

## A JUNGIAN RESPONSE TO KEN WILBER

by

**HERBERT VAN ERKELENS**

The book by Ken Wilber I especially value is *Grace and Grit*. It is a book about living, loving, death and resurrection, the central theme of Jungian psychology. Death and resurrection also concern me personally. The first dream I ever recorded as a student in physics was about a mummy in a subterranean chamber, coming to life again under the influence of love. Marie-Louise von Franz, the former co-worker of Jung, told me about the dream: 'What has been dead comes to life again in a creepy way. The physicists have, during the Enlightenment, declared matter dead. But matter is alive.'

In my dream an unknown woman stretched her hand towards the skeleton-like hand of the mummy which appeared unexpectedly between the white bandages. By this act the bony hand was transformed into a healthy, living hand. For many years Marie-Louise von Franz acted for me like that unknown woman. Her books and letters helped me to live and determined the course of my life. There was no need to turn to Ken Wilber. Why should I? But a medical doctor in Holland told me that Wilber had criticized Jung in a book about the disease and the dying of Treya Killam, the woman whom Wilber had married.

Around that time there appeared in German a book by Edith and Rolf Zundel about leading psychotherapists of our time. In that book one chapter was devoted to Ken Wilber, though he is not a psychotherapist. Edith Zundel tells us that Marie-Louise von Franz regarded Wilber as the modern Thomas Aquinas who was writing the *Summa Theologia* of our time. What could that possibly mean? On the one hand it is certainly a compliment. But on the other, it could mean that Wilber runs the risk of overlooking something of essential value. Aquinas himself suspended his writing in the third part of the *Summa*, because of the inner, mystical change that befell him. He said to his friend Reginald of Piperno: 'I cannot go on, Reginald, everything I have written seems as worthless as straw.'

### *The I-You relationship*

If Ken Wilber would ever meet with such a writer's block, he would not have to blame *Grace and Grit* for being 'worthless as straw.' It is a magnificent book, but it contains fragments from the interview by Edith Zundel in which Wilber launches a fierce attack on Jungian psychology. Apparently Jungian psychology does not fit into his view of a

transpersonal psychology. Wilber formulates the main reason for criticizing Jung as follows:

‘Jung’s major mistake, in my opinion, was to confuse collective with transpersonal (or mystical). Just because my mind inherits certain collective forms does not mean those forms are mystical or transpersonal. We all collectively inherit ten toes, for example, but if I experience my toes I am not having a mystical experience! Jung’s "archetypes" have virtually nothing to do with genuinely spiritual, transcendental, mystical, transpersonal awareness; rather, they are collectively inherited forms that distil some of the very basic, everyday, existential encounters of the human condition - life, death, birth, mother, father, shadow, ego, and so on. Nothing mystical about it. Collective, yes; transpersonal, no.’ (*Grace and Grit*, Shambhala, Boston, 1993, p. 181)

Has Jung really confused collective with transpersonal? Since Jung introduced his idea of the collective unconscious as distinct from the personal unconscious, the term collective must indeed be understood as transpersonal. But in Jungian psychology that does not mean that any experience of this transpersonal realm would be mystical in character. It is Wilber who equates transpersonal with mystical, not Jung. Nevertheless, there is nothing in the concept of the collective unconscious that forbids some kind of mystical experience. But that is not the aim of Jungian psychotherapy. The aim is to become conscious. That means that one is no longer obsessed by the contents of the collective unconscious. One obtains instead an individual relationship with them. Hence, we should carefully distinguish a collective experience of archetypal contents, such as mass hysteria, from a conscious, individual experience of the same contents. After all, the main discovery of Jung is the so-called individuation process. This process is tending towards the experience of one's uniqueness and wholeness.

