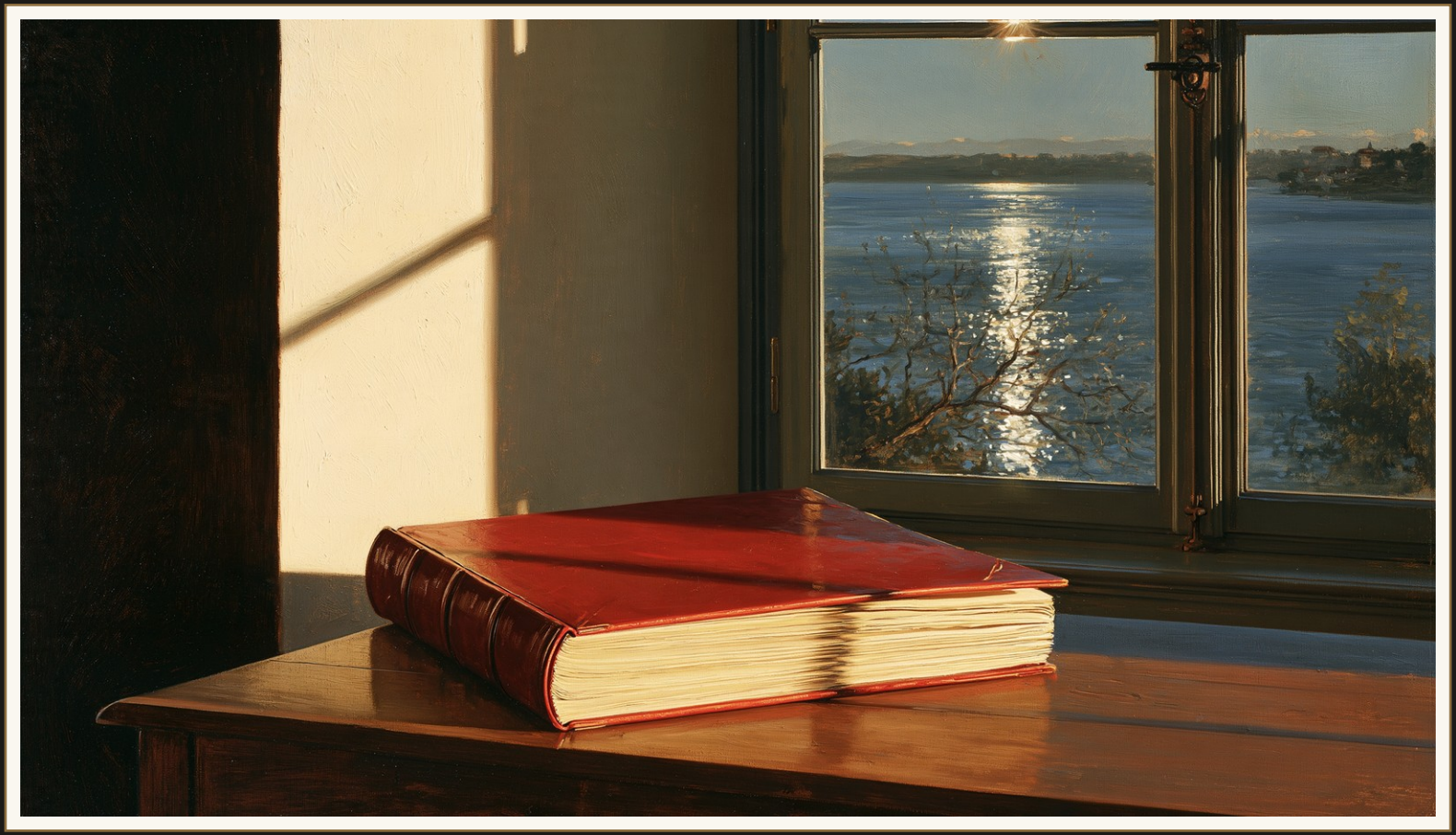
ACTIVE IMAGINATION: CARL JUNG'S RED BOOK EXPLAINED

A Reader's Companion on Liber Novus and the Creative Confrontation



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OPENING ESSAY · LAKE ZURICH, AUTUMN 1913

The Secret Folio: Jung's Confrontation with the Unconscious

In the autumn of 1913, in a quiet lakeside villa in Küsnacht on Lake Zurich, thirty-eight-year-old Dr. Carl Gustav Jung sat at his desk feeling as though the ground beneath his feet had split open. By every external measure of worldly prestige, Jung stood at the summit of European psychiatry: he had served as the senior physician at the renowned Burghölzli mental hospital in Zurich, led the Burghölzli's word-association experiments, which gave experimental evidence for emotionally charged complexes, and had been chosen by Sigmund Freud as his intellectual heir, first president of the International Psychoanalytical Association, and, in Freud's own words in a letter of 16 April 1909, his "successor and crown prince."

