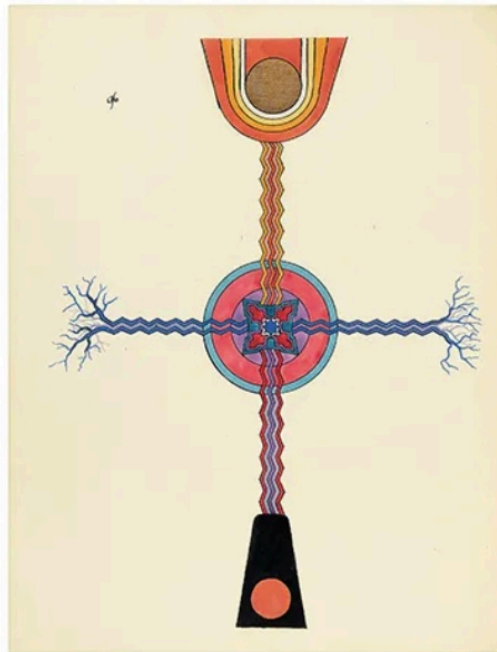


PURPLE

THE MAGIC ISSUE

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CARL G. JUNG



visual essay

the red book liber novus

"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." THESE WERE THE WORDS OF THE PSYCHOLOGIST CARL G. JUNG IN 1957, REFERRING TO THE BOOK HE WORKED ON FROM 1914 TO 1930 AND KEPT SECRET ALL HIS LIFE: *THE RED BOOK*. THIS DISTINCTIVE PIECE OF ART EMBODIES HIS PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY, BLENDING CULTURAL ARCHETYPES WITH PSYCHOLOGY SHAPED BY HIS CONCEPT OF THE COLLECTIVE UNCONSCIOUS — ONE OF THE MAIN REASONS FOR HIS BREAK WITH SIGMUND FREUD IN THE EARLY 1910S.

carl g. jung

ALL ILLUSTRATIONS FROM *THE RED BOOK: LIBER NOVUS* —
A *READER'S EDITION* BY CARL G. JUNG, A PHILEMON FOUNDATION
SERIES PUBLICATION (W.W. NORTON & COMPANY, INC., NEW YORK
AND LONDON), 2009, REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION FROM
THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORKS OF CARL G. JUNG, ZÜRICH

the story of a secret book

text by luca governatori

In the 1910s, Carl G. Jung experienced a profound period of crisis. He had just broken ties with Sigmund Freud and resigned from his post at the University of Zurich. Despite holding a prestigious position as president of the International Psychoanalytic Association, he felt compelled to devote time to confronting his own unconscious, as if he had only skimmed the surface of its mysteries. It all began one day on a train in the fall of 1913, when he was struck by a sudden vision of waves of blood engulfing Europe, bringing the death of countless thousands. Though it seemed like nothing more than a terrifying hallucination, an inner voice told him: "Look closely – it's quite real, and it will be so. You cannot doubt it." Jung was deeply troubled by this event, fearing for his mental health. But in the following months, as World War I erupted and wreaked havoc, he understood that his vision had revealed the future of humanity. He began to theorize that the unconscious might connect us to a dimension beyond linear time, offering access to knowledge that exceeds the bounds of reason.

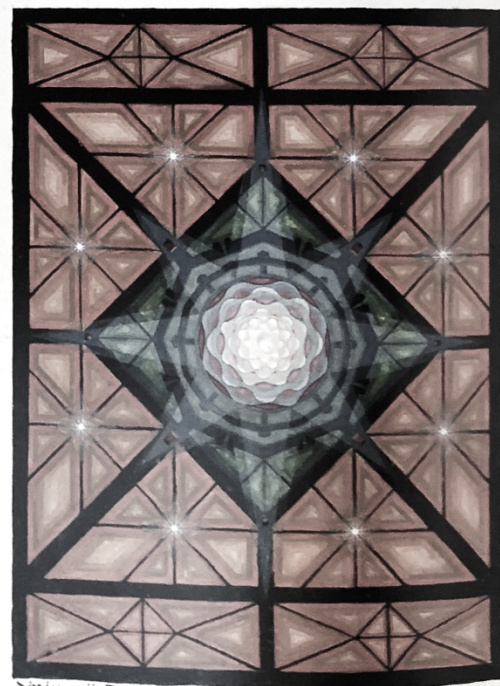
Fueled by this hypothesis, Jung embarked on a series of experiments over many months, grounded in the principle of "active imagination," a key method of exploring the unconscious that he would later recommend to his patients. In a state of calm akin to meditation, he allowed himself to be engulfed by a stream of spontaneous, imaginary sensations forming within him. He realized that these were not mere fantasies, but something with its own internal logic and autonomous life. However, these experiences were far from restful. Jung found himself overwhelmed by their intensity, as if caught in the volcanic flow of a lava stream. These visions conjured specters, spirits, and mythological creatures, each arriving with vehement "demands." It was a true "descent into the underworld," reminiscent of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Yet Jung chose to confront this torrent, establishing an ongoing dialogue with the forces stirring within him.

