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Chapter 1

Jung, Erikson, midlife transformation and the oneiric text

C.G. Jung’s 1931 essay “The Stages of Life” (Campbell 1976: 3–22) defined the entry into midlife as a transition period fraught with drama and even tragedy. Jung’s focus on midlife had much to do with the development of his own originality as a psychologist in the wake of his break with Freud in 1912, when he was in his late thirties and had enjoyed for a number of years his status as the young heir apparent of the Freudian movement. This painful break was followed by what Anthony Storr has called a “near psychotic breakdown” (Storr 1991: 15), in the course of which Jung confronted a flood of images from the unconscious of almost overwhelming intensity. Having experienced the power of what he would later call the “collective unconscious,” Jung originated a theory of the unconscious in its deeper archetypal dimension that expanded Freud’s conception of the psyche to include more—much more—than the purely personal contents described by his erstwhile mentor. Whereas Freud’s theory of the unconscious had assumed that all its contents derived from repressed personal memories, Jung posited that beyond this personal unconscious lay a “collective unconscious,” whose “archetypal” contents were not the result of repression, but rather preexisted the birth of the individual and constituted the psycho-instinctual substratum common to all humanity. Jung viewed the psychic growth and creative transformation he experienced at midlife as archetypal in nature, in that the images that triggered his transformation were not only associated with personal memories and associations, but were also linked with disturbingly powerful mythic images.

In Jungian terms, midlife transformation can be seen as programmed in the psyche in the same way as the transformation processes associated with adolescence or young adulthood. It has no doubt an extremely important personal dimension—people live out their midlife transitions in their own particular ways—but it also manifests archetypal patterns which are based on a template in the psyche that involves the individual at midlife in a process that is recognizably similar to what all other individuals undergo, regardless of the specific cultural milieu in which their lives are embedded. In order to illustrate clearly the nature of a few of these patterns, I have
chosen examples from literature and film and especially from the type of texts I call oneiric, that is, those which present significant mythological and dreamlike characteristics. They are texts that can be read as dream-texts, but dreams metamorphosed, polished and clarified by art, and made more accessible and entertaining for those who might be understandably bewildered and put off by the complexity and apparent confusion of personal accounts of actual dreams.

In the course of this book I will present not only examples drawn from literary and film texts of our own time, but also examples taken from the literature of other times and places, in order to highlight what they have to offer in terms of powerfully symbolic representations of the midlife transformation process. Such oneiric texts may be said to constitute a treasure house of symbolic representations of human experience. My assumption, which is shared by most Jungians, is that the archetypal characteristics of the human psyche are slow to change. Jung has written that

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\text{the collective unconscious, being the repository of man’s experience and at the same time the prior condition of this experience, is an image of the world which has taken aeons to form. In this image certain features, the archetypes or dominants, have crystallized out in the course of time. They are the ruling powers, the gods, images of the dominant laws and principles, and of the typical, regular occurring events in the soul’s cycle of experience.}
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(Jung 1956: 105)

For that reason, even ancient texts, such as some Greek tragedies or ancient myth narratives such as the Sumerian myth of the Descent of Inanna, remain relevant to the problems of the midlife transition in modern times, and, in spite of their cultural specificity, may provide precious insights into its archetypal foundations.

It was Jung’s personal experience of a quasi-initiatory midlife ordeal involving mental anguish and even the threat of insanity and death that turned him into a creative and original psychologist in his own right, and not merely a brilliant follower of Sigmund Freud. A “midlife crisis” is thus not a sign of neurotic regression—although it can certainly involve neurotic regression—but a sign of the ongoing growth and transformation of the psyche. In fact, writes Jung, neurotic regressiveness at midlife is primarily the result of resisting change and transformation: “the very frequent neurotic disturbances of adult years all have one thing in common: they want to carry the psychology of the youthful phase over the threshold of the so-called years of discretion” (Campbell 1976: 14).

Jung’s essay “The Stages of Life,” particularly as regards what it has to say about the challenges of midlife transformation, would have been a good place for him to have brought up the case of Oedipus, had he not,
throughout his later career, been consistently gun shy of the Freudian master myth, which saw in the myth of Oedipus a paradigmatic symbolic representation of a young boy’s fantasies of murdering his father and marrying his mother. Jung might have pointed out that the later story of Oedipus, as dramatized in Sophocles’ great tragedy *Oedipus the Tyrant*, could be taken as an equally powerful symbolic representation of a man on the brink of midlife transformation. Sophocles shows Oedipus not only as resisting knowledge about his own past (the murder of his father and his incestuous marriage with his mother), but also resisting midlife transformation and the new identity it will be his fate to realize and live out in the second half of his life. As I will demonstrate later, in Chapter 3, Oedipus’ tragic willfulness and pigheaded stubbornness in Sophocles’ tragedy can be taken as symbolic of the rigidity of midlife resistance to new values and to the process of assuming a new identity—a resistance to change all the more intense if, as was the case with Oedipus, the values of youth have led to what seems to be unqualified worldly success. At the height of his power as tyrant of Thebes, Oedipus seems to have done it all, and done it very well. He has vanquished the monstrous sphinx and saved the people of Thebes, thus becoming a heroic legend in his own time; he has married the widow of the former king and has had sons and daughters with her; he is respected and even idolized by his people; he is at the apex of his social achievements and at the zenith of his strength and glory.

But the great hero Oedipus, having risen so high, is soon due for a fall. Jung compared the course of life to the journey of the sun from dawn to sunset, with the moment when youth begins to give way to middle age being equated symbolically with the sun’s highest position in the sky. At that moment things get dramatic: “at the stroke of noon,” writes Jung, “the descent begins. And the descent means the reversal [enantiodromia] of all the ideals and values that were cherished in the morning” (Campbell 1976: 15). Jung found this solar analogy very meaningful, and expanded on it as follows:

> Our life is like the course of the sun. In the morning it gains continually in strength until it reaches the zenith heat of high noon. Then comes the *enantiodromia*: the steady forward movement no longer denotes an increase, but a decrease, in strength . . . The transition from morning to afternoon means a re-valuation of earlier values. There comes the urgent need to appreciate the value of the opposite of our former ideals, to perceive the error in our former truth.

