The Red Book in the Context of Jung’s Paintings

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The Red Book’s impact and the enthusiasm with which the public has welcomed it since its publication are undoubtedly due, in large measure, to its exceptional aesthetic quality. The calligraphic text and the images reveal Jung as a man gifted with amazing artistic skills, an immense creative talent, and a remarkable sense of color.

Jung has painted seventy-three pictures in The Red Book. This number actually takes into account only the pictures that stand out because of their important size. The huge amount of pictorial material clearly shows the importance that Jung attributed to the creation of images in the confrontation with the unconscious. For him, images were obviously much more than simple ornamentations of his text. He perceived them above all as totally valuable autonomous bearers of meaning.

If one observes the totality of the pictorial material spread throughout The Red Book, one immediately perceives differences from one phase to the other. One discovers different sections in the book. These sections are distinguishable by the fact that they contain several pictures related to each other by common characteristics of style or by their content.

In the course of the painting process, significant changes indeed occur in the style of painting and the themes also change in a characteristic way. The changes are not only the result of an increasing mastery in the use of the medium. The first pictures certainly appear a bit clumsy compared to the later images, and over the years, Jung obviously gained much technical skill. The changes, however, concern primarily the content of the paintings. They mirror the fact that in his confrontation with the unconscious Jung has gone through different phases. These phases appear to be stages in a process of experience, which can be understood in its completeness as a “phenomenology of the soul” (in analogy to Hegel’s Phenomenology of the Spirit, 1807/1977).

The phases describe different levels of access to the reality of the soul, or, to put it the other way around, different ways in which the reality of the soul has made itself known.

Rather than comment upon all seventy-three images, I will limit myself to eight paintings. I have chosen them from each of the phases of the painting process, and they convey something about the different dimensions of the soul experience in which Jung immersed himself through his creation of The Red Book.
The first picture concerns the ornate initial D at the very beginning of *The Red Book*. It is the first letter of the title, “**Der Weg des Kommenden**” (“The Way of What Is to Come”). The sweeping D includes three levels: the upper part with the celestial bodies and the astrological signs of the zodiac; the lower part, the level of water with all sorts of fish and sea vegetation as well as the underlying volcanic crust; and in between, a Swiss landscape with a medieval town in the foothills of the Alps with city walls and, in front of it, on the beach, an old sailing ship equipped for an ocean crossing.

What is expressed in the title of the chapter acknowledges *The Red Book* itself as a path, a path of experience. There is a ship ready to set sail, which is equipped for a long journey. The journey leads not just to the nearest shore of Lake Zurich, but, by evoking the Santa Maria of Christopher Columbus, it leads to the discovery of a new continent.

The starting point is a secure world with stable values and traditional moral rules contained in a closed collective represented by the church, the castle, and town walls. The picture seems to suggest that this trip that is about to start is anything but an enjoyable cruise: it will require letting go of the individual’s strong convictions and irrefutable certainties. The red flag under which the ship will be sailing is not the Swiss flag: if it were, what is to come would continue to be approached according to already known collective notions.
The red color of the flag makes us think rather of *The Red Book:* for Jung, *The Red Book* had a meaning similar to the flag on a ship. A flag reveals the identity of the ship’s operator and nationality. Therefore, because of its symbolic connection with the flag, *The Red Book* is to be understood as something that helped Jung to own *a posteriori* the experience he had previously developed in the Black Books and to make it visible and recognizable as something of value for the collective.

The experience that is about to be developed will not be drawn only from the mainland from which the ship is departing in the middle part of the picture: it will be drawn also from the upper and lower areas that are included in the image (in the initial *D*). We see a sky with clouds and over it the universe with its stars, and we see a lake that leads into the depths of the sea and the seabed. The familiar atmosphere of the individual’s inner world, the sphere of the personal consciousness and unconscious, is being expanded to reach a dimension that goes beyond the personal realm. The view opens up into space, where super-personal factors, archetypal ideas, and time constellations are operating; and it plunges into the depths of the collective unconscious, where the archaic structures and the ordering factors of the psychic fundamentals are present.

Jung’s journey seems not to be defined only in terms of his own lifetime but to come within the scope of a much wider collective time horizon: the journey is undertaken in the service of what is to come; the star that appears in the upper-right corner, which symbolically refers to the future and is reminiscent of the Star of Bethlehem, points to an important event in which something new announces itself, something that wants to incarnate.