According to Jung it is impossible to become conscious without a (therapeutic) relationship with another person. In *The Psychology of the Transference* Jung states: ‘The unrelated human being lacks wholeness, for he can achieve wholeness only through the soul, and the soul cannot exist without its other side, which is always found in a "You." Wholeness is a combination of I and You, and these show themselves to be parts of a transcendent unity whose nature can only be grasped symbolically, as in the symbols of the *rotundum*, the rose, the wheel, or the *coniunctio Solis et Lunae* (the marriage of the Sun and the Moon).’ (*Collected Works*, Vol. 16, par. 454)

One may wonder whether there is room in Jungian psychotherapy for some kind of transpersonal experience. I think there is, but in the context of the I-You relationship. In the end it is this I-You relationship which, occasionally, can be of a transpersonal kind, if it involves love. In a letter from April 1941 Jung writes about this in terms of something unexplainable: ‘This love is not transference and it is no ordinary friendship or sympathy. It is more primitive, more primeval and more spiritual, than anything we can describe. That upper floor is no more you or I, it means many, including yourself and anybody whose heart you touch. There is no distance, but immediate presence. It is an eternal secret - how shall I ever explain it?’ (Letter to Mary Mellon, in: *C.G. Jung Letters, Volume I, 1906-1950*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, p. 298)

## *Archetypes*

That Jung speaks about a love that is at once more spiritual and more primitive than we can describe is typical of his psychology. He does not try to reach the spiritual by overcoming the primitive. In the same way he does not use the term "archetype" as belonging to a spiritual domain high above the level of biological instinct. In *Aion* he writes that certain complex thought-forms, the archetypes, 'must be conjectured as the unconscious organizers of our ideas. The motive force that produces these configurations cannot be distinguished from the transconscious factor known as instinct. There is, therefore, no justification for visualizing the archetype as anything other than the image of instinct in man.' (*Collected Works*, Vol. 9, Part II, par. 278)

In Wilber's mystical view the archetypes 'are the first subtle forms that appear as the world manifests out of formless and unmanifest Spirit. They are the patterns upon which all other patterns of manifestation are based. From the Greek *arche typon*, original pattern. Subtle, transcendental forms that are the first forms of manifestation, whether that manifestation is physical, biological, mental, whatever. And in most forms of mysticism, these archetypes are nothing but radiant patterns or points of light, audible illuminations, brilliantly colored shapes and luminosities, rainbows of light and sound and vibration - out of which, in manifestation, the material world condenses, so to speak.' (*Grace and Grit*, p. 180)

Wilber now fosters the idea that there are Jungian archetypes and transpersonal archetypes: 'The power of the "real archetypes," the transpersonal archetypes, comes directly from being the first forms of timeless Spirit; the power of the Jungian archetypes comes from being the oldest forms in temporal history.' (*Grace and Grit*, p. 182) But the Jungian archetypes do not have any form. The archetype as such is a hypothetical and irrepresentable structural element of the unconscious that must be distinguished from the archetypal forms and ideas as they appear in our consciousness. These structural elements, the organizers of the archetypal ideas in matter and mind, are regarded by Jung as timeless. The Jungian archetypes are thus essentially the same as the transpersonal forms of timeless Spirit. As Wilber himself admits, the Jungian archetype of the Self is genuinely transpersonal because of its ultimately nondual character. That might imply that the individuation process already involves a gradual approach to the realm that Wilber himself calls transpersonal.

But Wilber insists on making a difference between Jungian and transpersonal archetypes. According to him Jung uses the term archetype 'as certain mythic structures that are collective to human experience, like the trickster, the shadow, the Wise Old Man, the ego, the persona, the Great Mother, the anima, the animus, and so on. These are not so much transcendental as they are existential. They are simply facets of experience that are common to the *everyday* human condition.' (*Grace and Grit*, pp. 180-181)

Is that true? In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* Jung speaks about his first descent in the collective unconscious: 'It was like a voyage to the moon, or a descent into empty space.' Here he met a strange couple: Salome and Elijah personifying the blind anima and the wise old man. Later another figure rose out of the unconscious: Philemon. Jung writes: 'Philemon and other figures out of my fantasies brought home to me the crucial insight that there are things in the psyche which I do not produce, but which produce themselves and have their own life. Philemon represented a force which was not myself... He was a mysterious figure to me. At times he seemed to me quite real, as if he were a living personality. I went walking up and down the garden with him, and to me he was what the Indians call a guru.' (*Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Fontana Paperbacks, 1983, pp. 207-208)

Wilber wants us to believe that these experiences have little to do with the transcendental. According to him they simply belong 'to the *everyday* human condition.' But I know very few people who walk in the garden with their spirit-guru. So I wonder why Wilber insists that archetypes in the Jungian sense 'have nothing to do with mysticism, with genuine transcendental awareness.' (*Grace and Grit*, p. 181) Is Jung's encounter with Philemon not a mystical experience?

