

# Active Imagination: The Effective Factor in the Practice of Psychotherapy

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**Abstract**—The desire for unequivocal clarity is understandable, but this can make one forget that things of the soul are experiential processes, or transformations, which should never be designated unilaterally if it is not wanted to transform something that moves, a living thing, into something static. Among the so-called ‘things of the soul’ there are especially spontaneous fantasies, that emerge during the processes, as a result from the use of the active imagination technique, for when fantasy is not forced, violated, or subjugated by an illegitimate, intellectually preconceived idea, then it is a legitimate and authentic product of the unconscious mind. This is how one can gain access to unadulterated information about everything that transcends the conscious mind. However, it is vital to discern between ego and non-ego, because this principle will result in a release of energy and a renewal of life, which will come to have meaning. This study will deal with the active imagination as a knowledge that depends on the individual experience of the therapist because the patient will be taken just to reach where the unconscious of the therapist was assimilated to his own conscience. In this way, the therapist becomes the method itself, being his personality, a fundamental part of an effective factor.

**Keywords**—Active imagination, effective factor, symptom, transformation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

LET us immediately take up some of Jung’s considerations, which are certainly well known to many, but which is always good to point out, especially when our central theme is the effective factor. The first consideration is that,

“the unconscious is neutral rather like nature. If it is destructive on the one side, it is as constructive on the other side. It is the source of all sorts of evils and also the matrix of all divine experience and, as paradoxical as it may sound, it has brought forth and brings forth consciousness” [1].

Any aspect of the unconscious communicates with us:

“[...] it usually communicates with man through the medium of the soul, in other words, our unconscious, or rather through its transcendental ‘psychoid basis’” [1],

thus allowing recognition that religious experience, while accessible to the human mind, cannot be distinguished from so-called unconscious phenomena. When depreciated, the unconscious blocks the channels through which “[...] the *aqua gratiae* flows [...]” [1], and such obstructions begin to manifest in the body through its effects, i.e., the symptoms. Experience shows us today that in this case, the obstructions work and keep working as if they had forgotten to disable their

function. They act as forms of protection at certain times of life and, subsequently, once they are installed they do not unblock as well as they obstruct the passages of “*aqua gratiae*”, creating obstacles and resistance to the flow of the libido, without which, there is no possibility of the creation of consciousness.

Jung explains:

“I don’t presume to know what the psyche is; I only know that there is a psychic realm in which and from which such manifestations start. It is the place where the *aqua gratiae* springs forth, but it comes, as I know quite well, from the immeasurable depths of the mountain and I do not pretend to know about the secret ways and places the water flows through before it reaches the surface” [1].

Then, the manifestations of the unconscious are in general ambivalent or ambiguous; firmness and the ability to discern are of the utmost importance. It is at this point that it is important to prevent the patient from blindly rejecting the data of the unconscious or submitting himself or herself to it without critical sense. Robert Johnson in his book, *Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth* [2], systematized active imagination, and denominate this understanding “ethical content”. Nowadays, unsuspecting individuals try to attempt to dominate the unconscious by the most illicit means possible, including indiscriminate use and abuse of psychiatric medication and other drugs. In this case, says Jung:

“There is no development at all but only a miserable death in a thirsty desert if one thinks one can rule the unconscious by our arbitrary rationalism” [3].

Not dominate and not be dominated, therefore, is the great process valid for the relationship of consciousness, either with the intrapsychic content, or with interpersonal or with supra-personal content.

A process that leads to satisfactory results can also be difficult because, as a rule, says Jung,

“If he (the individual) finds the task too difficult, he will usually fail right at the beginning and never get through the dangerous impasse [...] due to the possibility of triggering some psychosis. However, if it has got so far that the patient can do active imagination and shape out his fantasies” [4].

Then, there will hardly be any serious danger. The danger, therefore, which prevents the individual from going further, whether the analyst or the patient, is in the fear of the unconscious, “[...] because voluntary participation in the fantasy is alarming to a naïve mind and amounts to an anticipated psychosis” [4]. These comments by Jung are very

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significant and enlightening, since active imagination is also mentioned as dangerous by some scholars of analytical psychology. In fact, Jung concludes, there is a great difference between a psychosis that erupts without critical attention, and gives way to an extremely distressing state or panic, and an anticipated psychosis, that is

“[...] a voluntary involvement in those fantasy-processes which compensate the individual and—in particular—the collective situation of consciousness” [4].