In this journey toward what is to come, both the upper and lower realms are involved. The personal, consciousness and unconscious, as well as the collective, consciousness and unconscious, each have a formative influence. Both levels are at work in the images and imaginations emerging from the unconscious as well as in Jung’s conscious thoughts and the comments he makes.

The bringing-into-relationship of both levels is precisely what constitutes an active imagination, and it is that which Jung practices in *The Red Book,* with an immense patience and perseverance. The letter *D* includes in its large arch both levels - the level of mind, consciousness and meaning, on the one hand; and the level of the image, of the unconscious and of sensuality, on the other hand; this seems to affirm from the very beginning the method that will bring forth the whole experience. The curve of the *D,* like a sail puffed up by the wind, provides a visible expression of the transcendent function, which plays an essential role in the mediation of these opposites; it is also the transcendent function, as we know, which leads beyond previous perspectives, transcending prior self-evident concepts and opening the mind to the new awareness of what is to come.

And now a last detail represented in the image: the black and white snake that winds itself on the vertical beam of the *D* between a vessel containing fire at the bottom and a royal crown at the top. What could this mean? Perhaps it could indicate that the process leading to new insights (on the way of what is to come) is a painful one. It is a process that starts from the immediate experience of an individual, of Jung himself, and demands from him extreme effort and sacrifice (the blazing fire) before the crown of new knowledge, expressed in a reliable scientific form, can be reached.
This image represents Izdubar. It makes reference to a subsequent passage and illustrates the encounter with a powerful being identical with Gilgamesh as described in that passage:

Two bull horns rise from his great head, and rattling a suit of armor covers his chest. His black beard is ruffled and decked with exquisite stones. The giant is carrying a sparkling double axe in his hand, like those used to strike bulls. ( . . ) This is Izdubar, the mighty, the bull-man. (Jung 2009, 278)

In this imagination, Jung meets a powerful awe-inspiring male face-to-face. He kneels down at the edge of the picture in a worshipful attitude in front of the mighty being. The broad shoulders, like those of a Roman legionnaire, characterize him. On them appears a head armed with bull’s horns. Symbolically speaking, this being evokes an immense spiritual creative potential, referring to fertile ideas and to the generative spiritual power of imagination.

The figure of the hero is wearing a red garment, on which appears a design evoking a labyrinth or Egyptian hieroglyphics. It suggests an enigmatic script and cryptic meaning. Perhaps we could see in it also a symbol of the living material of the myth that this creative spirit of the Mediterranean generated and with which it has, so to say, clothed itself.
The blue breastplate protects and, at the same time, creates distance: symbolically, we can also see it playing a compensatory role in relationship to the red garment with mythical patterns; the color contrast between the two expresses a differentiation between blue reason and technology, on the one hand, and the civilizing role of mythical thinking, on the other hand—both aspects belonging to this masculine spirit.

It is a self-conscious spirit, which, by itself, simultaneously affirms and negates. The figure is shown armed with a double axe, symbolizing separation (splitting), judgment, and differentiation. Through such differentiating action, the mere fact of being and the blind-worldliness, as suggested by the many crocodile-layers in the foreground, give birth to a blue clearing into which the light of meaning can occur. The background of the world becomes animated by the presence of imaginary winged serpents.

Apparently, Jung’s imagination has encountered a symbolic personification of mythical thinking, an embodiment of the mythical dimension. He is filled with wonder and awe in front of its power and size. But he is aware that a powerful adversary of the mythical thinking and the mythical time has developed: western science and modern scientific thinking. This conflict manifests itself in the dramatic dialogue that takes place between Jung and Izdubar in the course of an imagination that follows in the book. Izdubar shrinks and becomes interiorized as an inner fantasy. The world- and culture-creating mythical factor becomes an intrapsychic reality; it is no longer a dominant factor ruling over culture and civilization.
This picture is beautifully realized from a technical point of view. Its six conical shapes create an optical effect of the kind that one can find in mosaics.

