

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE TRANSCENDENT FUNCTION

DEVELOPMENT OF THE EGO IN WESTERN CONSCIOUSNESS

The last three millennia have witnessed the development of the logical, thinking human being. Beginning with the ancient Greeks, Western civilization has marched inexorably toward the elusive goal of the autonomous, rational human. Through the emergence of Christianity, the awakening of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and Reformation, the Scientific Revolution of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton, the Philosophical Revolution of Bacon and Descartes, and into the Industrial Revolution and the modern age, Western consciousness has moved seemingly single-mindedly toward what may best be expressed in the Cartesian *cogito*—"I think, therefore I am." Many have argued that this rational, empirical, scientific thrust was necessary for the evolution of the human intellect so that we may comprehend the physical laws of matter, the order of the cosmos, and the processes of nature. Whatever its cause, this procession has led to a focus on the importance of the thinker's self-awareness.

In psychological terms, the march represents the development, indeed many would say an inflation, of the individual ego¹ that could apprehend separateness from the gods, from other humans, and from the surrounding world. With ego development came the ideas of self-determination, personal freedom, individual uniqueness, self-awareness, indeed the *self* as it is used in many areas of psychology today. Many would say (see, e.g. Romanyshyn, 1989), however, that these benefits came at a cost: a disunion with the undifferentiated consciousness that previously connected people; an amnesia regarding "*participation mystique*"² with the natural world; a repudiation of the *anima mundi*, the soul of the world, that created the fabric of community; and a devaluation of unprovable and unscientific concepts like intuition, unknowing,

fantasy, symbol, imagination, dreams, and emotions. Largely incompatible with the developing, rational ego, these disowned but necessary parts of human consciousness were relegated to the hidden terrain of the unconscious, where they must inevitably be reclaimed.

EMERGENCE OF DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY AND
EMPHASIS ON THE UNCONSCIOUS

In hindsight it came as no surprise, then, that at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the scientific paradigm, the Industrial Revolution, and Cartesian dualism were moving ahead at full throttle, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung gave birth to the field of depth psychology, that branch of psychology that gives primacy to the unconscious. Though the unconscious had a long history in areas outside of psychology, Freud and Jung were the first to give it close clinical scrutiny. Yet almost one hundred years later, we have merely begun to apprehend the significance, scope, and impact of the unconscious. It still sits beneath, before, and around us—or more accurately, we are immersed in it—as a profound mystery, the boundaries, effects, and implications of which we have only begun to fathom. With roots in the earliest efforts to understand consciousness itself, depth psychology seeks to go yet further and find what is beneath it.

“Depth psychology,” the modern field whose interest is in the unconscious levels of the psyche—that is, the deeper meanings of soul—is itself no modern term. “Depth” reverberates with a significance echoing one of the first philosophers of antiquity. All depth psychology has been summed up by this fragment of Heraclitus: “You could not discover the limits of soul (*psyche*), even if you traveled every road to do so; such is the depth (*batun*) of its meaning (*logos*).” (Hillman, 1975, p. xvii)

Depth psychology yearns to apprehend, indeed to integrate, what is beyond our conscious grasp, the deeper meanings of soul as expressed in dreams, images, and metaphors of the unconscious.

Freud felt that the unconscious was limited to contents rejected or repressed from consciousness. In his view, the unconscious was a kind of backwater carrying the stagnant refuse repudiated as too painful or intolerable to the conscious mind. In contrast, Jung believed the unconscious to be not only the territory of repression but also a mysterious landscape of autonomous, teleological intelligence that compensates for, supplements, even opposes consciousness. First articulated in his 1913 paper “On Psychic Energy” (1928/1960), Jung’s idea was that the unconscious guides us in a purposeful way.

