

# The Alchemist and the Goddess: *Further Thoughts*

by Misha Norland

*This article is a continuation from the previous issue, Vol.9 No.1*

*I pencilled the first jottings on the theme in 1988 in order to clarify my thoughts. As the essay began to unfold itself I found myself in the grip of an 'internal logic' which drove towards an uncomfortable conclusion. I would like to write about this and also make some further observations.*

The concluding sentence of the essay stated: we may be dependent on matter and bound by inner and outer necessity (for example karmic imperatives) to work with nature, but also to work against nature, participant creators and destroyers of the earth, of our very selves, to contain, transmute, transform the base material into something that is finer and more able to sustain our evolving consciousness. Enshrined within these statements are ideas which are reminiscent of alchemical processes, and of the *opus* itself, that is to say, the concept of transformation. In the field of psychotherapeutics this concept is often exhumed from the grave of, dare we say, outmoded ideas, in order to offer up a justification of the most uncomfortable, facts which could not be faced, in this instance the implication is that the destruction of nature, internally (psychologically) and externally (of the earth) is part of a 'natural' growth process. Although this may be related to anabolic and catabolic physiological processes, to decay in autumn and renew in spring and may thus be seen to be biologically founded, the concept cannot vindicate the wholesale destruction of species and habitats, it is inimical to moral as well as common sense. Yet this destruction exists and has always occurred. We are caught upon the horns of an ontological

dilemma; whether it is better to live and by so doing harm other life forms or to exercise compassion and risk annihilation. This latter, Buddhist view, leads in the direction of the de-hierarchising of 'kingdoms in nature' for it places all sentient beings at parity. It is non-confrontational. It gains ground by giving up ground, by maintaining a posture of non-attachment. It pays homage to the void and in so doing is anti-psychological in its approach, an *opus contra naturum*.

The latter part of our century is characterized by a marked polarity of feminine and masculine forces. In the latter case the impetus to control and to harness the forces of nature is apparent. Furthermore the cost to the environment engendered by the exploitation of these 'masculine' technologies is well known and generally acknowledged. The emergence of feminism as a wide-spread sociological phenomenon (note the prevalence of the male nude as an object of exploitation) and more especially, the sinister aspect of the feminine archetype expressed by the deathward processes of pollution and ecotastrophe is only now being fully realized. In mythology these aspects are personified by such figures as Kali Ma and Hecate who preside over death, destruction and waste products. Before focusing upon these aspects let us recall the benign feminine attributes, of these: fecundity, birth, growth, nurturing and healing spring readily to mind. We all had a mother, and should she have been good enough, to borrow Winnicott's phrase, we will cherish these attributes and be able to bring them forth out of our own soul, to nurture and heal the sick

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Earth. However, and this is a psychological truth, mother has much to answer for!

Let me briefly paraphrase Winnicott's observation: one maternal imbalance is characterized by 'too tight a hold'. Such a parent will not let her child go, she will smother, over protect and thus infantilize her, keeping her captive within the confines of the nursery well beyond the appropriate point. Such a child is deprived of independence. Further on in life such an individual may become dogmatically committed to codes and ideologies or yet again, may develop a contrary, anarchic posture to life. The other maternal imbalance is characterized by 'too loose a hold'; this engenders insecurity in the child and results in the posture of the one who clings, who fearfully beseeches and craves love and protection, or who in compensatory mode feigns independence and obstinate 'strength', or such an individual may develop destructive and violent traits.

The value of the not good enough mother is untrustworthiness. Such a parent cannot adequately nurture her young. Earth, as personification of the universal mother, the original Goddess, Gaia, is the ultimate repository of all projections of the psyche. She receives all our crap and composts it. However, we are noting that earth cannot cope with *all* of our 'stuff'. The seas are polluted, the rain is acid, the upper reaches of our atmosphere no longer offer a complete protection from the sun and under his glare life itself may wither. Radio-activity is measured in tens of thousands of years of half-life. Cancer and leukaemia are on the increase and a host of new diseases are discovered each decade. These are the sicknesses which result from man dumping upon the earth. We can no longer trust that the earth, like a good enough mother, will continue to hold and protect us indefinitely.

