

ARCHETYPE OF THE CONIUNCTIO: A JUNGIAN STUDY OF THE  
ALCHEMICAL SYNTHESIS OF OPPOSITES

A dissertation presented to  
the Faculty of Saybrook University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Psychology

by

Poh Suan Zaide

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PREVIEW

Approval of the Dissertation

ARCHETYPE OF THE CONIUNCTIO: A JUNGIAN STUDY OF THE  
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This dissertation by Poh Suan Zaide has been approved by the committee members below, who recommend it be accepted by the faculty of Saybrook University in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology

Dissertation Committee

James Hollis, Ph. D. 5 December, 2013  
James Hollis, Ph.D., Chair Date

Jerry Ruhl, Ph.D. 12/5/13  
Jerry Ruhl, Ph.D. Date

Marc Pilisuk, Ph. D. 12/5/13  
Marc Pilisuk, Ph.D. Date

Abstract

ARCHETYPE OF THE CONIUNCTIO: A JUNGIAN STUDY OF THE  
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Poh Suan Zaide

Saybrook University

Many of Carl Jung's most important constructs are abstract and not easily accessible to casual or cross-disciplinary readers. The present study explicates Jung's theoretically complex concept of individuation, a process by which psychic patterns of opposition and reconciliation lead to the formulation of a whole personality, and animates it with the vitality of symbol and image. Using an alchemical hermeneutic methodology, this study investigates the ancient alchemical process of the *coniunctio*, in conjunction with the Pythagorean geometrical symbol of the *tetractys*, as a developmental model for individuation and the synthesis of opposites. The meanings, relationships, and correspondences implicated by the conjunction of *coniunctio* (an abstract idea) and *tetractys* (a concrete image) in three different contexts—as an intra-psychic process, an interpersonal process, and as a collective or group process—are explored. Using selected alchemical texts and images, and a spontaneous vision that occurred to the author, a model of the synthesis of opposites that elucidates the stages, structures, and processes of individuation is constructed.

This research provides insights into the complexities of psychic processes fundamental to the evolution of consciousness through examination of the *coniunctio-*

*disiunctio* archetype. It explicates a more complete model of individuation that includes integration of aspects of psychic functioning beyond the conscious-unconscious pair of opposites: the final *coniunctio* is achieved when Spirit (mind), Soul (the unconscious), Body (the corporeal) and World (family, community, Nature) are integrated. These findings underscore the importance of bringing depth psychological understanding to arenas and disciplines such as ecology, culture, politics, and ethics, which are concerned with relations amongst humans, and between humans and the natural world. The study also makes an important contribution to depth psychological research through elucidation of the hermeneutic spiral as a valid method for investigation of the processes of the unconscious.

Dedication

Mdm. Sau Chan Lam (1923-2013)

To my Beloved Mother, whose unconditional love, encouragement, and sacrifices made it possible for me to live an unencumbered life and to seek the path of soul.

PREVIEW

## Acknowledgments

Mythologist Joseph Campbell tells us that the agony of the quest is tempered by the rapture of the revelations—this journey, as befits any task that concerns the ubiquitous opposites, has seen both. The metaphorical field in which this work was done contained all manner of opposites imaginable, and required of me more than I thought I had to give. I could not have done it alone. As I enter the portal that leads to the next unknown steps, I would like to thank the following agents of my transformation:

My parents who, though they did not understand it, unselfishly and unconditionally let me loose upon the world decades ago to find my life;

My children—Elysha and Daniel— who inspire me to be my best self through their big-heartedness, intelligence, passion, creativity, daring, and diligence;

My partner, Kiefer Elliott, whose steady love, support, and belief in me was a needed bulwark during stormy times (and there were many) when I felt unsure or unable to bear the burden of the opposites;

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

There is, of course, no end to the magnificence and horror in the human drama. Across the continents, humanity rises to every challenge, sinks to any depth. We cherish each heartbeat and murder at will. We bless nature's miracles, yet trash the hood. We accept this polarity as human nature then move on in our 'glassy essence'. All the while our righteousness lords over other life; yet we beseech gods for mercy. Our anger flares to violence; yet we demand justice. We covet ceaselessly, give generously. Our wallowing is legion; yet we take science and art to Olympian heights.