> (Jung 1956: 74–75)

For Oedipus, the experience of this descent is particularly tragic, since by the end of Sophocles’ play he has lost everything (his high position, his wealth, the respect he enjoyed) and everyone (his wife, his children,
his people) that he valued in his life. And he was almost totally unprepared for this tragic catastrophe. All the qualities that had served him so well in his youth (cleverness, self-assertion and youthful heroism) are of little use to him now. That is why Sophocles’ tragic and dramatic portrayal of a maturing Oedipus, as opposed to the more youthful heroic Oedipus as he appears in the traditional myth utilized to great effect by Freud, can be taken as symbolically paradigmatic of the midlife crisis faced by many people today. Modern people are sometimes as unprepared as Oedipus for this enantiodromia, this midlife reversal of values. Jung deplored the absence of “schools for forty-year olds” (Campbell 1976: 16), which would educate them and prepare them for the inevitable descent, since

whoever carries over into the afternoon the law of the morning . . . must pay for so doing with damage to his soul just as surely as a growing youth who tries to salvage his childish egoism must pay for this mistake with social failure.

(Campbell 1976: 18)

In “The Stages of Life,” Jung emphasized that

we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life’s morning; for what was great in the morning will be little at the evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie.

(Campbell 1976: 17)

As we have seen, Jung’s concern with midlife, which he felt began typically “between the thirty-fifth and fortieth year” (Campbell 1976: 8), although its onset can occur well into a person’s fifties, was partly the result of his own personal experience of an unusually transformative midlife passage, which led him to distinguish his own analytical psychology’s goals and objectives from those of Freud’s. Freudian psychology was mainly concerned with enabling the individual “to love and to work”—achievements no doubt valuable at any stage of life, but of most specific and crucial value to youth and early adulthood, when marriage, acquiring friends and professional success are traditionally of prime concern. However, it is not such personal goals, but rather “culture” that Jung wants to assign as the task of the second half of life:

Money-making, social achievement, family and posterity are nothing but plain nature, not culture. Culture lies outside the purpose of nature. Could by any chance culture be the meaning and the purpose of the second half of life?

(Campbell 1976: 18)
Jung felt, however, that modern culture tended to ignore and even to discourage the potentially momentous shift in values and psychological orientation that can occur at midlife. He had visited the United States on two separate occasions, during which he had had the opportunity to become acquainted with mainstream American culture and the dominant social values of the early twentieth century, when the modern cult of youth and youthfulness had become well established. In America, he wrote:

For the most part our old people try to compete with the young. In the United States it is almost an ideal for a father to be the brother of his sons, and for the mother to be if possible the younger sister of her daughter.

(Campbell 1976: 18)

But Jung had also had the opportunity of getting acquainted with the tribal society of the Taos Pueblo in New Mexico, and its respect for traditional values and the wisdom of the elders made a great impression on him. Jung thus felt able to make the following comparison between modern culture and traditional tribal culture:

In primitive tribes we observe that the old people are almost always the guardians of the mysteries and the laws, and it is in these that the cultural heritage of the tribe is expressed. How does the matter stand with us? Where is the wisdom of our old people, where are their precious secrets and their visions?

(Campbell 1976: 18)

His conclusion was that modern culture was tending more and more to identify with the goals of youth as the only goals worth realizing, and so to ignore that momentous enantiodromia of midlife where these youthful goals begin to lose their value and change their valence.

It was—somewhat paradoxically—the Freudian Erik Erikson, in close collaboration with his wife, Joan, who was to shed light on the period of the onset of midlife as a major stage of growth and transformation, thus taking a giant step beyond the Freudian emphasis on the problems of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. Without specific reference to (and perhaps without knowledge of) Jung’s earlier essay on the stages of life, Erikson in the late 1940s began to describe mature adulthood as a stage of life in which generativity came into conflict with what he termed stagnation; a successful resolution of this conflict would endow the individual with a broadened sense of concern for others and for the culture at large.

But it is interesting to note that, in their first formulation of his theory of the stages of life, the Eriksons almost omitted the stage of midlife! In her preface to the extended version of The Life Cycle Completed (1997), Joan
Erikson tells how the couple was on the way to Los Angeles, where her husband was to present their recently elaborated theory publicly to a gathering of psychiatrists and psychologists, along with a chart showing clearly seven successive stages of life. Suddenly they remembered that in his comedy As You Like It, Shakespeare had presented the “seven ages” of man, just as in their sequence, but realized that in Shakespeare’s listing there was a glaring omission as regards the flowering of mature adulthood. They then asked themselves whether they too had skipped a stage. Joan Erikson later remembered that “in a shocking moment of clarity I saw what was wrong: the seven chart stages jumped from ‘Intimacy’ (stage six [Young Adulthood]) to ‘Old Age’ [at that point stage seven].” Realizing, she wrote, that “we surely needed another stage between the sixth and the seventh” (Erikson 1997: 3), they quickly developed the idea of a stage of life in which the conflict between generativity and stagnation would be the dominant characteristic.

Shakespeare’s evocation in As You Like It (Act II, scene 7) of a parade of representative figures of the Seven Ages of Man does in fact include a figure who could be taken as symbolizing mature adulthood, but in anything but generative terms:

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Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon’s mouth.''
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The satirical and negative cast of Shakespeare’s portrayal of his midlife figure as a violent and braggart soldier (miles gloriosus) corresponds nicely, however, to what Erikson called the negative (dystonic) “ritualism” that is “potentially rampant in adulthood,” and is “authoritative” and linked to the “antipathetic trend” of “rejectivity.” “Authoritism” he defined as “the ungenerous and ungenerative use of sheer power for the regimentation of economic and familial life” (Erikson 1997: 70)—a kind of bullying that is brutal and self-seeking in its use of force. “Rejectivity” is defined as “the unwillingness to include specified persons or groups in one’s generative concerns— one does not care to care for them” (Erikson 1997: 68). Rejectivity can even lead to the hybris of pseudospeciation, a term Erikson later devised to designate hostile behavior towards other human beings, treating them as though they belonged to a different and lower species. “Stagnation” is the result of seeking to prolong youth beyond its normal bounds, thus resisting midlife transformation, and of the failure to become generative and generous-minded.

One must be careful, I feel, in making too broad a use of the term “stagnation,” which is associated in Erikson’s mind with the term “self-
absorption,” as the main pitfall in the attainment of midlife generativity. This is where Eriksonian and Jungian theories of midlife begin to clash. Erikson’s theory is mainly concerned with an individual’s level of functioning in the outside world, whether for better or for worse. In terms of social adaptation, generativity is good, and stagnation is bad. But, in the Jungian perspective, stagnation can also represent a long stage of liminality, of a slow psychic preparation for transformation. Jungian theory is also rather more open than Eriksonian theory to the idea that contemplative and spiritual values may play a large role in midlife transformation. The midlife crisis can also be a spiritual crisis, and Jung was prone to see it, at least for the analysands he had to deal with, as primarily that. In addition, the introverted and introspective aspect of Jungian analytical psychology contrasts vividly with the extroverted and socially concerned slant of Eriksonian theory. Jung was prone to speak of inner transformation and introspective depth, whereas Erikson stressed social adaptation and responsibility. But I see their two approaches as wonderfully complementary, and in the course of this study will turn to one or the other, depending on which one seems most illuminating for the particular hermeneutic context.

