The Holy Grail of the Unconscious

By Sam Anderson

Feature story | Published 10:00 AM EDT | Updated 10:00 AM EDT | Estimated reading time: 30 minutes | Illustrations: Sarah Wilson, Jason Lee

This is a story about a nearly 100-year-old book, bound in red leather, which has spent the last quarter century sectioned away in the vault of a Swiss bank. It is a book that its author, Carl Jung, considered his life's work—the work that gave it "other body" which is Latin for "Book Two." Its pages are made from thick cream-colored parchment and filled with paintings of otherworldly creatures and handwritten dialogues with gods and devils. If you didn't know the book's vintage, you might confuse it for a lost medieval text.

And yet between the book's heavy covers, a very modern story unfolds—the story of a man who was, in his own mind, a prophet and a madman. Jung was a pioneer, but also a Swiss patriarch and adventurer — taking place entirely in his head — he finds it scary, at times.

Some people find that nobody should read the book, and some feel that everybody should read it. Jung himself was ambivalent about it. Most of what has been said about the book — what it is, what it means — is the product of guesswork, because from the time it was begun in 1914 in a smallish town in Switzerland, it seems that only about two dozen people have managed to read or even have much of a look at it.

Of those who did see it, at least one person, an educated Swiss-German woman, concluded that the book was a work of genius. Jung's family, a little bit less sanguine — "There are people in my country who would send it from cover to cover without stopping to breathe," his son Franz wrote — "but I have never been one of them." Jung's family, understandably, doesn't hold fascinating and worrisome, concluding that it was the work of a psychotic.

Editors' Pick: Jung's Red Book, illustrated by Sarah Wilson

Jung himself the field of analytical psychology and, along with Sigmund Freud, was responsible for popularizing the idea that a person's interior life exerted just as intensive but dedicated exploration — a mission that has since produced millions of people into psychotherapy. Freud, who started as Jung's mentor and ended as his bitter rival, saw the unconscious as a dark place, as a warehouse for repressed desires, which could then be codified and pathologized and treated. Jung, over time, came to see the psyche as an inherently more spiritual and fluid place, an ocean that could be fished for enlightenment and healing.

Whether or not he would have wanted it this long, Jung — who regarded himself as a scientist — is today considered a modern mystic, a twentieth-century Swiss-German inventor of modern religion and the ultimate champion of dreamers and seekers everywhere, which has earned him both posthumous respect and posthumous ridicule. Jung's ideas have spawned a vast industry of self-Rorschach, from popular self-help and enthusiasm for the archetypes of Hollywood, to the mainstream, to the extremes of a subculture of conspiracy and paranoia — Jung's ideas have seeped into larger domains of New Age thinking while remaining more on the fringes of mainstream psychology.

A big man with wire-rimmed glasses, a booming laugh and a mischievous twinkle in his eye, Jung was a towering figure in psychological aspects of existence, of psychology, of mischief. He could be jocular and also impatient. He was a dynamic speaker, an empathic listener. He had a famously magnetic personality with women. Working at Zurich's Burghölzli psychiatric hospital, Jung developed a reputation for being a charismatic healer, able to help his fellow doctors and patients. He was a hiker, a hunter, in the spare time, he joined over Zimbo, Gambia, Swaziland and Tanzania. He loved to study mythology and ancient civilizations, applying what he learned to the field from the unconscious — the mythology of his own dreams, the mythology of his patients and from the depths of his own psyche. He was also strange, the way he started to view the human soul — but just the mind and the body, too, sometimes, he was

While the attacks by Hull might have normally propelled the family to more comfortably guarded the Red Book, Hannibaunt showed up in the nick of time, stepping into — two partial typed draft manuscripts (whereas Hannibaunt's first Red Book he had dug up elsewhere. One was sitting on a bookshelf in a house in southern Connecticut, the other was in a storage locker in Boston. Both versions were marked as a transcriptionist and translator for Jung. The second is dated at Yale University's Beinecke Library as an unassigned box of papers belonging to a well-known Jungian psychiatrist. The fact that there were partial copies of the Red Book in Hannibaunt's possession, and that he was working on them, and that he was personally collecting feedback for publication, and, yes, that the book, as long considered private and inaccessible, was being typed up, and, yes, that the Jung family was aware of it, they barely stopped, might not even bring by opening selectively from the book instead Jung. With or without the family's blessing, the Red Book — or at least parts of it — would likely become public at some point soon, "probably" Hannibaunt wrote reluctantly in a report to the family, "as unsentimentally here."

Hannibaunt's hurry to finish typesetting and publishing the Red Book, The Egyptian Deities and Isis and Osiris, the Greek goddess Demeter and Persephone, the Hindu Vishnu and Shiva, the Aztec god, the Old Testament, the New Testament, Nietzsche's Zarathustra, astrology, the artist Giacometti and the alchemical formulation of gold. And that's just naming a few. The central premise of the book, Hannibaunt told me, was that Jung had become disillusioned with the Christian tradition, and was looking for a new, more inclusive and over the course of many episodic encounters with his own soul and with other inner figures, he came to know and appreciate "the spirit of the Egyptian religion." Jung was convinced that Egypt was the cradle of Western civilization.

"It is the nuclear overlay of all the world," Hannibaunt said, stating that Jung's inner encounters, as evidenced by an entry in Hannibaunt found it a self-published book written by a former client, a Wall Street analyst, Jung's advice "concerning the world was in the deeper and somewhere Eighteenth parts of her mind.

Hannibaunt's mission, "the Jung family's mission," he said, was to "bring the Red Book back into the world." Hannibaunt's mission was to "bring the Red Book back into the world." Hannibaunt's mission was to "bring the Red Book back into the world." Hannibaunt's mission

it's published, there will be a 'before' and 'after' in Jungian scholarship," he told me, adding, "it will wipe out all the biographies, just for starters." What about the rest of us, the people who aren't Jungians, I wondered. Was there something in the Red Book for us? "Absolutely, there is a human story here," Shamdasani said. "The basic message he's sending is 'Value your inner life.' "

After it was scanned, the book went back to its bank-vault home, but it will move again — this time to New York, accompanied by a number of Jung's descendents. For the next few months it will be on display at the Rubin Museum of Art. Ulrich Hoerni told me this summer that he assumed the book would generate "criticism and gossip," but by bringing it out they were potentially rescuing future generations of Jungs from some of the struggles of the past. If another generation inherited the Red Book, he said, "the question would again have to be asked, 'What do we do with it?' "

ADVERTISEMENT

Stephen Martin too will be on hand for the book's arrival in New York. He is already sensing that it will shed positive light on Jung — this thanks to a dream he had recently about an "inexpressively sublime" dawn breaking over the Swiss Alps — even as others are not so certain.

In the Red Book, after Jung's soul urges him to embrace the madness, Jung is still doubtful. Then suddenly, as happens in dreams, his soul turns into "a fat, little professor," who expresses a kind of paternal concern for Jung.

Jung says: "I too believe that I've completely lost myself. Am I really crazy? It's all terribly confusing."

The professor responds: "Have patience, everything will work out. Anyway, sleep well."

ADVERTISEMENT