Yet behind that distinguished public mask (*the persona*), his inward life was in turmoil. In January 1913, after months of theoretical disagreement over the nature of human desire and religious symbols, Freud and Jung severed their friendship. When Jung also gave up his university lectureship in the months that followed (he was a *Privatdozent* at Zurich, not a professor), the professional and scientific establishment turned its back on him. More alarming than social isolation, however, was an eruption from within: powerful waking visions, apocalyptic dreams, and emotional storms began battering the walls of his conscious ego. Was he, the doctor of mental illness, quietly falling into the very schizophrenia he had diagnosed in asylum wards, or was he encountering an unknown layer of reality that medical science had never mapped?

Rather than turning away or suppressing the terrifying images, Jung made one of the most courageous choices in modern psychology: he resolved to enter the storm voluntarily. Over the next sixteen years, in six black leather notebooks and then transcribed calligraphically into an immense red-leather folio titled *Liber Novus* ("The New Book")—known to posterity simply as *The Red Book*—Jung conducted a systematic experiment upon his own soul. He called this process *Active Imagination*. Kept by the family, and from 1984 in a Zurich bank vault, until W. W. Norton published it in October 2009 in cooperation with the Philemon Foundation, *The Red Book* is neither a clinical case study nor a private diary; it is the fiery furnace from which his entire later psychology—the Archetypes, the Collective Unconscious, the Shadow, the Anima, and Individuation—was forged.

This companion booklet walks step by step through what our film explores: the bitter break with Freud, the terrifying waking visions of 1913, the methods Jung used to stay anchored to daily reality, the mysterious archetypal figures he encountered in the depths, and why this once-secret manuscript remains one of the most vital keys to understanding the modern human mind.

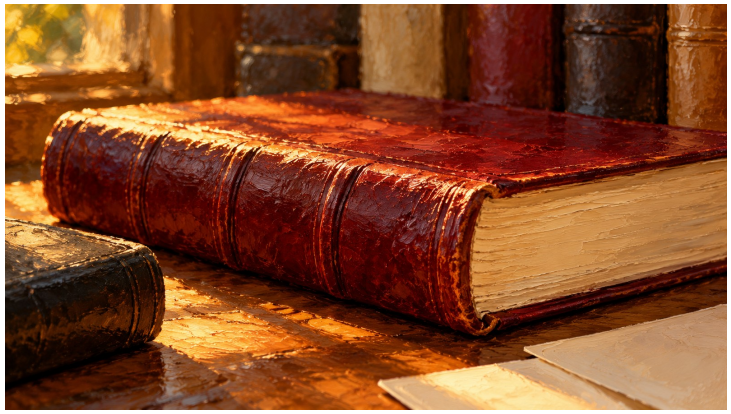


The Break with Freud: The Limits of Personal Libido

The story of *The Red Book* begins in March 1907, when the thirty-one-year-old Jung arrived at Freud's apartment at Berggasse 19 in Vienna. Their first meeting was legendary: the two men sat down and talked continuously for thirteen hours. Freud saw in the tall Swiss psychiatrist the champion who could establish psychoanalysis across the world; Jung saw in Freud a pioneer of fearless honesty who had dared to take dreams and unconscious desire seriously.

Yet beneath their mutual warmth lay a fundamental philosophical fault line. Freud insisted that the unconscious was essentially personal: a repository of repressed biographical memories, infantile wishes, and frustrated sexual impulses (*libido*). To Freud, religion, philosophy, and art were merely sublimated neuroses. Jung could not accept this reductionism. Working with psychotic patients at the Burghölzli, Jung had observed that individuals with no education often produced delusions containing intricate mythological motifs that matched ancient Greek, Egyptian, or Vedic imagery they could never have consciously known.