This theoretical leap required Jung to enunciate a psychic mechanism through which such guidance takes place. He called the core of that mechanism the transcendent function, a dialogue between the unconscious and consciousness through which a new direction emerges. The concept of the purposive unconscious operating through the transcendent function became the hub of Jung's psychology and represented an irreparable break from Freud. Jung eventually came to believe that one cannot individuate, that is, cannot become the person he or she is truly meant to be, without conversing with and coming to terms with the unconscious. The transcendent function is the primary means through which that reconciliation is accomplished. Conceived and explored quite early in the development of Jung's psychology, the transcendent function is implicated in many of his other key concepts (e.g., the role of symbol and fantasy, individuation, the archetypes, the Self³), indeed may be the wellspring from whence they flow.

PRIMER ON THE TRANSCENDENT FUNCTION

In the essay bearing its name written in 1916 but not published until 1957, the transcendent function is described by Jung as arising "from the union of conscious and unconscious contents" (1957/1960, p. 69). The paper describes a "synthetic" or "constructive" method (p. 73) through which unconscious components can be united with conscious perceptions to produce a wholly new perspective. Indeed, the word *transcendent* was used by Jung to signify the transition from one attitude to another (p. 73). Explaining how such unconscious contents could be elicited and brought into a dialogue with consciousness, Jung stated, "It is exactly as if a dialogue were taking place between two human beings with equal rights" (p. 89). He summarized the transcendent function that emerges as follows:

The shuttling to and fro of arguments and affects represents the transcendent function of opposites. The confrontation of the two positions generates a tension charged with energy and creates a living, third thing—not a logical stillbirth in accordance with the principle *tertium non datur* but a movement out of the suspension between the opposites, a living birth that leads to a new level of being, a new situation. (p. 90)

Simply put, the transcendent function is crucial to the central mission of depth psychology, which is to access, explore, and integrate the unconscious, and thereby apprehend the deeper meanings of soul. As Jung wrote in his 1958 prefatory note to "The Transcendent Function" prepared for the *Collected Works*:

As its [the essay's] basic argument is still valid today, it may stimulate the reader to a broader and deeper understanding of the problem. This problem is identical with the universal question: How does one come to terms in practice with the unconscious? (1957/1960, p. 67)

Jung believed that the conscious and unconscious contain opposite, compensatory, or complementary material and that psyche's natural tendency is to strive to bring the conscious and unconscious positions together for the purpose of integrating them. Fundamental to his theory is the idea that conscious and unconscious opposites can be bridged by the emergence of a symbol from the fantasy-producing activity of psyche. The symbol, in turn, produces something that is not merely an amalgam of or compromise between the two opposites but rather a "living, third thing . . . a living birth that leads to a new level of being, a new situation" (p. 90). Thus, the essence of the transcendent function is a confrontation of opposites, one from consciousness and one from the unconscious, from which emerges some new position or perspective:

Standing in a compensatory relationship to both, the transcendent function enables thesis and antithesis to encounter one another on equal terms. That which is capable of uniting these two is a metaphorical statement (the symbol) which itself transcends time and conflict, neither adhering to nor partaking of one side or the other but somehow common to both and offering the possibility of a new synthesis. The word *transcendent* is expressive of the presence of a capacity to transcend the destructive tendency to pull (or be pulled) to one side or the other. (Samuels, Shorter, and Plaut, 1986, p. 151)

At the heart of the transcendent function is transformation, a shift in consciousness. "Expressing itself by way of the symbol, [the transcendent function] facilitates a transition from one psychological attitude or condition to another" (Samuels, Shorter, and Plaut, 1986, p. 150). Indeed, "Jung considered the transcendent function to be the most significant factor in psychological process" (p. 150). Though its full implications are beyond the scope of this introduction, suffice it to say that Jung posited the transcendent function to be of central importance, particularly in the self-regulating functions of the psyche and in the individuation process:

The transcendent function, which plays the role of an autonomous regulator, emerges and gradually begins to work as the process of individuation begins to unfold. For Jung, it is in the activation of the transcendent function that true maturity lies. (Humbert, 1988, p. 125)

Moreover, Jung held that the transcendent function was crucial to the process of individuation and the drive toward wholeness by the Self. As Hall and Nordby (1973) state:

The first step toward integration is, as we have just seen, individuation of *all* aspects of the personality. The second stage is controlled by what Jung calls the *transcendent function*. This function is endowed with the capability of uniting all of the opposing trends in the personality and of working toward the goal of wholeness. The aim of the transcendent function, Jung writes, is “the realization, in all of its aspects, of the personality originally hidden away in the embryonic germplasm; the production and unfolding of the original potential wholeness.” *The transcendent function is the means by which the unity or self archetype is realized* [italics added]. Like the process of individuation, the transcendent function is inherent in the person. (p. 84)

The transcendent function has to do with opening a dialogue between the conscious and unconscious to allow a living, third thing to emerge that is neither a combination of nor a rejection of the two. It has a central role in the self-regulating nature of the psyche, individuation, and the Self’s drive toward wholeness.

Beyond its importance to Jungian psychology, the transcendent function is a subject that has broader significance to depth psychology. The transcendent function is an archetypal process that implicates other archetypal processes that can be found in the theories and writings of other depth psychologists. The concepts of a psychic struggle between polarized segments of consciousness, mechanisms that mediate such antitheses, transformation through the liminal spaces between such opposing forces, and the “third” emerging from the struggle of the “two” are all ideas that recur in the field of depth psychology. Indeed, the transcendent function may be an expression of a larger human urge to reconcile ontological quandaries such as spirit and matter, subject and object, inner and outer, idea and thing, form and substance, thought and feeling. Viewed in this way, the transcendent function can be thought of as an archetypal phenomenon,⁴ ubiquitous to and inherent in human experience, that implicates liminality, initiation, transformation, and transcendence.

Depth psychology is intimately involved in all these enterprises. The depth psychological perspective beholds all phenomena with the exhortations, “I don’t know” and “Something is happening here that I cannot see.” It seeks the unseen and liminal, that which is buried beneath or lies between the layers of what is perceptible. Jung and Freud initiated the “movement beneath and between” and that course is being followed by adherents in both schools.

One contemporary expression of these ideas can be found in archetypal psychology, an offshoot of Jungian psychology,⁵ which identifies “soul” as that which seeks deeper meaning and provides the connective tissue between the seen and the hidden. As Hillman, a powerful contemporary advocate of depth psychology’s message, states:

By *soul* I mean, first of all, a perspective rather than a substance, a viewpoint toward things rather than a thing itself. This perspective is reflective; it mediates events and make differences between ourselves and everything that happens. Between us and events, between the doer and the deed, there is a reflective moment—and soul-making means differentiating the middle ground. (1975, p. xvi)

There is a confluence between the soul-making aspiration of depth psychology and the telos of the transcendent function: a mediation of conscious and unconscious, a seeking of the reflective vantage point between ourselves and the events we perceive, a striving to have revealed that which remains hidden. Having accepted as its destiny the recovery and integration of the unconscious from domination by logical, rational consciousness, depth psychology struggles with ways in which to accomplish its charge. The transcendent function is fundamental to both the substance of that vocation and methods of pursuing it.

SCOPE AND ORGANIZATION OF THE WORK

This book is a theoretical and analytical examination of the transcendent function and the concepts it implicates. The exploration begins in chapter 2 with a detailed review and analysis of “The Transcendent Function,” one of three important essays that Jung wrote in 1916, soon after his break with Freud and during his struggles with the images of the unconscious. That chapter reviews and compares the 1916 version and the revised version prepared by Jung in 1958 for inclusion in the *Collected Works*. It investigates Jung’s thinking on the key topics that emerge from the essay and refers to Appendix A, which contains a comparison of the two, showing every addition to and deletion from the 1916 version that Jung made in creating the 1958 version.