Here, we discover an unusual double perspective: we can see the flat circular discs and, at the same time, we see behind them. More precisely, we see how each conical form generates a peak of a lighter color, above or under it, or, on the contrary, emerges from that peak. From this perspective, we can say that the picture has a mandala character that comes from this depth of field. We see not only the surface but also its origin. We see not only the immediate, tangible reality of the foreground, with the circular shapes made of mosaic-like elements but also the luminous layers behind them, their spiritual, transcendental background. One could say that here we are shown the metaphysical ground of reality, what lies behind the physical.

We clearly see that in this meta-psychological realm of the depth, behind the physical or psychological level of reality, the upper blue cones and the lower green ones come into contact. Perhaps the pole of spirit and consciousness, characterized by the color blue and the pole of nature, represented in green, end up touching each other. This corresponds exactly to the idea of a *unus mundus*, which Jung developed later, with the notion of synchronicity at its very center.
In the middle of the image, however, are two cones of different sizes, which do not touch each other. The bigger one is anchored in the top part of the picture; the smaller one in the bottom part. The upper cone (with its yellow-orange luminosity) evokes the realm of spiritual transcendence; the lower cone (with its warm red color, reminiscent of lava) evokes, on the other hand, an opposite kind of transcendence: one that has to do with emotions and passions, the realm of the demonic immanence. One could even say the Luciferian realm. These two cones do not touch each other but seem, on the contrary, to be in opposition to each other. Nevertheless, they are both situated on the central axis of the picture: because of this, they evoke a *coincidentia oppositorum*.

Perhaps we could understand this picture as a sort of hymn to the coincidence of fundamental opposites, to their belonging together: it could, therefore, represent what Jung saw as constituting the deepest reality of the soul, namely, a mediating entity bringing the opposites into relationship as a self-regulating principle.

**Picture 4: Mandala with Egg Form**

This mandala, probably painted in 1918, completes a series of eighteen mandalas, which are neither inserted in a text nor made reference to.

I have chosen to concentrate my attention on this specific one as it summarizes the developments that have previously taken place through the elaboration of the series.

It has the shape of an egg. It is vertical, pointing downward, and looks like a huge cosmic egg floating in the waters of the unconscious. The motif of the egg suggests the idea of becoming, of
creativity, of “potentiality” (which is actually the very last word of *The Red Book*). It contains within itself a wealth of complex circular shapes reminiscent of fish spawn. Also, these can evoke the potentialities of creative thinking.

It has a fourfold shape, which symbolizes its earthly reality, and it has an eight-point star in the middle. Four blue and four red arcs unfold out of it. At the same time, four streams or umbilical cord-like lines evolve from the center and connect the internal shape of the egg-mandala with four outer points.

We have here again an image of the self in which, on the one hand, the interaction between inner and outer sphere and, on the other hand, the notion of becoming, are meaningful. The notion of becoming is symbolized by the egg shape, the spawns, the “umbilical cord” and the movement of waves. The exchange between inner and outer realities is represented by the connection between the mandala and the four outer points. We can actually speak here of a kind of cosmology. We are presented with the description of an inner cosmos, a microcosm that is connected to an outer macrocosm. The self is here described as a reality *sui generis*, as the self-generating principle of individuation. As such, it does not simply revolve around itself, isolated, but also includes within itself the substance of the outer reality. Individuation is not just a solipsistic self-reflection, but, as Jung will say later, it includes “the world.”
With this picture, my job is, for once, easier since Jung himself has interpreted it in his article "Concerning Mandala Symbolism":

"In the centre, [says Jung,] is a star. The blue sky contains golden clouds. At the four cardinal points we see human figures: at the bottom, Loki or Hephaestus with red, flaming hair, holding in his hands a temple. To the right and left are a light and a dark female figure. Together they indicate four aspects of the personality, or four archetypal figures belonging, as it were, to the periphery of the self. The two female figures can be recognized without difficulty as the two aspects of the anima. The old man corresponds to the archetype of meaning, or of the spirit, and the dark chthonic figure to the opposite of the Wise Old Man. ... The circle enclosing the sky contains structures or organisms that look like protozoa. The sixteen globes painted in four colors just outside this circle derived originally from an eye motif and therefore stand for the observing and discriminating consciousness. Similarly, the ornaments in the next circle, all opening inwards, are rather like vessels pouring out their content towards the centre. On the other hand the ornaments along the rim open outwards, as if to receive something from outside. That is, in the individuation process what were originally projections stream back "inside" and are integrated into the personality again." (1950/1968, CW 9i, 682)
The image reminds us of a stained-glass window in a Gothic church. The motif of rose petals and the heavy framing of the whole mandala, which looks as if made out of lead, evokes such associations. The association with a monstrance (in the Roman Catholic communion ceremony, an open vessel in which the host, symbolizing the body of Christ, is held) also comes to mind. Because of this, the mandala has a numinous quality: it refers to a transcendent center, a glittering star in the dark sky (a black sky, not a blue one!). It makes me immediately think of a dream that Jung had some twenty-eight years later and described in a letter to Victor White:

