

Psychological Effects of Theurgy in Contemporary Practice

BRUCE MACLENNAN

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE, KNOXVILLE

PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR NEOPLATONIC STUDIES

2013 CONFERENCE

Introduction

I hope to show you today that we can achieve important insights into the psychological effects of Neoplatonic theurgical practices and understand their benefits for practitioners by comparing them with contemporary practices in analytical or depth psychology as pioneered by Carl Jung. The parallels are not coincidental, of course, because Jung was inspired in part by Neoplatonic and Gnostic practices. But the deepest parallels arise from the fact that both Jung and the Neoplatonists were conducting phenomenological experiments in the structure of the psyche. The techniques used are fundamentally the same, and so we can infer the effects of ancient theurgy from contemporary analytical practice. I will begin with a brief review of the parallels between the components of the psyche and some Neoplatonic concepts.

Background

Of central importance are the archetypes of the collective unconscious, which Jung explicitly identifies with Platonic Ideas. In psychological terms, archetypes are timeless, transpersonal patterns of motivation and behavior, which are common to all humans. They are just unconscious *potentials* for psychical activity, until they are energized by a triggering circumstance, at which point they actualize and affect conscious perception, emotion, motivation, and behavior. This can be experienced as a kind of possession, which is an apt description, since the archetypes are psychodynamical programs that implement innate purposes in the human psyche. As such, they behave like autonomous personalities and, in broad terms, correspond to the gods of polytheistic pantheons. We have all been possessed by Ares when inflamed by anger, or by Aphrodite when inflamed by passion. Elsewhere I have argued that the archetypes correspond most closely to the *noerà* or “intellectuals,” but we can leave such details aside for now.

The archetypes are phylogenetic, that is, common to *Homo sapiens*, but as people live their lives, they form personal unconscious associations with the archetypes, which adapt the archetypes to each individual. These associations affect the circumstances that can energize an archetype and the way that it manifests in an individual's consciousness. Analytical psychologists use the term *complex* to refer to these personal accumulations of subconscious content around an archetypal core. Jung stresses that complexes behave as autonomous subpersonalities, capable of possession of oneself and of projection onto other people. In fact, by energizing a complex, animals, plants, and inanimate objects in our environment can invite projection of a complex onto them. As autonomous subpersonalities generated by an archetype, complexes have much in common with *daimons* in the lineage of a god (and in fact Jung and other analytical psychologists occasionally refer to them as daemons).

These unconscious archetypes and complexes — these gods and daimons — exercise their power over our conscious lives, whether we like it or not. They can be repressed, for a time, by conscious will, but analytical psychologists agree that they cannot be banished. Rather, repressed archetypes and complexes are fueled by the energy of repression, and eventually will erupt in ever more primitive forms. On the other hand, we cannot simply act out these unconscious impulses. This is a dilemma, and neuroses arise from the divergence of our conscious and unconscious minds. Therefore it is necessary to reach some accommodation between them. This is the goal of *individuation*, which is the lifelong process of becoming psychologically whole or undivided (from Latin *individuus*). It is accomplished by conscious integration of unconscious content, that is, by conscious engagement with the archetypes and complexes. In particular, individuation is directed toward conscious integration of the *Higher Self* (or *God Image*), which is the totality of the archetypes. Jungians stress the Higher Self is contradictory and paradoxical because it is a whole, embracing all opposites, like the Neoplatonic Inexpressible One.

Although the unconscious can cause us trouble, it has benefits for us as well. Indeed, the archetypes have enabled our species to survive into the present, and they still have many gifts to offer if adapted to contemporary circumstances. As in the past, gods and daimons are potent sources of inspiration and guidance, *if* they are respected and approached appropriately. Furthermore, the Higher Self — the Inexpressible One — is providential because it is the subconscious force governing our individual destinies. In the developmental trajectories of our lives, it orchestrates and foreshadows growth and change in our psyches. If necessary, it will drag us along by our forelocks, but things will go more easily if we establish contact with The One and its descendant gods and daimons. This is the goal of theurgy and of its analytical parallels.

Incubation

I will turn now to three theurgical practices that have contemporary therapeutic parallels. The first is dream incubation. It is well known that Jung, like Freud, made use of dream interpretation. Jung, however, distinguished everyday dreams from “big dreams” (or *archetypal dreams*), which are produced by developmental processes moving in the subconscious. They are important because they foretell future developments in our psyches, for which we should prepare. But dreams don’t speak the language of the conscious mind, so myths and symbols are essential tools for interpreting dreams.