The rupture came in 1912 with Jung's *Symbols of Transformation* (*Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido*). In this landmark work, Jung redefined *libido* not as mere sexual instinct, but as general psychic energy—a primordial spiritual life-force that naturally manifests in sacred symbols, creative art, and universal archetypes. Freud interpreted Jung's theoretical independence as personal disloyalty. In January 1913, their correspondence broke off permanently, leaving Jung stripped of institutional backing and thrown entirely back upon his own inner resources.



October 1913: The Vision of the Blood Tide

In October 1913, while traveling alone on a train to Schaffhausen, Jung was suddenly seized by an overwhelming waking vision that seemed to arrive from outside himself. The daylight darkened, and he saw a monstrous yellow flood rising over northern Europe: covering the lowlands between the North Sea and the Alps, submerging entire cities, and carrying floating debris, ruined houses, and thousands of drowned corpses in its wake. As he watched in horror, the water turned entirely into blood. The vision lasted about an hour, and it shook him to his foundations.

Two weeks later, on the same journey, the vision recurred with even greater force, accompanied by an inner voice declaring that the catastrophe was real and impending. Throughout the spring of 1914, Jung suffered recurring dreams in which an unseasonable Arctic freeze settled over the continent, turning midsummer Europe into solid ice and freezing all civilization into silence. Terrified that he was succumbing to latent psychosis, Jung prepared himself for mental breakdown. He kept a loaded revolver in his nightstand, determined that if he permanently lost his sanity, he would end his life rather than become a burden to his family.

Then, on 1 August 1914, World War I erupted. The civilized nations of Europe hurled themselves into an unprecedented bloodbath of industrial slaughter. Jung experienced a profound shock of realization: his visions had not been a personal breakdown, but an involuntary premonition—a direct tapping into the violent collective tensions gathering in the European unconscious. If the human psyche contained depths capable of registering a continental catastrophe before it occurred, then psychology could no longer remain confined to the personal ego.



Active Imagination: Dropping into the Dark Depths

With the outbreak of the war, Jung realized that the unconscious was not an adversary to be feared or suppressed, but an objective nature to be investigated scientifically. To understand its forces, he had to observe them in himself. In late 1913, he developed the method he later formalized as **Active Imagination**. Unlike passive daydreaming (where the ego drifts with associative fantasies) and unlike free association (where images are used to trace past memories), active imagination requires waking consciousness to remain fully alert, entering into direct, dialogical engagement with the figures of the unconscious.

To lower the threshold of consciousness without losing control, Jung devised concrete rituals. Recalling how much joy he had felt as a boy building with stones, he went down to the shore of Lake Zurich every day after seeing his patients and began gathering stones, mud, and twigs, building miniature cottages, towers, and walls. At first, his intellectual pride resisted: what was a renowned doctor doing playing like a child? Yet as his hands touched the stone, his emotional blocks loosened, and the inner stream began to flow.

At night, sitting alone in his study after his family was asleep, Jung would deliberately silence his intellectual thoughts and allow his consciousness to drop down into the earth. On the night of 12 December 1913, he felt as if the ground literally opened before him: he plunged into soft darkness until he found his feet on a subterranean shore. There he saw a dead hero floating in dark water, a red sun rising from the depths, and a giant black serpent. He reached for a pen and began recording every word and image in his black notebooks.



Elijah and Salome: Logos, Eros, and the Serpent

As Jung ventured deeper into the underworld of *Liber Primus* (the opening section of *The Red Book*), he found himself in a high-walled rocky cavern where he met two distinct figures: an elderly, dignified man with white hair and a beard, and a beautiful young woman who was completely blind. Beside them coiled a large black serpent that showed no hostility toward him. The old man introduced himself as the prophet Elijah; the young woman was Salome.

Jung was thoroughly bewildered. Why was a biblical prophet of divine law paired with the wanton daughter of Herodias who had demanded the head of John the Baptist on a platter? And why was the serpent—the ancient biblical symbol of deception—their domestic companion? When Jung questioned them, Elijah assured him, as Jung recalled it in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, that he and Salome had belonged together from all eternity. Salome reached out her hands to touch Jung, proclaiming her love for him, which filled him with moral dread.

Through weeks of intense dialogue with these inner figures, the psychological meaning gradually crystallized. Elijah and Salome represented the two fundamental poles of human psychic life: **Logos** (thinking, forethought, wisdom, and moral order) and **Eros** (feeling, desire, relatedness, and instinctual passion). Salome was blind because feeling without conscious reflection cannot see where it goes; Elijah was austere because wisdom without feeling is dry, cold, and dead. The serpent was the unconscious mediator between them, uniting animal instinct with spiritual meaning. Wholeness requires bringing thought and feeling into conscious, living dialogue.