„Yesterday I had a marvelous dream: One bluish diamond-like star high in heaven, reflected in a round, quiet pool—Heaven above, heaven below. The imago Dei in the darkness of the Earth, this is myself. The dream meant a great consolation. I am no more a black and endless sea of misery and suffering but a certain amount thereof contained in a divine vessel“. (Lammers and Cunningham, 2007, December 18, 1946)

This mandala, therefore, also can be described as a divine vessel. In his description, Jung talks about several layers forming part-vessels for holding the imago dei. Psychologically speaking, vessels are different modes of conception. One could say that these represent attempts to grasp the transcendent reality of the soul in the vessel of consciousness—or to approach closer to its mystery with the help of the four functions of consciousness that are represented in the mandala: The innermost circle with the green single-celled organisms could correspond to the mode of perception connected with sensation; the subsequent circle, with its multiple fourfold rings, could evoke the differentiated mode of perception of the thinking function; the next circle, painted in red and formed by symmetrical shapes resembling rose petals could then refer to the feeling function; and then the ring at the edge of the mandala with the fan-shaped forms opening toward the outside would represent intuition.

In addition to consciousness, the anima and the animus also appear as vessels for the internalization of the soul and as manifestations of its reality: they are, in Jung’s words, soul images that reveal to the ego the existence of a soul reality. Anima and animus acquaint the ego with the inner world, with the realm of the soul and its autonomous energy. They generate in the individual an awareness of the fact that beyond the outer reality of this concrete world there exists another reality, the absolute spiritual reality of the soul. This is actually the very central theme of The Red Book: the rediscovery of the soul’s own reality that has been lost under the influence of the Spirit of the Time.

Soul as a vessel to receive the imago dei with the help of the four functions of consciousness and with the mediation of anima and animus: this seems to be, roughly speaking, a way of looking at the reality of soul that is suggested by this picture.
This picture is an image of Jung’s new God image, which has emerged from the depths of his soul after much effort. It is the representation of Phanes, a divinity that belongs to the gnostic tradition. Jung comments about it in *The Red Book*: “He is imagined as marvelously beautiful, a figure of shining light, with golden wings on his shoulders . . . He is of both sexes, since he is to create the race of the gods unaided. He is described as the brilliant one, a God of beauty and light” (2009, 301, fn211).

In the Black Books, the description of this figure is made in a text that has the quality of a hymn and that recalls litanies. For instance, Philemon describes Phanes with the following attributes:

Phanes is the smile of dawn.
Phanes is the resplendent day.
He is the immortal present.
. . . He is hunger and satiation.
He is love and lust.
He is mourning and consolation.
He is promise and fulfillment . . . He is the joy at every birth
. . . He is the song of joy (301, fn211)

This picture represents Jung’s attempt to allow the many paradoxical characteristics of this new God image in pictorial form. He is male and female, child and adult, dressed in the precious golden gown of absolute values and, at the same time, playful like a harlequin or a doll and friendly to human beings. It is a creative principle, which, with its circular forms, brings forth the multiple potentialities of self-development—a figure that is at the same time stable and everchanging, simple and multiple.
When we consider these characteristics of Phanes, we could, I think, see them not only as a representation of Jung’s God image but also of what constitutes the very essence of Jung’s genius. It appears to me like an image of his deepest aims, a representation of the spirit that ultimately and profoundly moved him; it appears as a representation of his vocation as a man and as a scientist; a representation of the God image that most profoundly determined his understanding of the soul and of the way to approach it.