This involvement, which occurs with the purpose of integrating the contents of the unconscious into consciousness, wants to achieve a sense of wholeness, which previously needed to split up what was united to generate insight. Now, however, it seeks to “[...] produce a whole meaning which alone makes life worth living and, for not a few people, possible at all” [4]. In other words, only the one who dares to risk the confrontation can win the hard-to-attain treasure. The individual who makes this inner experience - and individuation means this inner process of transformation - gains strength and confidence, for everything that threatened him came from himself, and now he has made it his own. “He has acquired the right to believe that he will be able to overcome all future threats by the same means.” [4]. As for its manifestation, this unconscious world does it by the image. As Jung says: “An archetype—so far as we can establish it empirically—is an image” [3].

## II. IMAGINATIVE ACTIVITY

### A. Image and Imagination

To the concept of imaginative activity, Jung adds that one of *fantasy*, using sometimes one, and sometimes the other, according to the context although, he says:

“I really prefer the term ‘imagination’ to ‘fantasy’, because there is a difference between the two which the old doctors had in mind when they said that ‘opus nostrum’, our work, ought to be done ‘per veram imaginationem et non phantastica’—by true imagination and not by a fantastical one.” [3].

Imagination, says the Swiss psychologist, is the creative activity of the spirit in general, without being a special faculty; it is reflected in all the basic forms of psychic life. Jung comments that fantasy, as an imaginative activity, is a direct expression of psychic activity.

The inner image, in turn, is a complex structure made up of the most varied materials and diverse sources; that is, it has autonomy and its own meaning and, “the image is a condensed expression of the psychic situation as a whole” [5]; that is, soul states momentarily constellated. For me, says Jung, “[...] there is an original behind our images, but it is inaccessible” [3], because in order to perceive it, it is necessary to transform it into psychic categories. In general, says Schwartz-Salant,

“imagination is the key to all alchemical opus. And in this spirit, and expanding Jung’s use of the active imagination as an inner dialogue, we can apply this to the field itself” [6],

i.e., the conjunction between imagination and the interactive

field (therapist-patient relationship) reveals a remarkable power of restraint and transformation.

“Since it is a matter of an ineffable experience the image is indispensable” [3], and it is important to think about our experiences, because our dominant ideas heavily rely on them. They depend to such a degree that God himself approaches men in the form of the symbol; the symbols of the self correspond to those of the deity [7]. This is what is understood by divine incarnation and individuation. I know from experience, says Jung,

“[...] the self does indeed seek such issues because it seeks consciousness, which cannot exist without discrimination (differentiation, separation, opposition, contradiction, discussion)” [3].

The differentiation that has to occur is intellectual, emotional, ethical, etc., that is “[...] the self or Christ is present in everybody a priori, but as a rule in an unconscious condition to begin with” [3]. It is not possible to take ownership of it by learning, suggestibility or mere interpretations. In general, it is projected in the external world and only the withdrawal of projections can make it a real experience. While projected, the psyche will be split up and, as it is split up, it will simultaneously be crying out for the healing of the split through the most different and intense conflicts. Thus, to the extent that the projections are being withdrawn, that is, to the extent that they will be finding the spontaneous representations that arise from unconscious affections, activated by interpersonal relations, the process of active imagination begins, and through it, one can accomplish this feat very quickly. This fact often bothers certain psychologists, who doubt this possibility because they did not have the corresponding training or experience. However, as Jung himself says, “Either I know a thing and then I don’t need to believe it; or I believe it because I am not sure that I know it” [3]. It is thus that the union of these opposites, occurring in a process of assimilation of the unconscious by consciousness, which frees the person from the conflict that otherwise would remain insoluble. And individuation is constituted in this process that can advance proportionately to the individual’s degree of effort in working on his inner world, until reaching the point of the “*grantor deo*” or the “*transsumptive leap*” [7]. Nature itself will produce the images that “[...] the individual who has reached a more complete state of consciousness [...]” [7] may experience the individuation, the restoration of the split state necessary for the understanding of who the self is and who is the not-self. The Persian poet and mystic, Rumi, went so far as to say: “of myself, only the name remains, all the rest is You” [8].

### B. Active Imagination

The question proposed by Jung is: how to approach the dark side of the human mind? He suggests that

“[...] this is done by three methods of analysis: the word-association test, dream-analysis, and the method of active imagination” [3].

“By objectifying his impersonal images, and understanding their inherent ideas, the patient is able to

work out all the values of his archetypal material. Then he can really see it, and the unconscious becomes understandable to him. Moreover, this work has a definite effect upon him" [3].

Everything that is done in relation to the symbolism falls on itself, producing a change of attitude,

"but by objectifying them (archetypes), the danger of their inundating consciousness is averted and their positive effect is made accessible" [3].

