

BOOK REVIEW

C. G. Jung, *The Solar Myths and Opicinus de Canistris: Notes of the Seminar Given at Eranos in 1943*. Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Daimon Verlag, 2015.

REVIEWED BY KEIRON LE GRICE

The central focus of this publication is an impromptu lecture given by Jung at Eranos in 1943 in which he provides psychological commentaries on solar myths and on a series of symbolic illustrations by Italian medieval priest Opicinus de Canistris (1296–c. 1352 CE). For anyone with an abiding interest in Jung’s work, this book is a real gem, providing numerous fascinating insights on a range of topics such as the dark side of the divine, Christianity, the tension of opposites, mythic symbolism, and the evolution of human consciousness.

As we learn in the foreword (by Thomas Fischer) and the introduction, the genesis of the book was the fortuitous discovery, in 2012, of some handwritten lecture notes in Jung’s former house in Kusunacht. These notes comprised “six untitled, small slips of paper” (p. 4) giving a rough outline of the 1943 talk. As it turns out, the discovery—by the book’s editors Riccardo Bernardini, Gian Piero Quaglino, and Augusto Romano—was serendipitously aligned with their endeavor, already underway, to bring to publication a transcript of this very lecture. With Jung’s own notes to hand, there was even more incentive to publish Jung’s lecture in written form for a wider

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audience, especially given that it provides a genuine addition to the existing body of Jung's work.¹

Jung's speaking notes, which are reproduced in the original German in the appendices and translated in the main section of the book, provide an intriguing glimpse into Jung the man, preparing to give a lecture, as any of us might, listing keywords that would trigger his amplifications on specific topics, and producing different versions of his planned talk as he revised his thoughts. The notes, which were likely "stimulated by the very papers he had listened to during the conference," (p. 36) supplement more detailed transcripts recorded at Eranos by two of Jung's students: Rivkah Schärf Kluger and Alwine von Keller. Both these accounts, although challenging to follow in places, are mutually consistent and complementary, forming the centerpiece of this publication.

The book is helpfully divided into clear sections presented in logical sequence. A sixty-four-page introduction by the editors provides essential background to the Eranos conferences and their significance for the scholarly development and dissemination of Jung's thought. Jung gave fourteen talks at Eranos between 1933 and 1951, and, as one would expect, was very much the dominant presence at the gatherings, which explored a diverse range of topics and viewpoints, fostered by the atmospheric setting and enriched by the contributions of figures such as Neumann, Corbin, and Kerényi—the latter speaking at the 1943 gathering. Jung, we learn, had not originally intended to present at that year's event, but had acceded to popular demand, giving "an exciting and multifaceted impromptu talk" (p. 28) to "about twenty-seven people," (p. 25) which served as "an astounding epilogue" (p. 28) to the conference outside of the regular program of presentations.²

As noted, Jung's talk consisted of two components: the first, an exegesis of solar myths, and the second, on which the editors place greater emphasis in their introduction, a psychological commentary on images from the *Codex Palatinus Latinus 1993*, attributed to Opicinus.

Jung had a deep interest in figures of a mystical or visionary disposition—including Goethe, Nietzsche, Hölderlin, Hildegard von Bingen, Niklaus von Flüe ("Brother Klaus"), Paracelsus, Jakob Böhme, Meister Eckhart, and alchemists such as Gerhard Dorn and Michael Maier—who each came face to face with the numinous power of the

unconscious, some succumbing to a tragic fate as a result. Jung's psychological analysis of the illustrations of Opicinus provides a further example of this kind, exploring the fate of an individual within a medieval Christian view of the world, struggling to come to terms with the tension of opposites in his psyche, and failing to successfully face and integrate the shadow. Reading *The Solar Myths*, one gets the sense that Opicinus had a visionary revelation of the kind Jung's describes in "Psychology and Literature." Such a revelation, according to Jung, bursts forth

from the hinterland of man's mind, as if it had emerged from the abyss of prehuman ages, or from a superhuman world of contrasting light and darkness. ... Sublime, pregnant with meaning, yet chilling the blood with its strangeness, it arises from the timeless depths: glamorous, daemonic and grotesque, it bursts asunder our human standards of value and aesthetic form, a terrifying tangle of eternal chaos.³

The editors' introduction provides essential details of Opicinus' life, based on the priest's autobiographical testimony—a life which appears to have been largely unremarkable until the onset of an illness in 1334, during which he fell into a coma for ten days.

