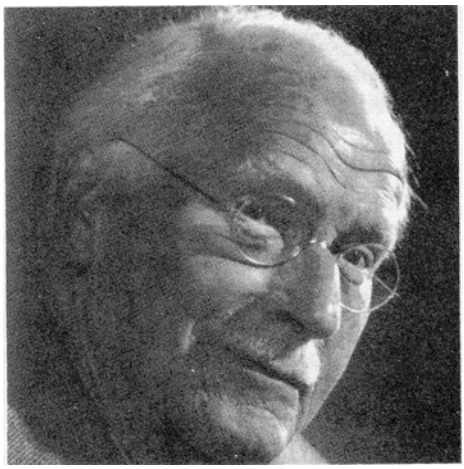
Jung and The Age of The Spirit

John Wren-Lewis



A somewhat equivocal sign of the growing interest in spiritual and mystical issues over the past few years was mentioned to me the other day by a librarian. She said surveys have shown that an author with one of the highest counts of books stolen from library shelves is Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist who died an octogenarian in 1961 and first became famous half a century earlier by breaking publicly with Freud, insisting that the religious urge in human nature is a significant force in its own right, not merely a by-product of repressed sexuality. I wonder how Jung would have felt about the theft of his books as a manifestation of the spiritual age of Aquarius, which incidentally he was one of the very first to announce, back in the darkest days of World War Two?

The latest study of Jung's life and work, recently out in English translation from a German original, suggests that he might not have been particularly surprised. The book is called simply, *Jung: A Biography*, and is by Gerhard Wehr, who comes to his subject from a wide background knowledge of spiritual movements in Europe — his previous writings include a book on Christian esotericism and studies of the seventeenth century mystic Jakob Bohme, of Nietzsche and Rudolph Steiner. To my mind this is the best book about Jung yet. It is more detached and objective than those written by Jung's disciples — for example, Barbara Hannah's *C.G. Jung: His Life and Work*, published in 1976. (Such writers tend to take his psychological theories as gospel and sometimes turn him into a kind of stained-glass saint.) And it is more appreciative of his significance than the somewhat gossipy works of Colin Wilson, Paul Stern or Morris West, which in emphasising the human-all-too-human Jung, miss out on his greatness. I'm personally very dubious about many aspects of the Jungian psychological system, but would still bet that he'll be seen by history as perhaps the greatest figure of our time.

John Wren-Lewis retired after a distinguished career as a scientist holding positions in industry and universities. He was founder-chair of AHP(B) in 1970 and now lives in Australia, where he is President of the Australian Institute of Parapsychology.

Jung was in no way starry-eyed about the spiritual impulse in human nature, as Wehr's book repeatedly makes clear. On the contrary, he knew very well from his psychological work that when people actually begin to experience life's mystical dimension, as distinct from merely living by a creed of faith, there is often a sense of being caught up into realities so far above the everyday that departures from conventional ethics — especially minor ones like purloining a library book you very much need — seem justified in the interests of the greater, longer-term spiritual good. In fact, Jung often emphasised this danger, but also insisted that it is not a reason for dismissing the spiritual impulse itself as spurious, as was the habit of Church establishments in his day.

Wehr's book tells Jung's story by showing how the psychologist's understanding of the spiritual dimension grew out of the man's own personal experience of it, right from childhood, when he was continually haunted by a sense of direct inner contact with some vast psychic force running through nature, which found no mention in school scientific textbooks, yet also didn't seem to fit with the 'gentle Jesus' Christianity of his pastor-father. At University in Zurich, Jung decided to challenge the extremely narrow materialism of the academic world by devoting his doctoral thesis to a psychiatric study of a medium, thereby making the point that such phenomena were part of the human scene and couldn't just be swept out of sight as mere aberrations or frauds. And at this juncture he seems himself to have succumbed to temptation in the interests of the greater long-term good.

It wasn't his aim to try to prove or disprove that anything really supernatural happened in mediumship — but he knew that if his examiners suspected him of even entertaining the idea, his credibility as an objective medical investigator would be doubted. So under the excuse of protecting his medium's confidentiality, he represented her as an hysterical, uneducated peasant girl whom he had encountered in the course of his work, when in fact she was his cousin. The lady's own story has since been told by another relative, whose book (not yet available in English) also reveals that Jung had been attending her seances for years, and had himself given her a book about a famous medium from which some of her more bizarre dictations in trance, about mysterious circular power-objects, almost certainly came.

Colin Wilson made this evasion on Jung's part a main feature of his entertaining little book *Lord of the Underworld: Jung and the Twentieth Century* back in 1984, but since he didn't document his sources, it was then little more than gossip. Wehr's is the first proper coverage of the story for English readers, and it makes the point that in this case, at least, forgiveness surely is in order, since the concealment didn't actually affect the psychological points of Jung's thesis, and he was able afterwards to go on and demonstrate that he did possess scientific ability of a high order, in his development of precise measurement in word-association tests as a tool of psychological investigation.