#### *The fourth element*

I don't think that Jung has made the errors Wilber is attributing to him. So I wonder how errors that Jung himself never made could have developed into 'the single greatest obstacle within the field of transpersonal psychology.' (*Grace and Grit*, p. 179) Maybe, the terminology of transpersonal psychology leads to a misunderstanding of Jung's achievements. In the books Wilber wrote after *Grace and Grit* he develops a scheme of our understanding of the world that is unable to incorporate the findings of Jungian psychology. The scheme of four quadrants derives from three value spheres connected with I, we and it. The I-You relationship, so central to Jungian psychology, does not play a significant role in this scheme. Moreover, Wilber likes to reduce the four quadrants to three basic principles. In an interview by the psychologist of religion Frank Visser Wilber clearly states: 'The Big Three is just a shorthand of the four quadrants.' Here the Big Three are the Good, the True and the Beautiful of Plato's philosophy.

Wilber seems to be unaware of the fact that Jung devoted almost all his life to reaching a point of view beyond Plato. In Jungian psychology the basic experience is connected with the so-called quaternity, an archetype which in dreams and fantasies is frequently symbolized by a circle divided by four. If people like Wilber begin to speak about the Big Three, Jungians always respond with the question: 'Where is the missing Fourth?'

Jung's *Psychology and Religion* is based on dreams of the theoretical physicist Wolfgang Pauli. In these dreams the quaternity plays an important role. Jung writes: 'The application of the comparative method indubitably shows the quaternity as being a more or less direct representation of the God manifested in his creation. We might, therefore,

conclude that the symbol, spontaneously produced in the dreams of modern people, means the same thing - *the God within.*' (*Psychology and Religion*, Yale University Press, 1938, p. 72)

Moreover he says: 'The medieval philosophers of nature undoubtedly meant earth and woman by the fourth element. The principle of evil was not openly mentioned, but it appears in the poisonous quality of the prima materia (primeval matter) and in other allusions. The quaternary in modern dreams is the product of the unconscious... [The] unconscious is often personified by the anima, a female figure. Apparently the symbol of the quaternary issues from her. She would be the matrix of the quaternary, a theotokos or Mater Dei, just as the earth was understood to be the Mother of God. But since the woman, as well as evil, is excluded from the Deity in the dogma of the Trinity, the element of evil would also form a part of the religious symbol, if the latter should be a quaternary. It needs no particular effort of imagination to guess the far-reaching spiritual consequence of such a development.' (*Psychology and Religion*, pp. 76-77)

The fourth element missing in the dogma of the Trinity is the world of nature. This world embraces the feminine, the reality of evil and the cosmic presence of matter. The quaternary unites what has been divided by the dogma of the Trinity. In the quaternary spirit and nature are again reconciled with each other. Therefore one can characterize the spirit connected with the quaternary as the spirit of nature or as the spirit of matter. Since this spirit of nature has no place in contemporary science nor in Christian religion, the transition from Three to Four in our understanding of the relationship between man, God and the cosmos would indeed be a tremendous step beyond traditional belief and thinking.

I have no idea how this step from Three to Four relates to transpersonal psychology. In the latter psychology we have the important insight that prepersonal states of mind should not be confused with transpersonal ones. Hence the development scheme: prepersonal, personal, transpersonal. Again the number three! From the perspective of transpersonal psychology Jung in a romantic way elevates prerational states to postrational glory. (*Grace and Grit*, p. 189) But does that mean that he has fallen into the pre/trans fallacy? If the first four integers stand for the unfolding of consciousness, the return to unity in Jungian psychology does not take place at stage three, but at stage four, according to the famous alchemical axiom attributed to Maria Prophetissa: 'Out of the One comes Two, out of Two comes Three, and from the Third comes the One as the Fourth.'

