

Review of *Jung and the Epic of Transformation Volume 1: Wolfram von Eschenbach's "Parzival" and the Grail as Transformation* by Paul Bishop

Bishop, P. (2024). *Jung and the Epic of Transformation Volume 1: Wolfram von Eschenbach's "Parzival" and the Grail as Transformation*. Asheville: Chiron Publications.

Reviewed by Leslie Gardner

Paul Bishop is well known for his forensic and illuminating exploration of Jung's intellectual milieu, particularly his two volumes *Friederich Nietzsche and Weimar Classicism* from 2004 and *Analytical Psychology and German Classical Aesthetics: Goethe, Schiller, and Jung* Volume 2: *The Constellation of the Self* from 2009. Having just finished reading this latest book on Jungian themes and German literature, I can attest to its witty and lucid presentation of numerous provocative issues.

The book is intended as the first in a series of four publications, intended to explore key texts in German literature that influenced Jung, beginning here with an exploration of Wolfram von Eschenbach's thirteenth century epic poem, *Parzifal* (von Eschenbach, 1477/1980). Subsequent volumes promise to examine Goethe's *Faust* (Goethe, 1808/2014), Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Nietzsche, 1883/1974) before turning to Jung's own work *The Red Book* (Jung, C.G. 2009).

Parzifal (von Eschenbach, 1477/1980) tells the story of the Arthurian hero Parzifal (or Percival in English) and his quest for the Holy Grail, reputed as the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper, but von Eschenbach's is one of many versions that have explored this story well into the twentieth century and beyond.

The provocative issues that Bishop presents are literary, aesthetic and psychological. Literary because he uses early German epics to track the grail - its impact, and its attraction. Aesthetic in the correlation of frameworks and patterns across artworks and literary sequence to directly symbolise human psychological endeavours. And psychological because the end goal of the book is to track 'individuation' in Jung's parlance, as it is exemplified in the grail legend. Bishop pursues these themes and correlates them to biographical moments in Jung's works, particularly to his ideas of projection, transformation and Individuation.

However, the theme that is most difficult to keep tabs on is that of 'transformation' which is the sub-title of this book. Is Individuation (the end-goal of the quest expressed in language that is deliberately correlated to Jungian ideas) a transformative progress or is it an unfolding of what is already there, suggesting an emergent self as an individuated self? Bishop shows that Jung perhaps has it both ways.

In the first part of the book, Bishop (2024) traces the history of the epics. In a crucial section, correlating the epic as psychology, he points out that “In their mania for categorising and classifying different types of epic, literary critics tend to overlook the experiential dimension of literature - as well as its philosophical importance” (Bishop, 2024, p.35). Thus, Bishop (2024) recounts von Eschenbach's *Parzifal* (1477/1980) in this vein, citing controversial and best-selling Luc Ferry's (2011) argument of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odysseus*, that epic is the ‘birthplace’ of philosophy. Ferry (2011), he points out, equates the ways of referring to moral and spiritual mores in other than mythic forms as ‘secularised’, not referring to religious belief or of the gods - as a ‘new’ form of philosophical discussion, the ‘miracle’ of what occurred in Plato's discussions.

Unaccountably the theoretical issues that make Ferry's (2011) ‘secular humanism’ controversial are not referred to by Bishop. Broadly speaking Ferry's (2011) rejection of religious dogma and superstition as irrelevant to prevalent human emotional and thinking modes which he claims are not viable touchstones, he often maintains, are not explored by Bishop that I note. But I would argue that these ways of receiving literature are essential to the experience of listening or reading. Strangely Ferry's (2011) points here are contrary to another controversial scholar Bishop refers to: Peter Kingsley - more on that later.

