

Excerpt

From *Far From This Land* by Michael Gellert

Author's Opening Remarks: How to Read This Book

The following story is based on a series of dreams I had in response to brain surgery and to facing my human frailty and mortality. It is the creative expression of what can happen when we consciously dream our dreams onward from where they ended. This can also involve protracted conversations with and among the inner figures who populate our dreams, conversations that produce penetrating insights into the dreams themselves and the vexing problems they are often about. Jung called this method of exploring the unknown “active imagination.” It led not only to the creation of his *Red Book*—a remarkable account of his conversations with his own inner figures—but to what subsequently became of that project, namely, the foundation of all his later psychological works. Since this method is so central to our book, some preliminary discussion of it is warranted.

As Jung himself acknowledged, he did not invent this method. In the fourth century, Saint Augustine admitted in the opening lines of his philosophical inquiry, *Soliloquies*, that he was mystified by the way it developed as a dialogue with “Reason,” the latter taking form as an inner voice that was not associated with a dream figure per se but that nevertheless suddenly spoke to him. Goethe is known to have written some of his poems in a somnambulist, dream state, as if he were possessed, and he purposely secluded himself so as to foster this condition. As did the Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman, whose screenplay for his film *Hour of the Wolf* was inspired by inner figures

who not only talked to him but, appearing externally as projections, wouldn't leave his room until the film was completed. (As contemporaries, Bergman was familiar with Jung but apparently not with his use of active imagination.) Similarly, Rainer Maria Rilke's mystical, prayer-like poems in his *Book of Hours* began with what he described as forceful "inner dictations" occurring in the mornings and evenings, the times when we are closest to sleep and the unconscious. (Rilke and Jung were familiar with each other, though Rilke was on more intimate terms with Freud.) But even a thinker as worldly as Thomas Jefferson clearly engaged in a self-reflective active imagination when he wrote his famous lyrical "dialogue between my Head and my Heart" as part of a letter to a married woman he fell in love with.

T. S. Eliot described the more shamanic side of active imagination as a "disciplined kind of dreaming" that has been forgotten in modern times but in earlier times was revered as the practice of seeing visions. (Visions would thus be dreams we cultivate while we are awake but in a meditative or trance state.) Coleridge understood this visionary discipline to be a way to participate in a "sacramental universe" or "imaginal realm transcending any personal existence," and he distinguished it from the creativity of the artist. *Active imagination is not fiction or novel writing*, even if at times it may resemble it because it gravitates toward expressive arts like sculpting, painting, poetry, playwriting, and creative nonfiction. Through them, it connects us to the deeper layers of the psyche, layers that, if their numinous effects on us are any indication, seem to border on otherworldly realms. Or perhaps, as William Blake and others intuited, *they are those realms themselves*—a possibility that this book entertains. This story is a

memoir of my visits—via dreams and active imagination—to what appeared to be such realms.

As you may have guessed by now, this is an unorthodox memoir. To begin with, unlike most memoirs, it is shaped by psychological and spiritual events more than familial, social, or historical ones; that is to say, it's more inner-oriented and intrapersonal than outer-oriented and interpersonal. Then there is the distinct kind of psychological and spiritual memoir that it is. The figures in our dreams, as any of us can observe, have a will and agenda of their own. There's no predicting what they will say and do. The same is true for the active imagination we engage in with them. There's no telling in advance in which direction it may turn, and why. Dreaming and active imagination are both a suprarational process. The inner figures who drive both activities can assume an identity far different than our own, representing what Jung called "part-souls" or "splinter psyches"—subpersonalities or parts of our psychic constitution but not all of it. Their existence is natural and normal—we all have these parts—and they become a problem only when the ego or central personality becomes fragmented and overtaken by them in such extreme and rare conditions as dissociative or multiple personality disorder. The diverse religious traditions that have historically incorporated active imagination into their practices have always viewed it as a safe and productive way to investigate the mysteries of the human psyche and to tap into Coleridge's sacramental or sacred universe. (Among such traditions, Jung includes the Jesuits with their Ignatian spiritual exercises, Patanjali's yoga with its sutras or aphorisms on the theory and practice of yoga, certain forms of Buddhist meditation, and medieval alchemy.) All the same, active imagination is not widely used as a way to tell one's personal story.

A further distinction making this memoir unusual is its main figure and narrator, a subpersonality—one so strong that it is practically an alter ego—named Richard Caldwell. His temperament, orientation, and biographical history are hardly my own. He personifies a skeptical side of me and gives voice to the existential doubts plaguing the period connected with my surgery, especially doubts about the continuity of consciousness after we die. In other words, the story is told from the critical, discerning perspective of a shrewd skeptic who is not easily fooled. That its narrator should be him rather than me was not a decision I consciously made. He spontaneously emerged in the post-surgical phase and insisted on telling the story—including all the dreams and visionary, active-imagination material that arose during this phase—from his point of view, essentially making it *his* story. What could I do, other than give him free rein? If repressed or cast out, he'd only return with greater forcefulness in his doubt.

Another figure, much closer to my conscious identity (or the actual ego), represents the professional part of me, the part informed by my profession as a Jungian psychoanalyst. The story very much unfolds as a dialogue between these two figures, my inner skeptic and my professional self. The first encounters a parallel universe (a.k.a. the afterlife), and the second, in the capacity of his analyst, helps him to make sense of this. The professional self becomes a helper or healer to the skeptical self, who in turn submits to the ordeal of psychotherapy. “Healer, heal thyself,” as the ancient proverb says.