Like Jung’s discussion of midlife transformation, Erikson’s theory of the stages of life is presented as gender-free, equally applicable, at least in principle, to either sex, even though Erikson’s examples are drawn almost entirely from the lives of men. Jungian theory, by contrast, thanks to its stress on the important contrasexual dimensions of the anima and the animus, is, at least potentially, more open to the possibility that there will be differences and even major differences between a male paradigm of midlife transformation and one that would apply specifically to women; my analysis in Chapter 5 of the midlife transformation of Penélope in the Odyssey, is one of my attempts to sketch out what those differences might be in terms of divergent archetypal paradigms. But, at least in the case of the Odyssey, however much Homer’s imagination might have been richly androgynous, there is always the possibility that the figure of his Penélope might deserve the strictures of Virginia Woolf, who argued that many of the great female characters created by male authors “are by no means what they pretend to be.” Some of them, she argues, “are plainly men in disguise; others represent what men would like to be, or are conscious of not being” (Woolf 1979: 42). The same problem exists with other figures that seem to provide rich material for the analysis of the female midlife transformation, such as Shakespeare’s Cleopatra. In Jungian terms, such a female character might be the result of a male author’s anima projection or might serve as an example of Woman as Other; in both cases such a distorted image would be unreliable, as Woolf reminds us, when it comes to illustrating “the truth about women.”

In her introduction to Jung’s Visions: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1930–1934 Claire Douglas (1998) has shown how Jung’s own gender bias
significantly distorted his presentation of a long sequence of visions experienced by an American woman, Christiana Morgan, who “at age twenty-eight and during a period of personal crisis set out on an imaginal quest similar in many respects to the one Jung had undertaken after his traumatic break with Freud” (Jung 1997: x), which had constituted for her “a personal but also archetypal rite of initiation” (Jung 1997: xiii). Douglas adds that “many of her images offer a view of women’s psychological development that is only now becoming generally recognized” (Jung 1997: xiv). Douglas’s remark suggests correctly that it is becoming more common today to recognize the possible unreliability of men’s views of women—and, I would add, of women’s views of men. That is why I have taken care to analyze texts by both male and female authors, assuming that writers are more likely to have accurate psychological insights into characters of their own gender. I have also tried to maintain a balance between the analysis of texts representing male, and those representing female, transformations at midlife.1

It would be impossible to formulate new archetypal approaches to midlife crisis and transformation without giving full credit to Murray Stein’s pioneering book In Midlife (1983); my early investigation of the topic was greatly indebted to it, and so, even more, was my need for guidance during my own midlife transition. But in Stein’s case also the question of gender focus does need to be addressed. Although his recent book Transformation (1998) opens with the interpretation of a thirty-five-year-old woman’s dream that provides one of its leading images (the emergence of a butterfly from a cocoon), it is, for all its gender-free language, mainly oriented around a description of the male midlife process, illustrated first of all by a lengthy analysis of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke at midlife. Some of the understandable ambivalence Stein may feel about setting up a male model of transformation as paradigmatic and applicable to women as well, for whom there may exist a separate and distinct pattern of midlife transformation, may be manifested in his decision to limit his subsequent discussion of midlife transformation via biographical vignettes to three men (Rembrandt, Picasso and Jung), and then in his somewhat unconvincing attempt to justify this decision not to discuss at least one woman (he mentions in passing Eleanor Roosevelt, Georgia O’Keefe and Frieda Kahlo as possible candidates) by referring to “limitations of time and space” (Stein 1998: 109). In fact, the question of whether there is a specifically female initiatory process is never broached in his book, and its references to “adult” imago and “human” transformation avoid the issue, even when he uses women’s dreams as material for discussion.

Yet Murray Stein’s recent book, however problematic its gender-free universalism may be, has many merits, including the marking and naming of a key element of midlife metamorphosis: the transformative images that preside over inner change at midlife. Stein defines them as “images [that]
arise from the archetypal collective unconscious—whether ‘inner’ or ‘outer’ is immaterial”—that “create the bridge between the old psychological constellation and the new one” (Stein 1998: 109). His idea seems to me to be a refinement of Jung’s theory of the transcendent function, according to which the unconscious can spontaneously provide a compensatory symbolic image, which can serve as a catalyst for the resolution of a near intolerable conflict in an individual’s psychic life. Stein gives a striking example of this from the life of William Mellon, heir to a great family fortune, who at age thirty-seven read in a magazine article about the life work of Albert Schweitzer, and immediately became inspired, deciding that he too wished to found a hospital caring for people in the Third World. He then wrote Schweitzer a letter, followed his advice, went to medical school and dedicated the rest of his life to founding and fostering the growth of the Albert Schweitzer Hospital in Haiti. It was thus a transformative image of Albert Schweitzer that was to become the catalyst for the radical reorientation of William Mellon’s life and its extraordinary transformation at midlife (Stein 1998: 39–40). In Mellon’s particular case, the origins of the image came from the outside world: a magazine article, probably some photographs of Schweitzer at work, and then a letter from Schweitzer himself. This outer image created in his mind a powerful corresponding inner fantasy concerning Schweitzer, which was to change his life completely.

But transformative images can equally well arise from the inside, and thus may appear first in significant dreams, or in the practice of deliberate fantasy generation—what Jungians call “active imagination.” In Jung’s own case, the account, in his autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1963), of a sequence of transformative images, will be of great usefulness for my analysis of literary works representing symbolically the inner psychic drama of the male midlife process. This particular section of Jung’s autobiography constitutes a prime example of an oneiric text, that is, a description of a dream or fantasy sequence organized around striking transformative images. Oneiric texts are narratives of a special sort, with a high symbolic hermeneutical potential. They can be found not only in accounts of actual dreams and fantasies in psychoanalytical studies, but also in literary narrative and cinematic texts. In the latter, the raw, unvarnished quality of the case study descriptions of dreams is given esthetic elaboration, which may mask to some degree the archetypal dimensions of the description. Oneiric texts thus include not only write ups of such archetypal dreams, but also literary and film texts that recreate the visionary effect of this type of dream in the context of an ongoing narrative or dramatic sequence. Reading such texts as oneiric texts highlights the presence within them of the archetypal subtexts that give them their visionary power—their sometimes almost hallucinatory effect.

We will now turn to Jung’s key midlife oneiric text—the much later write up in his autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* of the sequence of
dreams and waking visions that had propelled him almost fifty years before into a full blown midlife crisis and a near psychotic breakdown. The sequence is invaluable for the way it sets up via powerful transformative images five potentially major themes of male midlife transformation:

1. The demise or diminishment at midlife of the youthful and blindly self-assertive heroic attitude.
2. The problematic coming to consciousness of the shadow (the repressed contents of the personal unconscious).
3. The resurgence of a man’s feminine side (his “anima,” in Jungian terms).
4. The appearance of a midlife mentor.
5. The acquisition of a new sense of identity.