It is not convenient, in this small article, to ground the concepts of instinct and archetype, although it is taken into account its extreme necessity, because, as far as instinct is concerned, it is experienced as a physiological dynamism, while, on the other hand, its manifold forms penetrate into consciousness as images. Its assimilation never occurs only by absorption and immersion in the instinctive sphere,

"[...] but only through integration of the image which signifies and at the same time evokes the instinct, although in a form quite different from the one we meet on the biological level" [9].

It may be remembered, for example, that although physical and spiritual passion are mortal enemies, they are still sisters, just a small touch for one to become the other. This brings it back to one of the basic antinomies, always repeated by Jung, which cannot be neglected: "[...] psyche depends on body and body depends on psyche." [10]; or even,

"psyche and matter are contained in one and the same world, and moreover are in continuous contact with one another and ultimately rest on unrepresentable, transcendental factors [...]" [9].

In any case, Jung comments, the development of the psyche consists "[...] in integrating the unconscious contents into consciousness" [9]. Therefore, despite being tedious, it is an indispensable task, a difficult work to be experienced and to be reported, because whatever is said will always and only be the expression of a limited language, trying to say something of the unlimited. "The main difficulty is to describe the manner of this transformation" [9]. The question will then be: "What, then, are the means at our disposal of obtaining knowledge of the regulating factors of the unconscious?" [9].

Jung thinks that the causal explanation is insufficient, and the initial affective state for the procedure should be taken as a starting point. In clinical practice, today, any symptom is taken, even though the affection is also hidden, for example, in autoimmune syndromes such as Sjögren's Syndrome, or as found in the research of Bruxism, and other correlates; those images and affections are hidden in an apparently only physical-biological symptom. Thus, to the disorder will be given a visible form, allowing the spontaneous fantasy to expand until a dialogue between self and not self become possible.

As already said, it is primarily a question of a disidentification between the self and the unconscious and, through the dialectical method between these two instances establish a subsequent re-connection, which can either transform "[...] at a single stroke" [9] the situation of stagnation in which the libido was, immediately modifying the

symptom; or it is possible to find its meaning, even if the symptom remains. In the second case, the symptom itself is revealed through its own proper and peculiar image, that is, individual, as an inner guide, a kind of traffic sign for the progression or regression of the libido and the individual's modes of consciousness.

If healing means to make a sick person healthy, to Jung: "cure is change" [10]. Apparently, the Swiss psychologist says "[...] it would seem that the recuperative process mobilizes these powers for its own ends" [10], because these forces come from unfamiliar depths and speak a language that contemporary reason does not understand, although its manifest and immediate effects are the symptoms. The work

"[...] through the progressive assimilation of unconscious contents leads ultimately to the integration of his personality and hence to the removal of the neurotic dissociation" [10].

However, here is a novelty, so to speak, that accompanies the technique of active imagination in clinical practice, and it implies the requirement of the dialectical method, forcing the analyst not only to know how to ask, but also to know how to respond, since "[...] he is a fellow participant" [10]. In clinical supervisions, it is perceived that one of the greatest difficulties of the psychologist is to know how to listen and, consequently, to formulate the correct question. The effect is that active imagination simply "halts" and is interrupted by unsuitable interpretations or improper intrusion of reason that interferes on analogical language (which is suitable for the performance of a session of active imagination), and thus the process ends up hindering or preventing the advance of the technique.

### III. THE EFFECTIVE FACTOR

On the third page of *The Practice of Psychotherapy*, Jung states a fundamental question: what is the only thing I can individually and legitimately offer to my patient? Surprisingly, the answer is fast: "[...] my reaction" [10]. An effect produced by the meeting of two systems. However, by extending the condition from effect to effective, Jung refers to the work of Lehmann, who speaks of an extraordinarily effective effect or *mana* as an expression of the creative, of the power of medicine and of fertility, being still considered "[...] simply with anything impressive [...]" [10] because "the interpretation works, however we may elect to account for its working [...]" [10], what works is impact, and this is the decisive point: a factor that promotes a certain change of attitude, which causes an exit from the state of stagnation of the libido. Jung says that "[...] must simply try to discover, with the patient, what acts for him—I am almost tempted to say, what is actual" [10]. When two opposites are united in this way, and the transcendent function arises, this "is not only a change of consciousness, but also an energetic change" [10]. This is a risky venture, says Jung, "it is as if one began to build a bridge out into space" [10]; it consists precisely in fantasizing with the patient; and this is not of little importance, because fantasy is, Jung insists, "to me, it is the maternally creative side of the masculine mind" [10].

