THE MYTH OF KING ARTHUR AND THE PROCESS OF INDIVIDUATION

GIACOMO GAGGERO

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PSYCHOANALYTIC REFLECTIONS ON THE THEME OF IDENTITY

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Giacomo Gaggero

Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is
FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

Preface

A number of authors have understood the course of human life as a developmental process through which each person becomes who they are by bringing their innate inclinations and potentialities as fully as possible into being. Among those who reflected most deeply on this theme was Carl Gustav Jung, who called this development the "process of individuation."[1]

Throughout his work, Jung describes the principal developmental stages that, in his view, should characterize the process of individuation in every human being.

At each of these stages, the individual encounters a difficulty—what we might call a "crisis." [2]Every decisive choice entails a discontinuity and a destabilization of one's psycho-spiritual equilibrium. The more successfully a person moves through these developmental stages, the greater their possibility of experiencing themselves as an integrated, self-realized individual who recognizes themselves in their own life story. Conversely, the failure, or only partial resolution, of any one of these stages may give rise to existential unease or anguish and, in some cases, to psychological suffering of varying degrees of severity.

Many years ago, when I first encountered the legend of King Arthur, I had the intuition that, when read from a psychological

[1] Among the authors who have addressed the subject discussed here, I would mention, in addition to Jung, Friedrich Nietzsche, Heinz Lichtenstein, Carl Rogers, Erik Erikson, and James Hillman, whose ideas resonate in various ways throughout this book

[2] The meaning of the term "crisis" essentially unfolds across three semantic dimensions: (1) discontinuity, which introduces (2) a disturbance that may be overcome through (3) an act of decision. Erik Erikson uses the term "psychosocial crisis" to describe the critical transitions of human life (E. Erikson, 1997).

perspective, it offered a compelling poetic and literary representation of the process of individuation as described by Jung. This book develops and gives form to that initial intuition.

Its aim is to offer readers a means of looking back over their own existential journey and, through that renewed reading, of gaining greater clarity, understanding, and awareness of their personal history: of the central themes and turning points that have shaped it up to the present and that, in doing so, have also laid the foundations for what may come next.

I believe that those who find themselves in a parental role may also discover elements of interest in these pages. And for the therapist, too, "guiding a person's development toward the possibility of being what they are" (...) constitutes a "task full of wonder" (L. Trabucco, in A. Moroni, 2022, p. IX).

In the final part of the book, I will offer a number of philosophical and psychological reflections. On the one hand, these will bring into view the theoretical premises underlying the present work; on the other, they may be of interest to those engaged in clinical practice or, more broadly, in the field of helping relationships.

Introduction

Beginning with Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae, written around the twelfth century, the Arthurian narrative cycle developed into a multitude of legends, with innumerable ramifications and versions. Chrétien de Troyes (active between 1160 and 1190) made important additions to this material and gave it greater unity, thereby inaugurating the genre of Arthurian romance. As Franco Cardini writes, "[he] is the faithful, though exceptional, interpreter of the twelfth century, a warrior and rural age (...) and the knight (...) is the result both of the everyday experience of the time and of the collective memory that presided over it, shaping and informing it" (F. Cardini, 1981, p. 72).

Among the most significant later developments are the two works Josephe and Merlin by the French poet Robert de Boron (late twelfth–early thirteenth century), and Parzifal (ca. 1170–1220). In the fifteenth century, the English writer Thomas Malory composed Le Morte d'Arthur, completed in 1469 and published in 1485; this is probably the work that contributed most to the dissemination of the legend.

The analysis presented here retraces the central thematic nuclei of the cycle, which are effectively reorganized and given cinematic form in John Boorman's 1981 film Excalibur, based on an adaptation by Richard Pallenberg and Boorman himself of Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur.

As Jung and his collaborators have shown, legends, sagas, and myths are symbolic narratives deeply rooted in the collective unconscious.[1] Because of their archetypal[2]—that is, universal—nature,

[1] See the entry "collective unconscious" in the Glossary.

[2] See the entry "archetype" in the Glossary.