

C.G. Jung's 'Man and His Symbols'

Book Review

Kir Roberts, January 2023

'Man and His Symbols' is a distillation, in layman's terms, of C.G. Jung's collected works. It is also the last work attributed to him, though more precisely it is a collection of essays, of which only the first is written by Jung himself.

I came to 'Man and his Symbols' after reading 'The Red Book', which I had been recommended by a stranger, and left wanting to know more. At the time I put down this obscure text I was about to embark on a hiking trip, and decided to walk into town to see if I could find anything else by Jung. I was not actually familiar with the town, since I had moved there a couple of weeks before, and had no idea what might be available. Synchronicity was at work - the first shop I came across was a second hand book shop (Exeter Book-Cycle, to be exact). I walked in, and alone on the first shelf I walked up to was 'Man and his Symbols' by C.G Jung.

Rightly or wrongly, Man and his Symbols is a vastly influential work, at different times meaning different things, to different people. Published at the beginning of

the 60's, I am certain it had a readership among the hippy movement, and is best contextualised within the emergence of the New Age (though this would not have been Jung's intention, I'm sure). There may be no other work which would have contributed more to the familiarity with Jungian ideas among the general public, concepts now unhinged from a Jungian association - archetypes, the collective unconscious, synchronicity, introversion and extraversion, and dream interpretation.

This book, though not the only one, may have persuaded many secular people to revive an interest in the symbolic dimension of life, and to take a keen interest in some aspects of culture which were at risk of becoming uncool. It simultaneously has resonated with believers, and is often seen as legitimising faith, or at least giving a helpful leg-up among a hostile modern world. Within this context, this book has functioned as a bridge between two islands, which many were keen to cross. Jung, being a bit of a snob, may be grateful to have passed away ignorant of the impact his work has had, and I imagine with this one in particular. Jung was a man of the avant-garde, and had to really be persuaded to write something appealing to outsiders, which is what separates him from many others working along similar currents. While many would aspire to make such a notable text, I do not think Jung took much pride in it.

I think 'Man and his Symbols' is worthy of commentary, but I think that's because of Jung's work in general really.

It is very much a work of pedagogy, and therefore the vibe is serious, dry, and possibly even boring. It lacks poetry on the one hand, and hard scholarship on the other, seemingly attempting to straddle the two, but being neither. To some it may seem unbalanced, optimistic, overly sure in its convictions. It is lacking in citations, in undismissible data, and its rhetoric seems unaware of its being rhetoric.

That said, as Jung goes, it is fairly easy to read. I recommend reading it slowly anyway, since his ideas are huge, and not intended to be passively glossed over. Openness and concentration are mandatory in a fruitful reading of Jungian texts. In a way, reading this text is a litmus test for the budding Jungian, rather than the summit of the mountain. For that reason, I would not choose this work for a commentary on Jung's psychology. That said, it opened up a whole new world to me at the time of my first reading. It was vastly significant, and replaced my confusion over psychology with an invitation to go deeper. It is surely essential to be at least familiar

with Jungian psychology, and this is the only distillation of that world which had been approved by the man himself.

Out of all Jung's work, 'Man and his Symbols' is the one which comes off as being slightly 'woo-woo'. Maybe at the time of writing there wasn't such a strong resistance to that space, because I don't think Jung would have ever risked being seen as occupying a space such as the one in which the 'woo-woo' resides. I also do not believe that much of his other writing flirts with this space in the slightest, 'Man and his Symbols' simply hasn't aged well in that regard.

In my opinion, his work is a lot more ambiguous than people like to think, and it appears as though he struggled to make people fully appreciate this. It appears as though many people read Jung as unambiguously sympathetic to religion, and it is true that he does not shy away from it in his writing. However, I have always read him as being more ambiguous on this point, and that it is more accurate to say religion was something he tried to document as part of his explorations. As a phenomenologist, his priority was always to describe these discoveries in their own terms, and in that way he did legitimise them, but legitimised them as *phenomena*, rather than as (capital T) Truths.

One of the most impressive things about Jung is the wide variety of people able to resonate with his perspective, but I don't necessarily think this implies perennialism, so much as it shows the breadth of Jung's intellect. I think Jung was on a bigger scale than people give him credit for. Some people only see this microscopic Jung, the way *his ideas apply to their island of beliefs*. Jung's ideas are like a fractal. One definition of a fractal is that you can take any part of it and understand something about the whole structure from the part. The idea of the collective unconscious works in this way, and so can be applied in a narrow or a broad sense, and it is dependent on the readers' openness, their appetite for exploration.

Jung himself operated on a daunting scale, it seems, and I don't think people often are capable of taking in Jung in his entirety. Jung is much easier to take in if you have demarcated the limits of your island *prior* to reading his work. This way of reading Jung is going to enlighten your approach to the given area in which you apply it, but this is a fraction of its true potential. In what I have read of Jung, I believe he would have felt the same. I think he saw himself as being at the dawn of these ideas, rather than as their crystallisation. He made new exploration possible, rather than complete the explorations himself, and in that way he is a Cartographer of the mind, rather than a prophet.

His thought is like a cartography rather than a dogma, because if you really follow where he is going, you realise he is saying 'these ideas are tools, but tools which use you more than you use them'. In this way he does not really provide tools, so much as name the forces which you are at the mercy of. People have always felt they are at the mercy of something, and Jung gives these forces names and characters - the shadow, the anima, the archetypes, synchronicity, to name a few.

He delineates and describes these forces to the best of his ability, while at the same time delineating the obscurities too. He is very careful about leaving the parts of the map blank which are yet to be discovered, which is something every good cartographer should do. The voids are as important as the known features. He was most interested in these voids, and sometimes pretends to know a bit more about them than he really does, and honestly that's one of the loveable things about him. Every explorer worth their salt recalls a tall tale every now and then.

Another thing worth mentioning, is that for me, Carl Jung's pedagogy is not spiritual, even though there is spirituality within it. His aim is to teach people the importance of being whole, and part of being a whole person means being in touch with the irritational, the

spiritual, and the magical. He makes a point to talk about those parts of our being because he feels they are the most under threat, at risk abandonment, and therefore the biggest threat to our wellbeing. Wellbeing is the operative word here, because in the way I read Jung, he does not promote any spiritual path in particular, rather he recognises the importance of history. His personal and cultural history belongs to the Holy Roman Empire, and like a patient may find it healing to revisit events from their childhood, Jung finds healing in the most reliable and complete symbolic register available to him.

He gives frequent words of caution to those who wish to go astray from their Christian roots, and this seems only natural. He lived a life with very deep roots, he was personally connected to a very particular place and time, and as a deeply rooted creature, saw the virtue in this way of being. The virtue here is that deep roots allow deep nourishment, but they also mean strong attachment. The times which have passed have meant that many now know a life without these roots, and maybe in drawing on Jung's ideas are able to nourish themselves nonetheless.

In conclusion, though 'Man and his Symbols' may be the junk-food of Jungian reading, it still demands its place in any library which seeks to resonate with its cause.