According to depth psychologists, all dreams emerge from the unconscious, possibly conditioned by external events. As a consequence dreams may compensate for excesses in the conscious attitude. In effect, the unconscious mind seeks to balance the conscious mind. Therefore dreams can reveal where we need to seek better balance. The unconscious mind, in both its collective and personal aspects, orchestrates our psychical development in both its universal and individual aspects, that is, in the phylogenetic and ontogenetic life cycles. These two cycles — one the same for all people, the other different for each of us — constitute our destiny, both as member of the human race and as individuals. These crucially important but unconscious currents in the depths of the psyche are revealed in dreams.

As windows on the unconscious, all dreams are important, but some dreams announce their significance by their emotional charge and impressiveness. These are the “big dreams,” which should command our attention. To the extent that they reflect *universal* processes in the unconscious, they involve the archetypes and may make use of archetypal images and themes found in the world’s mythology and folklore. Other big dreams make use of personal or cultural symbols. Since big dreams reveal ongoing unconscious developmental processes, they can be prophetic, bringing to consciousness an unfolding

psychical future. That is, these dreams reveal what the gods and daimons have in store for us.

Psychologists tell us that we all dream every night, even if we do not remember doing so. That is, we regularly receive messages from the gods and daimons, if only we learn to hear them. There are practices for improving our ability. For example, like modern psychologists, Synesius recommends keeping a “night book”¹ to record our experiences asleep, just as we might keep a “day book” or diary for our experiences awake.

But dreams don’t always come when we need them. We may be facing some issue or turning point in our lives and need guidance. We may sense that forces are astir in the unconscious, but be unclear what they are or what to do about them. In these cases nowadays, as in the ancient world, we may resort to *incubation* as a way of eliciting a dream. We know something of the ancient technique, from practices at the Asclepieia and the Oracle of Trophonius, and also from the magical papyri, which provide many examples. Techniques include sleeping in a *temenos* — a place demarcated from the secular — and preparatory devotional activities, including prayers petitioning divine aid and an intention to remember the dream. (Maybe, as Pythagoras recommended, it’s good to abstain from beans too!) As in the ancient world, it might take several nights to receive a helpful dream.

According to Robert Johnson, a depth psychologist, there are four steps in dream interpretation. The first is to make a list of each image in the dream and of all the ideas it immediately suggests to you. These personal associations are more relevant than those cataloged in dream books, since they are the associations *your* unconscious uses. See if one or more of them “clicks.” Afterwards it may be useful to “amplify” the associations by investigating the possible archetypal meaning of the symbol.

The second step is based on the observation that every figure in the dream is some aspect of the self, some interior psychodynamical energy system. The challenge then is to figure out which of your (perhaps unacknowledged) traits is represented by the figure. Even if other people appear in the dream they are, in the context of the dream, part of you.

These first two steps lay the necessary foundation for the third step, which is to formulate the interpretation. The goal is assemble the preceding insights into a coherent narrative that has meaning for you. Especially important is the *lysis*, the final resolution or catastrophe, of the dream, since this symbolizes the goal of the unconscious processes. Developing a coherent interpretation may take some work, but it is the most important task.

The last step, as it was in the ancient oracles, was to affirm the revelation of the dream in some physical action, that is, in some ritual, which Johnson defines as “symbolic behavior, consciously performed.” One result of the ritual is to confirm your conscious interpretation and to implant it into your unconscious. In effect you are communicating your understanding to the gods and daimons. Johnson says, “The best rituals are physical, solitary, and silent.”

Sustasis

Sometimes we wake up before a dream is done, or don't remember to record it at night and have forgotten it by the morning. Or, as is often the case, its significance is unclear. Wouldn't it be valuable if we could reenter the dream at will to resolve these issues? These are some of the purposes of *active imagination*, an analytical technique developed by Jung.

¹ An *epinuktis* as opposed to an *ephêmeris* (Migne, *Patr. Gr.* 66, 1316).

In its goals and techniques it corresponds to the theurgical practice of *sustasis* or liaison with a god or daimon. In contemporary analytical practice it is an informally ritualized method of entering into negotiation with a personified complex or archetype in order to achieve a beneficial accommodation between the conscious ego and the demands of the subconscious personality. As I will explain, active imagination, like the other two practices I'll mention, makes use of symbols to establish the connection, just as in theurgy.