I will assume—and this is perhaps a controversial assumption—that Jung’s visionary experiences indicated symbolically not only what was going on in his own psyche at that time, but also provided valuable insights into the psyche of men in general (whether of women in general is another question). In other words, if one accepts the possibility that Jung’s archetypal dreams constituted objective knowledge of certain aspects of the psyche—that is, that they were visions into the objective, collective nature of the psyche, the collective unconscious—then Jung’s oneiric text and the transformative images it contains may be taken as a paradigm or template for the archetypal, quasi-instinctual process of the male midlife transformation, not just for Jung himself, but for men in general. One would then expect to find other oneiric texts—literary and film texts that can be read and interpreted somewhat as though they were dreams—that would confirm, to some degree at least, the general validity of Jung’s descriptions. (I will assume that the corresponding template for a woman’s midlife transformation may differ, perhaps in significant ways, from the male paradigm, and will consider this topic later.)

One major transformative image presiding over Jung’s entry into a full-blown midlife crisis is that of the murder of the Germanic hero Siegfried. Jung’s dream occurred on December 18, 1913, and he later described it as follows:

I was with an unknown, brown-skinned man, a savage, in a lonely rocky mountain landscape. It was before dawn; the eastern sky was already bright, and the stars fading. Then I heard Siegfried’s horn sounding over the mountains, and I knew that we had to kill him. We were armed with rifles and lay in wait for him on a narrow path over the rocks. Then Siegfried appeared high up on the crest of the mountain, in the first ray of the rising sun. On a chariot made of the bones of the dead he drove at a furious speed down the precipitous
slope. When he turned a corner, we shot at him, and he plunged down, struck dead.

(Jung 1963: 180)

In Jung’s later interpretation of his dream, he saw Siegfried as symbolizing two things. First of all, he symbolized “what the Germans [just before the opening of World War I] want to achieve, heroically to impose their will” (Jung 1963: 180)—thus far, nothing of great psychological interest. But his second interpretation of his Siegfried dream can be said to mark a moment of discovery in the history of analytical psychology. Jung believed he had discovered, first for himself, but also by extension for other men, that the heroic myth, however necessary it may be in a man’s youth (since a young man must struggle to “impose himself”—to win his way in the world—or remain always in a state of infantile dependency), can turn sour at midlife.

Jung’s emotional reaction to the dream murder of Siegfried was at first fraught with guilt and anxiety:

After the deed I felt an overpowering compassion, as though I myself had been shot: a sign of my secret identity with Siegfried, as well as the grief a man feels when he is forced to sacrifice his ideal and his conscious attitudes. This identity and my heroic idealism had to be abandoned, for there are higher things than the ego’s will, and to these one must bow.

(Jung 1963: 180–181)

In Jung’s personal case, the analogy between the figure in the dream of the Germanic hero Siegfried and himself (his “secret identity with Siegfried”) seems clear enough: as the heir apparent of the Freudian movement, his fellow Freudians had called him their “gigantic blond Siegfried” (Wehr 1987: 180), and it was this privileged role of the young hero of the Freudian movement that he had relinquished by breaking with Freud earlier that year. In the dream’s symbolic language, he had “killed Siegfried.”

Once Jung had awoken from this dream, he found himself unable to make sense out of it and tried to go back to sleep:

but a voice within me said, “You must understand the dream, and must do so at once!” The inner urgency mounted until the terrible moment came when the voice said, “If you do not understand the dream, you must shoot yourself!” In the drawer of my night table lay a loaded revolver, and I became frightened.

(Jung 1963: 181)

Thus Jung’s experience of this transformative image of the murdered Siegfried was also accompanied by the threat of death to himself, and this
in itself is highly significant. Transformation means not only the acquisition of a new identity but also the loss of an old one—metaphorically, the death of the older self in the form of Siegfried—and this threat of death points to an obvious initiatory element in midlife transformation. In youth initiation rites, as described by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his now classic *The Rites of Passage* (*Les rites de passage*, 1908), the element of symbolic death can play a significant role, even to the extent that

in some tribes the novice is considered dead, and he remains dead for the duration of the novitiate. It lasts for a fairly long time and consists of a physical and mental weakening which is undoubtedly intended to make him lose all recollection of his childhood existence. Then follows the positive part: instruction in tribal law and a gradual education as the novice witnesses totem ceremonies, recitations of myth, etc. . . . When the novice is considered dead, he is resurrected and taught how to live, but differently than in childhood.

(van Gennep 1960: 75)

From a Jungian perspective, there is good reason to think that all rites of passage organized collectively as rituals by archaic societies as well as the inner experiences of modern individuals without such ritually structured scenarios are based on an archetypal template that is activated when there is a need to move from one stage of life to another, including the midlife transition from youth to mature adulthood, and from an already established type of identity to a new one. Thus Jung’s first visionary experience, which was the prelude to his vision of the murdered Siegfried six days later, was clearly initiatory in character. Jung had sat down alone at his desk and allowed himself to feel himself dropping into dark depths; eventually he saw the vision of a corpse floating by:

A youth with blond hair and a wound in the head. He was followed by a gigantic black scarab and then by a red, newborn sun, rising out of the depths of the water. . . . I was stunned by this vision. I realized, of course, that it was a hero and solar myth, a drama of death and renewal, the rebirth symbolized by the Egyptian scarab.

(Jung 1963: 181)

The next set of Jung’s fantasies (accompanied this time by active imagination on his part) concerned a *katabasis*, a descent into the underworld of the unconscious—and a *nekyia*, a journey to the Land of the Dead. In its intriguing symbolism and images are found two more themes of great potential importance for a man facing the transition to midlife: the coming to consciousness of his inner femininity (the anima) and the appearance of a
midlife mentor. After what seemed like a descent of about one thousand feet, Jung felt as though he were on the edge of a cosmic abyss:

First came the image of a crater, and I had the feeling that I was in the land of the dead. The atmosphere was that of the other world. Near the steep slope of a rock I caught sight of two figures: an old man with a white beard and a beautiful young girl. I summoned up my courage and approached them as though they were real people [a primary technique of Jungian active imagination being active engagement with fantasy figures as though they were real], and listened attentively to what they told me. The old man explained that he was Elijah, and that gave me a shock. But the girl staggered me even more, for she called herself Salome! She was blind. . . . They had a black snake living with them which displayed an unmistakable fondness for me.