In *The Wisdom of the Myths: How Greek Mythology Can Change Your Life* (Ferry, 2014) - part of his series on ‘Learning to Live’) Ferry (2014) reinterprets classic stories from Greek mythology, including Homer, to uncover their philosophical insights. So ‘epic as psychology’ is given grounding as a viable tract, rather than as evidence of the combination of creator and audience psychologies, contextualised in the language and place of delivery. Elsewhere, in *A Brief History of Thought* (Ferry, 2011), Ferry both suggests that there are more efficacious secular avenues than spiritual solutions (or, as he says, ‘superstition’) to ‘learning to live’. Ferry (2011) certainly opposes Jung's ideas that Christianity or other religious solutions may well be beneficial for people seeking meaning in their lives.

Although Bishop (2024) points out that there were many other classical schools, he primarily refers to Plato, although he does not allude to Plato's awareness of affect as operative communicative strategy (see ‘Gorgias’ and Helen's complaints at being blamed for the war, and her lack of love for her estranged and controlling husband; sounds 19th century romantic; but it's there). Further what is lacking in Ferry's (2011/2014) analysis is awareness of audience impact which is critical in Homer's epics - which were oral recountings, after all. Alluding to Ferry, Bishop (2024) says that Homer's epic poetry was a sort of philosophical tract engendered by rationality and logic.

Brilliantly, however, Bishop (2014) makes us aware of the respective, crucial differences of von Eschenbach's darker epic fairy tale rather than the psychological thriller that became Wagner's operatic version *Parsifal* (1882). By this discussion, he implies at Jung's fascination in the epic as a young man. Bishop (2024) refers then to Nietzsche's impact on Wagner's epic, before moving onto Jung's references to both works not only in his psychological writings in *Aion* (CW, 9ii), but also in *Answer to Job* (CW, 11) and in *The Red Book* (Jung, 2009). We are reminded that Jung read von Eschenbach's epic as a 15-year-old and was amazed by it and reread it many times. It was a sort of deep guide to living for him.

Citing Jung's writings in letters and notes to Aniela Jaffe, and in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (Jaffé 1963), Bishop (2024) builds a case for Jung's self-assessment

as a prophet, one who recognises the value of the vessel (the grail) and its vital, deep authority for one (like Jung) who knows what to find. The resolution of transformation is Individuation, and the epic form holds the pattern and transformative trigger for scientific and 'natural' sources of projection too. In fact, projections are dissolved by the prophet Jung, who knows - the king who is transformed. Individuation is the goal.

Bishop (2024) frequently cites another controversial mystical writer and former Jungian therapist, Peter Kingsley as the book continues. Based on Kingsley's (1997) commitment to mystical interpretations, Kingsley's (2021) reading of *The Red Book* which Bishop points to, reveals a form of transcendence that is synecdoche rather than simple allegorical likeness. It is a genuine and finally altered otherness, a new individual, who is driven to seek out change as Bishop explains 'Parzifal' does, as aligns with Jung's ideas. In other words, the symbol has material presence yet the grail, the vessel takes up space and time without metaphysical coordinates undermining its 'truth'.

Kingsley's (1997) earlier writings on pre-Socratics are widely respected, but as he went on, he diverged from standard academic formulations, and rather 'reads into' writing in radical ways - particularly of modern writers such as Jung. I think this needs to be set out.

While the contexts of Parmenides' writings Kingsley wrote about brilliantly may be seen as recognition of a culture redolent of fully committed other-worldly coordinates, Jung's world is/was not. Even the mediums Jung encountered who may have purported to attain to metaphysical significant communication, lived in a world that had more-or-less eschewed such components in a way early Greeks had not. Kingsley's (2021) application of those factors seems untenable even to consideration of *The Red Book*. If Bishop (2024) is to use Kingsley's arguments, they need to be defended or at least pointed out to readers.

From the beginning of the volume which comprehensively explores to the contexts of the grail literature, and von Eschenbach's (1477/1980) variations, the question of what 'transformation' is, and how it works in a Jungian framework is explored. It seems to me a formulaic progression - thereby rendered static - and yet is also presented as a revelation of what is dynamically integral to what the grail is, and so a bursting-forth, an integral presence, already 'there' and not in that sense 'new'.