### *The five-pointed star*

Frank Visser has published in Holland a book about Ken Wilber. It has as subtitle *Thinking as Passion*. If I should write a book about Carl Gustav Jung or Marie-Louise von Franz I could never use such a subtitle. What Jung and von Franz have tried to achieve is some middle point between thinking and feeling, sensation and intuition. That is the reason that their basic writings deal with symbols and not so much with concepts.

Symbols have a feeling tone that is missing in rational concepts. In some sense Jungian psychology can be viewed as the psychology that tries to rehabilitate the feeling function. Von Franz herself had many dreams in which her head was chopped off. She had to sacrifice her strongly developed rational thinking in order to arrive at the middle ground where Jung was staying.

In *Grace and Grit* the feeling function is present. It is a very moving story of a love relationship under the doom of cancer and death. The Wilber I get to know from this book seems to me a very sympathetic man with a lot of compassion and humour. But in *A Brief History of Everything* Wilber as an individual who lives and suffers in a concrete world disappears again behind intellectual schemes which do not touch my heart. Here Wilber is again the philosopher, the Thomas Aquinas of our time.

I am afraid that *Grace and Grit* will remain the only book by Wilber dear to me. Surprisingly it ends with the number five. It even points beyond the number four of Jungian psychology. Wilber tells us that in the year of Treya's fortieth birthday, Da Free John, a teacher of both of them, began saying 'that the ultimate enlightened vision was when one saw the five-pointed cosmic star, or cosmic mandala, pure and white and radiant, utterly beyond all finite limitations.' Wilber then continues: 'Treya didn't know this was said at that time, but nonetheless that is exactly when she changed her name from Terry to Estrella, or Treya, which is Spanish for star. And it is held that, at the precise moment of death, the great five-pointed cosmic star, or the clear light void, or simply great Spirit or luminous Godhead, appears to every soul. It is my own belief that this vision had appeared to Treya some three years earlier - it had done so in a dream she told me of, right after an empowerment with the Very Venerable Kalu Rinpoche - the vision was unmistakable, and accompanied by all the classic signs, though she told no one of it. She did not change her name to "Treya" because Free John had talked about this ultimate vision; she had simply had this vision, of the luminous cosmic star, in a very real and direct way.' (*Grace and Grit*, p. 404)

### *The ladder to heaven*

In the face of death all distinctions disappear, also those which seem to separate Jungian from transpersonal psychology. Marie-Louise von Franz discusses in chapter 11 of her book *On Dreams and Death* the idea of a spectrum of consciousness, the very idea with stands at the beginning of Wilber's career as a writer and thinker. Jung had put forward such a spectrum as a new hypothesis in order to throw light on the relationship between the body and the psyche. In a letter to Raymond Smithies he wrote: 'It might be that the psyche should be understood as *unextended intensity* and not as a body moving with time. One might assume the psyche gradually rising from minute extensity to infinite intensity, transcending for instance the velocity of light and thus irrealizing the body... In the light of this view the brain might be a transformer station, in which the relative infinite tension of intensity of the psyche proper is transformed into perceptible frequencies or "extensions." Conversely, the fading of introspective perception of the body explains

itself as due to a gradual "psychification," i.e., intensification at the expense of extension. Psyche = highest intensity in the smallest space.' (*On Dreams and Death*, p. 144)

This hypothesis by Jung is not very clear in itself. But the whole idea of degrees of consciousness is confirmed in many dreams by Wolfgang Pauli in which the concept of frequency is related to various levels of spiritualization or disembodiment. Pauli wrote an essay about the frequency motif in his dreams. It will be published as part of the correspondence between Pauli and Jung. In this essay on "background physics" Pauli remarks: 'It seems to me that personal consciousness is actually placed on the side of matter and ordinary time, whereas timeless, objective psyche is found on the other (complementary) side.' In the same way von Franz writes in *On Dreams and Death*: 'The psychic universe is timeless, is spread throughout space and also contains a transpersonal knowledge, a knowledge which Jung ascribes to the collective unconscious.' (*On Dreams and Death*, p. 153) She further remarks: 'Perhaps the various staircases, ladders, etc., which appear so often in the cited dream material [of dying people], also point to a more gradual connection between the two forms of energy (body matter and psyche).' (*On Dreams and Death*, pp. 153-154)