The vendetta of the dark side of the feminine is upon us! And what are we to do? Firstly, we should listen to the 'call' of the sick soul, become aware of its symptoms. This in turn requires that we be awake. Let us not make light of this primary need for feigning sleep is a last ditch defence against danger. If an animal cannot fight it flees, if it cannot flee it may faint sleep/death. In the face of the continual onslaught upon our senses which is a primary characteristic of our age of electronic communication systems we respond by becoming dulled and blunted. Although some may seek to regenerate themselves by entering the sanctuary of the silence of a voluntary radio, TV and sound-system ban, most are so caught up in the web of the established social order that to do so would seem tantamount to suicide. Thus we become increasingly blunted. Doctors, responding to stress-induced diseases, prescribe drugs such as Valium in national annual figures of thousands of tons. In order to cut through our anaesthetized senses and to evoke a response we bombard ourselves with mega-sensationalism. The TV is loaded with a seemingly

endless catalogue of catastrophies and political coups. We thrive upon the food of disasters and prognostications of ecological horrors. Films gain popularity in direct relationship to the level of violence portrayed in them. We need to be continually shocked into response in order to cut through the thick skin which we have developed in order to cope with the sensory overload which we habitually subject ourselves to.

In order to hear the voice of our soul and also that of the earth we need to develop sensitivity. Feelings are our guide. In order to develop a sense of ourselves we need to experience who we are. This we do by navigating our course through life by means of our innate sensitivity, our sense of what pleases and displeases us. The healthy individual moves away from that which is inimical and towards that which is beautiful and sustaining. Feeling responses act in a way which is analogous to instinct in that the latter mechanism is concerned with the survival of the body, the former with the survival of the soul. Our primary instincts inform us of danger and invoke such responses as flight or fight. However, our education inhibits this expression; we learn to repress ourselves. One kind of repression inevitably leads to another in a chain of related attempts to adapt to the first imbalance.

Feelings are our guide to our inner nature. Kent tells us that it is when our loves and hates are perverted that we are most deeply disturbed. Surely, the highest mission of any healing therapy is to set us into order at this level so that we may act out of our centre, rather than our pathology.

It is the aspect of repression and dulling of our feelings and natural sensitivity which leads to many of the difficulties facing the prescriber and points to the urgent need to be trained in psychological modes of perception. It is for this reason that we find it so useful to trace the development of the individual from childhood onwards with particular reference to the latter in that this reveals the individual's core nature. The degree and the character of the pathology may then be related to the relative lack of adaptation, or distortion which the individual has made, this viewed in the light of inheritance and miasm. The lack of this perception accounts for the prevalence of the layer model of prescribing and leads the neophyte into a maze of multiple prescriptions and monthly follow ups stretching forth into the future; years characterised by mutual dependence based upon the needs engendered by partial cure and partial pathology. This does not help the patient gain self-awareness or self-knowledge.

If we do not know ourselves then how should we know right from wrong? At a fundamental level this knowledge is inbuilt as is instinct. We need to listen to the voice of our conscience. This inner voice speaks in the language of primary feelings. Our dilemma and the dilemma facing Earth is that we

have become so dulled and insensitive that we cannot hear this voice. Guilt and shame are our inheritance, yet these feelings are also dulled and often lost beneath the cacophony of modern life. It may be of interest to note that the ancient, pre-biblical myths of the deluge state that the flood was ordered after several previous punishments had been meted out in order to quell the din and disturbance which man was making. The prior correctives being various plagues (are A.I.D.S., M.E. and cancer modern equivalents?), drought and famine (are the consequences of the green-house effect going to have a similar effect?) and finally the flood itself, reminiscent of the increasing sea levels due to global warming, which are predicted in the years to come.