However, this analyst does not practice his craft entirely in the style I do. He often seems more like a didactic teacher than an analyst simply listening and gently fording the patient's inner process with him, trusting the psyche to find its own cure. He's quick to make interpretations and to explain to the patient the meaning of the latter's

experiences, as if he knows better (and as it often happens, he does). In large measure, this is a creative device employed for narrative purposes, one whose use Jung would probably frown upon. He would agree that a psychopomp or spiritual guide is needed in order to clarify what the unconscious has revealed (often the guide is an agent or spokesperson for the unconscious, and in this story there is more than one), but he would disagree that this function should be the ego's. Citing Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* as an example of active imagination that is "too strongly consciously formed," Jung stresses the importance of carefully separating material in one's conscious mind from that of the unconscious. He believed that material seeping in from the ego or conscious mind waters down the objectivity of the unconscious and the active imagination that flows from it. The approach I take here is more in sync with the poets, playwrights, and philosophers who do not so finely distinguish between conscious and unconscious material and intentions. Either way, the conversations our inner figures have with each other or directly with us speak to the psyche's impulse to reveal itself and to work out its inner conflicts and self-dividedness. A tremendously transformative and integrative power is unleashed when we allow our inner parts to talk with each other.

Speaking of poets, as a record of visits to other realms, the book has some features in common with Dante's *Divine Comedy*—a fact I was unaware of during the process of writing it. Of course, I am not elevating my account to the level of Dante's eloquent, sublime, epic poem, mesmerizing us with its boundless, vivid imagery and layers of rich allegory. Merely, I am pointing to these basic features—six of them, to be exact—to illustrate how creativity of this kind can follow certain "grooves," suggesting

the influence of what Jung understood as the archetypes of the collective unconscious. No writer is an island unto themselves.

The first way my story resembles *The Divine Comedy* is that the latter is also, as Eliot and others contend, a product of active imagination. Both have the quality of a revelation, a novel disclosure yet also a perennial truth. Like many exercises in active imagination, both stories wrestle with religious, philosophical, spiritual, and psychological themes.

Second, Dante and I are both actors in our stories—such participation being a general feature of active imagination—and we are both portrayed as alternate versions of ourselves. In Dante's case, he is presented as an idealized version he would have liked to have been. In my case, I'm presented in two versions that, as discussed above, reflect exaggerated parts of me, one that is a skeptic in matters of ultimate truth, and the other a loquacious, proactive psychoanalyst. I'm afraid neither of these alternate versions is as attractive as Dante's.

Third, if we compare Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise (or Heaven) to most modern near-death experiences (admittedly, perhaps an unfair comparison), we see a sharp difference in purpose. Dante's allegorical visit to the other side of the grave is primarily *instructive*, aiming to illuminate how to live a moral and spiritual life that leads to God or Heaven rather than to Purgatory or Hell. In contrast to the modern near-death experience, it was not intended to provide emotional comfort and facilitate safe passage back to the land of the living. It was not a short, single-episode event but a learning process unfolding over the course of a week, precisely, the week beginning on the night before Good Friday in the year 1300. Though the story told in this

book is about a modern near-death experience, it likewise aspires to be educative and process-oriented, but naturally with a different perspective and different themes than characteristic of Dante's medieval Catholic theology.

Fourth, the fact that this story begins darkly yet concludes with a kind of redemption and a hopeful outlook further gives it something in common with Dante's journey. This qualifies both stories as comedy—"comedy" as understood in the ancient, classical sense of the meaning—as opposed to tragedy whose movement is from light to darkness.

Fifth, given this comedic feature, it is noteworthy that the redemption in both stories is spearheaded by male guides (in Dante's instance, the Roman poet Virgil) but is finally midwifed or consummated by extraordinary women who are the love interests of the narrators. As we shall see, a man's female, inner figures tend to serve as a bridge to the hidden depths of the psyche, or to what the ancients called the soul. With its diverse characteristics, this feminine side within every man is what Jung referred to as the anima.

Lastly, another core feature that the two stories share is their concern for ordinary life in the everyday world we inhabit. It should be remembered that Dante did not intend his *Commedia* to be only an exaltation or mystical contemplation of otherworldly realms. (Indeed, the adjective *Divina* was added after he died.) He also intended it to be a reflection upon the condition of the mundane world that he lived in, namely, the Christian world around the year 1300. So, too, does this story explore questions about an afterlife as a means to raise our awareness about how we should choose to live here and now in *our* world and century. It is, at heart, a story about *this* world, this Earth we dwell upon—in Dante's words, "The small round floor that makes us passionate . . ."

On a final note, it is worth repeating that the book is a memoir. It is a faithful rendition of what the psyche released when its intimate partner, the brain, was intruded upon and when my natural fragility as a mere mortal was stripped down to a stark naked vulnerability. The dreams and visionary, active-imagination experiences in the story are described in the way they happened. They are events as real or true as any, only they represent the reality or truth of the psyche. Specifically, they represent the part of the psyche that appears to be able to perceive higher or otherworldly realms, or, again, to perhaps be those realms itself. This memoir is about my visits to this distant region of the psyche, where the mind evidently meets and merges with these realms.

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Los Angeles, 2021