Tony Balis<sup>1</sup>

Opposites are ubiquitous and particularly troublesome when it comes to humans. Contemporary planetary crises are traceable to human psychic and unnatural origins, a foresight that Jung had 100 years ago. Many have had this insight since then; some have voiced this concern, but few have heeded it. Humanity has split itself into *Logos* and *Eros*—it seems like an original marriage that has become divided into two rather disconnected halves. One of this half, the *Logos*, is running the world; the other, the *Eros*, cleans up the mess. A world run on logic and reason needs empathy and relatedness to mend, heal, and solve the problems it creates. We mine, harvest, forge, build, and synthesize—like the ancient alchemists—but we do this without soul, and to these ends, we injure our psyches and the world. Much is at stake, and healing of our individual, interpersonal, and collective splits is critically needed. We cannot ignore the power of the unconscious any longer.

Mainstream psychological theories as well as the more progressive insights that come from humanistic, existential, and transpersonal schools are incomplete without investigation of the effects of the unconscious. This dissertation is concerned with bringing the visionary ideas of Carl Jung—in particular, his theory of psychic opposition

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Balis, Massachusetts, USA is the founder of The Humanity Initiative ([www.humanity.org](http://www.humanity.org)), and editor and publisher with a background in international marketing and law.

and reconciliation—across the borderlands that restrict analytical psychology to clinical domains and into contemporary cultural, social, and political arenas in which the big issues of our time are addressed. The defined goal is to translate and expand on Jung’s seminal thoughts about personality development through the individuation process, and thus infuse a critical depth psychological perspective into current understandings of the polarities in human nature. This was done by investigating the alchemical<sup>2</sup> stages of the synthesis of opposites—the *coniunctio*—as a perfect metaphor for individuation.

### **Background**

The work presented here is the result of the alchemical marriage of a lifelong interest in patterns of opposition and reconciliation in the drama of being human with the taking on of the task of scholarly investigation of such phenomena. As apropos to the challenge, it has involved negotiating what seemed like insurmountable minefields of opposites. It turns out that this researcher survived to tell the tale<sup>3</sup>.

According to Jung (1963), Goethe, when writing *Faust*, was “in the grip of that process of archetypal transformation” (p. 206); it was a supra-personal force that so seized Goethe and propelled him to write what many consider to be one of the greatest works in German literature. Without aspiring to the literary attainments of Goethe, the present researcher has similarly been guided by such an archetypal force that made its presence felt long before initial engagement with the topic; it contradicted her egoic judgment, and blazed a small trail that leads to this point.

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<sup>2</sup> Alchemy is the ancient philosophy, tradition, and craft of transmutation. A fuller treatise of this is provided in Chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> As appropriate to the methodology employed in this study, a brief personal statement is given in Appendix A (p. 223)

The point at which one's essential nature or character is revealed—the defining moment—came to this author sometime between the age of three and four when she reacted to feeling wronged and misunderstood by her parents with a rousing indignation that was accompanied by a sense of conviction that there were two opposing truths. One truth was their point of view, and the other was hers. These positions were antinomies, oppositional, and conflicting to each other. This early experience of the opposites was revelatory and seized her childish imagination in a way that she would not be able to explain until some decades of life had happened. But it provided the driving force behind her lifelong quest to understand the nature of the human condition, to satisfy her curiosity about how consciousness comes about, and to understand how the collisions between aspects of our inner and outer worlds would be reconciled. Like celebrated playwright and activist, and former president of Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel (1990), who gave this intriguing account of himself, she wondered:

How does it all fit together? Why don't these paradoxical qualities cancel each other out instead of co-existing and co-operating with each other?...how can I—this odd mix of the most curious opposites—get through life, and by all reports successfully? (pp. 202-204)