(Jung 1963: 187)

The image of Salome, a figure from the New Testament represented in Jung’s vision as blind, embodies a resurgence of the feminine at midlife, that feminine side of the man that, in the process of constructing his male gender identity and social persona, has been repressed and left undeveloped. Given the biblical origin of Salome in the figure of the female nemesis of John the Baptist, whose head she had demanded on a platter, it is understandable that Jung adds that he was “distinctly suspicious” of her (Jung 1963: 181). The anima, Jung’s term for such an image of a man’s own repressed feminine side, is grounded in the psychobiological contrasexual archetypal feminine, and is thus both individual—a female subpersonality whose specific characteristics vary from man to man—and collective, that is, a representation of what Goethe called the Eternal Feminine (das Ewig Weibliche), whose ultimate function is to serve as a bridge to the collective unconscious. The anima is potentially many sided. She can be helpful, like Dante’s Beatrice (a transformative image for Dante based on a memory of a young woman with whom he had never even had a conversation); she can be tricky and devious, like Kirke in the Odyssey; and at her worst she can be a femme fatale of the psyche, who may lure a man into madness and death. But in whatever form she may appear, she teaches a man something about the femininity he has locked up inside himself and has only until then experienced through blind projection onto the world and through the subsequent infatuation with women, who can appear to him as sweetheart angels or demon bitches or as both at the same time, according to the positive and/or negative nature of the projection. Jung’s “suspicion” regarding Salome underlines this ambiguous status of the psychic feminine in a man’s life. Her blindness may also point to something lacking in her from the standpoint of reliable wisdom and guidance.
Jung’s Salome appeared in the company of an old man with a white beard, who identified himself as Elijah; Jung felt he was worthier of trust than Salome. “Elijah and I had a long conversation” (Jung 1963: 181), he wrote later, adding, somewhat humorously, that it was a conversation he could make no sense out of. The figure of Elijah represented the first appearance in Jung’s psychic life of a midlife mentor, a figure who can communicate (if only one can understand him!) the wisdom necessary for a man’s transformation at midlife. Such a figure, as we have seen, was represented for William Mellon by Albert Schweitzer, who was both a real doctor who wrote him a short handwritten letter that urged him to go to medical school, and an inspirational figure—a secular saint, not only for Mellon, but for many people in the modern world. For Mellon, he was also a transformative image that helped unleash the energy and resolve that changed his life.

But Elijah was not enough of a mentor for Jung, since Jung was unable to understand anything he said. So another figure, Jung recounts, developed out of the Elijah figure, this time pagan rather than biblical. (Jung’s distrust of the value of his family’s ingrained Protestantism is perhaps evident here.) He called the figure Philemon (a classical Greek name) and, writes Jung, “he brought with him an Egyptian-Hellenistic atmosphere with a Gnostic coloration.” Philemon became a genuine mentoring figure for Jung: “in my fantasies I held conversations with him, and he said things which I had not consciously thought” (Jung 1963: 182). Philemon was the one he credits with teaching him about the objective nature of the psyche, and this resulted ultimately in Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious, a theory that challenged the assumptions of the erstwhile mentor of his youth and early professional success, Sigmund Freud, for whom unconscious contents of the psyche could only be the results of the repression of an individual’s memories of conscious experiences. In relation to Freud, the mentor of his earlier years, Philemon represented for Jung “superior insight” (Jung 1963: 183)—“superior” in the first instance, one imagines, to Freud’s. But the whole experience of this first encounter with the collective unconscious was still painful for Jung, who felt himself to be awash in powerful images from the unconscious that nearly overwhelmed him. Anthony Storr, as we have seen, has characterized this period as a near psychotic breakdown, and Jung’s ordeal should be a reminder that the midlife crisis, like any crisis leading to transformation, can have painful and even excruciatingly painful dimensions. “In my darkness,” wrote Jung,

I could have wished for nothing better than a real, live guru, someone possessing knowledge and ability, who would have disentangled for me the involuntary creations of my imagination. . . . In the absence of a living figure who could pick up where Freud left off, this task was undertaken by Philemon.

(Jung 1963: 184)
But this salutary midlife mentoring task was undertaken for Jung’s benefit not only by the “ghostly guru” Philemon, if the truth were told, but also by a woman in flesh and blood. Toni Wolff, first Jung’s analysand and student and then lifelong friend and lover, played an equally important role as his midlife mentor, especially as regards the practical side of surviving a near psychotic breakdown. Jung, like many European men of his class and generation, was careful to hide his private life from public gaze, although his lifelong liaison with Toni Wolff was an open secret for his entourage in Zurich. She was later known as an extraordinarily good therapist in her own right. Although she had herself not ventured deeply into the unconscious, she had an extraordinary mediumistic ability to guide others into it and back again safely. She was as instrumental as Philemon, if not more so, in pulling Jung out of the dangerous situation in which he felt he was near to drowning in an apparently endless flood of images from the collective unconscious.

Although Jung avoids all mention of her in his autobiography, Toni Wolff’s “rescue” of Jung is alluded to covertly in one of its most fascinating episodes. The section of *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* that recounts a trip Jung took to Ravenna, Italy, with an unnamed friend, describes in detail his visit to the fifth-century tomb of Galla Placidia and the Baptistery of the Orthodox, where he was especially impressed by four wonderful mosaics that he did not remember having seen in an earlier visit twenty years before in 1913. The fourth mosaic, he later wrote,

was the most impressive of all... It represented Christ holding out his hand to Peter, who was sinking beneath the waves. We stopped in front of this mosaic for at least twenty minutes and discussed the original ritual of baptism, especially the curious archaic conception of it as an initiation connected with real peril of death. Such initiations were often connected with the peril of death and so served to express the archetypal idea of death and rebirth. Baptism had originally been a real submersion which at least suggested the danger of drowning. (Jung 1963: 285)

As they soon found out, the particular mosaics they had admired so much together did not actually exist. After his return to Zurich, Jung asked another friend, who had also scheduled a visit to Ravenna, to bring back postcards of these mosaics, since he had been unable to find any himself. But his friend returned and reported that, not only were there no postcards, but the mosaics themselves were simply not there! Although this explained why Jung had not noticed the mosaics during his first visit in 1913, Jung was still quite astonished, since his visual memory of them was so vivid, and, he recalled, “the lady who had been there with me long refused to believe that what she had ‘seen with her own eyes’ had not existed” (Jung...
This lady was in fact Toni Wolff (Molton and Sikes 2011: 244) and what she and Jung had experienced together in the Baptistery of the Orthodox had evidently been a vision or hallucination à deux. “It was,” wrote Jung much later in his autobiography, “among the most curious events in my life,” adding that “it can scarcely be explained,” after which he starts to run on about mosaics that might have burned in the early Middle Ages, without adding anything in the way of psychological interpretation at all. He mentions only—intriguingly and tantalizingly—that “I had actually had a brush with those perils which I saw represented in the mosaics. I had come close to drowning” (Jung 1963: 286), but says nothing about who might have played Christ to his drowning Peter. But the explanation, once one knows who the lady was and what her earlier role had been in Jung’s desperate years twenty years before, is obvious to the reader and must have been obvious to Jung as well, although he chose not to make his interpretation public in his autobiography. It is clear that the vision of the mosaic concerning Christ’s rescue of Peter drowning had represented symbolically for both of them the fact that it was Toni Wolff who had rescued Jung from drowning in the flood of unconscious images which had brought about his near psychotic breakdown starting in 1913; and that, in so doing, she had played a major role as a midlife mentor for him.

