Catafalque: Carl Jung and the End of Humanity, by Peter Kingsley

Robert A. Segal is wary of an attempt to offer a definitive new interpretation of Jung

C.G. Jung (1865-1961), the famous Swiss psychiatrist, is typically seen as Sigmund Freud's great rival. But Jung was always his own person.

Freudian psychology centres on humans' relationship to other family members, especially parents. Jungian psychology, more narcissistic, centres on humans' relationship to other parts of themselves.

Despite Jung's proudly labelling himself a scientist, there have been efforts to downplay his scientific outlook in favour of a deeper, religious one. The most extravagant expression of the supposedly true Jung is The Red Book, which amasses Jung's speculations from 1914 to 1930. It was not published until 2009.

For most Jungians, the book is the equivalent of the Koran. It gets compared to the greatest works of the humanities. In actuality, it is a disorganised series of dubious distinctions, illogically turned into oppositions and then equally illogically into paradoxes. Far from profound, it is sophomoric.

Peter Kingsley is an English classicist who, decades ago, wrote several acclaimed books on the Presocratic philosophers. Now he offers a two-volume tome on Jung, whom he ties to the Presocratics. Volume one consists of readable pronouncements about what Jung is really saying; volume two, equally long, consists of notes.

We are informed by Kingsley that almost every other authority on Jung has got him wrong. These include Jung's disciples, Jungian clinicians and scholars of Jung. To date, only two persons have got Jung right: the French scholar of Sufism, Henry Corbin, and Kingsley himself. Kingsley reminds one of the line by Church historian Adolf von Harnack about the early Christian theologian Marcion: only Marcion understood Paul, and even he misunderstood Paul. But Kingsley denies any misunderstanding of Jung on his own part.

Kingsley asserts that The Red Book evinces the true Jung. But, ironically, most Jungians say the same. They adore Jung's contempt for science.
For Kingsley, appealing to Jung in his autobiography, there are two Jungs, one public and one private. Jung’s public personality is that of a person of science. Jung’s private, true personality is that of the unconscious. Jung dared not vaunt his true self – the reason the book remained unpublished for so long.

The public Jung goes back to Plato and Aristotle. The private Jung goes back further, to the Presocratics (although even the consummately rational philosopher of science Karl Popper sought to go “back to the Presocratics”). The scientific Jung starts with word association tests to make his claims. The private Jung relies on his unconscious for truth. The public Jung is very critical of mystics. The private Jung is a consummate mystic.

Kingsley never offers arguments for his intuitions about Jung. He considers himself better read than others. But he is not. And he is continually wrong. For example, Jung faults, rather than celebrates, so-called primitive peoples for projecting themselves on to the world. For him, moderns properly differentiate themselves from the world, even if they now need to reconnect themselves to the unconscious. Above all, moderns harbour psychology, which is one of the sciences.

Yet the ultimate issue is not what Jung is claiming but whether he is right. Is the unconscious the sole source of truth? What of all the competing notions of truth, and of science and reason, that serious thinkers consider? Kingsley pays these issues no heed.

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