Guilt arises when our actions have transgressed our conscience. Then we are ashamed and like Isaac we try to hide from God. Small wonder then that we have tried to kill God. How can we face up to that part of ourselves which is tarnished by the sin of our transgression? Once God is dead we need feel no shame. Now we can freely rape and pillage the Earth, just as we may justify the myriad crimes which are daily committed in the name of commerce. We have afforded ourselves the privilege to act against nature. In so doing we invoke the vendetta of the shadow side of Gaia. This is so because, at a psychological level, Earth is our universal and archetypal mother, yet because of our actions we feel progressive alienation from and by her. She is no longer the unfailingly trustworthy, good enough mother.

However, suffering is grist to the mill of evolution. Evolutionists hold that the gentle ape would not have moved out of the plentiful jungle had not a shifting climate forced the change upon him. A stable state does not engender change. And our present state is anything but stable! In fact it is so dangerously precarious that we feel the urgent need to address ourselves to the question of repair. Let us therefore take a look at the concept of conscience as a prerequisite for ethical behaviour, correct conduct and correct livelihood.

Conscience may be thought of in terms of the conscious aspect of the collective 'instinct' of survival of the living planet. Man's actions are modified by free will, yet despite the fact that man may, in part, do as he will, yet his conscience acts as a guiding influence; it is, as it were, the feminine aspect of his soul which connects him to the Earth and the laws of the Earth. If transgressed Earth speaks to us through our psyche/soul in the direct and experiential language of 'feels right or feels wrong'. Naturally there is a tension between responses which arise from the collective and which appear to consciousness as law, and those responses which arise from the ego and appear to consciousness as arising from free will. There is no theoretical resolution to this tension of two irreconcilable principles. The way out of the dilemma is empirical, in other words, according to the age old adage of

suck it and see. Man is caught in an ethical dilemma, whether to do or not to do. And being man he does! He is gifted with the right to do as he will, even to murder and to self-destruct. Shame or guilt is the natural consequence of so many of our actions, yet we most often fail to acknowledge its pangs. To be explicit: our very survival depends upon the destruction of plants and animals. These acts are viewed by conscience as dubious if not indeed wrong for they put our survival above that of other species. Under present conditions, characterised by over-population and ecological instability, the interest of the collective is under direct threat.

A sense of shame is a natural consequence of human existence. I believe that we should acknowledge this. Should we reclaim this awareness and view it as our birthright, then we may navigate according to this feeling: if what we do causes us to feel ashamed then we should desist. By these most simple of means we may begin to act in greater accord with the needs of the collective, in other words, we may begin to be less egotistical.

At the start of this essay I made reference to the feminine principles of nurturing and healing. I suggested that had we experienced adequate mothering then we should be able to call forth these attributes out of our soul in order to nourish and heal the sick Earth. Had we not experienced good enough mothering, then we must begin by healing ourselves. I suggested that homœopathy, skilfully applied, could heal the soul. Since we are Earth's caretakers, this healing would also affect the Earth herself. The central disturbance of the vital force should be addressed, not the outer manifestations, or the peripheral disease. The outer is characterized by destruction such as of forest and species, by the evolution of new disease etc, the inner by such states as the loneliness, anxiety and despair of increasingly large numbers of human beings. It is such states as these which are amenable to transformation at an individual level. This alchemical transformation of the soul is a reality which may yet illuminate the shadows of our individual and also our collective wrong doings.

The last word should be given to Hecate who's altar is the place of rubbish dumps, for she has her place within the feminist revival, and it is she whom the 'greens' address when they extol the virtues of the compost heap. For in the darkness and out of the process of decay a new soil is created out of which the self regenerating seed life is born. Hecate and Kali Ma preside over death. On a global scale we are entering again the winter phase of the world's cycle; the Earth depleted of natural resources. This may be compared to a period of gestation. However violent the upheavals seem in the present moment, yet they are but as the single beat of a bird's wing upon a migratory flight. □