By way of providing a striking parallel with Jung’s experience of the simultaneous appearance of both an anima figure and a midlife mentor, I would like to turn to an episode recounted in the fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarch’s book *The Secret* (*Secretum*). In it he evokes the arrival of the beautiful young virgin whose name is Truth, who brings with her “an aged man, venerable and majestic” (Petrarch 2003: 86), a mentoring figure he calls “Saint Augustine,” who both resembles and differs from the actual historical figure of one of the chief fathers of the Church. Petrarch’s narrative stands as a clear antecedent for Jung’s description of his waking vision of Salome and Elijah, and Petrarch’s conversations with Augustine provide a startling precedent for Jung’s own conversations with Philemon (although there is no evidence that Jung was acquainted with this particular work of Petrarch’s). The Italian poet wrote down these conversations as a kind of memorial for the help he received from a “ghostly guru” at a critical moment of his midlife *enantiodromia*. Although the text is a literary fantasy, and modeled on the philosophical dialogue form originated by Plato and carried on by Petrarch’s great Roman culture hero Cicero, it surely has its roots in Petrarch’s inner psychological life and experience. *The Secret* was written between 1346 and 1353, but refers back to the period around 1342–3, when the poet was almost forty years old. Until that time, he had been obsessed night and day with his beloved Laura de Noves, dedicating an immense amount of youthful energy and poetry to an attempt to win her affections. But, however enriching all this amorous enthusiasm and anima infatuation were for his poetic genius, any expectation of a flesh
and blood relationship was ultimately doomed to frustration. As he reached the age of forty, he increasingly felt that he was wasting his time with Laura, and fell into a deep depression.

Petrarch’s account of his midlife transformation in the *Secretum* begins with an account of this depression, which his mentor figure and ghostly guru Saint Augustine labels *acedia* (listlessness or torpor) or *aegritudo* (grief or sorrow), but which had symptoms that went beyond mere lethargy and spiritual dryness. Petrarch has his namesake Franciscus describe its effects in this way: “everything is sad, hard, miserable and horrific.” It is a disease, he says, where “the road to despair beckons relentlessly, and [where] everything colludes to push unhappy souls to self-destruction” (Petrarch 2003: 90). Saint Augustine’s first task as midlife mentor is thus to lighten the burden of Petrarch’s depression and suicidal despair. By the end of the second chapter Petrarch can claim that, thanks to their philosophic dialoguing and spiritual conversations, he is ready to live more philosophically, accepting the necessary sorrows of life with better grace.

But chapter three opens up a totally new and unexpected perspective. A deeper analysis of the cause of his depression, according to Augustine, leads to the conclusion that it lies in his love for Laura. Franciscus defends himself vigorously against this accusation:

> Whatever worthiness you see in me I possess because of her, and I never would have attained whatever reputation or glory I now have if she had not nobly cultivated the fragile seed of virtue that nature had placed in my breast.

(Petrarch 2003: 110)

In the end Franciscus is forced to yield to Augustine’s insistence that this noble love was merely disguised enslavement to a woman’s charm:

> this claim that she taught you to focus on higher things and that she took you away from the common lot of humans really means only that you sat at her feet, captivated by her sweetness alone, assiduously neglecting and utterly contemptuous of everything else.

(Petrarch 2003: 111)

Petrarch is thus brought to a near total reversal of his youthful values—values that were oriented around his love for Laura and the poetic career for which he experienced her as the primary inspiration, given the role of creative anima figure and Muse that he had projected onto her. Now, at midlife, he sees his new life’s path as one of spiritual struggle, and of a new concern for the life of the soul that is introspective and meditative in nature. Abandoning the role of the young lover he had celebrated in his
verse, he declares that “I will collect the scattered fragments of my soul, and I will diligently focus on myself alone” (Petrarch 2003: 147).

To the extent that we take Jung’s midlife initiation as potentially paradigmatic for many men at midlife—in other words, to the extent that it was a personal experience rooted in an archetypal and collective initiatory pattern that included the peril of death and the appearance of a mentoring figure or guide—it is clear that a man’s midlife mentor can be a female figure like Toni Wolff just as well as a male figure like Jung’s Philemon, Mellon’s Albert Schweitzer or Petrarch’s Saint Augustine. This should come as no surprise, for midlife initiations are likely to turn out to be different from the familiar patterns of traditional and more ritualized initiations of youth into adulthood. Since the establishment of a solid social and gender identity is the main goal of these earlier youth initiations, it is not surprising that, in traditional societies where male and female worlds demanded different skills and presented different challenges for young adults, the mentors for boys would be older men and the mentors for girls would be older women. At midlife, however, the major goal for an adult is not to forge a primary social identity (this would already have been done), but rather to develop cultural capacities that would bring into functioning aspects of human potential neglected in youth, especially generative and contrasexual qualities. For this purpose, a female mentor might well play as important a role for a man at midlife as a male mentor. Such, for example, seems to have been the case with Socrates as he is represented in Plato’s Symposium, where he tells his circle of male friends and associates that his great teacher when it came to understanding love and sexuality had been the woman Diotima. Since he is talking about something that was obviously of great importance to his development as a man and as a philosopher, one can easily see the parallel with Jung and Toni Wolff.

In most pre-modern societies there was a need for young people to assume the status of adults as soon as possible; given the many dangers threatening the welfare of a tribal society, there could be no delay in young people assuming their roles in adult society. So it made sense that youth initiations would be carried out over a relatively short period of time and would be marked by dramatic and often perilous ritual activity. We can assume that midlife initiations, by contrast, might occupy a longer time frame, since the goal is culture building and not adaptation for survival; in that case, it would be likely to involve gradual process rather than quick transition. The process could well extend even over years, and would contrast vividly with the rather quick and abrupt initiation of youth into early adulthood.