The notion that psychological life is profoundly influenced by a struggle between opposing tendencies—odd mixtures of curious and seemingly incompatible values, countenances, viewpoints, characteristics, duties—planted its seed in this author at that tender age. She was taken, and would thereafter seek it. Or perhaps, it is the other way around: she was the one sought. As Czech poet, Rainer Maria Rilke (2000) said, “Many signals affirm that the future has stepped into us in such a way as to change itself into us, and that long before it manifests itself outwardly” (p. 75). This sentiment is echoed by Jungian analyst, Robert Romanyshyn (2007), who affirms that

to do research with soul in mind is to be attuned to the fact that in one's work one is already being claimed by an-other story, that one's work is already situated within a larger pattern, and that in one's work, one is in service to something other than oneself. (p. 83)

Romanyshyn also proposes that research can be regarded as a vocation: the Latin root-word is *vocatio*, which means “calling,” “summons,” or “invitation.” It is with this deep sense of taking on a summons that this researcher humbly approached the task at hand.

There are many ways research on the archetype of the *coniunctio*<sup>4</sup> can occur, and much of the initial work is to decide on what to include or exclude, which paths and layers to pursue, and what voice is given primacy. Amidst the outlines and conscious intentions are the threads and invisible influences that shape inquiries of this nature. This dissertation focused on the psychological rather than on mystical aspects of psychic processes, thus distinguishing itself epistemologically from transpersonal or metaphysical viewpoints on consciousness. This author was interested in the internal, psychic, and archetypal factors, which determine the course of individuation. Developing psychological theory that has cross-disciplinary application was her chief concern. Furthermore, the dissertation is an important contribution to current understandings of Jung's individuation process.

In the fall of 2009, about two weeks *before* the idea of pursuing a Jungian Studies doctoral degree at Saybrook University appeared to her, which was also two weeks before she even knew of the existence of such a program and such an institution, this author attended a didgeridoo performance. During the first half of the performance, which lasted about two hours, what she can only call a “vision” spontaneously came to her. She saw, in her mind, a sequence of events unfolding in which she was the central

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<sup>4</sup> This refers to the psychological aspect of the alchemical synthesis or integration of opposites that leads to an expanded consciousness and spiritual maturity.

figure partaking in scene after scene of strange and even bizarre activities. She was aware that all this was happening in her inner world as she sat, in the outer one, listening to the performance. She remembers moments during this “vision” in which she felt that those things were actually happening to her viscerally, as her body registered the sensations associated with particular events in the vision. She also remembers checking in with herself several times throughout, asking herself if she should allow it to continue. More about all this later; for now, this author will just report that she went home that night and dutifully wrote it all down. Then, she put the transcript away.

Fast forward four years, and this author, when researching the idea of the *coniunctio* in Jung’s (1963/1989) *Mysterium Coniunctionis* volume, was struck by how similar the stages of her vision are to the stages of the *coniunctio*—both are stories of transformation that contain patterns of opposition (separation, division, differentiation) and reconciliation (union, unification, integration). The idea occurred that the vision that was given to her was not personal, but rather of a collective or archetypal nature. She wondered if it can be a *coniunctio* narrative. This author’s early formulations of the research question was: Can the concept of the *coniunctio* as a synthesis of opposites be amplified and expanded into a developmental model for individuation? If so, can it be tested against ancient alchemical texts as well as modern archetypal dreams?<sup>5</sup>

Like its psychological counterpart in Jung’s analytical psychology, the transcendent function, the *coniunctio* is mysterious and paradoxical; it is both the process and product of the union of unlike substances to arrive at a new and purer form. Many ancient alchemists also understood that their work constituted a process of mutual

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<sup>5</sup> In a Jungian framework, dreams and fantasies are spontaneous products of the unconscious psyche. An archetypal dream is one that is not personal, but rather universal, originating from the collective unconscious.

transmutation—the changes they sought in separating and recombining materials invoked parallel inner psychic movements and transformations. It is this psychological aspect that Jung calls the great opus of individuation. In analytical psychology, individuation comes about through the operation of the transcendent function—the function, operation or process that mediates between or reconciles two opposites. Individuation is the achievement of the *coniunctio*: Jung spends 30 years and fills three volumes of his published work with images and symbols from alchemy to illustrate how this happens. Yet, all these three terms—individuation, transcendent function, *coniunctio*—are pregnant with meanings that are not immediately obvious or available to anyone outside the field of analytical psychology. This study unpacks some of that meaning in order to better understand and translate these concepts.