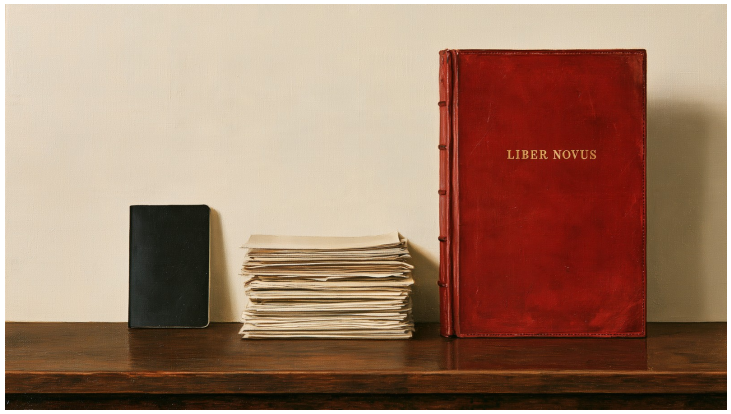


Philemon: The Winged Guru and the Autonomous Mind

Soon afterwards, a third and even more decisive figure emerged from the depths of Jung's imagination: **Philemon**, an old man with the curved horns of a bull and the iridescent blue-green wings of a kingfisher, holding a bunch of four keys. Unlike Elijah, who spoke from ancient scripture, Philemon was a pagan sage steeped in Gnostic, Egyptian, and Hellenistic wisdom. Jung often saw him walking in the garden of his Küsnacht home, pacing back and forth beside the lake while engaged in prolonged conversations with him.

Philemon brought about an intellectual revolution in Jung's understanding of the psyche. Up to that point, Jung had shared the conventional assumption of modern psychology: that when a person thinks, *he* is creating the thought. Philemon proved to him that this is an illusion. Thoughts, Philemon told him, were like animals in the forest, or people in a room, or birds in the air; in the words Jung recorded in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*: "If you should see people in a room, you would not think that you had made those people, or that you were responsible for them."

Philemon possessed a distinct, separate consciousness that knew things Jung himself had never learned. He became Jung's inner teacher, instructing him in what Jung would later call **objective psychology**: the recognition that the unconscious is not a byproduct of our personal brain, but an objective natural reality that possesses its own autonomous life, its own intentions, and a wisdom far older and deeper than the small daytime ego. In his memoirs Jung wrote that Philemon "taught me psychic objectivity, the reality of the psyche."



The Making of *Liber Novus*: Calligraphy as Sacred Craft

Between 1913 and 1917, Jung filled six small black leather notebooks with raw dialogue, emotional crises, and spontaneous reflections. Yet he knew that leaving these encounters in rough notes was insufficient. If the unconscious was an objective reality deserving of scientific and human dignity, it had to be integrated through conscious work and given enduring aesthetic form. In 1915, Jung had a large folio volume made, bound in red leather, with some six hundred pages of heavy paper (the figures come from Sonu Shamdasani's introduction to *Liber Novus*).

For some sixteen years, Jung devoted his evenings to the painstaking task of transcribing and editing his experiences into this volume, giving it the formal title *Liber Novus*. He did not write in modern cursive; instead, adopting the discipline of a medieval scribe, he wrote in an elaborate Gothic script with pen and ink and painted the pages with care. The margins were filled with ornamental borders, initials, and radiant circular paintings.

Why did a twentieth-century scientist employ such an archaic medieval medium? Jung understood that the psychological function of craft is essential to mental health. The sheer physical discipline of drawing every illuminated capital, ruling every line, and waiting for layers of paint to dry provided a vital anchor that kept him firmly grounded in sensory reality. Furthermore, it demonstrated respect: treating the unconscious not as a clinical pathology to be eliminated, but as a sacred precinct requiring devotion, reverence, and beautiful form.



The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious

The raw, mythological dramas recorded in *The Red Book* provided the empirical foundation for Jung's two most famous scientific concepts: the **Collective Unconscious** and the **Archetypes**. When Jung looked back at his encounters with Elijah, Salome, Philemon, the serpent, and the black giant Ka, he realized that he had not created these figures from personal memories; they had stepped forward from an archaic, universal human inheritance.

