



Jung Watts: notes on C.G. Jung's formative influence on Alan Watts

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ABSTRACT

This article contains brief notes concerning C.G. Jung's early influence on Alan Watts' life and work. Three themes are addressed. First is the bearing of Jung's commentary on *The Secret of the Golden Flower* upon Watts' early thinking about Christianity in relationship to the East. Second is Jung's contention that analytical psychology offers a viable mode of understanding the religions of Asia. Third is the shadow side of Alan Watts, particularly the extent to which Watts understood and accepted his own demons. A brief conclusion addresses these themes in light of the continuity and change in Watts' intellectual life.

ARTICLE HISTORY

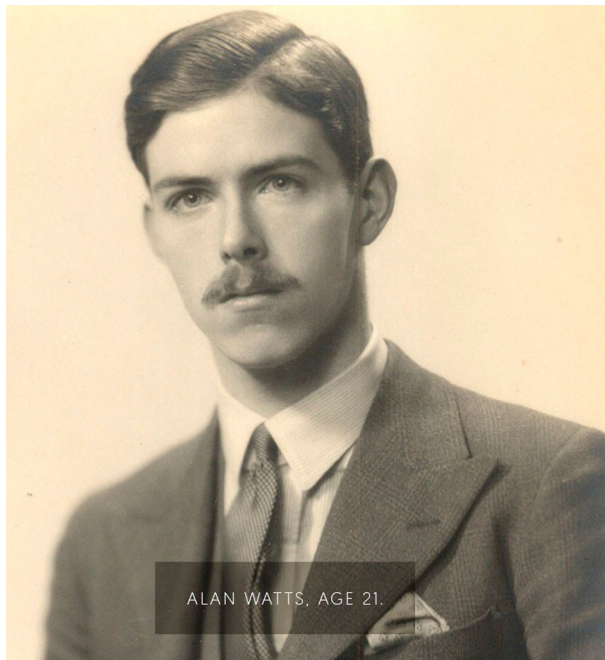
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Looking back on his life and labor, Alan Watts (1973) observed: 'Anyone who has read my books from *The Legacy of Asia* (1937) to *Psychotherapy East and West* (1961/1985) will see what a vast influence Jung has had on my work' (p. 385). Watts acknowledged reading all of Jung's writings immediately upon their translation into English, and having access to many unpublished transcripts from private seminars in which Jung spoke freely about controversial topics such as 'astrology, alchemy, and *kundalini* yoga' (p. 385) without fear for his reputation.

Jung's influence dates to the adolescent Watts' studies of psychology and Eastern philosophy while in 'rebellion against the sterile Christianity' of his childhood (Watts, 1961/1985, p. 133). 'From the beginning', notes Watts (1973), 'I was interested in the work of C.G. Jung' (p. 380). As vast as Jung's influence on Watts may have been, however, the present article modestly notes three themes, including (1) the problem of interpretation and reflexivity vis-à-vis 'the East', (2) the possibility of understanding Buddhism, Taoism, and Vedanta via modern psychology, and (3) the shadow side of Alan Watts.

'Difficulties encountered by a European in trying to understand the East'

Columbus and Rice (2017) note Watts' transition from his 1940s–1950s perennial philosophy to hermeneutics in the 1960s, a shift reflecting larger trends in Western thinking as psychoanalytic theory, Marxist social theory, indigenous peoples, and Asian cultures challenged the universality of Western religious and philosophical discourse. The



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present discussion notes Jung's (1931/1975) interpretative influence on Watts' early thinking about the Christian West vis-à-vis peoples and cultures of Asia, an influence preceding Watts' perennial sensibilities but which, surviving as a kind of hermeneutic reflexivity, remained consequential throughout his life and work. (See Homans, 1969, for an early assessment of Jung's contributions to hermeneutics, plus Barnaby & D'Acerno, 1990 and Gundry, 2006, for later considerations.)

Watts (1973) acknowledged that his 'enthusiasm for Oriental wisdom has been disciplined' (p. 385) by Jung (1931/1975). There Jung laid out certain 'difficulties encountered by a European in trying to understand the East' (pp. 77–82). The primary difficulty, wrote Jung, is that Europeans have overdeveloped since the Renaissance a one-sided, intellectual sensibility. A consequence of outsized rationalism is scientism, the belief in science as the 'one and only way of comprehending ... and therefore we gladly dispose of Eastern "wisdom" in quotation marks and push it away into the obscure territory of faith and superstition' (p. 78).