A more serious charge against Jung, still dredged up from time to time by critics, is that he was anti-semitic and flirted with Nazism in its early days. Wehr takes time out from his main theme of Jung as

explorer of the mystic dimension, to devote a whole chapter to laying this canard to rest, I hope for good. The allegation of anti-semitism has always been patent nonsense: many of Jung's closest friends and collaborators were jews, including Dr Aniela Jaffe, to whom he dictated his memoirs at the end of his life. As to Nazism, Jung's mistake, which he openly admitted long before the outbreak of war, was a naive failure to anticipate that a few remarks intended to 'give the devil his due' by calling attention to the enormous psychic energy in the movement, would be seized on by Hitler's supporters to claim Jung as an ally. Because of that, Jung's efforts in the later 1930s to keep open the lines of communication with German psychologists were misunderstood, though leading Jewish authorities have since agreed that this did far more good than harm to individual Jews in Germany. And Jung also did a great deal to alert European public opinion to the terrible power of the destructive forces Hitler was unleashing in the German psyche.

Incidentally, I can't help wondering whether, in the early 1930s, Hitler's romantic use of the term 'Third Reich' (or third kingdom) didn't hook on in Jung's mind to an idea often mentioned in his psychological writings, originally proclaimed by the Abbot Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth century, that history was divided into three great ages of kingdoms corresponding to the three persons of the Christian trinity. Ancient times had been the age or kingdom of the Father. when humanity was in childlike tutelage under externally-proclaimed laws for good behaviour. The centuries following Jesus had been the age or kingdom of the Son, when the spiritual nature of humanity had been actually demonstrated, yet was still only a second-hand ideal for most people. The Third Reich, yet to come, would see the prophecy of Jeremiah fulfilled, and spiritual energy experienced directly by everyone. Oddly, considering his background in these matters, Wehr makes no mention of Jung's interest in the Abbot Joachim, but one of Jung's pupils whom I knew in London in the 1950s claimed that Hitler had actually tuned in to the burgeoning age of the spirit and perverted its energy to evil ends. Could this have reflected Jung's own thinking, and underlain his hope that the turmoil of the war might herald the dawn of a real Aquarian age of spiritual awareness on an unprecedented scale?

Certainly, Jung himself underwent a dramatic spiritual opening of his own in those war years, when he nearly died of a heart attack in 1944, at age 69. He had an extraordinary experience of seemingly going through death into heavenly bliss, and his utter innocence of anti-semitic prejudice is surely demonstrated by the fact that his mind translated this into a vision of the legendary celestial marriage of Rabbi Simon ben Yochai from the Jewish Kabbalah. With a nice ecumenical twist, this vision faded into another of the Christian mystical 'marriage of the Lamb' in the heavenly Jerusalem. Nowadays, we would call this a near-death experience or NDE, and since Jung's time a whole new field of medico-psychological research has grown up around such experiences, though Wehr doesn't mention this in telling Jung's story.

It's a topic on which I can speak with some authority, since I had an NDE in

1983, when for four hours it was touch and go whether I would cross the brink or not. I've been closely involved with research in the field ever since (which I described in *S&S* in March 1991). Most of the stories about NDEs in the popular press concentrate on the ones where people find themselves floating out of their bodies and watching the death-scene from somewhere near the ceiling, but Jung's was altogether more spectacular, as befitting someone with a sense of himself as a world figure — he shot about fifteen hundred kilometres into space, and saw the whole globe of earth as astronauts have since done. And while there are some interesting claims that people on more limited out-of-body trips have seen objective events happening in the next room or at a distance, Jung's experience clearly wasn't objective in that sense, for he encountered a huge rock floating in space with a Hindu temple hollowed out of it, complete with flickering lights and cross-legged swami!

To say that such experiences are merely subjective, however, would be to miss the central point of all Jung's life work, which was that subjectivity is the most important thing in the human world, because it's what we are. What is emerging from modern NDE research is that proximity to death can open up a dimension of experience largely unsuspected in ordinary life, which mystics of all ages have called eternity, a kind of depth which is ultimate, uncaused happiness, and is not limited by time because the very process of time is contained within it. Sometimes when these depths first open up, the mind translates the experience into visionary terms, in which case the vision usually reflects the individual's personal concepts of the eternal: some people see angels, some see Buddha. Some, like me, get no visions, only the pure experience of timeless happiness, but the most significant thing is that once this new depth of consciousness has opened up, it remains as a new dimension in all ordinary life afterwards. And for me this comes over again and again in the closing chapters of Wehr's book, about the last years of Jung's life.

Wehr adds an appendix hinting that he may be planning another book on Jung's influence on the world, in which case I hope he'll include Jung's place in NDE research. Meantime I strongly recommend this book — but please don't steal it from your library.

Further Reading

Barbara Hannah, *C.G. Jung: His Life and Work*, Putnam, 1976

Carl Gustav Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Random House/Pantheon, 1963

Paul Stern, *C.G. Jung: The Haunted Prophet*, Brazzilier, 1976

Gerhard Wehr, *Jung, a Biography*, (David M. Weeks, transl.), Shambhala, 1988

Morris West, *The World is Made of Glass*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1983

Colin Wilson, *Lord of the Underworld: Jung and the Twentieth Century*, Aquarian Press, 1984

John Wren-Lewis, 'A Reluctant Mystic' in *Self & Society*, March/April 1991