There is no doubt that there are sick fantasies, which

Johnson called passive fantasies, to differentiate them from active imagination. In passive fantasy nothing is created, everything repeats itself insistently until it vanishes, and in the meantime, there is a psychic energy theft, without the occurrence of any change in attitude or without something being solved. Theft of energy, in turn, can be translated into tiredness, wish for nothing, stagnation. It is common to confuse passive fantasy with active imagination, and in this case, the differentiation is extremely effective.

Every human work is a result of the imagination, and

“the creative activity of imagination frees man from his bondage to the ‘nothing but’ and raises him to the status of one who plays” [10].

The purpose of this practice is to produce a state of fluidity, something effective, where each one can make experiences with his or her own being from which nothing else will be petrified, rigid, nor definitive. The individual is now to become in a state of transformation. Although this technique at that time was being presented only in its principles, it should not be interpreted as having no goals or limits, says Jung.

What Jung strives to demonstrate is that “In handling a dream or fantasy, I make it a rule never to go beyond the meaning which is effective for the patient [...]” [10] for, as abstract as it may seem,

“[...] practical experience shows that many neuroses are caused primarily by the fact that people blind themselves to their own religious promptings because of a childish passion for rational enlightenment” [10].

What the psychologist of these days should know, and this is still valid one hundred years after the beginnings of psychoanalysis, is that it does not really matter the dogmas and creeds that belong to religions, but rather a religious attitude. That is absolutely necessary to make an active imagination occur that takes the unconscious seriously. Its psychic function has an invaluable range. Such a religious attitude is broadly widely discussed, for example, by Ulanov [11], [12]. The effectiveness of the inner work consists in making visible the invisible, either in writing or in painting, because what really matters is that an effect is produced. When he or she leaves the passive state of the one who only receives from the therapist and assumes an active place in front of himself or herself, and the patient is forced to contemplate “[...] the concrete shaping of the image enforces a continuous study of it in all its parts [...]” [10], i.e., it is the release of deplorable psychic states to the beginning of a so-called adult state.

Both, in active imagination and paintings, “what he paints are active fantasies —that which is active within him [...]” [10]. There is a differentiation between the self and not self, which brings with it a new meaning, unknown until then. In other words, this not self is the other forever, the eternal unknown or, still, the bottom of the soul.

Although it is not possible to describe how this happens, the center of personality shifts, points of view and new values emerge. Jung’s opinion is well showed in the current testimony of a patient:

“After a session of active imagination [...] facts were taking place, surprising me more and more, reaching proportions that I have never dreamed could take place. I was delighted with the effectiveness of the technique and made a new active imagination to focus on another aspect of my life that needed to be seen. Surprises occurred again [...] and I saw myself with attitudes I have never had: speaking of my internal processes, having attitudes, at home, totally different from the previous pattern, making decisions, etc. [...] I could also observe that the sessions I have been doing are reverberating in the lives of my own patients: they are opening up, revealing facts, and others making decisions. Fantastic!” (Sic).

Again, here are the words of Jung

“But have we not always known this to be so? I myself believe that we have always known it. But I may know something with my head which the other man in me is far from knowing, for indeed and in truth I live as though I did not know it” [10].

May it be, nobody knows it. When someone practices active imagination properly, this effective factor emerges in an amazing way and the not only can self finally open up, interact, and reveal itself to consciousness, accelerating in an unspeakable way the withdrawal of projections from the external world. The problem, Jung adds, is “[...] a bias which comes from overvaluation of the conscious mind” [10]. This transformation resulting from both writing and painting brings with it a markedly symbolic character, which, in due time, should be understood intellectually, in an emotional, rational and ethical integration. As a result, the individual will acquire inner firmness and renew his or her self-confidence. There is now a state of faith, once unknown. Whoever wants to probe the soul,

“the investigator of the psyche must not confuse it with his consciousness; else he veils from his sight the object of his investigation” [10].

The perception that the self occupies a peripheral position is notorious and that, when the soul’s history emerges, its remarkable effect on consciousness can be seen: it increases the sensation of Life, a creative fluidity flows continuously. Perhaps it is necessary to review what is meant by “illusion”, because, Jung says, for the soul “[...] all things that work are reality” [10]. That is, in the realm of the psychic, realities are, in fact, the effective factors,

“[...] regardless of the names man chooses to bestow on them [...] these designations and the changes rung upon them never even remotely touch the essence of the process we have described” [10].