An early, perhaps the earliest, reference to Jung (1931/1975) by Watts is in a 1935 essay concerning Britain's relations with India. The 20-year-old Watts (1935/1997b) wrote:

Serious interest in the philosophical and religious legacy of India is, for the most part, confined to academicians, to a certain species of scientist whose practice it is to kill everything he touches by dissecting, analyzing, and classifying it – and then putting it away on a shelf for the use of specialists only. (p. 151)

Here Watts quoted Jung (1931/1975):

This, in fact, is the Western way of hiding one's own heart under the cloak of so-called scientific understanding. We do it partly because of the *miserable vanite des savants* which fears and

rejects with horror any sign of living sympathy, and partly because an understanding that reaches the feelings might allow contact with the foreign spirit to become a serious experience. (Jung, cited in Watts, 1935/1997b, p. 151)

Watts subsequently developed the above theme in depth via *The Legacy of Asia and Western Man* (1937), exploring the problem of *relations* between Buddhism, Vedanta, Taoism, and Christianity, particularly Christian ‘ways of living’ in light of the European Renaissance. The book’s intended audience was the ‘thoughtful [Western] person who feels uncertain of his roots, who has seen the replacement of Faith by Reason and has learnt the barrenness of Reason alone, whose head is satisfied but whose heart thirsts’ (pp. xiii–xiv). Identifying Jung (1931/1975) as ‘one who has already begun to tackle this very problem’, *The Legacy of Asia and Western Man*, wrote Watts, ‘owes its inspiration to his work’ (p. xiv).

Watts (1973) in later life called *The Legacy of Asia and Western Man*, published in his 22nd year, a ‘somewhat immature’ text, suggesting that ‘it is for the best that it is long since out of print’ (pp. 142–143). Nevertheless, Jung, particularly his commentary on *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (1931/1975), served as an important interpretative influence on Watts (1937) throughout his life by questioning the consciousness, subjectivity, and assumptions of interpreters in relation to their topics of study. Thus, in his 1961 tribute to Jung, Watts observed:

I began to read Jung when I first began to study Eastern philosophy in my late adolescence, and I’m eternally grateful to him for what I would call a sort of balancing influence on the development of my thought... It was Jung who helped me to remind myself that I was, by upbringing and by tradition, always a Westerner, and I couldn’t escape from my own cultural conditioning... I feel it’s for this reason that I have always remained, for myself, in the position of a comparative philosopher, wanting to balance East and West rather than go overboard for exotic imports. (Watts, 1961/1985, pp. 133–134)

‘Modern psychology offers a possibility of understanding’

Jung (1931/1975) suggested that a one-sided, European rationalism results in the classification of ‘eastern ideas’ as ‘philosophical and ethnological curiosities and nothing more’ (p. 82). On the other hand, when faced with the challenge of comprehending ideas indigenous to Eastern cultures, the common error of Western peoples is similar to ‘the student in Faust. Ill-advised by the devil, he contemptuously turns his back on science, and getting a whiff of eastern ecstasies, takes over their yoga practices quite literally, only to become a pitiable imitator’ (p. 79). Alternatively, Jung stated, ‘my experience in my [psychotherapy] practice has been such as to reveal to me a quite new and unexpected approach to eastern wisdom’ (p. 83) via the collective unconscious. As a heritage common to all humanity, the collective unconscious is not reducible to the Freudian unconscious, and pervades variations in culture and consciousness. Thus, ‘by its means can be explained the analogy, going even as far as identity, between various myth-themes and symbols, and the possibility of human understanding in general’ (p. 83). Jung added: ‘Taken purely psychologically, it means that we have common instincts of ideation (imagination), and of action’ (p. 84). In this manner, as Watts (1937) explained in *The Legacy of Asia and Western Man*,

Jung opens up a way to the understanding of the East which does not involve breaking away from our own roots. He keeps carefully to scientific method in so far as he is never led away by the mere glamour of words, symbols and exotic doctrines which capture the faith of so many who have lost confidence in Christianity. For by approaching the Eastern wisdom neither as outworn superstition, nor as metaphysics, nor as a body of esoteric and inaccessible mysteries, but as psychology, he sees it as a natural growth of the soul which we of the West can develop out of our own roots without any resort to imitation. (Watts, 1937, pp. xiv–xv)

Watts (1939/1997c) subsequently offered a paper entitled ‘Is there an “Unconscious?”’ The essay was an apology for psychoanalysis writ large, that is to say, the systems of Freud, Adler, and Jung vis-à-vis students of religion and the occult. The particular importance of the unconscious, noted Watts, is that it reminds religious practitioners ‘of the forgotten gods [and demons] and of the place where they are to be found’ (pp. 138–139). Watts further observed: ‘Too many would-be mystics and occultists try to follow the rationalist technique of imposing a discipline upon themselves without first understanding the nature of the thing to be disciplined’ (p. 139).