Jung’s conception of the human being and his understanding of psychic reality is inspired essentially by the polarity between the masculine and the feminine, to which the image, with its androgynous quality, is referring; in addition, Jung’s psychology favors a mercurial playful attitude as seen in his therapeutic goal that aims at a “dissolution of an attitude and a capacity to experiment with oneself” (1931/1966, CW 16, 999); it consists in stimulating creative energies with the goal of transforming the personality, which is the central idea of individuation; and finally, it is determined by the notion of the essentially paradoxical quality of the psychic reality. These specific features of Jung’s view of the psyche are well represented in this God image of. It provides us with an immediately perceptible representation of the very core of Jung’s concept of the soul.
Jung has accompanied this impressive image with a short comment:

„The accursed dragon has eaten the sun, its belly being cut open and he must now [instead of „not“ in the English translation] hand over the gold of the sun, together with his blood. This is the conversion [instead of „turning back“ in the English translation] of Atmavictu, of the old one. He who destroyed the proliferating green covering is the youth who helped me to kill Siegfried“. (2009, 119)

Atmavictu is a dragon that appears for the second time in The Red Book. He is described as the „Old One“ who dies and resurrects in a new form. He is the snake of the creative energy, the very core of the Self. It is the self-manifesting supreme wisdom of the Self, which later will speak through Philemon. Jung also uses the term „the breath of life,” the creative impulse as such. Atmavictu is Jung’s daimon: this is the reason why he also represented it in wood and stone sculptures.

This elementary creative power has also a destructive aspect. It is not only affirmatively constructive but also negatively destructive. Goethe has expressed this dual nature of creativity in words often quoted by Jung: „Gestaltung, Umgestaltung, des ewigen Geistes ewige Unterhaltung“ (Formation,
transformation, this is the eternal spirit’s eternal game) (1808, 193. Quote from German original). Because of this, Jung rightly talks about the “accursed” dragon. The dragon has, indeed, a negating aspect: it devours the “light of the sun.” In other words, it annihilates the enlightening collective values, the generally admitted convictions. It cancels the traditional facts. This is the destructive aspect of negation inherent to any creativity that opens new paths.

The picture shows not only the figure of Atmavictu but also the fight of the hero with this changing archaic energy. The hero’s fight could, therefore, also show that what is represented here is the confrontation with this creative energy, the necessity to enter into contact with it and to integrate it. The confrontation leads to Atmavictu’s conversion, which is a transformation of the elementary creative energy. Thanks to this transformation, part of it can become available to the individual.

The integration takes place through cutting open the belly and destroying the green covering. One can see this covering as the manifestation of the creative spirit in obsolete symbolic forms, in “dead symbols” as Jung later would say, which cannot give adequate expression to the living spirit anymore (1921/1971, CW 6, 7816).

A young man kills the old Atmavictu—the same young man who had helped Jung to kill Siegfried in a previous imagination. When the young man kills the old one, it becomes evident that the killing refers essentially to a renewal. In that previous imagination, he was killing Siegfried; that is, he was overcoming a heroic attitude belonging to the Spirit of the Time, a striving for perfection. In other words, since here it is the same young man who opens up the belly of the dragon, the fight obviously aims at liberating oneself from established opinions, thinking patterns, and prejudices that are collectively accepted.

And what about the blood that must be shed? It could perhaps mean that the blood of vital emotions that was imprisoned in abstract symbolic forms and in the structures of science, religion, and objective thinking has now been freed. From these liberated emotions, new symbols will come to life: from suffering and pain. This is a recurring idea throughout The Red Book.
This picture is different from all the others in *The Red Book*. It already stands out by its size: it is one of the largest, if not the largest one. It also differs from the others in that it has two distinct image levels with two very different pictorial styles.

The upper part of the image shows a golden circular mandala-like disc with a red cross and a red circumference. Similar to the protuberances of a sun, the mandala-like form sends into the space eight intense rays of energy, burning in red and white. The fire expands into the blue sky in a more refined and complex flickering of light.

The golden fire disc is like a creative primordial source, an absolute divine beginning, a becoming out of itself, an inexhaustible fountain of energy and light. It represents the autonomous sun-like active force of the Self, which acts out of itself, *sui generis*, bringing forth life, constellating developments, and generating knowledge. We may think of the overpowering force of the original experiences “Jung talks about in the Epilogue of *The Red Book* (2009, 360). Or it may evoke what he later calls “immediate experience”: that is, the experience of being captured by the central archetype of the Self and by its immediate inner revelations (1938/1958/1977, CW 11, 75).

The proximity of this creative factor *par excellence* triggers a fascinating wealth of insights *ex nihilo*, enthusiasm and awe. It points to the future while remaining grounded in its eternal sameness. Not accidently, this image is situated opposite to the opening of the chapter entitled “The Three Prophecies. Could it be that with this motif Jung was picturing the prophetic inspiration that comes
from an immediate experience of the autonomous reality and wisdom of the Self? Could it be that he expressed here the basic experience he had while working on *The Red Book*: the experience of a tool and vessel for an autonomous “process of revelation,” providing knowledge of general importance that later had to be patiently processed in a lifelong meticulous work of differentiation?

Opposite to this upper half of the picture with the motif of numinous knowledge generated by the Self, we find a significant difference. We witness here a rather grayish and ordinary foreground: the realm of everyday life. The horizontal dimension is clearly stressed by the flat plain where the whole scene takes place and by the accentuated horizontal wisps of smoke coming from the train engines, the chimneys, and the steamboat. Here we are obviously in the realm of concrete worldly existence with its characteristic horizontal “down to earth” dimension.

This reality of outer life and everyday existence is further expressed as a social world represented by numerous boundaries and special connections. Boundaries take several forms. A heavy fence, for instance, surrounds the garden of the wealthy owner. In the lower-right corner at the bottom of the picture, we discover military fortifications, which also point to the idea of a territory that has to be defended. The combative shooting, as well as marching and guarding soldiers, make further reference to boundaries and to the distinction between being at home and abroad, between one’s home country and the world. A town wall with towers surrounds the medieval town in the center.

Complementary to the division and differentiation of boundaries is the reality of relationship and connection, which is also explicitly stressed: indeed, we discover telephone lines, power lines, traffic links, and conveyances such as railways, cars, and boats that characterize a world of exchange and interpersonal communication.

This lower area of the picture, therefore, represents a rather complete inventory of real life. It could stand for that dimension that Jung will later on describe as the realm of Personality Number 1, which he characterizes as the „Spirit of the Time“ (Zeitgeist) at the beginning of *The Red Book*. Jung saw himself as belonging to this earthly dimension and being responsibly connected to it. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961/1989), he insists on how important it had been for him to be safely anchored in his professional activity and family life when he undertook the big experiment of *The Red Book*.

Two different realms are, therefore, represented in this image: in the upper part, the realm of Personality Number 2, of inner experiences under the direction of the Self, the domain of the „Spirit of the Depths“; in the lower part, the realm of Personality Number 1, with its real-life connections within the scope of human society, the domain of the „Spirit of the Time“. Between the two, we discover a harlequin-like, mercurial male figure sitting with crossed legs. He is placed on a black cushion at the horizon of the concrete outer reality where he appears to bond with the horizontal foundation in the lower world, while seeming to absorb, on the other hand, a substance coming vertically from above in a red vase. Couldn’t this represent the „capturing“ (Auffangen) of overpowering archetypal forces through the physical development of *The Red Book*? Isn’t it also interesting in that respect that the vase is red? Could the vase correspond to *The Red Book*, the beautiful container Jung created with so much care to hold the overwhelming insights emerging from the Self?

We may perhaps push our interpretation of this motif even further and notice that the figure sits on a black cushion. Isn’t it strange that the basis of *The Red Book* is to be found in the records Jung made of his inner imaginings in what he called the Black Books?
This figure mediating between the horizontal and vertical dimensions and sitting in a meditative attitude at the juncture of the lower earthly world of human beings and the upper spiritual world of the divine is a being who seems to facilitate transitions and reconciliations: he appears like a genius of revelation and prophecy. His mediating role resembles that of Philemon guiding Jung along his journey into new territories. The alternating bright and dark stripes and the contrasting black and white on the chest evoke a dialectical being. It could symbolize a mercurial consciousness, which like the mythological Mercurius, has a bipolar adaptability. Thankfully, he can establish connections, mediate between opposites, and anticipate new developments. It was most probably this kind of spirit that animated Jung when he undertook the great endeavor of The Red Book.