Often, the impetus for active imagination comes from a big dream, but not always. We may feel that some spirit is trying to get our attention, perhaps through an unexplained emotion or persistent mood. Or we may be experiencing events, such as illnesses or accidents, that seem to have some meaning. On the other hand, we may be seeking some inspiration or guidance for our plans. These are all reasons for contacting the gods and daimons. To do this, analytical psychologists, like theurgists, make use of symbols. A spirit may be invoked by name, if known, or its appearance may be called to mind, if seen in a dream, for example. Or one may sink into a mood or emotion, in order to energize the corresponding subconscious structures. Indeed, any symbols associated with the god or daimon can be assembled physically or vividly visualized to invoke the spirit. As we might expect from theurgical practice, Johnson and other analytical psychologists suggest that a *temenos* be set aside for active imagination; garments reserved for the ritual are also helpful. With these symbols present, the modern theurgist invokes the named or unnamed spirit, and awaits their arrival in a state of contemplative openness. The god's arrival is signaled by some sign of animation in the environment. It might be subtle signs of movement or plays of light, as ancient theurgists reported.

Once the spirit has arrived, the hard work begins, for it has its own legitimate demands and plans for you. These plans and demands cannot be rejected out of hand; nor can we simply accede to them, for they may be unacceptable to us as conscious moral agents. Therefore we must negotiate some mutual accommodation between us and them, which is to say, between the conscious and unconscious psyches. Analytical psychologists stress that the spirit should be treated with respect and even reverence, for it is a potent force and divine, but also that we should not yield our ground as autonomous moral agents. Negotiation may be spoken out loud or the dialogue may be internal. The spirit might lead you to places in your imagination, or show you signs and symbols for their future invocation. In any case, psychologists suggest that the colloquy be recorded in writing or by audio recording as it takes place.

As for dream interpretation, it is important to affirm any agreement arising from the negotiation by means of a physical ritual. The principle is the same as for incubation: inner work needs to be embodied in outer reality. For example, the agreement may be symbolized by a concrete act. Moreover, any promises made to deities should be fulfilled, or if that proves inadvisable, then an alternative needs to be negotiated. In particular, insights gained during the operation should be incorporated into your everyday life with intelligence and common sense. For that is the goal of *sustasis*: an alliance with Providence to fulfill your individual destiny and your role in the destiny of humankind.

Divination

Finally let's consider divination. It's well known that Jung used the *I Ching* for divination, and he wrote a famous introduction to Richard Wilhelm's translation of the Chinese classic. Divination has continued to be a useful tool among analytical psychologists, who also use tarot, astrology, and other divination systems.

Jungians explain divination by means of *synchronicity* or meaningful coincidence. Synchronicity attaches significance to events, which should be interpreted symbolically in order to establish a connection to the subconscious, archetypal mind. Synchronicity results

from a resonance between external events and interior unconscious processes.

Synchronicity is often spontaneous, and so analytical psychologists and their clients pay attention to chance omens. Some event or constellation of events seems charged with significance, psychically potent, numinous. This is because an archetype or complex has been activated; a god or daimon is present and we feel their energy. Sometimes the meaning of the omen is immediately apparent; other times it will require investigation through divination or by a meeting with the spirit.

What if we are facing an issue and no omen is forthcoming? Then we may resort to divination, the essence of which is to arrange for a synchronistic event to occur. Its premise is that reality is a unity of the physical and the psychical, the *unus mundus*, as Jung called it. Divination takes a snapshot of this inner-outer totality and reveals the quality of the moment when the oracle is cast. It thus reveals both the inner and outer dynamics of the situation. True *divination* — that is, communication with the *divine* — presupposes the presence of a god or daimon. Therefore, through prayer or ritual, or indeed through crisis, divinity should be present at the divination. With the question in mind, the cards are shuffled, the dice or knuckle bones are shaken. Guided by the spirit, at the perfect time, the *kairos*, the diviner cuts the cards or casts the lots. This act captures the holistic essence of the moment. Guided by the spirit, the cast is interpreted, revealing the trajectory of reality, interior as well as exterior.

A wide variety of techniques are effective and most were known in one form or another in the ancient world. There is some *cut*. In bibliomancy the book is opened and the line selected. In dice oracles the dice or knucklebones are cast. Or again, with hands clasped over your ears, you go into the marketplace, uncover them, and listen for an omen. Furthermore, the oracle should be of such a nature as to invite projection, that is, to provide a medium for symbolic communication. The emotional charge of the situation facilitates the synchronistic event, which must be interpreted symbolically. Finally, as for the other theurgic practices, the interpretation should be affirmed by concrete ritual.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I hope I have convinced you that by exploring these contemporary therapeutic practices, which are closely parallel to ancient theurgy, we can see that successful theurgy resulted in psychological integration and, in particular, in better integration with the archetypal and daimonic forces acting upon each person. We can see how theurgy helped its practitioners to live lives in conscious cooperation with divine Providence, unifying the god within to God of the All.