Certainly, those who prefer images and symbolic interpretations as the most appropriate and effective factors are right.

In the article “Subtle Body and Active Imagination” [13], which this author presented at the Frontiers Congress – 2018, Brazil, this effective factor was mentioned, in other words. Schwartz-Salants [6] speaks of the *interactive field*, as being the “intermediate” field between the field of the collective unconscious and the realm of subjectivity, but at the same time

the intercession of both.

"I think the concept of field can be a great representation in modern terms of the key idea of alchemists, that of 'subtle body'" [6].

While an intermediate reign between spirit and matter, where an imaginary vision is activated in a 'uniqueness of the process', the 'interactive field' is considered the content of the processes which two individuals may experience as their unconscious dyad and the ways in which this dyad is modified and modifies them [6]. The interactive field, however, requires that in terms of analysis, the idea of the existence of an area, essentially of "not knowing", be accepted, where the emerging affection, be it hatred, anger, love or fear, come from the analyst or analysand. This author, in her experience, shares the idea that by practicing active imagination the transformation occurs in the subtle body, that is, in a realm that is neither material nor mental, being paradoxically an interaction of both.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Being the active imagination the effective factor par excellence in the practice of psychotherapy and taking into account that such effectiveness depends on the personality and training of the therapist, as well as the "interactive capo" [6], it is perceived that certain unconscious conditions, that is, especially the symptom as language, act as regulators and as stimulators of the creative activity of the imagination. The preexisting factor, the archetype, operative and timeless, generates corresponding configurations in the form of image through which it expresses itself, even if it takes possession of already existing conscious material. Even though its effect may be curative or destructive, in the clinical experience of this author with countless patients and students, the so-called destructive effect applies to the inability to deal with the unconscious or, even worse, to lack of knowledge. Even in extreme cases of psychosis, the unconscious is never just destructive. It repositions itself in relation to consciousness, when it is turning to an introverted attitude, having promoted the regression of libido and it enters into a dialectical relationship with the unconscious. Very positively, an individual can be transformed – "sometimes gradually, but sometimes suddenly" [6] - due to the field experience that can focus both on the relationship between two persons and between the consciousness and the unconscious, bringing with it a certain degree of enlightenment. There can be no transformation without that.

Through *active imagination* a person is in a position of advantage, for

"we can then make the discovery of the archetype without sinking back into the instinctual sphere, which would only lead to blank unconsciousness or, worse still, to some kind of intellectual substitute for instinct" [9].

This author disagrees to this perception of Jung, because she has done this "diving into the instinctual sphere" in all its fullness, and yet, without assimilating the material contained therein, experiencing a deep, loving and respectful interaction between the two systems of consciousness and the

unconscious.

Finally, while settled on transcendent and unrepresentable factors, the archetypes, body and psyche are permanently in contact with each other, being enclosed in one and the same world, for "in archetypal conceptions and instinctual perceptions, spirit and matter confront one another on the psychic plane." [9] Thus, integration, assimilation of the contents of the unconscious into consciousness, constitutes the main operation of all analytical psychology. In this case, when recognized the effective factor, which is present behind even violent outbursts full of archetypal representations, our work will constitute the process of individuation. A careful consideration or *religere* "[...] constitutes the essence of religion." [9], and thus, the transformation must begin and continue in the inner world, depending on the desire, commitment, and capacity for evolution of the individual psyche.

Although not explicitly mentioned in this article, what is at stake in the whole process of active imagination and effective factor is the transformation of the archetypal or psychoid energies, through its personifications, whose main objective is the activation and the manifestation of the self. If the ego can penetrate these energies and at the same time remain in them for some time; that is, enduring imaginative states almost always associated with altered states of consciousness and ecstasy, it can perceive sources of living energy [14], and can direct and channel them to the center, whose effective factor is also the care experienced in a way all its own. The self is always one and essentially the same, although it has a myriad of appearances in different states and stages of development. Its latent form requires a movement to the manifested, that is, to an increasingly conscious awareness of the ego. "The images that the self uses to embody itself, can change very rapidly" [14]. However, in addition to the speed of the image's change, it may happen that active imagination reaches the third and last level that Johnson [2] calls *the capture of the spiritual dimension* and which Raff mentions as *mystical or oceanic experience*. They have no form and usually have no content, for they are direct experiences of the divine spirit itself. The individual feels ecstasy in these states, but there are no dialogues or interactions in them" [14]. When it manifests itself in the form of an image, the individual launches himself or herself into the form as an artist looking for the right canvas; and the canvas on which he or she captures himself or herself is the imagination.

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