The goal of any stage of life initiation is the establishment of a new identity, and as regards this new identity, Jung’s autobiography does not make explicit this final and key element in its long description of the transformative images that presided over his midlife transformation. But
Stein (Stein 1998: 43–45) points out how Richard Noll (Noll 1994) had called attention to the fact that the sections in Jung’s autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* dealing with his near psychotic breakdown after he had ceased relations with Freud do not tell the whole story of the images and fantasies that began his own process of midlife transformation, a process that began in 1913 and would not be complete until about 1920 (that is between ages thirty-eight and forty-five), when Jung finally emerged from the pain and confusion of his midlife crisis and emerged as the generative psychologist he was to continue to be for the rest of his life. The particular fantasy, which the autobiography omits and which Noll has highlighted, occurred in December 1913, a few nights after the initial fantasy of Salome. Jung was to describe it at length over ten years later to a group of his students in a seminar given in English, notes of which were later published as *Analytical Psychology: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1925*:

Then a most a most disagreeable thing happened. Salome became very interested in me, and she assumed that I could cure her blindness. She began to worship me. I said, “Why do you worship me?” She replied, “You are Christ.” In spite of my objections she maintained this. I said, “This is madness,” and became filled with skeptical resistance. Then I saw the snake [the black snake of the first fantasy, who reappears with its head now turned white after being defeated by a white snake] approach me. She came close and began to encircle me and press me in her coils. The coils reached up to my heart. I realized as I struggled that I had assumed the attitude of the Crucifixion. In the agony and the struggle, I sweated so profusely that the water flowed down on all sides of me. Then [the blind] Salome rose, and she could see. While the snake was pressing me, I felt my face had taken on the face of an animal of prey, a lion or a tiger.  

(Jung 1989a: 96)

In his interpretation of this fantasy, Jung draws a comparison with the “mysteries of deification” that gave the reborn initiate a sense of immortality. The actual transformation the snake induced in him through its pressure was both a transformation into the crucified Christ as well as into the lion-headed god (*Deus Leontophorus*) of the Mithraic mysteries, “the figure which is represented with a snake coiled around the man, the snake’s head resting on the man’s head, and the face of the man that of a lion” (Jung 1989a: 98). Jung underlines the Mithraic context of the fantasy, but it is possible to seek a more specific explanation of the meaning that this adult imago would have had for him personally, whose significance is underscored by the care with which he presented to his seminar group in 1925, about twelve years after the event. The process of midlife initiatory death and rebirth is certainly inherent in the crucifixion motif. Jung wrote
later in his autobiography that this “integration of unconscious contents made an essential contribution to the completion of my personality” (Jung 1963: 286), but remained vague as to what specifically that completion entailed for him personally, stating only that “we have a particular feeling about ourselves about the way we are” and “we convey a particular feeling to others” (Jung 1963: 287). Murray Stein has gone into great detail concerning the process of how “the adult imago functions to express and orient the manifestations of psychic energy” at midlife (Stein 1998: 108). In the case of the lion-headed crucified god in the coils of a snake, the iconographic significance may be both Christian and Mithraic in origin, but what might have been the exact personal relevance for Jung of this powerful image? I would speculate that Jung was to come into his own as a psychologist for whose system the religious instinct (emblemized by the crucifixion) was to become as important as the sexual instinct was for Freud’s; for Jung, transformation at midlife frequently involved an awakening of this need to find a spiritual orientation. As for the “lion-headed god,” the self-imposing heroic attitude that Jung had let go of in the form of the youthful hero Siegfried is replaced in the fantasy by a mature form of spiritual heroism symbolized both by Christ and by the lion. It is an “adult imago” that combines spirituality, generative suffering, and a new kind of midlife heroism. It represents rather exactly Jung’s new identity at midlife.

If Jung is correct in asserting that the structures of the deep unconscious are common to all human beings, then one would expect there to be a great deal of evidence concerning midlife transformations and its associated psychic imagery in cultures distant in time and/or in space. But although modern anthropology has uncovered an enormous amount of material associated with youth initiation, it has almost totally neglected the topic of midlife initiation. The reason for this is primarily the apparent absence of midlife rituals corresponding to those of youth initiations. But here anthropology has perhaps overlooked the possibility that the rituals designed to initiate young people also involved the active participation of older people in a way that was initiatory for them as well, but in a different way. The adults’ participation has been viewed only in terms of its relevance to the initiated youth, not in terms of its transformational potential for the older people themselves, who presided over, and directed, the ritual process. I would maintain that these youth initiation rituals thus had a hidden or at least less obvious dimension, which was the significant effect of the ritual on the older people themselves. Initiating young people into adulthood was preeminently a generative act. It confirmed not only the new young adult status of the children, but also the older adult status of the initiating elders. Thus a midlife ritual is present but invisible in the rituals seemingly associated only with the initiation of youth. The elders themselves were active participants in a ritual celebrating change and
transformation, but were they not themselves changed and transformed in the process? Was the youth initiation not also a midlife initiation for the elders and the mentors?

There is of course another possibility, which is that the midlife transition was simply less heavily ritualized than that of childhood to adulthood in archaic societies, and that much of what took place in the men’s secret societies and other such adult groupings constituted a kind of ongoing process of initiation over time, as for example in the rites and rituals of Freemasonry in modern times. If the transformation at midlife involved a slow process of maturation rather than a quick transition from boyhood to manhood, its ritual context would be much more spread over time and less dramatic and intense.

There is also a third possibility, one that does not exclude the other two, but the one that this book will tend to foreground, namely, that midlife has traditionally been the great age of culture building, and the much of its archetypal transformative imagery is to be found in cultural performances such as epic recitation and theater, rather than in ritual per se. Of course, both types of performance, both epic and dramatic, have a ritualized dimension, and although the listeners and spectators may seem to play a more passive role than participants in a ritual, this is not in and of itself a problem. In discussing the effect of ritualized performances, Jung had the following to say concerning “experiences induced by ritual”:

In these mystery-dramas the transcendence of life, as distinct from its momentary concrete manifestations, is usually represented by the fateful transformations—death and rebirth—of a god or godlike hero. The initiate may either be a mere witness of the divine drama or take part in it or be moved by it, or he may see himself identified through the ritual action with the god. In this case, what really matters is that an objective substance or form of life is ritually transformed through some process going on independently, while the initiate is influenced, impressed, “consecrated,” or granted “divine grace” on the mere ground of his presence or participation. The transformation process takes place not within him but outside of him.