Watts’ early understanding of Jung’s analytical psychology is perhaps best identified by a 1937 paper in his ‘Mystics of Today’ series written for *The Modern Mystic and Monthly Science Review*, an esoteric journal circulating from 1937 to 1940. Others profiled by Watts in these essays included J. Krishnamurti, D.T. Suzuki, and G.K. Chesterton (see Watts & Snelling, 1997, pp. 67–105). Watts (1937/1997a) located Jung’s psychology between science and religion. Noting that ‘the nineteenth-century quarrel between science and religion has, generally speaking, been brought to an end by agreeing that the two are concerned with totally different things’ (p. 72), Watts suggested that scientists and religionists view Jung as favoring opposite sides of the debate: ‘Scientists accuse him of turning psychology into mysticism’ and religionists ‘suspect him as one who rejects their most cherished beliefs as mere phantasies of the unconscious mind’ (p. 72). Watts further noted: ‘psychology extends into both science and religion. There are materialist psychologists ... and there are religious psychologists ... Yet if psychology as a whole stands between science and religion, Jung stands between these two groups of psychologists’ (p. 73). Watts allowed that Jung’s psychological system can be termed ‘mystical if it can be said that mysticism does not necessarily involve belief in the supernatural, if it can be made to include the development of wisdom and peace of mind without any change of physical conditions’ (p. 73). Four ‘main contributions’ of Jung to psychology were considered by Watts, including his (1) ‘conception of the Unconscious Mind’, (2) psychological typologies, (3) study of symbols and myths, and (4) integrative methodology ‘achieving a certain mental poise which is similar to some forms of religious experience’ (p. 73).

Also in 1939, Watts (1939/1994) offered a paper to the Analytical Psychology Club of New York City, entitled ‘The Psychology of Acceptance’. As the subtitle indicates, the paper concerned ‘The Reconciliation of the Opposites in Eastern Thought and in Analytical Psychology’. Discussing the psychological snares of acceptance, Watts drew heavily from Jung’s essay, ‘The Mana Personality’ (see Jung, 1928), calling it ‘one of the most important chapters he has ever written’ (p. 34). Watts wrote:

Here he [Jung] explains that having mastered the *animus* or *anima*, by acceptance you have captured for yourself what primitive peoples would call its *mana* or magic power over you. But there is a danger that this *mana* may inflate you and make you imagine yourself as a ‘*mana* personality,’ which is to say, a man of might, a magician or god. (p. 34)

Themes from 'The Psychology of Acceptance' (Watts, 1939/1994) were incorporated into *The Meaning of Happiness* (Watts, 1940/1968a). Watts, then aged 25, was attempting a reconciliation of 'modern' (psycho)analytic psychologies and the "wisdom of the East" vis-à-vis 'the realization of "happiness" in the Aristotelian and Thomistic sense of man's true end or destiny' (Watts, 1952/1968b, p. xvi). Happiness in this sense 'means union with God, or, in Oriental terms, harmony with the Tao, or moksha, or nirvana' (p. xvi). In the preface to the first edition, Watts noted that 'the need for a rapprochement' between Asian wisdom traditions and Western psychology 'has for some time been recognized by the foremost living practitioner of ... [analytical] psychology – C.G. Jung of Zurich' (Watts, 1940/1968a, p. xvi). Drawing heavily on Jung (1928, 1931/1975, 1933a, 1933b, 1938, 1939), the thesis of *The Meaning of Happiness* is that 'this special and supreme order of happiness is not a result to be attained through action, but a fact to be realized through knowledge [insight]. The sphere of action is to express it, not to gain it' (Watts, 1940/1968a, p. iv).