When he came out of the coma, he had been weakened both physically and psychologically. He could not speak. His right hand was paralysed. He complained of a serious loss of memory. Along with his illness came apparitions and nightmares that tortured him. He recorded a vision that he had in June, when he saw "a vase in the clouds." In his bizarre annotations, the vase has a remarkable role since, by a play on the double meaning of the word, *canistra* ("vase"), it is linked to his own name, Canistris. He also had recurrent visions of the Virgin Mary with her son in her arms. She appeared sorry and was sitting on the ground, stricken with sorrow because of Opicinus' spiritual perdition. Nevertheless, Opicinus tells us, "the weakening of my right hand was transformed into a strengthening of my spiritual potential." (pp. 42–43)

The visions were recorded by Opicinus as fifty-two drawings in the *Codex Palatinus Latinus 1993* on which he is believed to have worked until his death. The drawings, as the editors note, are "full of annotations and correspondences that are theological, symbolic,

astrological, historical, and cartographic.” (p. 45) Indeed, Opicinus, who was appointed scribe to Apostolic Penitentiary by Pope John XXII, was an astrologer, and thus “tried to superimpose classical astrological symbolism on such features of the Christian calendar as the feast days of the saints” and “produced an interpretation of his city, Pavia, in the light of ‘Christian astrology.’” (p. 45)

A peculiar and striking aspect of his illustrations is his projection of anthropomorphic and theriomorphic symbolism upon the geography of Europe and North Africa. Continents and seas take on human or bestial form, and apparently represent the extreme tension of opposites playing itself out in Opicinus’s psyche. The editors explain:

In Opicinus’ cartography ... the Mediterranean Sea is actually represented as a demonic world, a dark “anti-world,” in contraposition to the luminous world of dry land. In plate 39 of the *Codex Palatinus Latinus 1993* (figures 43 and 43bis) in particular, if Europe is represented symbolically as a figure of male gender and Africa as a woman (in other representations by Opicinus, the genders of the two continents may be inverted), the Mediterranean appears as a demonic figure—Jung notes, from Alwine von Keller’s account—“with a goat’s beard” and the Atlantic as a monstrous animal, probably a fish, which swallows up Europe from the north-western coast of France. (p. 35)

For Opicinus, the world assumed a sexualized character (“a gigantic and geographical copulation,” [p. 47] as Claude Gandelman described it) and is thus consistent with Mircea Eliade’s understanding of the sexualized hierophany or sacred cosmology behind the origins of alchemy, which was concerned with reconciling the same pairs of conflicting opposites that appear in Opicinus’s cartographical art.⁴

Jung’s analysis centers on the conflict between the upper realm of the light of God in the form of *sol*, the sun, and the lower realm of “*aries*—ram, horned ram, goat beard, and ... the devil,” as depicted in the *Codex*. (p. 98) Identifying with the light side, the “lamb of God,” Opicinus, in Jung’s judgment, was unable to integrate the dark side of the divine and was caught in an irreconcilable tension of opposites between Christ and the devil, good and evil, light and dark. Jung explains, “He wanted to rule this fearsome conflict out and shut himself off inside the *corpus mysticum* of the Church.” (p. 98) Unable to face

the conflict within himself, Jung adds, “he did not ... master ... the spitting-in-two in his *unconscious*, which was the problem of the new era. This is a picture of a schizophrenic.” (p. 109)

Jung sees in some of Opicinus’s drawings the basic structure of a mandala, incorporating circles and quaternities, no doubt compensating for the psychological turbulence the Italian priest was experiencing. Alongside this, the editors draw our attention to the wealth of symbolic and allegorical content, such as the Christian image of a “new Jerusalem descending from heaven,” the alchemical *coniunctio* of *sponsus* and *sponsa*, astrological symbolism, and juxtapositions of opposites such as sun and moon, East and West, spirit and flesh, and the “bright” inner man and the shadow of the outer man. (pp. 48–49) The age, decaying condition, and fine detail within the Opicinus documents make some of the illustrations of the *Codex* difficult to clearly discern, in electronic format at least, so we can be grateful to the editors for their careful commentary.

While the Opicinus material provides a fascinating and unique case study, perhaps the principal theoretical contribution of the 1943 lecture is to be found in Jung’s treatment of the emergence of human ego-consciousness, as symbolized by the development of solar myths over time. Jung notes that “the Sun is basically a living symbol for the illumination of consciousness.” (p. 83) Solar creation myths thus refer to the process of “becoming conscious” (p. 83); just as the sun rises out of the darkness at dawn, consciousness emerges daily from the dark ocean of sleep and dream, and ego-consciousness, over the millennia, is progressively differentiated from the dim twilight existence that characterizes the primordial condition of *participation mystique*. Like the sun, the individual human ego, carrier of the light of consciousness, rises up out of the dark primordial mists towards a pinnacle of illumination.

