which carries the date of November 1919, there is a perfectly symmetrical mandala with a diamond crystal emerging from the sun and four rivers flowing into the centre of the circle. Below is written, «This stone, so beautifully set, is certainly the Lapis Philosophorum. It is harder than diamond. But it expands into space through four distinct qualities, namely breadth, height, depth and time. It is hence invisible and you can pass through without noticing it. The four streams of Aquarius flow from the stone. This is the incorruptible seed that lies between the father and mother and prevents the heads of both cones from touching. It is the Monad that countervails the Pleroma.»

In plate 122 which is dated 4<sup>th</sup> December 1919 and is entitled *The Horrible Being*, Jung depicts a monstrous head with horns and a long pointed black beard painted in a mosaic style and surrounded by fossils. Below is written, «This is the backside of the gem. He who is in the stone has this shadow. This is Atmavictu, the old one after he has withdrawn from the Creation. He has returned to endless history where he took his beginning. Once more he became stony residue having completed his creation. In the form of Izdubar he has outgrown and delivered Philemon and Ka from him. Philemon gave the stone, Ka the 8 followed by the alchemical hieroglyph for the sun.»

Interestingly enough the man with the black pointed beard which Jung associates with Goethe's Mephistophele is also to be found in the parable analysed by Silberer whom he tentatively associates with the devil, as Jung notes (CW 12, p. 69). If Philemon as Jung says represents superior insight, the spiritual aspect or meaning, he is relativized by the emergence of Ka which as Jung writes is, «a spirit of nature, like the Anthroparion of Greek alchemy – with which at that time I was not familiar [...] the Anthroparion is a tiny man, a kind of homunculus.» (MDR 208-9) The next plate represents the extraction of the spirits of nature from the dragon/ devil which corresponds to the alchemical process of making spiritual the body.

In Plate 123 dated 4<sup>th</sup> January 1920, is written, «This is the caster of holy water. The Cabiri grow out of the flowers which spring from the body of the dragon, Above is the temple.»

In this plate the putrefying body of the dismembered dragon is being washed by water that comes from the temple suspended in a lake on the top left of the plate which the youth who killed the dragon is pouring down. Silberer writes citing Paracelsus that «putrefaction transforms all things into their first shape and is the beginning of generation and multiplication.» (p.139) Putrefaction completes the dissolution of the bodies and this must be followed by washing the bodies. In alchemy washing is a symbol of purification but it can only be carried out by a spiritual water. Artephius, an Arabian alchemist cited by Silberer, writes, «It is a living water that comes to moisten the earth that it may spring forth and in due season bring forth much fruit [...] and because this water is the water of the vegetable life, it causes the dead body to vegetate, increase and spring forth and to rise from the dead to life.» (p. 161) Through the purification of the putrefied body of the dragon, red roses spring up and inside the roses, the Cabiri take form. The Cabiri here are *homunculi*, living beings created by art from putrefied bodies of which Paracelsus writes, «Because of art are they there and grown up like a rose or flower in the garden.» (Silberer, p. 141) As Jung notes the *Rosarium or Rosarius*, «the rose garden of the philosophers is one of alchemy's favourite symbols» (CW 12, p.174) but it is one that Jung could not have found in Gnostic texts. It is extremely likely however that he took it from the parable utilized by Silberer, where the adept finds himself in a square garden with beautiful blooming roses. (p. 6) The Cabiri are spirits of nature and they represent the transformation of the Horrible Being/ Devil/ dragon into a principle that can be integrated. As the Cabiri tell Jung later in the text they function to overcome the one-sidedness of Western consciousness:

We carry what is not to be carried from below to above. We are the juices that rise secretly, not by force, but sucked out of inertia and affixed to what is growing. We know the unknown ways and the inexplicable laws of living matter. We carry up what slumbers in the earthly, what is dead and yet enters into the living. We do this slowly and easily, what you do in vain in your human way. We complete what is impossible for you. (2009, p. 320-321)

## Conclusion

If as Harold Bloom would have it in his seminal work *The Anxiety of Influence*, «influence anxieties are embedded in the agonistic basis of all imaginative literature» (p, xxiv) it is undeniable Jung's *Red Book*, a true work of the creative imagination, can be seen as Jung's struggle to free himself once and for all from the influence of Freud, in order to find his own original vision of the psyche and of the unconscious. It is relevant in this context that as Paul Bishop notes, that many of the mythological themes that Jung refers to in his first attempt to distance himself from Freud, are repeated and re-elaborated in *The Red Book*. (2012, p. 341) In his anxiety to cast off the chains of Freud's thought, Jung also tended to down-play the role of Herbert Silberer as a source for his alchemical references in *The Liber Novus*, preferring instead to stress the undeniably frequent synchronistic experiences that lead him to alchemy. Tracing out the influence of Silberer on Jung does not however subtract from the originality of Jung but rather it restores a voice to a gifted individual who unlike Jung, was unable to free himself. As Bloom writes, «The dead may not return but their voice comes alive paradoxically never by mere imitation but in the agonistic misprision performed upon powerful forerunners by only the most gifted of their successors.» (*ibid*)

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