The shadow side of Alan Watts

In Watts' (1961/1985) view, Jung's primary psychological insight was that 'in order to admit, and *really* accept and understand the evil in oneself, one had to be able to do it without being an enemy to it... You had to accept your own dark side' (p. 136). Watts (1973) reiterated the point in his autobiography: 'Impressive was Jung's attitude to the yin (or dark aspect of the unconscious), his feeling that psychic integration was largely an acceptance and assimilation of the devil in ourselves by the power of love'. Watts further acknowledged: 'Through Jung I understood that in repressing my devils and animals I would be cutting myself off from the manure' (p. 384) that fertilizes psychological health and creative spirituality (see also Watts 1959, p. 85).

Opinions vary concerning the extent to which Watts consciously accepted the shadow side of his psychological life. Watts (1973) himself remembers critics of his early work contending that he was 'too young' and 'hadn't suffered enough' to really know his subject matter, while others argued that he 'showed no evidence of God-consciousness' because he 'thoroughly enjoyed the pleasures of good food, of smoking, drinking and sex' (p. 191). In Huang's (2012) view, however, Watts indeed was deeply cognizant of his shadow side, as reflected in *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety* (Watts, 1951), a book addressed manifestly to a 1950s Cold War audience in the wake of World War II. However, Huang continues:

Alan's pithy writing flowed out of his own personal crises at the time. His first marriage had collapsed, he resigned his positions in the Episcopal church and at Northwestern University, and had yet to secure his faculty position at the American Academy of Asian Studies. (p. 226)

A moderate counterpoint to Huang (2012) is found in Krishna (1975). Gopi Krishna, a Kundalini yogi, reflected on Watts' (1973) self-ascriptions – his 'wayward spirit', 'addiction to nicotine and alcohol', 'occasional shudders of anxiety', 'interest in women', 'lack of enthusiasm for physical exercise' (see Watts, 1973, pp. 256–258). Though complementing Watts for his 'candid admissions' and 'his frank confession', Krishna (1975) called Watts' lifestyle a 'commonly met traumatic condition of the modern, highly intelligent, or creative mind'

resulting from 'gross neglect', ignorance, or apathy 'toward the spiritual ... requirements' (p. 97) of life.

Stronger criticism is found in Corless (1989). Citing various 'gory details' in Furlong's (1986) biography of Watts, Corless conjectures that 'Watts' life went disastrously wrong' due possibly to the 'spiritual disease' of alcoholism. 'As William James and Carl Jung variously put it, the alcoholic is a failed mystic' (p. 304). Corless concedes: 'without a medical diagnosis, which cannot of course now be given, it is impossible to say for certain whether Watts was an alcoholic'. Yet, the author suggests, assuming Watts actually was an alcoholic and failed mystic is 'the key to the tragedy of his life'. Watts' 'vision was wonderful, "the joyous cosmology" indeed, but he mistook the means of securing it. *Behold the Spirit: A Study in the Necessity of Mystical Religion* (1947/1971) became, in time, the necessity to consume spirits' (pp. 304–305). Corless argues that Watts' 'failure' needs to be confronted and requires our mourning, adding: 'It may serve as a warning to some of us still living' (p. 305).

Here is offered a supplementary if not wholly alternative understanding informed by Watts' religious formation as an Anglican Catholic. Watts was raised and educated in the Church of England, studied at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, and was ordained as an Episcopal priest. Arguably, he did not renege on the Sacrament of Holy Orders, saying upon his resignation from the Episcopal Church: 'I know that I am a priest forever, and have no thought whatever of going back to a former state' (Watts, 1973, p. 246). Even his most critical take on Christianity (Watts, 1964) was written from the viewpoint of a loyal commentator. Perhaps Watts, particularly toward his life's end, was less 'failed mystic' than simply situated amidst the soul's Dark Night, markedly while writing his final book, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, with a view toward understanding 'how these ancient writings reverberate on the harp of my own brain, which has, of course, been tuned to the scales of Western culture' (Watts, 1975, p. xvi).

In *Behold the Spirit*, Watts (1947/1971) wrote of the 'Dark Night' in Catholic mysticism 'wherein one experiences bitter desolation and comes close to absolute despair' (p. 89). However, the desolation and despair are pregnant with possibility: 'In the midst of the soul's dark night of despair ... there dawns the *agape* of God – the realization that although the soul is powerless to attain union with God, God out of unchangeable and infinite love has given union with himself to the soul' (p. 74). A quarter-century later, in the preface to *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, Watts (1975) wrote: 'I shall try, in what follows, to show how the principle of the Tao reconciles sociability with individuality, order with spontaneity, and unity with diversity' (p. xiv).