This process ultimately leads, Jung suggests, to the Christian revelation, especially the Gospel of John, and is further developed in the theological speculations of the Scholastics. (p. 86)

By now we have observed how the Sun god runs through a development in older culture and, in fact, takes on ... a more and more spiritual shape; and, in the end, this light of the Sun becomes the light of John’s logos, which shines out in the darkness and undoubtedly means spiritual illumination and the raising of human consciousness. It is the light of the *gnosis theou*. (p. 86)

Although Jung (and others, such as Erich Neumann) has made similar arguments elsewhere, in this lecture Jung more explicitly connects the development of solar symbolism to the emergence of a differentiated ego consciousness. For Jung, the course of development of solar myths reflects a profound transformation in the human psyche by which the conscious ego emerged as an independent and autonomous self-willing agent, bringing a concomitant progressive strengthening of the human will. The fortification of an independent will enabled human beings to move beyond the *heimarmene* of the ancient world—characterized by fatalism, compulsion, crippling superstitions, and subservience to the will of the gods. As Jung puts it, “The dependency of people of the ancient world on *heimarmene* is [due to] this lack of consciousness that one is in the hands of.” (p. 88) In the ancient world, human will, to the extent that it existed at all, was secondary in its power and authority to the will of the gods.

If the emergence of the ego and an autonomous human will is a great cultural achievement, as Jung believes, it also brings with it certain attendant dangers, which he proceeds to discuss. With the development of the individual human subject, a subtle but consequential shift occurs, which places singular emphasis upon the willing agent—the “I” principle—utterly disregarding divine will.⁵ From the Renaissance and the Reformation on, Jung argues, “the individual no longer said: I *know*, I *will*, but the sound-stress shifted and now he said: I *know*, I *will*. As the human being became conscious of his size and freedom, the undermining of godly authority began.” (p. 108)

This psychological transition gave birth to a dualism—between subject and object, God and nature, consciousness and unconscious, light and dark—that so defines the modern era, for better and for worse. It is a dualism that finds primary philosophical articulation in the work of Descartes. As Jung describes it:

This freedom of human consciousness, the emancipation of the judgment and will from dependency on what is higher, brought one, I would like to say, one problem into the world—*duality*, a problem that really had never been there before. There had never been the sovereignty of the person in this sense. There had always been higher controlling powers at hand, which put a damper on things. So, this duality brought about a foundation of human consciousness, which had never been there before. (p. 89)

For Jung, of course, the light of human consciousness, supported by a differentiated ego, fulfills a singularly important role in the world. He repeats in this lecture his proclamation of the world-constitutive power of consciousness: “consciousness has a meaning that is entirely extraordinary. ... Without consciousness, nothing exists. The world had really been nothing at all until somebody said: that is the world; that *is*.” (p. 86) Similarly, here, as in *Answer to Job*, Jung stresses the critical role of the human in bringing the unconscious divine (the “Dark Father”) to consciousness. (p. 104) As we read in von Keller’s transcript: “[God] revealed a functioning independent human consciousness. Now, the human being is instrumental; he was invented for that. God wanted consciousness so that he could be expressed.” (p. 104)

It is on this note that the two components of Jung’s talk come together. The dualism between the light, all-loving God and the dark power of nature, personified in Opicinus’s Christian astrological imagination as the goat-devil, is at the heart of the schizophrenic splitting of the Italian priest’s psyche, and it is a “prelude,” Jung suggests, “of what today we are the shaken witness of.” (p. 109) It is a dualism that we ourselves must reckon with if we are to meet the spiritual challenge of our time.

The central content of *The Solar Myths* thus provides us with an illuminating example of the symbolized psychological process of an individual in the wake of a spiritual revelation, failing to come to terms with the deep-rooted transformation impinging on the Christianized psyche. And the book’s main theoretical contribution to Jungian psychology is its concise discussion of Jung’s view of the collective development of consciousness in the context of solar myths. The inclusion of a wide selection of photographs, mostly from Eranos, including many of Jung himself, and biographical accounts of the two sources of Jung’s lecture, Rivkah Schärf Kluger and Alwine von Keller, completes the truly fascinating and eclectic collection of materials within this volume. The publication is successful in bringing to life the spirit and personalities of the Eranos gatherings at that time, giving what feels like intimate access to the seminar, including a rare glimpse of Jung as a lecturer. For all these reasons, we owe Bernardini, Quaglino, and Romano a large debt of gratitude for making this material available to us.

NOTES

1. For a number of reasons, an editorial decision had been made not to include this material in Jung's *Collected Works*.

2. These descriptions are from two sources: (1) the words of Swiss artist Hedy Alma Wyss, from a short summary of the seminar written on August 28–29, 1943 some two weeks after the event; and (2) Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn's letter to Hans Conrad Bänziger on August 13, 1943, written after Jung's seminar on the preceding days: "From 9:30 until noon Jung spoke to about twenty-seven people in the best of moods and they had the feeling that the old days of the seminar had come back to life." (p. 25)

3. C. G. Jung, "Psychology and Literature" (1950) in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 15, ed. and trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), § 141.

4. See Mircea Eliade, "The World Sexualized," in *The Forge and the Crucible* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).

5. The position Jung advances in this lecture is broadly consistent with perspectives in recent work such as Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) and Richard Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New World View* (New York: Viking, 2006).