Chapter 3 traces Jung’s thinking about the transcendent function by way of the dozens of references he made to it in eight other written works, five public seminars, and four published letters. It addresses such questions as: How exactly does the transcendent function work? Does the transcendent function operate on its own or can it be prompted in some way? How does the transcendent function interact with other key Jungian concepts such as individuation, the Self, and the archetypes? Reference is made to relevant excerpts from each of the written works, seminars, and letters. Appendix B

gives a complete list of all those references together with the pages surrounding each reference that the author believes give the reader the material necessary for the reference to be fully understood. The research that led to this chapter yielded an important realization: that the references to the transcendent function implicate just about every core Jungian concept. The references are addressed thematically in the framework of key topics in Jung's paradigm.

Chapter 4 springs from the analysis in chapter 3 and posits that the transcendent function is centrally located in the complex web of Jungian concepts. Indeed, it makes the proposition that the transcendent function is Jung's root metaphor for psyche itself or for becoming psychological and is the wellspring from whence flowed much of the rest of Jung's imaginal, depth psychology. It then makes an attempt to set forth and analyze, both in words and images, the core components of the transcendent function. The chapter concludes by posing questions that flow from the idea of the transcendent function as a root metaphor: Does it find expression in the theories of others? Is the transcendent function reflective of deeper, even archetypal, expressions of psyche?

Chapter 5, working from the premise that the transcendent function may be seen as a metaphor for becoming psychological or for psychological transformation, compares and contrasts the transcendent function with the theories of others. Notwithstanding the uniqueness of Jung's thinking on the transcendent function (i.e., the dynamic opposition of the psyche, the role of fantasy and symbol in mediating such antitheses, the emergence of something larger than the ego that is purposeful, even numinous and holy, and the potentiating of a transformative result), many schools of psychology struggle with the relationships between self/other, me/not-me, known/unknown. Here the book engages in a lively dialogue about whether there is any relationship between the transcendent function and transitional/mediatory phenomena hypothesized by others.

Chapter 6 shifts to an exploration of the deeper roots or archetypal basis of the transcendent function. Viewed through this lens, the transcendent function is conceptualized as ubiquitous to psychological experience, a way that the psyche seeks connections between disparate elements in order to continually evolve and grow. It implicates deeper patterns in the psyche, including the binary oppositions inherent in consciousness, the chasm between subject and object, archetypal patterns of liminality and initiation, the archetypal energies of Hermes (the god of boundaries and connections between realms), the deeper foundations of three (the number embodied by the transcendent function, i.e. the emergence of the third from the polarity of two), and the search for a connection with the Divine. Through an examination of these patterns, chapter 6 posits that the transcendent function is an archetypal process that represents what the chapter calls the "neither/nor" and "autochthonous" urges of the psyche. Though somewhat abstract, this

discussion of the deeper patterns of psyche is the natural analytic destination of any comprehensive discussion of the transcendent function.

The book concludes in chapter 7 by turning to more practical concerns: How can we better recognize and apply the transcendent function in our lives? Here the transcendent function is used as a tool for everyday living, to prompt a conversation between that which is known/conscious/acknowledged and that which is unknown/unconscious/hidden, a dialogue through which something new emerges. It uses analogies to alchemy to emphasize that the essence of the transcendent function is to allow something new to emerge from things that are in seemingly irreconcilable conflict. Through these concepts, the transcendent function is then applied to relationships, social and cultural issues (e.g., race relations, gun control, abortion, gender differences, democratic discourse), and day-to-day living. Chapter 7 proposes a model for deepening relationships and for revisioning the deep rifts we see in social and cultural issues. Finally, it shifts the focus to everyday living, showing how the transcendent function allows us to see all the world as a way of embodying, relating to, and integrating the unconscious.

It is important to note here that this book does not venture into the related and important area of the clinical application of the transcendent function. In the essay that bears its name, Jung introduced the method of active imagination as a way to prompt the occurrence of the transcendent function in analysis. That is the proper topic for a separate work and is reserved for a future volume. It is also a subject that has received treatment by others. Readers who wish to add a clinical dimension to the theories and analysis offered herein would be well served to consult the work of Chodorow (1997), Hannah (1953), von Franz (1980), Dallett (1982), and Johnson (1986). In addition, Appendix C provides a literature review of sources that discuss the transcendent function in ways that are less central to the focus of this book.