The human body possesses an anatomical history: our bones, nerves, and organs bear the evolutionary imprint of millions of years of mammalian life. In the exact same way, Jung argued, the human psyche possesses an evolutionary anatomy. Beneath our conscious awareness lies the *Personal Unconscious*—the shallow layer containing our personal memories, childhood wounds, and forgotten experiences. But beneath that personal stratum lies the vast ocean of the **Collective Unconscious**: an inherited psychic structure shared by all human beings regardless of race, culture, or historical era.

The structural elements of this collective layer are the **Archetypes**: innate, universal patterns of instinct, emotion, and image-formation. Just as birds inherit the instinct to build nests without being taught, the human mind inherits the tendency to perceive life through recurring archetypal lenses: the Mother, the Father, the Hero, the Trickster, the Wise Elder, and the Shadow. In *The Red Book*, Jung was not recording private idiosyncrasies; he was mapping the universal landscape of the human soul.



The Shadow and the Integration of Opposites

Of all the archetypal encounters depicted in *The Red Book*, none is more psychologically demanding than the confrontation with the **Shadow**. The shadow represents the hidden, repressed, and unlived parts of our personality—those qualities, desires, and weaknesses that our conscious ego deems unacceptable, ugly, or immoral. Because the ego cannot bear to acknowledge these traits in itself, it automatically projects them outward onto other people: our spouses, our political rivals, our cultural enemies, or foreign nations.

In *The Red Book*, Jung repeatedly finds himself forced to embrace what he despises. In one chilling sequence, he encounters a crippled tramp who mocks his scholarly pretension; in another, he must eat the bitter liver of a murdered child; in a third, he finds himself complicit in the assassination of the legendary hero Siegfried. Jung is forced to recognize that the murderer, the scoundrel, and the blasphemer are not merely figures outside in the world; they live within his own breast.

Jung later put the point in a single sentence of *Psychology and Alchemy* (Collected Works, Vol. 12, §208): "there is no light without shadow and no psychic wholeness without imperfection." Moral perfection—trying to become purely good, virtuous, and rational—is a dangerous illusion that merely drives the rejected darkness into the unconscious, where it gathers explosive force. True healing comes through what Jung called *Enantiodromia*—the ancient Heraclitean law that every extreme eventually turns into its opposite. To become whole, a human being must possess the humility to look his own darkness in the face and integrate the shadow into a larger conscious life.



Psychological Types: Understanding Human Diversity

In 1921, while still actively working on the Red Book manuscript, Jung published *Psychological Types*, his first major theoretical work following his break with Freud. While today this work is best known as the historical ancestor of personality typing instruments, for Jung it was an urgent philosophical and therapeutic necessity: he needed to understand why brilliant thinkers looking at the exact same human psyche arrived at completely incompatible theories.

Why had Freud seen the human mind entirely in terms of the pleasure principle and sexual drive? Why had Alfred Adler seen it entirely in terms of the will to power and the inferiority complex? And why did Jung himself see it in terms of symbols, mythology, and spiritual transformation? The answer, Jung realized, lay in the structural orientation of the observer's own consciousness.

Jung identified two fundamental attitudes toward the world: **Extraversion** (where psychic energy flows outward toward external objects, social validation, and active engagement) and **Introversion** (where psychic energy flows inward toward subjective meaning, inner images, and reflective contemplation). Across these two attitudes, he mapped four basic cognitive functions: two rational functions of judgment—**Thinking** (logical evaluation) and **Feeling** (value-based discernment)—and two irrational functions of perception—**Sensation** (concrete sensory observation) and **Intuition** (unconscious perception of possibilities and underlying patterns). Every human being relies primarily on one superior function, while its opposite remains submerged in the unconscious. Psychological differences are not moral failings, but necessary facets of a multifaceted human consciousness.



Aion and *Answer to Job*: The Metaphysics of Evil

In 1916, at the height of his Red Book visions, Jung experienced a terrifying haunting in his Küsnacht home: his children saw ghostly figures in their bedrooms, the front doorbell rang violently with no one on the porch, and the atmosphere grew stiflingly cold. As Jung tells it in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, he cried out: *"For God's sake, what in the world is this?"* and a chorus of voices answered: *"We have come back from Jerusalem where we found not what we sought."* Over the next three evenings, writing in an altered state of intense inspiration, Jung produced the mystical poetic text *Septem Sermones ad Mortuos* (Seven Sermons to the Dead). He had it privately printed that year, and a version of it stands in *Scrutinies*, the last part of *Liber Novus*.