### **Rationale**

*Mysterium Coniunctionis* (Jung, 1963/1989) is perhaps the most esoteric volume in Jung's *Collected Works*. Jung suggests the term whose Latin meaning is “the mystery of the conjunction” to portray the mystical paradoxes in psychic life that hint at contact with unknowable numinous phenomena. This volume holds the key to understanding Jung's most fundamental yet most abstract concepts: individuation, and the transcendent function that facilitates it. Moreover, the theme of opposition and reconciliation of polarizing factors underlies his entire psychology and runs throughout his *Collected Works*; yet, it too is abstract and cryptic. How exactly do the opposites come together to unite and become a third new thing, a new consciousness? What fragments in psyche, how does this happen, and how do the disparate parts reunite? How do these processes—

the battle between conscious and unconscious forces—play out in real life? How do they play out in individual, interpersonal, and group psychology?

Jung elaborates on the specifics of the *coniunctio* process by examining various texts of 16<sup>th</sup> century alchemist, Gerhard Dorn, to delineate the three-fold nature of the synthesis of opposites. He uses alchemical drawings to reflect on psychological transformations, but the richness of alchemical imagery and symbolism often borders on the bizarre and the macabre (hermaphroditic people, a marriage between brother and sister, boiling of dragons, serpents eating their own tails, blackened corpses, etcetera), and may be disturbing to those not familiar with the method of symbolism and paradox. Furthermore, obscure medieval imagery may not readily find audiences that would relate well to it. People easily dismiss things they do not understand. This would make this important work of Jung's inaccessible to many, and indeed, decades of misunderstanding have already marginalized Jung in mainstream psychology.

Jungian analyst Edward Edinger (1995) attempts to simplify and clarify Jung's analyses by using charts and diagrams, and one of these—the Pythagorean *tetractys* (∴∴∴∴) symbol, represented by four rows of pebbles (first row of one, second of two, third of three, and fourth row of four)—holds great promise for further development of Jung's theory of individuation and the union of opposites. Edinger's analysis of the *coniunctio* using the *tetractys* formation is helpful and creative, but it is incomplete. This dissertation study expands on what was done and contributes new elaborations of existing theory.

Jung's psychology is built upon the fundamental idea that tension between psychic opposites creates the energy flow responsible for consciousness. His observations of psychic phenomena in himself, his patients, and in the great figures of history led to

the discovery of structures and processes that, though remarkably consistent throughout his work, have been criticized for lack of precision or uniformity. Some of his concepts are abstract and Jung often does not systematically develop critical links between theory and praxis. Jung also does not provide descriptions of his methodology. His analyses of the synthesis of opposites and the transcendent function rely on psychological interpretations of alchemical materials and processes; these are brilliant and make for fascinating reads for those who, like the present author, are interested in understanding obscure and arcane texts and images, or are students and scholars. Most who are interested in analytical psychology, including those who undergo analysis, are unlikely to encounter *Mysterium* and the arcane concept of the *coniunctio* even as they experience personal transformations or shifts of consciousness. Those unfamiliar with Jung's work may be further discouraged by the symbolic and paradoxical natures of his concepts. Any elucidation of theory that leads to a better understanding and application is a contribution to the field.

### **Research Question**

The central research question is: Can the conjunction or alliance of the ancient alchemical concept of the *coniunctio* with an esoteric geometrical symbol (the *tetractys*) lead to the development of a model for Jung's individuation process? A symbolic representation of the individuation process would clarify pathways and stages, and serve as a psychological simulation of the developmental structures and processes of psyche. This study also took a deeper look at the meanings, relationships, and correspondences in Jung's individuation process in order to gain insights into how better understanding of personal transformations can help us promote collective consciousness shifts.

## Introduction to Methodology

Dialectical hermeneutics as a method of textual interpretation concerns exploring the infinity of meanings the subject matter carries; in this way, it resembles the Jungian method of amplification of symbolic materials in dreams and fairy tales. The structural components of dialectical hermeneutics dictate a circular or spiral process of interpretation, an ongoing engagement—called *indwelling*—of researcher with the research subject and process to produce a deeper understanding that ultimately leads to the best interpretation or elucidation of the subject matter investigated (Demetrio, 2001).

