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# Mundus Imaginalis

## Module 7: Analysis and Assimilation

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## Bringing the Active Imagination into Consciousness

At this stage in the active imagination process we have collected a large amount of information and our task is to turn our attention towards bringing to conscious understanding the messages received from the unconscious in the active imagination, exploring and uncovering the dynamics at play within our personal psyche or at work in our interactions with the outer world. Without this link to specific events, feelings or other dynamics in our lives, the active imagination is pointless, it is mere entertainment and we are back in the landscape of fantasy.

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### Analysis

Having identified your personal and objective associations from your active imagination images, you need to figure out what is going on inside of you that is represented by the situation in the active imagination. And here Jung tells us that:

*“..It is consciousness that holds the key to the values of the unconscious, and that therefore plays the decisive part. Consciousness alone is competent to determine the meaning of the images and to recognize their significance for man here and now, in the concrete reality of the present. Only in an inter play of consciousness and the unconscious can the unconscious prove its value, and perhaps show a way to overcome the melancholy of the void. If the unconscious, once in action, is left to itself, there is a risk that its contents will become overpowering or will manifest their negative, destructive side.” (Man and His Symbols, p.297.)*

In analysing the messages and meaning that has come up from the unconscious in the active imagination ask yourself:

- What initial situation is presented by the active imagination?
- What develops or changes during the active imagination? In other words what is the action that takes place?

- What is the climax?
- What is the lysis? That is, how does the active imagination end? Has the situation changed from the beginning of the active imagination? How are things left?

Returning to the active imagination used as an example in Module 3 about the swans and the Druid priestess, let's work through these questions:

**What is the initial situation?** Here the active imagination alludes to the person as being a black swan, alone in the waters of the unconscious, that is the lake, looking into her own reflection. Here the unconscious is telling us that the psyche is being reflected in the unconscious.

**What develops or changes during the active imagination?** In this active imagination there is a lot of movement, beginning with a group of swans and one swan swimming towards her and the forming of a heart shape as their necks arch and their heads touch. Could this image be pointing towards self-love? The acceptance of self by the other?

The two swans now join the group of swans—a movement towards community?

And swim towards the bank—consciousness perhaps?

At this point in the active imagination, we have the **first climax**, the first change and movement as the scene shifts the client from being the swan to being the woman standing on the bank of the lake watching the swans swim towards her. Here we might well ask, “What has changed, why this transformation from swan to woman on the banks? Is this a movement from the instinctive life? (Remember, animals represent some instinctive aspect of the psyche.) And if then, what is the transformation, the lysis here?”

Again, we see the repeating theme of community as the woman is standing with a group of people behind her—villagers.

The swans move towards the bank, towards the woman. Again, we see the repeating theme of instinctive forces from the unconscious moving towards the banks of consciousness. It is common in active imagination to see these repeating themes, as if the unconscious through repetition ensures that the message is delivered.

The **second climax** of the active imagination now occurs as the woman places her hands on the heads of the two swans and catches a glimpse of a symbol. During the amplification process it emerged that the symbol on the palms of her hands is a Triskele, a Druid symbol of the spirit of three. The Celts believed that the Triskele represented the fact that the most important things come in threes – body, mind, spirit; past, present, future; maid, mother, crone; personal growth, human development and spiritual expansion. How interesting that the woman doing this active imagination has not previous knowledge or reading on Druids and in fact had no interest in Druidry.

**What is the lysis? That is, how does the active imagination end? Has the situation changed from the beginning of the active imagination? How are things left?** The meeting with the swans on the bank of the river, the placing of hands on the heads in some way is an initiation ceremony and the woman steps into the role of Druid priestess. Among Druids, swans represent the soul and are associated with the pagan Goddess Brigid, who in turn represents a triple aspect of the goddess—maiden, mother, crone. As maiden she rules over poetry, writing, inspiration and music. As mother she rules over healing. As crone she rules over fire and transformation.

Having worked through the active imagination, answering the questions:

- What initial situation is presented by the active imagination?
- What develops or changes during the active imagination? In other words, what is the action that takes place?
- What is the climax?
- What is the lysis? That is how does the active imagination end? Has the situation changed from the beginning of the active imagination? How are things left?

We can now translate the images and the associations into psychological language and connect the active imagination images to the inner dynamics, looking to see what is happening inside of the psyche. At this stage you need to figure out what is going on inside of you that is represented by the situation in the active imagination and this can be done by asking yourself:

- What is the active imagination commenting on?
- What part of me is this?
- Where have I seen it functioning in my life lately?
- Where do I see that same trait in my personality?

- Who is it inside of me who feels like that or behaves like that?
- What is it saying about your behaviour / attitude?
- What is it implying about the situation / problem you are experiencing?
- How do you feel about it?
- What is the dynamic or pattern which the dream is commenting on?
- Where do you display this dynamic in your waking life?
- Is this dynamic / pattern affecting how you relate to people or situations?
- Is it working for you?
- Can you change it or are you willing to change it?