In this extraordinary work, speaking under the persona of the second-century Gnostic master Basilides of Alexandria, Jung addressed the spirits of dead Christians who had found no peace in traditional dogma. He introduced the Gnostic concept of **Abraxas**—a deity higher and older than both God and the Devil, who unites within himself light and dark, creation and destruction, good and evil.

Decades later, in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, Jung developed these insights into his most controversial masterpieces: *Aion* (1951) and *Answer to Job* (1952). Jung argued that the traditional Western theological doctrine of evil as a mere absence of good had blinded humanity to its own destructive instincts. By denying the dark side of the divine image, Western civilization had projected its shadow onto the political arena, resulting in total war. In *Answer to Job*, Jung presented a revolutionary reading: God is a living archetype that seeks to become conscious through the suffering, discernment, and moral development of humanity itself.



Individuation: The Circumambulation of the Self

By 1928, some fifteen years after the visions began, Jung noticed that they were drawing to a close. During the First World War, while serving as a medical officer in an internment camp in Château-d'Oex, Jung had begun drawing a small circular geometric design in his notebook every morning. He noticed that the symmetry, balance, or disruption of these circular drawings directly reflected his internal mental state. He had discovered the **Mandala**—the ancient Sanskrit symbol of the sacred circle.

Jung realized that the goal of psychological development is not the aggrandizement of the ego, but what he termed **Individuation**: the lifelong journey of becoming the unique, undivided whole that one was created to be. Individuation is not selfish individualism; on the contrary, one can only truly relate to others when one has stopped projecting unconscious complexes onto them. The center of this wholeness is not the conscious ego, but the **Self**—an inner ordering archetype that transcends the ego and encompasses both the conscious and unconscious realms. The path of individuation is a spiral circumambulation around that central mystery.

In 1928 Richard Wilhelm sent him the Taoist text *The Secret of the Golden Flower*; Jung later wrote that it confirmed his ideas about the mandala and first broke through his isolation. By 1930 he had set *The Red Book* aside. He already lived part of his myth in stone: at Bollingen, on land bought in 1922, he began a plain tower in 1923, with no electricity, wood for heat, water pumped by hand, and inscriptions he carved himself. In 1957 he told Aniela Jaffé, as Sonu Shamdasani's introduction to *Liber Novus* records: *"The years … when I pursued the inner images were the most important time of my life. Everything else is to be derived from this."*

PRIMARY SOURCES & HISTORICAL ARCHIVES

Reading, Listening & Historical Sources Guide

Watch first, in original context:

- *Carl Jung's Red Book Explained*, our film on Afterglow Books & Arts: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ms4uHwiFWw
- The Red Book & Archival Scholarship: Philemon Foundation: https://philemonfoundation.org/works/red-book/
- Library of Congress Exhibition Overview (Carl Jung's Red Book): https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/red-book-of-carl-jung/

Read next:

- **C. G. Jung, *The Red Book: Liber Novus*** (Facsimile Edition, edited by Sonu Shamdasani, Norton, 2009; and *The Red Book: A Reader's Edition*, Norton, 2012). The indispensable primary text containing Shamdasani's masterly historical introduction and scholarly apparatus.
- **C. G. Jung, *The Black Books (1913–1932): Notebooks of Transformation*** (7 volumes, edited by Sonu Shamdasani, Norton, 2020). The raw, unedited working notebooks recording Jung's daily active imagination encounters.
- **C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*** (recorded and edited by Aniela Jaffé; German edition 1962; English translation by Richard and Clara Winston, Pantheon, 1963). Jung's inward autobiography, especially chapter 6 ("Confrontation with the Unconscious").
- **C. G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*** (Collected Works, Vol. 5, Princeton University Press, 1956). The pivotal 1912 work that precipitated the break with Sigmund Freud.
- **C. G. Jung, *Psychological Types*** (Collected Works, Vol. 6, Princeton, 1971). The foundational taxonomy of Extraversion, Introversion, and the four psychic functions.
- **C. G. Jung, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*** (Collected Works, Vol. 9ii) and *Answer to Job* (Collected Works, Vol. 11). Jung's mature investigations into religious archetypes, evil, and the collective crisis of Western consciousness.
- **William McGuire (ed.), *The Freud/Jung Letters*** (Princeton University Press, 1974). The complete correspondence documenting their intense friendship and tragic rupture.

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