This is the same question we ask of what Jung might mean by individuation: a gradual evolution of a self, a change? Or a sudden unpeeling of what's *already* there but hidden? The grail functions in these (and other) varieties of ways and the poets in these cases use its broad meanings to propound their world views.

In part, this is down to the aesthetic genre itself which requires steps in sequence to greater meaning through hardship and struggle. But is it only that? Or are there also different meanings of transformation: a core modification of a personality, thus a personal change which Parzifal goes through? My question is whether this is a core alteration or indeed simply another face of self-presentation where multiple personalities worn for purposes of expressing valour, or mystical engagement, or religious piety where the many stages of the story are displayed in each work of the grail stories.

Bishop (2024) points to Jung's creative and persuasive ploy to explore his communicative effectiveness. There is a duality. On the one hand, the use of adornment (allusions to hollowness of attractive 'other' mystifying, transcendent meanings) and on the other to 'natural sequence', common sensical, and material presentation.

Jung is engaged in de-projections of metaphysical ideas, trying to get at grounded, material attributes of the grail and its vessels. The goal of individuation is akin to the king's journey: unhappy and yet stripped of the world's disfiguring and unnatural projections onto his personality. This prevailing unhappiness is persistent. We are told that Jung acknowledges those scholars who indicate that this inherent natural sequencing in the king is the inspiration for scientific enquiry. But the God has filled a vessel with emboldening liquid (knowledge) - that only the prophet can access, and Jung is one - as he expresses it in the Red Book (2009). Who but only Jung can follow this?

The notion of literary form as psychology is intriguing, and its possibilities as triggers of the movement of intellectual enquiry is persuasive, but individuation for Jung must also accommodate the common presence of multiple personalities - so what personality is 'uncovered'? Which is the 'integrated' one? - if we are born with a personality, and the potential for others in certain circumstances, is it a matter of developmental integration or a matter of revelation? What transformation is, and Jung's contentious ideas of individuation bear further exploration. However, Bishop's use of literature is a brilliant pointer to why Jungian discussion of literature and film, for example, are so appropriate and fruitful.

Contributor

Leslie Gardner PhD is the convenor of biannual feminisms conferences and classics and depth psychology conferences. She is a Fellow in the department of psychosocial and psychoanalytic studies at the University of Essex, and has published numerous chapters in collected volumes, as well as edited collections of essays with co-editors Frances Gray, Catriona Miller, Paul Bishop, Terence Dawson, Richard Seaford. She is the author of *Rhetorical investigations: GB Vico and CG Jung* (Routledge 2014) based on her PhD. An upcoming commissioned volume on ghostwriting is due out next year, to be published by Routledge. Leslie also runs an international literary agency, Artellus Ltd.

References

- Bishop, P. (2024). *Jung and the Epic of Transformation Volume 1: Wolfram von Eschenbach's "Parzival" and the Grail as Transformation*. Asheville: Chiron Publications.
- Eschenbach, W. V. (1477/1980). *Parzival*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Ferry, L. (2011). *A Brief History of Thought*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Ferry, L. (2014). *The Wisdom of the Myths: How Greek Mythology Can Change Your Life*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Goethe, J. W. V. (1808/2014). *Faust I & II: Goethe's Collected Works, Volume 2* (Princeton Classics): Goethe's Collected Works - Updated Edition: 5. United States: Princeton University Press.
- Jaffé, A. (1963). *C.G. Jung: Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Great Britain: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD.
- Jung, C. G. (1958). *Psychology and Religion: West and East*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD.

- Jung, C. G. (1959). *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*. Great Britain: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD.
- Jung, C. G. (2009). *Liber Novus (The Red Book)*. United States: Philemon Foundation.
- Kingsley, P. (1997). *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition*. USA: Oxford University Press.
- Kingsley, P. (2021). *Catafalque: Carl Jung and the End of Humanity*. India: Catafalque.
- Nietzsche, F. (1883/1974). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. London: Penguin Classics.