Whilst you are uncovering the insight offered by your active imagination, it is important that you:

- Choose an interpretation that shows you something you don't know.
- Avoid the interpretation that inflates your ego or is self-congratulatory.
- Avoid interpretations that shift responsibility away from yourself.
- Avoid turning the symbol into a sign. In other words, saying swans here means soul. We avoid turning the symbol into a sign by staying open to its multi-dimensional meaning, keeping in mind that swans travel over three realms—water, earth and air. Earth could then represent the physical realm, water the emotional realm and air the intellectual realm and so on.

It is common for an active imagination to hold several interpretations, all of which are equally valid and of value to your journey here and now. Choosing which one to work with, then, is simply a matter of resonance—which meaning holds the most energy, captures your attention now.

At this stage we ask questions like:

- What are they advising me to do?
- What is the central, most important message (insight) that these symbols are trying to communicate to me?
- What adaptation is being called for?
- What is the overall meaning of the active imagination for my life?
- How am I affected by this information?

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## Assimilation – The Ethical Confrontation

Speaking about the process of Active Imagination in his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, Jung warns us against stopping the active imagination process once we have some insight into or have made conscious the messages from the unconscious, saying:

*“It is equally a grave mistake to think that it is enough to gain some understanding of the images and that knowledge can here make a halt. Insight into them must be converted into an ethical obligation. Not to do so is to fall prey to the power principle, and this produces dangerous effects which are destructive not only to others but even to the knower. The images of the unconscious place a great responsibility upon a man. Failure to understand them, or a shirking of ethical responsibility, deprives him of his wholeness and imposes a painful fragmentariness on his life.”*

And in *Inner Work*, Jungian Analyst Robert A Johnson says:

*“Once the imaginative process is launched, once the primordial, instinctual forces are invited to come up to the surface and be heard, some limits have to be set. It is the conscious ego, guided by a sense of ethics, that must set limits in order to protect the imaginative process from becoming inhuman or destructive or going off into extremes.... Ethics is a principle of unity and consistency. People who behave ethically are those who make an honest effort to conform their behaviour to their values. If one’s conduct is grossly at odds with one’s essential character, it always reflects a fragmentation of the personality.”*

Why then this warning about bringing an ethical point of view to the contents of the unconscious? The unconscious by its nature:

*“...is the source of the instinctual forces of the psyche and the forms or categories that regulate them, namely the archetypes.” (CW 8 par 342)*

In general, the compensating attitude of the unconscious works to maintain psychic equilibrium, compensating the conscious ego attitude, holding a creative function necessary for psychological health and holding all that consciousness is not currently aware of.

*“... everything which, involuntarily and without paying attention to it, I feel, think, remember, want and do; all the future things that are taking shape in me and will come to consciousness:” (CW 8 par 382)*

From this point of view the unconscious hold wisdom and guidance unknown or unavailable to consciousness. However, it is also instinctive, archetypal and so by its nature the unconscious is amoral, unconcerned with ethical values of justice, fairness, protection of the defenceless, service to others, or keeping intact the fabric of practical life. Since the contents of the active imagination arise from the unconscious, these characters and images are forces of nature, in no means superior to consciousness, simply bringing in new compensatory information. For this reason, an ethical confrontation, a mediation by the ego—that is consciousness—is required or we will fall prey to the power drive, to asserting ourselves, having our own way with family or friends, making everyone dance to our tune, to becoming inflated and held captive by destructive and ultimately self-destructive extremes.

It is at this point in the active imagination that the crucial task of the ego is to answer back, to speak up for human values like fairness and commitment. Ask, “What effect will this extreme, otherworldly doctrine have on my everyday life?” The ego must find the way to gentle and humanise these impersonal forces of the unconscious, with their overwhelming, sometimes inhuman nature. If an attitude comes roaring out of your unconscious that will destroy your practical existence, hurt your relationships with your family, cause trouble for you at your job, or get you into power struggles with everyone, then you have both the duty and the right to answer back, to present the ethical alternative.”

At this stage of the active imagination process you need to bring your ego strength into an ethical confrontation with the symbols that have come up, asking questions:

- Is this information, the attitudes and conduct, consistent with my character and deepest values? You can't sacrifice essential values in order to pursue one narrow urge or goal.
  - Is an archetype or part of myself trying to take over at the expense of other archetypes or parts that live in me? Ethical balance requires that you do not let one archetype or one part of you take over at the expense of other parts of you.
  - Is there a conflict between this urge and my practical daily life or my human relationships? And if so, what is the expense of following this urge?
  - What effect will this extreme, otherworldly doctrine have on my everyday life?
  - Can I accept this information?
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## Application

Conduct an analysis of the active imagination and see what messages the unconscious is bringing to consciousness.

Conduct the assimilation—the ethical confrontation with these messages.

## Recommended Reading

**Inner Work Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth** by Robert A. Johnson

**Man and His Symbols** conceived and edited by Carl Jung