With a unique and strange dramaturgy, each experience was meticulously recorded in a series of notebooks. Eventually, Jung realized that these records needed to be transformed into a comprehensive work. On an enormous manuscript bound in red leather covers, he dedicated himself to a project that would occupy him for over a decade. He transcribed his inner dialogues in Gothic script, analyzing them and, alongside this, drawing the contents of his visions with a painting talent he had previously developed. This compilation would become the enigmatic and monumental *The Red Book: Liber Novus* ("new book" in Latin), which he refused to publish during his lifetime, fearing it would be seen as the work of a madman.

The discoveries that led Jung to break with Freud were largely tied to a complete shift in perspective regarding the nature of the unconscious. For Jung, the unconscious could not be reduced to a mere regulator of childhood-derived instinctual conflicts. Through extensive observations, particularly of schizophrenic patients, he illuminated the autonomous existence of the unconscious and revealed that it contained elements of a unique nature – what he termed "archetypes." These archetypes form a reality that transcends the confines of the ego. Jung discovered, much as in the great Eastern spiritual traditions, that at the core of the unconscious lies the Self. He described this Self as akin to "God within us." To him, the roots of our psychic life are deeply anchored in this dimension, along with our highest aspirations.

In essence, Jung proposed that we harbor two simultaneous existences that intersect and interweave within us: a personal existence, bounded by time and space, and a "transpersonal" existence that precedes birth and endures after death. For Freud, this idea was an unacceptable distortion of his theory of the unconscious. But for Jung, it opened a narrow yet captivating path where psychology, at its deepest level, becomes a spiritual quest – a quest for the Holy Grail.

The drawings and illuminations that populate *The Red Book* are not merely decorative or illustrative. They possess a life of their own, capturing what concepts alone cannot express. Born from Jung's intense and radical immersion



Die Illustration vom 19.12.1917 über Hermetismus Jung auf S. 52. Sammlung MGG.

in the unconscious, these images bring to the surface what lies hidden or submerged. They depict a psychic heritage inherited from ancient cultures such as India, Egypt, and Greece, and in some cases, the drawings reveal the invisible substratum of physical matter. This is how the primordial forms of our energetic structure – the “chakras,” as they are known in the East – emerge within its pages. Jung, who intuitively rendered these currents of energy just as they appear in Eastern mandalas, in the shape of a star surrounded by petals, had not yet delved into the details of Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist philosophies (though he would study them later). He independently uncovered the fundamental grammar taught by these great mystical traditions.

This grammar, which seeks to balance opposing forces and harmonize the energy of these chakras, aims to link the “chthonic dimension” of existence (symbolized by the serpent) to the “stellar nature” of the soul. This journey is indeed a formidable adventure, as the depths of the unconscious unveil a fierce struggle: a battle between the ego, which claims omnipotence, and the soul, striving to make the self the conscious center of existence. Much like in numerous myths, this conflict is not merely symbolic but an actual struggle to vanquish the creature – the “accursed dragon” – through which egotistical drives manifest. Only under these conditions can the peripheral forces be balanced, allowing a “window open to eternity” (as Jung referred to one of his mandalas) to truly occupy the center, symbolized by a lotus flower or a ruby. The self is no longer overshadowed by the ego, which begins to orbit around it, much like the Earth around the sun.

Thousands of faces can then surround and express this central core, reflecting our true identity, which is never reducible to any single one of its myriad facets.

Jung’s uniqueness lies in his refusal to be categorized strictly as either a true theoretician or a spiritual messenger. Unlike Freud, he never settled on a definitive theory, nor did he position himself as a prophet. Instead, he walked a delicate line between the two, embodying above all else the role of an explorer of consciousness. Jung dared to surrender himself entirely to the unknown, navigating beyond scientific truths and beneath religious dogmas. He chose not to publish his *Red Book* to prevent it from becoming a static, revered artifact. Instead, he wanted to inspire us to discover and explore our own inner books. His paintings and drawings capture the primal force that springs from direct experience, suggesting that it alone holds the true key to existence.

For Jung, the universal is not something that can be universalized; it must be continually rediscovered, as suggested by the closing line of *The Red Book*, which speaks of the path to “being alone with oneself.” This is where Jung situates the question of “magic,” and it’s no coincidence that the inner odyssey described in *The Red Book* concludes in a countryside home where the magician Philemon and his wife Baucis reside. Far from the shadowy, often misunderstood figure of the sorcerer, Philemon and Baucis lead a simple life with childlike concerns. Jung writes, “They water their tulip bed and talk together about the flowers that have just bloomed.” For them, magic is not supernatural. On the contrary, it is fundamentally natural because nature itself is magical. This serves as a reminder, as expressed in *The Red Book*, that life knows no rules and that its only, mysterious “law” is its lawlessness.

In this sense, magic is akin to “wild wisdom,” the art of entering into absolute sympathy with the fundamentally inexplicable aspects of life. It is an art available to everyone, for as Jung wrote, it is an “innate gift that every person possesses.”

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