'On the plane of human history', Watts (1947/1971) observed, God's union with the soul is the Incarnation – 'the sudden change from the old order of striving for redemption through obedience to the law, to the new order of redemption through divine grace' (p. 73). Note again Watts' (1975) preface, concluding, 'although I will by no means despise precise and descriptive information – the Letter, I am obviously more interested in the Spirit – the actual experiencing and feeling of that attitude to life which is the following of the Tao' (p. xvi). Reviewing Watts (1975), Sadler (1976) wrote: 'In many ways it is Watts at his best' (p. 303), closing:

For all his well advertised love of good food, rare wines, and the sweet life, Alan Watts sought and found the power to heal: a gift for persuading men [people] to release the curative forces

within, and the wisdom to understand the Upanishadic dictum that what is without is also within, and what is within is also without. Or, as he says in this book: 'In the Taoist view there really is no obdurately external world'. (p. 304)

Conclusion

In this article, three themes are noted concerning Jung's formative influence on the life and work of Alan Watts, including (1) hermeneutic reflexivity, (2) psychology as a mode of comprehending Eastern wisdom traditions, and (3) Watts' acceptance of his shadow side. Three brief conclusions about Watts are now drawn in light of 'prevailing disagreements concerning the developmental trajectory of his intellectual life. There are differing opinions concerning the degree of continuity versus change in comparison with his earlier and later works' (Columbus & Rice, 2017, p. 8).

First, Jung's early influence on Watts (1937, 1940/1968a) indicates a phase of thinking *prior* to his 1940s–1950s perennialist leanings. This earlier, Jungian-type thinking viewed Eastern wisdom as an avenue through which Western peoples may recover their own cultural and religious symbols. Yet Jung's (1931/1975) emphasis on the interpreters' reflexive relations to their subject matter remained within Watts' sensibilities as he transitioned to perennial philosophy and, eventually, into his 1960s hermeneutical writing *per se*.

Second, the trajectory of Watts' thinking about psychology and psychotherapy shows a marked yet seldom considered transition away from Jung's analytical psychology as considered in *The Legacy of Asia and Western Man* (1937) and *The Meaning of Happiness* (1940/1968a) toward social psychological emphases as exemplified by (1) his 1956 essay in the *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* (Watts, 1956/2017), (2) his 1950s consultations on Gregory Bateson's communications research, and (3) *Psychotherapy East and West* (Watts, 1961/1985) in which analytical psychology is called (justifiably or not) a 'backwater' and 'out of touch' (p. xii) with contemporary trends in psychology and psychotherapy.

Third is the thorny issue of Watts' shadow side. As Columbus and Rice (2012) observed, 'Watts is often discounted by pointing toward his lifestyle choices, such as his extramarital affairs and immoderate alcohol consumption, as contraindications of spiritual and philosophical insight'. Watts' critics assume 'that supposed sins of the flesh ought not afflict those perceived as operating on a higher (or deeper) spiritual plane' (p. 5). Perhaps Watts (1961/1985) himself, discussing Jung, offered an adequate reply to critics of his lifestyle:

I think this was the most important thing in Jung – that he was able to point out that to the degree that you condemn others, and find evil in others, you are, to that degree unconscious of the same thing in yourself – or at least to the potentiality of it. (p. 135)

The relationship between suffering and creativity is complex, and denying the personal, interpersonal, and societal ravages of alcoholism is not helpful. But when thinking about the shadow side of Alan Watts in relation to his life and work, B.D. McClay's (2017) essay on the lives of poets Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop seems an insightful reference. McClay writes: 'They drank too much, hurt the people they loved, succumbed to despair. Out of this, if not only this, came the poetry. One wishes them happier lives, but it's hard to wish for other poems' (p. 25).

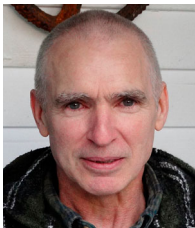
As a young man, Watts was clearly influenced by Jung and throughout his life he demonstrated respect for the depth of Jung's work. Informed by Jung, Watts entertained,

encouraged, and instilled hope in people struggling to understand what it means to be whole. The relevance of Watts' teachings persists today as many of the issues he addressed remain front and center in contemporary life, including the loss of hope and demonization of 'the other'.

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