It seems to me that one and the same myth underlies Jungian and transpersonal psychology. It is the ancient Egyptian myth of the death and resurrection of Osiris. In the dream I mentioned at the beginning of my exposition there is a mummy in a subterranean burial chamber. It is the spirit in matter. But the corpse may as well be regarded as Osiris. His rising out of the land of the dead is in the Pyramid Texts connected with a stairway or ladder to heaven. For instance the Egyptologist Wallis Budge writes: 'The ladder is referred to in the Pyramid Texts. It was made originally for Osiris, who by means of it ascended into heaven. It was set up by Horus and Seth each of whom held one side and they assisted the God to mount it.'

Why Horus and Seth? Von Franz tells in *On Dreams and Death* that in the ancient Egyptian *Book of Gates* Death itself is represented as a God with two faces: Horus and Seth. But Horus and Seth are enemies. Seth has killed Osiris, and Horus as the son of Isis and Osiris wants to revenge his father. But in the end both Horus and Seth hold the ladder on which Osiris ascends towards the ever circling stars which never go down under the horizon. There is a reconciliation of opposites in the face of death. The ladder itself is a sign of that reconciliation. If a human person dies, he becomes Osiris and says according to the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*: 'I set up a ladder to Heaven among the Gods, and I am a divine being among them.'

Jungian analysts are people who have a mother rather than an Apollo complex. They first have to descend into mother earth, into the depth of their own psyche, before they can even think of ascending to heaven. For many of them the descent into the interior of the archetypal earth is experienced as going through hell. After such an adventure you have learned your lesson. You have experienced the life-giving water that rationality is unable to offer you. Consequently, Jungian psychology is convinced that rational thinking must play a more modest role in a future science. Marie-Louise von Franz therefore writes at the end of *On Dreams and Death*: 'We stand at a great turning-point in modern science,

which points toward the healing discovery that we are everywhere surrounded by rationally impenetrable mysteries. This is a recognition that hopefully signifies the beginning of a period of greater intellectual modesty.’ (*On Dreams and Death*, p. 157) If such intellectual modesty is adopted, there would no longer be any need for a hot debate between Jungian and transpersonal psychology. We would, like Horus and Seth, both hold up the ladder to Heaven.

Copyright © 1999 - Permission is granted to quote from this article on the condition that full credit is given to the author.

#### *Note on the author*

Herbert van Erkelens took his doctor's degree in theoretical physics at the University of Amsterdam. In 1984 he left this academic speciality in order to concentrate on the relations between modern physics, depth psychology and religion. For six years he received grants from the Free University Amsterdam to investigate the connection between modern physics and religion. To that end he studied the efforts of theoretical physicist Wolfgang Pauli to reconcile quantum physics with the world of alchemy. He now is a free-lance science journalist and teacher in alchemical symbolism. He coordinates the activities of the Dutch branch of the international *Scientific and Medical Network*. Some of his publications on Pauli's relationship with the unconscious are in English:

‘Wolfgang Pauli's Dialogue with the Spirit of Matter,’ *Psychological Perspectives*, Issue 24, Spring/Summer 1991, C.G. Jung Institute of Los Angeles.

‘The Piano Lesson. An Active Fantasy by Wolfgang Pauli’, *Psychological Perspectives*, Issue 38, Winter '98-'99, C.G. Jung Institute of Los Angeles.

‘Wolfgang Pauli and the Chinese *Anima*-Figure’, *Eranos Yearbooks*. Vol. 68, Eranos Foundation, Ascona, 1999.

Kenneth Earl Wilber II (born January 31, 1949) is an American philosopher and writer on transpersonal psychology and his own integral theory, a systematic philosophy which suggests the synthesis of all human knowledge and experience. Wilber was born in 1949 in Oklahoma City. In 1967 he enrolled as a pre-med student at Duke University. He became inspired, like many of his generation, by Eastern literature, particularly the Tao Te Ching. He left Duke and enrolled at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln