



# Jung Journal

## Culture & Psyche

ISSN: 1934-2039 (Print) 1934-2047 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ujun20>

## Improvisation and Craft: Art's (Jungian) Opposites

Susan Rowland

To cite this article: Susan Rowland (2016) Improvisation and Craft: Art's (Jungian) Opposites, Jung Journal, 10:2, 93-96, DOI: [10.1080/19342039.2016.1157418](https://doi.org/10.1080/19342039.2016.1157418)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19342039.2016.1157418>



Published online: 16 May 2016.



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*Literary Improvisation* was published in March 2015 by Spring Journal Books. His first book, *The Gorilla Man and the Empress of Steak: A New Orleans Family Memoir*, the tale of two distinctive people—his parents—and his efforts to survive them, is now in its fourth printing. *Correspondence*: randy@fertel.com.

#### ABSTRACT

Suzi Naiburg's *Structure and Spontaneity in Clinical Prose: A Writer's Guide for Psychoanalysts and Psychotherapists* offers "an extended writing seminar" for clinicians who seek to capture on paper their experience with patients. A clinician and writing coach, Naiburg offers five types of clinical writing and excellent examples and close readings of each: the narrative, evocative, enactive, lyric narrative, and paradigmatic modes.

#### KEY WORDS

Francis Bacon, Hillman, Jung, Kant, Nietzsche, Quintilian, *The Red Book*, Shamdasani, spontaneity, structure, writing

## Improvisation and Craft: Art's (Jungian) Opposites

SUSAN ROWLAND

Review of: Randy Fertel, *A Taste for Chaos*, New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2015.

*A Taste for Chaos* is important to Jungians because it says something new about archetypal dynamics and literature. In support of this exciting cross-disciplinary opportunity, this book offers a new and powerful multidisciplinary context for Jung's *Red Book* (2009), all the while providing a radical argument about the psyche and its arts.

Fertel proposes that "improvisation," rightly characterized as "a taste for chaos," is a

fundamental creative impulse that has shaped literature as diverse as Homer's and John Milton's epics, the eighteenth-century novel *Tristram Shandy*, poetry by Tennyson, *Huckleberry Finn*, novels by James Joyce and Thomas Mann, and, of course, *The Red Book*. Moreover improvisation itself, and in any form, cannot exist except in dialogue with its own opposite: meticulous craft. The "opposite" consists in improvisation's fidelity to spontaneity, to letting the words just "flow," as opposed to a deliberate conscious adherence to a particular form or genre, a crafting that inevitably entails redrafting and much deliberation. And yet, one of Fertel's main arguments is that, however possessed by archetype or muse, absolute spontaneity is never possible in written form. Improvisers always discover limits to the revolutionary impulse to "let the chaos in" as Fertel quotes Sonu Shamdasani in conversation with James Hillman on *The Red Book* (Hillman and Shamdasani 2013; quoted in Fertel 2015, 377). Fertel here pays tribute to Shamdasani's remarkable and painstaking research that has provided Jung's extraordinary work for the modern reader. He sees the conversation between Hillman and Shamdasani as a tacit recognition of what puts *The Red Book* in a dialogue with major European works of literature. Improvisers revise. The drive to immediacy, to the "poetics of presence" as Fertel astutely analyzes, always discovers something more, a patterning or a limit to the chaos and its presentation to the world through writing.

Such an exploration of a key psychological tension within the depths of the creative process takes this remarkable book away from the confines of literary criticism and into psychology, poetics, philosophy, and complexity science. What the relatively recent research into complexity theory and "emergence" proposes, Fertel shows, is something that has

always been embedded in our heritage. Those persistent experiments with spontaneity lead to the sense of interdependence and interconnectivity in the basic nature of things. Hence the assertion that improvisation must be archetypal for it goes deeper than cultural or religious contexts and ideas. Instead improvisation becomes a means of exploring or expressing the dominant thoughts of the age. Homer, Tennyson, and Jung do not share an epoch, but they are linked by a topos of spontaneity and presence that is found to be inextricable from craft, tradition, and form. Chaos summons form and pure unmediated presence is forever bound up with structures that limit its being.

*Presence* here means the immediacy, the dream or fantasy of mind speaking to mind in the writing and reading of literature. If only words could flow, unmediated by conscious hesitations, or conventional restrictions of form, or cultural expectations. If only poetry and art could just pour out from holy, or even crazy in-spiriting, inspiration, onto the page! Or, as a Jungian might see it, if only the collective unconscious could just guide the pen or typing finger, then pure psyche would result. If only we could open a window into another's skull and share the dream!

So far joining another's dream while it happens is not possible. Dreams are *mediated* by what the ego remembers and by how the images can find their being in words or painting or other material modes for images. In this sense, we can see that improvisation, even literary improvisation, is a quest that can never be realized in absolute purity. Words, grammar, cultural expectations, and cultural genres will interrupt the flow and turn out to be the only way it can be preserved and communicated. Dreams are thus imperfectly transmitted by images that inevitably record

the intervention of some kind of nonspontaneous, nonchaotic formation. Jack Kerouac spent seven years revising the apparent spontaneity of *On the Road* and, of course, *The Red Book* is not, and never could be, pure active imagination.

*The Red Book* (2009) was composed from a process of revising active imagination, Jung's own therapeutic method of allowing images from the unconscious psyche to *spontaneously develop* without the ego trying to control them. Active imagination, in this sense, is Jung's own psychic improvisation technique. Like any literary improvisation, the unconscious energy finds its expression in words that Jung recorded in his *Black Books*. This material, like Homer's *Odyssey*, Kerouac's *On the Road*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, was then extensively *worked* and shaped into *The Red Book* we have. While tempting, especially before the now-anticipated publication of the *Black Books*, to consider *The Red Book* as some kind of direct window into Jung's psyche, it is rather, as *A Taste for Chaos* demonstrates, an improvisatory literary work in which the patterning figuration of spontaneity incarnates a paradox in its very use of spontaneity, as well as in its content. For although on the one hand, *The Red Book's* spontaneity makes it rough and revolutionary as psychology or conventionally genred literature, on the other hand, to Fertel's argument about the overlooked long lineage of literary improvisation, the work is *entirely expected and traditional*. For *A Taste for Chaos* thoroughly demonstrates that texts like *The Red Book* possess common stylistic and thematic features, wherever they "emerge." All such literary products employ a topos of spontaneity in making a declaration of their embrace of chaos and urge to immediacy and presence. They appear, or aspire to, a notion of carelessness or effortless composition. In claiming to

transcribe experience, they evoke chance or found objects, or unplanned-for situations such as Jung's unwelcome "descent." Writing occurs in intimate settings (active imagination) or under the imperative of drink, drugs, or madness, or various divine/archetypal beings.

Such works often adopt the persona of a fool or trickster, such as *The Red Book's* naïve "I," and dialogues with trickster-clowns such as "The Red One" and "Izdubar." Stylistically, *The Red Book* shares with other improvisatory literature conventions of free-association, digression, simplicity, formlessness, fragmentation, imperfection, the shift away from everyday genres, and the appeal to biographical realism. *The Red Book* even shares themes with the improvisation meta-genre such as embracing the Fool and rejecting rationality, an attempt to embrace the widest spectrum of life, a poetics of presence and an invocation of encyclopedic realism. These wild energies are authenticated by the divine within or without.

Above all, Fertel suggests, improvisation in literary writing begins as a rejection of conventional rationality and ends with a restatement of the rational, but in an expanded mode. *A Taste for Chaos* is only a "taste" and is not, and never can be, an embrace of it to the extent of removing all deliberation or the marks of consciousness from a literary work. With Jung in particular, Fertel makes the important point that this psychologist wants ultimately to strengthen and expand consciousness, not avoid it. Like all the other literary improvisers, the writer of *The Red Book* discovers that chaos has limits, that there is a patterning in the cosmos, and that this innate structuring is certainly present in language and art.

As in *The Red Book* itself, *A Taste for Chaos* argues that all improvisers eventually "settle" for an expanded rationality or a

consciousness strengthened by improvisation's brief immersion in the waters of chaos, the unconscious. The improvised works eventually withdraw from chaos, realizing the impossibility of entirely spontaneous literature and complete "presence" (that a human psyche can be straightforwardly "present" on the page).

And yet the urge to improvisation is perennial. Fertel suggests that it erupts collectively at times of paradigm shifts—when the worldview of an era is about to change. Certainly, *The Red Book* has been persuasively heralded as a work of literary modernism by scholars such as John Beebe (2013) and Matthew Spano (2012). Here, *improvisation* would be seen as a key ingredient of that epistemological and cultural transformation, just as Jungian and Freudian psychologies contribute to, and simultaneously result from, modernist innovation. Here, *modernism* names the key paradigm shift that we are still implementing in the twenty-first century. Not coincidentally, it is arguably the whole subject of *The Red Book*: the need for the strategies of rationality to be renewed by a rejuvenating connection to what that work named evocatively and truly as "the spirit of the depths."

*The Red Book* as modernist is not the full extent of its literary identity, as *A Taste for Chaos* deftly and powerfully demonstrates. As a work of improvisation, Jung's enigmatic text, published in 2009, is a book for the twenty-first century as well as the twentieth. What *A Taste for Chaos* and its reading of *The Red Book* both suggest is that the true extent of the paradigm shift is yet to come emerge.

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SUSAN ROWLAND, PhD, is Chair of MA Engaged Humanities and the Creative Life at Pacifica Graduate Institute. She is author of a number of books on literary theory, gender, and Jung including *Jung as a Writer* (2005); *Jung: A Feminist Revision*

(2002); *C. G. Jung in the Humanities* (2010); and *The Ecocritical Psyche: Literature, Evolutionary Complexity and Jung* (2012). Her latest book, *The Sleuth and the Goddess in Women's Detective Fiction*, is on archetypes and detective fiction (Spring Journal Books, 2015). *Correspondence*: susanr183@gmail.com.

**ABSTRACT**

*A Taste for Chaos* by Randy Fertel is important to Jungians because it says something new about archetypal dynamics and literature. In support of this exciting cross-disciplinary opportunity, this book offers a new and powerful multidisciplinary context for Jung's *Red Book*, all the while providing a radical argument about the psyche and its arts.

**KEY WORDS**

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