Hermeneutic researchers acknowledge the influence of the researcher in the form of biases and presuppositions, calling critical self-reflection the most challenging aspect of the work; this is akin to the problems of transference-countertransference in depth psychological theory and praxis. Indeed, in depth psychological research, an additional heuristic task is the researcher's clarification of what exactly he or she brings to the research. Thus, identifying both conscious (personal history and culture, agendas, biases, presuppositions) as well as unconscious (hidden motives and complexes, shadow materials, or archetypal forces) influences on the research is essential. This is a problem that lies at the heart of psychodynamic therapy—the transference/countertransference effects—and is unfortunately ignored by 90% of practitioners, due to issues of skill and competency. A traditional, logos-based, hermeneutical approach does not address the unconscious influences on research, much as traditional cognitive therapies do not take them into account. Alchemical hermeneutics is a more recent approach to depth psychological inquiry and research that is founded on a marriage of the dialectical-hermeneutics tradition and that of the heuristic/intuitive inquiry traditions. The present

study utilizes such an approach to develop a model of individuation, and to analyze and compare (a) some alchemical recipes (texts and images) for individuation, and (b) a spontaneous vision given to the researcher. The conceptual (*coniunctio*) is concretized with an image (*tetractys*) in order to develop the best psychological interpretation of the structures and processes of individuation.

### **Overview of Study**

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the study. The background to the research, its rationale, central questions, and goals are discussed. An introduction to the methodology is also provided. The Literature Review in Chapter 2 provides a background for the main Jungian concepts of the study: the rise of the ego from the unconscious; archetypes, complexes and symbols; individuation and the transcendent function; Jung's theory of opposites; and Eastern perspectives on duality. This is followed by descriptions of (a) the alchemical traditions and Jung's use of the corpus of spiritual alchemy to elucidate his psychology, and (b) a summary of the *tetractys* as a sacred symbol of creation, and exploration of its relevance to the present study.

Chapter 3 provides the background and rationale for the choice of the hermeneutic approach, and develops the alchemical hermeneutic method of Romanyshyn (2007) as a suitable way to investigate phenomena that takes into account the presence of the unconscious. The research design and data analysis techniques are explained; in particular, the author provides a visual schematic of the hermeneutic spiral as a method of depth psychological research.

Chapter 4 (Phase I) explores the archetype of the *coniunctio* and discusses its fit as a metaphor for individuation. Jung's and Edinger's treatments of the stages of the

*coniunctio* using the *tetractys* symbolism are expanded; they are further aligned with alchemy's metaphor of the synthesis of the four essential elements (earth, air, water, fire) towards an ultimate unified masculine-feminine *heiros gamos* or alchemical marriage. The chapter ends with an explication of the *Coniunctio* Model of Individuation.

In Chapter 5 (Phase II), the author examines some “recipes” for individuation with the aim of testing out and further elucidating the model developed. A number of different documents are explored for this purpose. Both Jung and Edinger discuss the psychological implications of the 16th century work called *The Rosarium Philosophorum* (*The Rosary of the Philosophers*), using the first 10 images<sup>6</sup> (images 1-10) from the original set of 20 woodcuts accompanying the texts. The author summarizes their ideas and adds her own. Additionally, analyses of the remainder of the set (images 11-20) are provided. Using the model developed, she also analyzes (a) a short alchemical passage called the *Tractatus Aristotelis*, and (b) her archetypal vision or “dream.” The meanings and correspondences of these diverse textual and pictorial materials are discussed.

Chapter 6, Synthesis and Reflections, pulls together all the materials thus explored and examined. New insights are developed for the *Coniunctio* Model of Individuation and its implications for intra-psychic health, interpersonal relations, and group psychology. Furthermore, the applications of the model beyond the therapy room—in social, cultural, and political relations as well as the cultivation of an environmental ethics are discussed. The contributions of the alchemical hermeneutic methodology for depth psychological research are presented. The chapter ends with the author's reflections for a revisioned world based on insights derived from the study.

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<sup>6</sup> These 16<sup>th</sup> century images are freely available on the internet and considered to be in the public domain because their copyrights have long expired.