(Jung 1971: 51)

Thus the audience of epic recitation, like the spectatorship of drama, may itself be theorized as the potential beneficiary, to some degree at least, of the represented transformational experience, without having to undergo the near psychotic breakdown and eventual radical change that might characterize an inner experience of the sort Jung described in his autobiography and in his 1925 seminar. If Alain de Botton (de Botton 1998) entitled his book amusingly How Proust Can Change Your Life, he was not altogether tongue-in-cheek, and it would be to lose faith entirely with the value of
literature if one were to deny its potentially life-changing power. So we can assume that if Proust can change your life, at least to some degree, so can Homer or Shakespeare. Having granted the possibility of this kind of potentially transformative effect of a text upon its audience, we can feel confident in analyzing literary works and films as regards their oneiric representations (frequently in mythic and symbolic terms) of transformative images leading to midlife transformation. In other words, their effect on auditors, spectators, or readers may not only be esthetic, but also (if only indirectly) psychologically transformative, in that they have the power to awaken or “constellate” some of the structures of the psyche that preside over midlife transformation.

Of course, it would be to exaggerate the effect of literature on life to claim that literature can be a sufficient cause of radical transformation. Jung felt that the effect even of highly significant archetypal dreams was not in itself transformative:

> the most beautiful and impressive dreams often have no lasting or transformative effect on the dreamer. He may be impressed by them, but he does not necessarily see any problem in them. The event then naturally remains “outside,” like a ritual action performed by others. The more aesthetic forms of experience must be carefully distinguished from those which indubitably involve a change of one’s nature.

*(Jung 1971: 52, my emphasis)*

However, even if one continues to doubt that literature can really change one’s life, it is still not totally outlandish to expect that literature can enlighten one’s life—that there is at least a potential cognitive benefit even when the transformative benefit may be weak or nonexistent. When a person is ready for change, literature and film may become contributive causes, if not sufficient causes, for midlife transformation. So learning something through literature and film about the nature of the archetypal structures of midlife transformation is certainly worth the trouble, although there is much pleasure as well. It may be easier to read about midlife transformation than to experience it, but psychological armchair tourism of this sort may wind up stimulating and informing the actual journey.

It is also possible that oneiric texts, myth related as they are, may have a real advantage over theoretical disquisitions, when it comes to stimulating change. Jung had reservations about the ultimate value and effect even of the theoretical terminology of his own analytical psychology:

> The protean mythologem and the shimmering symbol express the processes of the psyche far more trenchantly and, in the end, far more clearly than the clearest concept, for the symbol not only conveys a visualization of the process but—and this is perhaps just as
important—it also brings a re-experiencing of it, of that twilight which we can learn to understand only through inoffensive empathy, but which too much clarity only dispels.

(Jung 1968: 26)

The idea that a certain kind of literary or film text can be analyzed at times as though it were roughly analogous to the account of a dream, daydream or fantasy is found already in Freud’s 1908 Essay “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming.” Freud’s basic idea was that while a writer is indeed a daydreamer presenting his audience with personal wish fulfillment fantasies, it is the writer’s esthetic talent that allows us to enjoy his personal fantasies as though they were our own, the formal qualities of the work serving as a means to overcome our reluctance to make contact with the private fantasies of another human being. Freud explains that “the essential ars poetica lies in the technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion which is undoubtedly connected with the barriers that rise between each single ego and the others.” (Gay 1995: 443). The question still remains, however, as to how a private fantasy can not only be made palatable to another, but also convey meaning in such a way that the other feels enlightened and instructed. For Freud, this is not the issue; literature gives pleasure, and that is enough, since “our actual enjoyment of an imaginative work proceeds from a liberation of tensions in our minds.” (Gay 1995: 443). Freud’s idea is a somewhat trivializing restatement of Aristotle’s theory of catharsis (according to which the goal of tragedy was the purging of an emotional overload of pity and fear), which he makes applicable to the imaginative arts in general. Literature, in other words, has nothing to teach, but it does make one feel more relaxed, since it enables us to enjoy daydreams that, if they were our own, would frequently prove embarrassing, and that, if we took as someone else’s private fantasies, would frequently repulse us. Freud does, however, entertain the possibility that some fantasy is less personal in origin, since it would derive “from the popular treasure-house of myths, legends and fairy tales” (Gay 1995: 442) in which case all a writer has to do is to “re-fashion” this ready-made material. For Freud, this material is probably no more than “distorted vestiges of the wishful fantasies of whole nations – the secular dreams of youthful humanity” (Gay 1995: 442).

But Jungians would call such material “archetypal,” and would value it highly for its capacity to stimulate awareness of the collective unconscious and of its fateful effect on human life and transformation.

Jung’s analysis of his own 1913 dream in which he murdered Siegfried illustrated in fact both of the possibilities that Freud discussed several years earlier. Siegfried was on the one hand a negative wish fulfillment of Jung’s anguished sense, after his break with Freud earlier that year, that he was finished as the young hero of the psychoanalytic movement, and that he had to abandon or “kill” any hope of continuing as a Freudian Siegfried.
On the other hand, Siegfried is ready-made material, part of the treasurehouse of Germanic mythology, and as such represents the dangerous power drive of the Germans near the opening of World War I. But Jung took the analysis of the dream a step forward when he asserted that Siegfried represented “higher things than the ego’s will”; in other words, an archetypal force “to which one must bow” (Jung 1963: 180), and not merely a figure symbolizing what Freud called sarcastically “His Majesty the Ego, the hero of every day-dream and every story” (Freud 1958: 51). Freud’s position in 1908 that “we must separate writers who, like the ancient authors of epics and tragedies, take over their material ready-made, from writers who seem to originate their own material” (Freud 1958: 50) is also something that Jung took up and transformed in his 1930 essay “On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry,” with his distinction between “psychological” and “visionary” writers. It is the second category that attracts his interest, and he attributes to it a function that goes far beyond simply refashioning ready-made material or creating material spontaneously. Visionary writers are the keepers of the gates of horn, and thus we all owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude for revealing the presence of the archetypal structures of the human psyche.

Oneiric texts are of almost infinite variety, but they have in common that they shed light on the deeper structures of psychic life. They provide a kind of vicarious experience of the archetypal world, and for that reason have not infrequently been taken as guides to living human life in depth. These are the types of texts I will be presenting in the following chapters, with the hope that my analysis will encourage readers to understand through the prism of art the emotional and intellectual dimensions of midlife transformation, and to experience, if only vicariously, some of its agony and wonder.

Notes

1 This is especially necessary now that recent research has begun the process of differentiating the two. The Breaking Point by Sue Shellenbarger (2004) was the book that first revealed to a larger public the growing consensus among professionals that women may have midlife crises and periods of midlife transformation that have some different characteristics from those of men.

2 In my opinion, it is one of Jung’s more questionable procedures to present psychological material from his dreams and fantasies as prophetic of collective world historical happenings.


4 “Active imagination” is a Jungian term for the conscious development and elaboration of a fantasy initially supplied by the unconscious.

5 See also Bair 2003: 729–730, n. 34.